

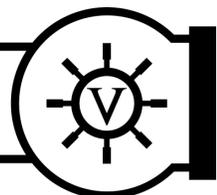
# Twilight, Revised

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PONY FICTION VAULT



My heartbeat quickened as we walked into the ruined hall that was lined with what had once, no doubt, been very impressive stained glass windows much like the ones in the palace, but now had fallen into disrepair. The stone floor, somehow free from the invading plants of the Everfree Forest, was fairly intact, which I regarded with some suspicion. The roof had even fallen prey to the ravages of time, being absent in many places. However, I couldn't help but feel a sense of majesty from the building; for being abandoned for so long, its smooth stones still radiated a sense of *presence*.

However, the feature that dominated the room was a proud, time-weathered display on which five spheres sat. Somehow, when I saw them, a shudder of excitement ran from the tip of my horn to the end of my tail. An almost ethereal feeling hovered about the room. These could only be the Elements of Harmony, hidden away like the sun behind a bank of clouds, ready to burst forth and bring light to the land once more.

“Woah,” Rainbow Dash breathed.

“Come on, Twilight,” Applejack said. “Isn't this what you've been waiting for?”

I stepped forward. “The Elements of Harmony... we found them!” My hoof twitched, desiring to dash forward and make sure that we had in fact found the instruments of our salvation. Everypony was counting on me; after all this time of having *others* clear the way for me—even if they had helped me through things I never could have overcome alone—it was time to do my part.

Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash each grabbed an Element in their hooves and carried it down from their platforms. Fluttershy, of course, treated it like a delicate egg, but Rainbow Dash's quick movements betrayed a sense of impatience—or, perhaps, rashness. “Careful, careful...” To my relief, they set the precious objects on the floor without incident.

“One, two, three, four... there's only five!” Pinkie Pie said, casting a curious but neutral glance in my direction.

“Where's the sixth?” Rainbow Dash said.

I crouched down, inspecting the closest stone, hoping some answer would reveal itself through its magic. To my disappointment, no such answer appeared, but I wasn't clueless. “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?” Applejack asked.

These didn’t exactly *look* like powerful magical artifacts, so maybe they just needed a jump start? “I’m not sure, but I have an idea. Stand back: I don’t know what will happen.” The others backed away.

I lit up my horn, screwing my eyes shut in concentration. If a spark was all that they needed, I could provide that. Elemental spells had never exactly been my forte—Princess Celestia had said something about getting to those areas of magic a few years down the line—but with any luck, a little static would be all I’d need. Even a filly could manage that.

“Come on, y’all, she needs to concentrate,” Applejack said as I heard her lead the others out, their gentle steps sounding more like tiptoeing to me.

I reached out with my magic, willing a spark to come forth. All I needed was to get things started. A huge wellspring of magic started to form in front of me—such a powerful force could only be coming from the spheres! I opened my eyes, only to see a whirlwind surrounding them. “The Elements!” I jumped in without thought to consequence or result; losing them was not an option.

The small maelstrom spat me out in the ruins of a grand throne room, filled with decayed remnants of a long-dead reign. At any other time, the historian in me would have been leaping for joy at the prospect of cataloging and recording everything I could observe, but to call me “a little preoccupied” at the moment was the understatement of the century. Right now, I didn’t care about the classical pillars, the weathered dais, or the scuffed stone, worn smooth from centuries of hooves walking over it. I only had eyes for Nightmare Moon, the Elements floating around her in her mane! She cackled as lightning struck all around her. A gasp escaped my throat; the Elements were still inert.

I had to do something, or all of Equestria would be lost. I settled on one thought: Nightmare Moon appeared to have quite a flair for the dramatic, as her actions tonight had shown; if I played into her classical pride and lured her into a showdown where I’d be woefully outmatched, I could catch her off-guard and reclaim the Elements. She wanted to prove her power—if not to me, then to the rest of Equestria—so a direct challenge, no matter how ridiculous on my part, would be a temptation she wouldn’t be able to pass up. Part of me whispered that I still didn’t know what the sixth Element of Harmony was, but instinct told me that the sixth element would take care of itself. Somehow. At this point, I had to make do with what I had.

I narrowed my eyes, scraped the floor with a forehoof like the knights of yore, and snorted in challenge. I just had to appeal to her pride...

Her eyes narrowed, and her mouth turned down in a frown. "You're kidding. You're kidding, right?" she asked, flaring out her wings in unconscious answer. To my delight, she dropped the Elements, playing directly into my hooves. Despite her words, I knew she'd take the bait. It was in her nature, and her body was already getting ready for it. She had to take the bait. It was my only chance; if I was wrong, I'd be in for a world of hurt.

I lit up my horn in preparation for my little gambit and charged, my hooves racing over the time-worn smooth stones of the floor as I prayed she was as stupid and vain as I thought she was.

The grin of a predator watching a mouse struggle under the weight of a claw came over her face as she leapt down. She galloped toward me, a confident leer etched into her features. It was a struggle to keep a victorious grin off my face; all I had to do now was work my magic. And I could do magic.

Just before I would have collided with Nightmare Moon, I blinked across the room in a quick teleport to reach the Elements.

The sudden, unfamiliar lurch of teleportation came over me, and my head swam for a moment. I had fooled Nightmare Moon, but a canny opponent like her wasn't about to let me have more than a few moments to act.

A hard object poked me in the side. "Oh, was that supposed to be clever?" Nightmare Moon's silky voice rolled over me as my pupils shrank to terrified pinpricks.

I glanced up, grimacing at how quickly she had moved; no doubt she had teleportation magic of her own. A dark field surrounded me, hurling me backwards into one of the room's pillars.

I screamed, forgoing words in favor of a primal expression of pain as I heard a few sickening cracks from my back. I squirmed as she held me fast against the pillar with magic so powerful, my own was as a mouse before a lion. Tears welled in my eyes as I found myself pushed further and harder against the unrelenting stone; my spine flared with needles of pain as Nightmare Moon held me several meters off the floor and walked slowly, leisurely to me.

She looked up at my miserable form. "So you are Twilight Sparkle..." she mused.

“You... you know my name?” I coughed out. My throat grew tighter and tighter; darkness crept into the corners of my vision. I had to fight! If I let Equestria down, I could never live with myself. In vain, I tried to nudge a hoof forward. It spasmed but broke free, wiggling under my command. Nothing was going to stop me: not pain, not a renegade princess, not anything.

Nightmare Moon proved me wrong by sending a few thousand volts of electricity straight into my horn. My screams of agony echoed off the walls; my tears sizzled the moment they fell from my eyes under the strength of her assault, and the nauseating smell of burning hair filled my nostrils. My once-victorious hoof, thoroughly beaten, went limp.

“But of course. Only a foal would fail to examine every last pawn before challenging one such as Celestia.” She tilted her head and arched an eyebrow as a contemplative tone entered her voice. “I wonder what she imagined a puny little pony like you could do?”

At that moment, the concerned cries of the five ponies who had accompanied me echoed up the staircase at the room’s rear. I opened my mouth, ready to scream out a warning, but a fresh wave of electricity and the glare of the insane mare before me put a stop to that. “You won’t... get away with this, Nightmare Moon.” My throat was scratchy, raw, but I refused to let her have the satisfaction of seeing me broken. “Equestria... Equestria will never accept you... as its ruler.”

“On the contrary, my little pony,” she said, grinning a grin that looked as cheerful as the gates of Tartarus, “I think you’ll find that bowing to me is altogether rather *pleasurable*.”

“Never.” I spat the word with all the fury and indignation I could muster. Unbidden, Princess Celestia’s gentle, smiling face came into my memory. This pony... this *monster* stood there choking me to death and thought that I would join her cause? “I’ll never join you!”

Her grin widened. “Whoever said you had a choice in the matter, my little pony?”

I coughed up a little blood, which I noted with satisfaction landed on one of Nightmare Moon’s hoofguards, although her gaze never left my face. “What the hay... is that supposed to mean?”

My only answer was a sinister, toothy grin that filled my fading vision as I blacked out.

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I regained consciousness in a giant, well-ordered library with a ceiling so high I couldn't see the top. The floor was simple, no-nonsense cobblestone; the architect had had the good sense to let the books do the talking. I rose to my hooves, peering around at the endless expanse of solid wooden shelves and rows of books. "How did I get here?" My voice echoed off the bookshelves that rose dozens of feet into the air, offering me no answer. I took a tentative step forward, feeling the orderly stone under my hooves. Whoever owned this library could only be described as "meticulous." Every shelf was filled with books that looked familiar and tidy, and not a speck of dust was on the vast majority of the shelves. My heart swelled with pride for the librarian, whoever she was.

A clattering noise aroused my attention as my ears perked up. Another noise, this one more identifiable as a dull "thud," sounded off in the distance. Was someone knocking books off the shelves? I charged in the direction of the noise, which grew only more violent as I drew nearer, as though the vandal had heard my approach and was trying to shove as many off the shelves as he could before I stopped him. There would be no mercy for anyone harming a defenseless book.

I rounded the corner of a lavender-colored bookshelf, only to see a perfect double of myself, sitting in a pile of books and scribbling in them furiously with dozens of quills. "What are you?" I blurted.

The other me looked up, and I got a closer look at her. Her eyes had a strange, catlike shape in their pupils, and her grin was downright malicious, creating a jarring feeling; I did *not* look like that. She stood, never allowing her quills to stop their frantic editing—she had to have as many as eighteen books at a time in her grip! Despite her sinister appearance, I couldn't help but be impressed by her degree of control. "Oh, I'm just the librarian." She giggled at my confused expression.

My eyes were drawn to another oddity on her body: her cutie mark, which was exactly identical to mine save one detail: overlaid over my own starry cutie mark was the image of a glowing moon. Looking at it made my eyes glaze over as my gaze stayed there, unable to tear my sight from this strange cutie mark. It took a deliberate, almost desperate effort to look away; I couldn't help but wonder if I had a touch of Marecissus in me. "What... why do you look like me, then?" I said, still woozy from whatever strange fugue had come over me after staring at her like that. A slight blush came over my cheeks as I considered how I must have looked: I met a mare, and immediately stared at her rear. What was wrong with me?

"Oh, do I? I'd hardly noticed," she responded with a widening grin.

“What is this place, then?”

“Look around you, sun-lover. Where are you now? Apply that brain of yours... or is it just empty space under your horn?” She raised a hoof to her mouth, suppressing a snicker. This pony, whoever she was, was much ruder than I, at any rate. “I’m the new caretaker for this place. I’m just... making a few changes.”

I bristled at her remark about my intellect, but took her advice and took in my surroundings a little more thoroughly. Meanwhile, the eerie doppelganger continued her frantic work. Nothing new presented itself to me physically, but a certain feeling hung in the air, as though I’d been here hundreds of millions of times—as though I knew the stacks’ contents by heart. My eyes wandered upward to the bookshelf across from us; it bore a familiar sunburst motif. Despite the bizarre situation I found myself in, I couldn’t help but smile. Every library could use a shelf devoted to Princess Celestia. The shelf’s simple, unadorned placard read *Memories of the Summer Moon Celebration*.

“Huh?” I murmured. “That’s not right.”

“It is now,” she whispered from behind me.

“What?” I turned, suddenly filled with a feeling of intense dread. All the books she’d been scribbling in were re-shelved, and her quills were stuck in her mane. On a sudden thought, I looked to this bookshelf’s label. It read *Early Foalhood*. “Wait...”

Suddenly, it all added up: the familiar feeling from the books; not feeling lost, although I’d never walked these halls before; getting an even more protective feeling about the books than normal; feeling disoriented when I stared at a distorted reflection of myself; and most of all, the library layout.

“Step away from my memories.” I growled and pawed at the ground, determined to restrain her.

She broke into a run. “No can do!”

I did a quick teleport, estimating her approximate position, and appeared right in front of her in a burst of magic. Her eyes widened in surprise, and it occurred to me where I’d seen such slitted pupils before: Nightmare Moon.

“I’m just making an improved you, Twilight. It’s for our own good!” she cried. She leapt into the air, snarling, and as I braced myself for impact, she lit up her horn and

teleported past me. Her rapid hooffalls sounded behind me, mocking my incorrect choice.

I sprinted after her. “I doubt it. I like me just the way I am. Now undo whatever you’ve been doing!” Putting on all the speed I could muster, I lunged at her oh-so-close tail, desperate to knock her concentration off so I could undo the changes to the books... to my very memories.

She danced out of the way, snickering as I slammed into a bookshelf. “Poor little sun-lover, so desperate to get a piece of herself,” she sang, cantering away as my vision spun and her figure faded from sight.

“W-what?” I asked, my cheeks flushing. “That’s not... I mean, I wouldn’t want to...”

The image of her face, drawn into a coquettish smile, appeared before me. “Oh come now, Twilight. There are only two we’ve ever loved... ourself and the princess.”

“You leave Nightmare Moon out of this!” I clapped my hooves to my mouth as my cheeks burned.

Laughter, malicious laughter, sounded all around me as her face faded and her voice echoed from all around me, wavering in tone from high to low. “Oh, *what* princess was that, *moon* lover? Feeling a bit... *confused*?”

“I... I meant Princess Celestia!” My words lacked conviction even to my own flaccid, drooping ears.

“If you say so...” Her mock concern faded into peals of insane laughter that buffeted my huddled form from every direction, echoing like the taunting jeers of my classmates from the painful days of magic kindergarten.

I hauled myself to my hooves, heaving with exertion. I sped off, listening for the intruder’s steps, which always seemed to be just around the next corner. My teeth ground together; there was no time for this foolishness. “Come back here, you tease!” I cried.

She tittered. Once again, that damnable *voice* echoed all around me, seeming to shift in pitch and tone with every moment, as though the speaker had given up trying to sound equine and had instead chosen to speak in a tone born of madness. “Oh my, Twilight, just what sort of mare do you think we are? We don’t like persistent ponies... or *do* we?”

“You are *not* me!”

Her laughter sounded once more, this time ice cold and clinical, the mortician about to dissect a member of the dearly departed. “Come closer, Twilight, and I’ll let you have all of me you *want*.”

Fresh shudders came over me. I slowed, realizing that the elusive steps had faded into silence. My ears swiveled and flicked, trying to detect any hint of masked breathing or the scuffling of a hoof on stone.

My head swam for a moment, and the scenery around me wavered. Panic gripped me as I considered what it could mean that my consciousness was fading while I stood in my own mind.

“You’re losing yourself, Twilight Sparkle...” My own voice faded away, its growl fading into silence, and with alarm, I realized that I had no idea who had said that: the imposter throwing her voice or me.

“Ugh... no, not yet... I need to fix this.” Summoning all the will I had, I forced myself to keep moving forward. More than anything else, more than anypony else, I had to cling to my trust in Night—Princess Celestia. I sucked in a shuddering breath and leaned against a nearby bookshelf for support, bracing myself against the swirling, taunting colors of gentle night gathering before my eyes.

Princess Celestia had made me the mare I was through years of guidance, and she *needed* me now. No one else could save her: not her guards, not her councilors, not her country. Only I could do this. “I won’t let you down, Princess Celestia. This I swear... *I’ll* be there for you this time,” I whispered, feeling an inner fire burn within me. I shook my head, banishing the colors and feeling vigor flow back into me.

Try and stop me, Nightmare Moon. I could take anything she could throw at me. Instilled with confidence, I took another step closer to a diminutive, disused bookshelf marked *Friends*, where I was sure the mockery of me was hiding; I had just heard a book fall, released from her careless grip.

I crept closer, confident that she couldn’t hear me. Her breathing was sharp and ragged, stirring up dust; why, she might as well have been broadcasting her location for all to see! For this exact reason, I circled back around; nopony would fall for such an obvious trap, least of all me. Since she obviously had some magical ability, she was trying to trick me while she teleported away and flanked me.

I turned around and doubled back, eager to beat her at her own game. I crept low, remembering one of the how-to guides on sneaking I'd read when I was a filly enamored with tales of donkey ninjas. Slow steps. Relaxed breathing. Patience. Wait for your opponent to make a mistake, and then move. It was this philosophy of watching and waiting that allowed her to make the first move; that was *my* mistake.

A hoof rapped on my back, eliciting a wince as my sore back screamed in protest. "Oh my, Twilight, I thought *you* wanted to make the first move?" my own voice asked. My blood ran cold; I had tricked me. No... she had tricked me. She was not me. She was *not* me.

I rolled to my hooves and spun, only to see the smirking doppelganger right in front of me. I opened my mouth to scream defiance, but she used the moment to dart in and kiss me.

I froze up in shock. I wasn't sure how I felt about kissing other mares, but it felt completely wrong to have my own tongue probing my mouth, rolling over each and every tooth like a desperate, writhing worm, eager to bore further and further into the rich soil I provided, regardless of how I felt on the matter. I tried to pull away, feeling weak as a newborn, but she wrapped a foreleg around me and held me close. The longer I stayed like this, the weaker I felt, like I... *she* was drawing something out of me. With a magical shove, I broke away. My heart pounded; my breaths came in short, sharp gasps. "What... what are you doing," I said rather than asked. At this point, it really wasn't even worth guessing at her motives anymore. She could only be a product of Nightmare Moon, sent into my mind to confuse and distort my memories. My vision blurred in front of my eyes, as though to drive home the point.

"Aww, but Twilight, we've always said we didn't need anypony but ourselves. Don't you trust yourself?" she asked, taking a step closer as her reptilian eyes shone with false emotion. It... it had to be false emotion. Although maybe I did have my best interests at heart after all. I shook my head, trying to clear my muddled thoughts.

I drew back. "Well, it's true that I trust in myself... but don't... don't say 'we.' You're... not me..." My voice trailed off, my pitiful attempt at assertion ending on a choked note.

"Then shut up and trust this." I stared as my own horn glowed on that victorious face, and as my horror grew, she pulled me in for another vampiric kiss. As my lips brushed against mine, I whispered, "Don't worry. I'll take care of everything for us. Trust me."

“N-no... stop...” I moaned, trying to pull away from myself. A wave of revulsion, like a thousand parasprites marching just under my skin, swept over me. This was *wrong*. I shut my eyes and looked away, determined to at least rid myself of the sight of my own vile face.

My voice sounded in the small space between us, rolling over me in a hypnotic, soothing melody. “Look at me. Look at yourself.” Despite my best efforts, I turned back and looked into the depths of those half-lidded eyes. “We’ve only needed us. Always.” Her hoof brushed the side of my face, a lover comforting a lover, and despite my horror, an electric thrill ran down my spine. Her eyes—my eyes—were so inviting. “Our whole lives, all we’ve needed are us and our princess. Right?”

“Right,” I mumbled, feeling my eyelids start to droop as my words rolled into my ears. “Always the princess.”

I chuckled, feeling the foreleg holding me shake from my own laughter. I looked into my own slitted eyes and saw myself reflected in them; I had a point. The more I listened to myself, the more I seemed to be correct.

As I stared at myself, I said, “You see? Not so bad. Just accept me. Accept yourself. Who am I? Who are you? Who are we?”

I stared at the pony—at myself—*inches* from my face, whose hot breath continued panting its way onto my muzzle. “I’m Twilight Sparkle. You’re Twilight Sparkle.”

As one, both of me said, “We are Twilight Sparkle,” and I felt at peace with the new serenity I had shown myself. Surrender could be such a sweet thing.

Then, I kissed myself, and as everything fell into the darkness of unnatural rest, only one thought stayed with me, fading in power as I pressed my soft lips into mine, destroying any will and conscious thought I had: Celestia. Celestia. Celestia...

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I got to my hooves slowly, feeling very drowsy. I stood in the shadow of a familiar, ruined throne amidst a once-great hall in the middle of the Everfree Forest, and I had been... been... what had I been doing? My mind was shrouded in fog, as though thinking about anything was like looking up from the bottom of the ocean at a solitary pegasus high above the clouds. Something around my neck pulsed, bathing me in soothing mauve light.

Around my neck, I discovered a halter in the royal style, emblazoned with an image of a silvery moon against a dark background. My mind stirred at this sight, and as the emblem pulsed again with tinted light, the fog in my mind cleared. Of course: I was with my Mistress. The Mistress had been dealing with the rebel faction opposing Her.

The image of a white-coated, gently smiling face floated into my mind, delivering a lecture on the cosmos. Hadn't it been her sun-raising sister that I had been following? Celestia?

I swayed on my hooves, overcome by nausea. Although it was ridiculous to consider me being anything but loyal to my Princess and Mistress, a part of me still screamed that I had been tutored by that "Celestia" who had done so much to try to unbalance my Mistress' reign. I fell to the ground and writhed, feeling that traitorous part of me that was so willing to ignore everything my Mistress had done for me in favor of such a ridiculous idea burning like a terrible, corrupting disease in my mind.

Princess Celestia was my teacher. Princess Celestia was my teacher.

My Mistress was who I served. My Mistress was who I served.

I beat my head against a nearby wall in frustration, trying to drown out the disloyal voice. I would never betray my Mistress, but what if she was never my mistress at all? I shook my head, quickly, only to notice my halter flaring again. I closed my eyes, trying to shut out its harsh glow, even as I felt it wash over me and soothe my tormented spirit.

When I opened my eyes again, I was calm. No longer did impure thoughts cloud my mind; there was only love for my Princess: Nightmare Moon. I was a good, pure servant once more.

I climbed to my hooves, feeling myself rather short of breath from my ordeal. I looked myself over quickly, but aside from a lingering pain around my throat and a few scorched spots on my coat—thinking on them made my head throb, as though there were memories I couldn't quite grasp—I was fine.

The sound of heavy hooffalls echoed behind me, and I turned, uncertain of what I would see in this fearful place. However, to my delight, it was only the glorious visage of my Mistress, shaking some stone dust from five nearby piles of rubble near the throne from her hooves as she walked. I immediately bowed, as I was not worthy to so much as glimpse Her glorious mane. "Mistress, please forgive your lowly, unworthy servant who is not worthy to gaze upon Your..." My words sounded hollow, as though they were

being fed into my mouth. The feeling sent a shiver from my ears to my tail. Could this be some side effect of whatever strange fugue had caused me to doubt my very memories? To make me think that the pony who had been a second mother to me and then a trusted teacher was somehow not deserving of my love and adoration? How absurd.

“Rise, Twilight.”

I blushed, feeling honored that She would remember the name of Her humble student, and rose to my hooves. “I... I am not worthy of your indulgence, Mistress...” I looked at the ground, still certain that I was unworthy of gazing at Her. As Her glorious mane snaked its way under my chin, forcing me to look at Her, my blush deepened and my tail raised of its own accord. Slightly, so it may have been mistaken for a nervous twitch.

She drew back, alarm plain on Her face. Quickly, however, Her expression returned to one of entirely deserved superiority, and She drew near once more. “I hadn’t realized her feelings for my sister were that strong... I may have to adjust the enchantment,” my Mistress murmured.

Now that I was permitted, my dreamy gaze lingered upon my Mistress’ perfect face, taking in everything about Her dark, beautiful expression. “Sorry, Mistress, what were you saying?” I slurred, intoxicated by Her hot puffs of breath on my face. She had never been this close to me, and I found Her otherworldly scent—like a particularly cool morning dew, chilled by the blessing of night—intoxicating. A slow, dreamy smile came over my face. Although I knew there was probably important business at hoof—crushing those who would threaten Equestria’s perfect state of eternal happiness, forever shrouded in a pristine night—all I could focus on were Her deep eyes, which no doubt saw through to the foalish state of my thoughts. She was clever like that, perfect like that, sharp like that; if I grew up to be even half the pony my Princess was, I could die happy. She was the mold I wanted to cast myself in. Ever since I saw Her raise the sun at the... a buzzing entered my ears.

The sun?

“What was that, Twilight?”

A small, electric thrill went through me again just to hear Her saying my name. Apparently, I had spoken my heresy aloud, which tempered my enthusiasm with a revulsion of shame. “I’m... I’m sorry, Princess...” I tried extra hard to bring out the respectful capital in apology. “My mind’s kind of loopy tonight. I don’t know why. Too many hours studying under you, I suppose...” I sighed, a schoolfily gazing at an innocent

crush. How very like Her: She had far more pressing concerns, and when I showed a hint of very fragile, innocent mortal weakness, She tried to help. How magnanimous. How empathic. How like the princess who ruled over that which gave us light...

The buzzing grew louder, becoming a sharp keening in my ears. Why did I keep associating Her with the sun? I whined, a puppy desperately trying to hide wrongdoing from its mother.

She quirked an eyebrow almost to the ridge of her helmet, and for a brief, horrifying moment, I was sure I had disappointed Her. Had this all been a test? Was I about to fail?

Luckily, faint calls of my name from several ponies came from a spiral staircase at the other end of the room and distracted us both from my failures. My little headache grew more insistent upon hearing them, and I clenched my head between my forelegs to block it out.

Nightmare Moon, true ruler of Equestria, my Mistress and teacher, reached down and smoothed my mane. Heat rose to my cheeks; *She was touching me!* “Don’t worry, Twilight. I know you must be confused. Just trust in what you know to be the truth, my little pony.” She directed my gaze with a tip of her mane to the moon sigil I wore. “Know that you are my most valued subject... and student, Twilight. I will not let these ponies, who are bent on ruining everything you and I hold dear, have their way.” She stood and pointed an accusing hoof at the doorway with perfect dramatic flourish, sending my heart aflutter with renewed admiration. “I, Nightmare Moon, shall protect you. Hide thyself in the darkness that is my domain and trust in me.” She turned and grinned the grin of a predator setting a trap for rebellious prey. “I will not fail Equestria.”

My mouth moved, but I failed to form words. To avoid looking like a more foalish foal, I nodded vigorously and jumped into a shadow from a nearby pillar to watch my Mistress defend Equestria firsthoof. I bit my lip, holding back a squee of anticipation. Although She rarely displayed it, accounts of Her battle with the traitorous Princess Celestia told of powerful magics She subdued her with before She banished her to the moon. To see such amazing magic for myself was a dream!

The buzzing in my head grew to a shrieking that threatened to split my horn. Why would Nightmare Moon banish Celestia to the moon? Had She not sent her to the sun to sit amidst her own element and think on her crimes?

I shook my head, dismissing the conjecture. Of course my Mistress had banished Celestia to the moon; where better to keep an eye on a powerful enemy than one’s own seat of

power? I stuck my muzzle in the air with swelling pride; logic had defeated foalish emotion once more. At this, my treasonous confusion waned, becoming little more than an annoying whisper in a sun-loving voice that amounted to little more than nothing. Satisfied that I had dealt with my own issues, I turned my attention to the door to see my Princess deal with Equestria's.

A group of five ponies had advanced cautiously into the room: a cyan pegasus with a prismatic mane and tail who looked ready to destroy anything that looked at her crossways, a yellow pegasus who trembled with every step, an orange earth pony wearing a wide-brimmed hat and a serious expression, a pink pony with a goofy smile on her face, and a white unicorn who clearly used a great deal of hair care products every morning. I felt I knew these ponies, although I'd never seen them before. Since they were rebels, had I suppressed the memory of meeting with them? The memory surely would have been something I'd felt ashamed about, owing to my strong loyalty to the Crown of the S—Moon, so it made some sense. Idly, I swatted the air around me with my tail, as though I could dispel the resurgence of my bout of confusion. If only I could make myself—body and soul—the perfect student for Her. But, I lived, so I was flawed.

Unbidden, as though to emphasize my weakness, my brain whispered names in my ear for each pony: Rainbow Dash, Fluttershy, Applejack, Pinkie Pie, and Rarity.

“Where's Twilight, huh?” ‘Rainbow Dash’ cried as she maintained a steady hover in the air. “What have you done with her?” Without waiting for a response, the foolhardy foal dove forward, only to be halted by ‘Applejack’ grabbing ‘Rainbow Dash’s’ long, vibrant tail in her mouth.

“Now, hold on there, Rainbow Dash,” she said through a mouthful of tail. “No need to go flying off the handle now.” Interesting: I did seem to know these ponies from somewhere if I knew their names. But from where? My brain itched—as though there was something that I really *should* have remembered—but the memory refused to surface.

“But... what if something scary happened to Twilight?” Fluttershy asked, daring to peek out from behind Applejack's rear.

My Mistress shot a scathing glare at the pitiful pegasus, who quickly yelped and ducked back behind Applejack.

“Oh, nothing ‘scary’ has happened to Twilight. She's safe and sound,” my Mistress assured them with a casual smile.

“Well that’s good!” Pinkie Pie said. “I kinda figured we were in one of those scary-wary situations where suddenly everything’s all darky and then you try to light a candle like FWOOSH to lighten the mood with flaming breath from hot sauce and somepony says, ‘But Pinkie, that’s not what that expression means’ and then everyone has a good laugh at how silly that pony was for misunderstanding such a simple phrase!” As everyone stared at her, trying to process her rapid-fire rambling, she added, “I mean, what else would it mean? Of course ponies were having trouble seeing! Like, duh!”

“Er... thank you, Pinkie,” Rarity said. She turned to my Mistress, and in her audacity, looked Her directly in the eyes without permission. “Well then, er, Nightmare Moon, if our friend is alright, would you mind simply trotting her out here?”

My heart fluttered when she said the word “friend”—had I been her friend? Out of the aether, my pounding headache returned a thousandfold, as though part of me was desperate to break free of my own mind. I grit my teeth, determined to weather whatever weakness was making me doubt myself once again. I believed in my Mistress. I believed in Nightmare Moon.

Just as the pain became unbearable, the choker I wore pulsed with a soothing light, and the pain vanished. A slow, smooth exhale of breath I hadn’t been aware I was holding followed. Those ponies were not my friends. I would never have befriended somepony who wanted to bring down Her Majesty and ruin Equestria. I put a gentle hoof to the necklace I wore. It bore Her very emblem, symbolizing Her trust in me; I had to be worthy of Her trust. I had to.

“In due time,” Nightmare Moon purred. “First I must ask something of you foals.”

They all tensed—even Pinkie Pie—sensing the dangerous undercurrent in her words. From the shadows, I smirked. They were wise to not underestimate her; it was a shame their wisdom did not seem to extend to whom to support as ruler.

My Mistress struck a dramatic, commanding pose, and my heart melted at the sight. She was just so perfect in every way: always strong, always in control, always kind, and always ready to help me.

If I could permit myself a touch of foolishness, I could almost call it admiration. No, admiration was too weak of a word. My whole life, I had known exactly who I wanted to be, what pony I wanted to emulate, what standard I strove for: I wanted to be just like my Mistress, the perfect princess Nightmare Moon.

One could even call it love.

Meanwhile, Nightmare Moon continued. “Will you swear loyalty to me as ruler of Equestria?” She gave them an imposing gaze, looking every inch the majestic royal prepared to offer magnanimous pardons to misguided idealists. How perfect, how without flaw, how noble She was!

“No!” they all chorused, determination carved into all their features.

I sagged. Were they really so stubborn?

“What a shame. Still, it was *only* a question.” My Mistress grinned anew. “I think you’ll find that having me as your ruler is entirely more pleasurable than my *sun-loving* sister. Isn’t that right, Twilight?” She cast a beckoning glance in my direction.

Nervous at being put on the spot, I walked out from the shadows, ignoring the astonished gasps from the five ponies. With precise purpose, I took my place next to Her and gazed out at the small band of rebels.

Applejack sputtered, her mouth moving faster than her words, “T-Twilight! You’re okay!”

I shifted, uncomfortable at being addressed in such a familiar way by somepony who was the antithesis of everything I stood for and loved. “Of course I am...” I said, unsure how exactly to respond to such concern from a complete stranger.

“What’s that weird thingy around your neck?” Pinkie Pie asked, pointing at my moon emblem torque.

I drew back, clutching at it for protection. Somehow, it felt wrong to have her even look at it. “It’s a symbol of the trust and love I have for Her!” I hissed, once again stressing the respectful capital. I calmed myself, lowering my shaking hoof from the brooch. They seemed like rational ponies. Surely, at least one of them would have the sense to repent if I just explained things. I drew myself up, trying to look the perfect diplomat. “Look, I’m sure you all have your reasons for opposing Princess Nightmare, but please, I beg of you, reconsider.” She glanced at me askance as I said this, perhaps noting my unusual form of address in regards to Her. Somehow, staring out at these rebellious ponies, it seemed right.

“How do you know that, huh? *Were* you a spy the whole time?!” Rainbow Dash cried, pointing an accusatory hoof in my direction.

“A spy?” I shook my head. “No, I was never a spy.” I shifted closer to Her, and She wrapped a protective wing around me. I nuzzled into Her coat, blushing as I did so. I was a weak pony, but She allowed me my indulgences. I turned back to the five ponies, whose jaws were dropping lower by the second. “I don’t know what your reasons are, but I know She can deal with them! She’s always treated me well, even when I was a filly.” I sighed, awash in fond memories of my days spent under Her tutelage.

“I thought you said you were Princess Celestia’s student?” Applejack asked.

“W-what? No!” I jerked away from my Mistress, fearful of Her wrath if She were to believe them. “Please, Princess! I was never... I wouldn’t...” My mouth clamped itself shut before I could babble anything else.

“That’s all I need to hear!” Rainbow Dash launched herself forward, but even as I felt Her tense up in anticipation, Applejack bit on her tail and held her back.

“Something doesn’t seem quite right here,” Rarity said. “Twilight was bent on stopping Nightmare Moon’s return, and without all of us, we wouldn’t have gotten this far.”

“What... what do you mean?” My headache started to return, and my vision swam. Somehow, flickers of these ponies—traveling with them, laughing with them—rose in my consciousness. What trickery was this? If I could have, I would have vomited; thinking such disloyal thoughts towards the great pony I’d idolized my entire life made me feel ill. My Mistress’ gift to me, my moon torque, glowed, and for a moment, the feeling vanished. All was well again.

Moments later, the memories resurfaced, which made my nausea resurface, which made the torque glow again, which made the misery vanish, which made the memories resurface... “Stop it! Just stop!” I screamed, dropping to the floor in agony. “I don’t want to be confused! I don’t want to be *wrong!*” Tears fell from my eyes as my Mistress’ gift, intended only to soothe my aches, reinforced the cycle of suffering. “Please...” I whispered, reaching a trembling hoof towards the dark figure of salvation above me. “Please... help me.”

She took my hoof with her own, causing me to shiver with pleasure in the midst of my agony. “I will.”

Such simple words, yet they held so much power. Even now, in the depths of my despair, weakness, and pain, here She was, ready to help me and support me, as She always did. I couldn’t even imagine what would have happened on that day if She hadn’t restrained

my out-of-control magic during the exam. She had always been right there, ready to help a weak, clueless pony find her way in a big, complicated world; what had I done to deserve such indulgence? Truly, Her patience and kindness knew no bounds. Tears gathered in my eyes as I nodded with more gratitude than words could ever express.

“Hey everypony, look at that weird shiny thing coming from that moon thing!” Pinkie Pie said, pointing to the precious gift She had bestowed upon me.

“That must be what’s making her act all funny-like!” Applejack said. “Come on, girls—we’ve got to help her. We’re friends, aren’t we?”

A cheer of assent went up from the assembled ponies, but my mind froze on that one word: friends. Friends. Friends? Did I have friends? Were these ponies my friends? My eyes widened, shimmering unbidden with fresh tears I couldn’t explain. “Are... are they my friends?” I whispered. Something—the beginning of something great and terrible, a violent, coursing torrent of emotion—boiled up within me, like the precursor to a violent storm that yearned to explode from my body and wash away everything before me.

“No. Now sleep,” my Mistress told me. She touched her horn to mine, and over the valiant cries of the rebel ponies charging, I fell into Her element: darkness, as feeling faded from my weary mind.

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I opened my eyes and found myself staring at a wracked, bent-over form. The pony before me groaned. She was blue—a lighter color than the pony I revered—and her mane was not nearly as impressive, but save for those things and her shorter stature, I could have mistaken her for Her. Even their cutie marks were the same, which was not altogether unheard of, but this many similarities almost defied belief.

She looked up with world-weary eyes and chuckled: a tinny, wasted sound that felt almost insubstantial.

“Who are you?” My curiosity was going to get me in serious trouble one of these days.

Her sunken, dull, half-dead eyes regarded me with pity. “My name, Twilight Sparkle, is Luna. You’ve suffered a terrible fate, haven’t you?”

“A terrible fate?” I echoed.

“Yes. I have been watching you,” Luna said.

My head cocked to the side, I tried to place this strange pony. She had both wings and a horn, and her strong resemblance to my Mistress made me somewhat suspicious. Could this be some trick of the mind, trying to make me doubt myself as it had not so long ago? “Who are you, really? Are you a princess?”

The ragged pony hung her head. “I... do not deserve such a title after the blasphemy I have wrought.” She paused for a few moments, clearly lost in some inner reverie as we stood there in silence. “But this is not about me, Twilight Sparkle. This is about you. It is too late for me, but you may yet be freed.”

“Freed? From what? Nightmare Moon”—a smitten sigh escaped my lips, unbidden—“is going to take care of everything. Those weird ponies, my confusion: my Mistress will make it all better.”

Luna’s right eye twitched, and her lips tightened as though to restrain a small fit of rage. She drew in a quick breath and calmed her quivering eye, then said, “Very well. Consider this before you cut me to the quick. Ponder, Twilight Sparkle. Think back. Have you always depended on your...” She paused, her quivering lips almost choking on her words as she continued, “Mistress... quite so much as you have recently?”

The love-struck smile that had adorned my features faded. “Well, no...”

“And do you not think it strange that suddenly your mistress, your mentor, was suddenly so eager to leap in and help you directly?” She began pacing, circling around me in the dusky haze surrounding us. “Was she not always tasking you with solving things on your own? Finding your own solutions? Not using her as a cheap apothecary’s panacea?”

“Well, you do have a point there. I guess she does seem awfully willing to act right now, but that’s because it’s an emergency! Equestria is in danger!”

Luna, her eyes widening in fear and hope as she glanced around at the suddenly more oppressive darkness, shook her head in an emphatic no. “Thou art too sharp to live a falsehood. Think. Have any other oddities arisen? Does anything seem out of place?”

A sharp keening grew in my head as unbidden memories of laughing and adventuring with rebel ponies rose to the forefront of my mind. “I...” I reeled, overcome with nausea; somehow, I didn’t think vomiting was any more common in dreams. “I...” I shook my head. “N-no! I trust Her! She would never lie to me or deceive me! Stop... stop trying to confuse me.” I took a few steps closer—close enough that I could have reached out and touched her haggard face—and smiled. “I know me. And this is what I want. I want to be with my Mistress. I do not deserve to be the student of such a great pony, but I would never, ever desert Her. At Her side as Her faithful student is where I belong.”

Luna’s face hardened, her brows furrowing downward as her ears lay flat against her head. “Student, or slave?” she barked. “Look at thyself, Twilight Sparkle! Remember who you truly are! Cast away the illusion of happiness and see what truly transpired. Who was the pony who, as a filly, pushed boundaries and overcame impossible odds to pass a magic test most grown unicorns could not hope to pass? Who was the pony who felt joy at seeing her teacher bring forth the dawn?”

The gloom surged in, so thick that I could barely see Luna’s blazing eyes. “Where is your fire, Twilight Sparkle? Where is thy wit and will?” Tendrils reached out from the darkness, lashing about her legs and wings, but her gaze never wavered. “Wake up. Wake up, and see what she has made you, see what she made me. Wake up, lapdog!” The tendrils, desperate to drag her from my sight, tried to force their way into her mouth and gag her, but she thrashed about. Her voice rose to a lion’s roar. “Wake up, expendable pawn!” She faded from sight, dragged off by the omnipresent, inky blackness, but as I stood there, trying to make out what had happened, one final scream reached my ears: ***“Wake up, thou simpering slave!”***

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“Wake up, my faithful student,” a melodious voice admonished, as though I was hearing a mother trying to rouse her child who had overslept by just a few minutes.

Feelings of dread and joy washed over me as I shifted, feeling a soft, downy surface beneath my back. My eyes fluttered open. “P-Princess?” Lying next to me atop the covers of a canopy bed was Princess Celestia; Her billowing mane and concerned eyes were mere inches from my drowsy gaze. “P-Princess?!” I scooted away, my face aflame as my mind raced. Princess Celestia was the enemy of Equestria. No, She was its savior and my teacher. No, Nightmare Moon was my almighty Mistress. The jewelry I wore pulsed, and as my mind cleared, I once again knew that Princess Celestia was my teacher.

Tears gathered in my eyes as the memory of what I had done returned to me—in sharp contrast to what I’d believed I was doing. “Oh... oh, Princess! It was terrible! I... I...”

“Shh...” She held me close, running a soothing hoof through my frazzled mane as Her wings folded around me. “It’s okay, Twilight. I know that it wasn’t you. Nightmare Moon was using you.” My cheeks burned all the hotter; I couldn’t remember the last time I had been this *close* to Her, close enough that a sugary-sweet scent floated into my nostrils every time I inhaled—the smell almost reminded me of waffles, or any comfort food a mother would make for a daughter the morning after a trying day. “I know you’re probably still confused, but don’t worry. Everything should become clear in time.”

“Princess, I...” The tears ran freely, no doubt staining Her flawless coat. My voice dropped to a hoarse whisper. “I betrayed you. I... I failed you. I failed Equestria.”

Her hug tightened. “Don’t you believe that, Twilight. Not for a moment. You performed admirably, my little pony.”

I buried my shame deeper into her coat, but I couldn’t stop myself from a few muffled mutters. “But... you said to make some friends, and right when I made some friends... I abandoned them.”

“Oh, them?” Her voice dropped to an uncharacteristically low tone. “They weren’t important.”

“W-what?” I pulled back.

A strange, sardonic smile graced Princess Celestia’s face. “As you can see, I was able to escape on my own. The Elements of Harmony really *were* nothing more than an old mare’s tale, I’m afraid.” She winced and averted Her gaze. “You and your friends were a distraction so I could have time to escape. I must apologize for deceiving you, Twilight.”

My eyes widened in appreciation. “No, no, not at all! I’m just glad you’re back...?” My voice trailed off to a confused whisper as my eyes—having had their fill of seeing Her again—wandered to the window. Night still reigned outside, and a few flowers in the window had begun to wilt, no doubt from a lack of sunlight. “Princess, why haven’t you raised the sun?”

She chuckled and rose from the bed, moving to the window and gazing out at Her country, Her face an unreadable mask. “I’m afraid escaping from my prison took more out of me than I care to admit, Twilight.”

The cold claw of fear seized my heart and mind, throttling them. “Are you okay?!” I rushed to Her, my eyes darting to and fro over Her flawless body in search of some wound, some burn caused by Her ordeal. “Oooh, what can we do now? If you can’t raise the sun, then all the plants will be in trouble, and everypony’s still going to be living in fear of...”

Laughter, laughter like the tinkling bells of a Hearth’s Warming Eve display soothing a saddened filly on a cold evening, sounded from the magnificent mare before me, easing my panicky mind. “Twilight, I’m not stuck like this forever. But... I do need to ask you to do something for me.”

“Anything, Mistress,” I replied without thought, dropping into a low bow that sent my tail high into the air. After a few beats of awkward silence, I rose with a cough. What was wrong with me? “I’m... I’m sorry, Princess. Something still isn’t right with me...”

I fidgeted, avoiding Her gaze. “Nightmare Moon... did something to me, made me believe I was her faithful servant.” I shivered, remembering the dark thrill of surrendering my body and soul to my lustful, insistent doppelganger as she snaked her way into my mind and body. “It was horrible... yet it kept feeling so right.”

My aimless eyes wandered to the window, and I stared listlessly out at Equestria, still shrouded in an eternal night. “I wanted... I wanted to never leave her side. I wanted to make her happy in whatever way I possibly could. I never questioned. I only obeyed.” Almost imperceptible shivers ran through my body. “She could have done anything to me, or had me do anything for her.”

I turned back to a patient Celestia. Tears pooled in my eyes as my voice dropped to a hoarse whisper. “It was like... like...”

My brain fumbled for a word, a word that I somehow knew didn’t exist in any language spoken in Equestria. An ugly, horrifying word. A word that meant someone dominating you in every way, forcing themselves upon you, just to prove that they could, just to show that they had power and you did not. In the face of such power, I had wanted it. She had *made* me want it.

Or had she? Would I have let Princess Celestia treat me in such a way just as readily? Obeying Her without question, carrying out Her will wherever I went, with nary a thought to my own goals and dreams? A student without will, one who eagerly obeyed Her every desire without ever thinking of herself: a servant who only thought of the whims and wishes set before her by another.

A slave. A happy, willing slave, willing to never do anything for herself if her Mistress commanded it. Was this what I truly was? Nightmare Moon's magic had only brought my true self to the surface. Had this servile, appeasing pony lurked in me all along, yearning for the day when the nobler princesses of my mind abdicated, leaving me a dutiful serf happy to never make another decision for herself? For all I knew, this was what my purpose in life was: my cutie mark was ambiguous enough that no comfort could be found there.

Come to think of it, my cutie mark had appeared the moment I met Celestia and accepted being Her student.

For all my drive, all my gumption, all my will, this apparently was the core of my being: a pony happy to serve, grinding herself down until the nothingness of the grave's call became impossible to resist and her mistress found a new servant.

I heard, rather than saw, Princess Celestia approach and slowly drape a wing over me, careful to not startle me. "Twilight, it's okay. I know what Nightmare Moon did to you, and I'm sorry to ask so much of you so soon, but I really have no choice. Please, Twilight. Help me save Equestria."

I sniffled, willing the tears back. As though casting off a heavy weight, I lifted my head up until I was staring directly into Her soft eyes. "Of course. But... how do I know I'm not under some kind of residual effect? What if somepony says some kind of trigger phrase or something, and I go back to...?" Fresh convulsions came over me; not even Princess Celestia pulling me in for a gentle, warm hug quelled them.

"Twilight, I examined the magic she placed on you. Fully reversing it without causing permanent damage to your mind would take more power and time than I have right now, but I did what I could. Anything I couldn't remove, I just changed so you would feel towards me rather than her."

"W-wait." I pulled away from the hug, grateful that Her wings parted to allow me to distance myself. "So you're saying... you changed me so that you're my... Mistress... now?" The word came out in an ugly, choked whine, as though I couldn't believe my own mind.

She nodded, Her eyes downcast. "It was the only way, Twilight. Please believe me."

I chuckled, feeling the sheer weight of irony come crashing down on my head. “I’m not sure what disturbs me more: that I didn’t care that I was under mind control then or that I don’t care that I’m under mind control now.”

She winced. “That is such an *ugly* phrase, Twilight. Think of it more like... like a state of *suggestion*. Nightmare Moon’s magic essentially just switched her place and mine in your memories, while amplifying your feelings for me.” She chuckled. “If anything, I should be thanking her—right now, you’re the only one I can be sure I can trust, thanks to that.”

I took a concerned step forward, not noticing when I bumped my hoof against a coffee table. “Trust? What do you mean?”

Her expression darkened, a cloud briefly passing across the sun. “Twilight, what I’m about to tell you pains me very greatly, but it must be said. There are members of my court here in Canterlot who would see Nightmare Moon triumph.”

I gasped. “No! Who would do such a thing?”

“That’s what I need you to find out. I know I can trust you, my faithful student. Under the pretense of being too ill to govern, I will appoint you as my regent. I’ll need you to sniff out the spies in Canterlot as best you can, while I do some work of my own behind the scenes to work on restoring my own power and setting a trap for them.”

I reeled: me, ruling Equestria? What madness was this? “I... Princess, I can’t. I’m... I’m still just a student! I’m not worthy of the throne, even if it’s in Your stead!” My knees gave out on me as thoughts of Equestria—all of Equestria—rattled in my brain. Everything from the woes of Ponyville’s weather squad to ensuring the Frozen North didn’t spread south would be my responsibility. I would be assigned a job that one pony, a magnificent pony, had been doing for all Her long life. Millions of ponies had passed through Canterlot’s throne room under Her loving, watchful eyes, and each life had been Her responsibility. Was I up to such a task? Could I possibly handle being the one pony responsible for the lives, the safety, and the well-being of untold thousands I’d never meet?

I plopped on the floor; the dull clang of my moon emblem necklace provided a fitting exclamation point to my conclusion. “I can’t do it, Princess,” I whispered. “I-I’m just a unicorn who writes papers and studies magic. That’s all. I can’t... I can’t be you. How could I be?” I curled up into a ball, grabbing my tail with my forehooves. “What would I do? What would I say? How would I know what was right? If I did something wrong, thousands, millions would pay the price.” My hooves twitched uncontrollably, tousling

my tail hairs. “I’d be remembered as the pony who ruined Equestria!” I wailed. “I’d undo all the things You’ve done, Princess.”

I gulped and steadied my frantic breaths, trying to look at least a little composed. “I’m so sorry; I can’t be You. Maybe... maybe I wanted to be. Back then.” When I had been just a foal, reading book after book about Her exploits and history, then I had thought that I could become just as great a pony. Now, after experiencing firsthoof being the pawn of one of Equestria’s greatest enemies, I knew that my foalhood dreams had been just that: dreams. “But now? I know my limits. I’m not You, and I never could be.”

Silence gripped the room. I couldn’t bear to look up, to see the disappointment no doubt writ large all over Her face. In a barely audible squeak, I addressed the tiles. “I’m sorry I wasted Your time.”

I lay there, awaiting Her departure so that She could find someone more worthy of Her attentions. I was just a lowly unicorn. Even if I had just been meant as bait, I had failed Her by falling to the enemy at a critical moment. Even if it were under manipulation, I had happily let the poisoned words of one who was set to ruin Equestria fill my mind with madness. I had nuzzled a bringer of darkness, even when five who were trying to bring the light stood just before me. I had been willing—eager, even—to do anything my Mistress required of me.

A more cynical part of me pointed out that it could have been worse; in the condition I was in, Nightmare Moon could have ordered me to beat the life out of the five ponies who only wanted to save me, and what would I have done?

I was not worthy of my true Mistress’ trust.

“Twilight. Look at me.”

I clamped my mouth shut against a “Yes, Mistress,” that struggled to escape my lips and looked up through a film of water at Her. The moment I saw Her, the phrase escaped anyway, which only made the growing emptiness inside me accelerate. “What, Princess? What can I do?”

“You can help me. Please, Twilight, I do wish there was some other option, but this is the only way.” She lay on the floor, bringing Her eyes—Her beautiful, reflective slits—level with mine. “Help me, my faithful student. Help Equestria. You’re the only one who can.” She leaned in.

For a brief moment, She leaned in, Her lips almost brushing mine, and my foolish heart soared on winds on anticipation; my lips tingled with anticipation, wanting nothing more in the world than to be caressed by one who would wash away the memory of their last partners. She went over my lips, however, and planted the briefest, daintiest, most innocent peck on the tip of my horn. Heat shot to my cheeks as my tail shot straight up in surprise. “P-Princess C-C-Celestia! I-I-I-I...” I averted my eyes out of sheer terror... clearly it was terror that was causing me to hyperventilate and not excitement.

Who was I kidding?

“Twilight, please.” Her silky voice settled over me like a familiar bridle guiding ever onwards towards the correct path. “I need you.”

“You... you need me?” My eyes shone as I turned back to Her. Maybe that was all I needed to hear: that the most important pony in my life needed me. A feeling of calm washed over me, eroding all my worries. Part of myself whispered that sudden shifts in mood like this were hardly healthy, but that voice faded away, drowned in the gentle pools of Her eyes.

She didn’t ruin the moment with words; She merely nodded, Her eyes shimmering like the sun’s reflection in two rippling ponds. I would quell them. I couldn’t bear to see Her upset. “Okay. I’ll... I’ll do it.”

A smile warmer than the dawn alighted on Her face; I basked in its radiance. “Take this, Twilight,” She said, levitating a scroll sealed with Her signet mark towards me. “This gives you authority to act in my name. Don’t worry: I’ll send messages to all my advisers, and you can just read them what that scroll says and they’ll understand.”

“Okay,” I murmured, unable to focus on much other than Her face.

“In the meantime, rest, Twilight. Rest.”

My eyelids grew heavy, and She floated me over to Her bed. “Will you...?”

She left the room before I finished my sentence, and all faded into darkness.

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I awoke, not from any change in the light—the moon still hung high in the sky—but from a rustling. I glanced over, only to see Her smiling face staring at me as one of her hooves stroked my mane. “Good morning, Twilight.” She grimaced, and her smile

turned down at the corners. “Or it would be if I could raise the sun.” She shifted on the bed we were sharing.

Ignoring the shameful heat coming over me, I shimmied out of bed and onto my hooves. “Don’t worry about it, Princess. I’m sure that the next dawn you bring will be all the brighter for the sun’s absence!”

A shadow of a grimace—like an instinctual reaction nurtured over years beyond counting of habit—passed over Her face for a brief moment, but vanished as quickly as it came. When she spoke, her voice took on a silky tone that I wasn’t accustomed to hearing from Her. “Oh, and it *will*, my little pony. Just please—my court has been gathered in the throne room by my guards.”

“Okay! I won’t let you down!” I was so filled with excitement I was sure I was going to explode at any moment; not only was I taking on an important mission for Her, but I was going to be the only pony in years to sit on Equestria’s throne. I’d go down in history! “Twilight Sparkle: Loyal Regent of Equestria under the Merciful, Magnificent, All-Knowing Princess Celestia of Equestria” did have a nice ring to it. Although doubts about my ability to act as caretaker lingered, Her faith in me gave me strength. I was nothing on my own, but with Her guidance, I could do anything. Anything for Her. Anything for my Mistress, the most perfect pony in Equestria.

The door to the outside loomed before me, imposing upon me the massive weight and size of what I was about to do. My knees shook despite themselves, despite my attempts to quell them—didn’t want to seem any more unworthy in Her eyes. The door, like the throne, was so much *bigger* than me. Than anypony, really.

“I...” I coughed, trying to clear the sudden lump in my throat. Could I do this?

The most beautiful, powerful voice in the world sounded from behind me. “Twilight.”

“Y-yes?” I turned, fearful of having disappointed Her with my apprehension.

“I believe in you.” Her smile—so simple, so stark, so powerful, just like the celestial body She ruled—blazed with a power that I drew on, a plant desperately trying to draw all the sustenance it could from a faraway star.

“O-okay. I... I am not worthy of...”

“Oh, just get going already.” Her smile grew a tad impatient, and I scurried to do Her bidding.

“Y-yes, Mistress!” I scurried off, not thinking twice about my instantaneous obedience.

• • •

In moments, I found myself before the entrance to the throne room. The usual crowd of petitioners had been turned away today—something I was very grateful for—so all that remained was a cavernous hall with only myself and two guards.

These guards looked a bit different than the norm. Their coats appeared black as the night—although I knew that without the armor on, they’d have normal coat colors—and their eyes... something wasn’t quite right with their eyes. Their eyes were golden, which wasn’t unheard of in ponies, but their pupils appeared narrowed and catlike, or even a bit draconic in nature. On top of that, leathery bat wings were folded at their sides. A half-forgotten memory, like a history book I’d been forced to forget, stirred in the back of my mind, whispering tidbits about a banished princess, but I dismissed the foalish thoughts.

I had more pressing concerns.

“Hello, sirs. Is the court gathered?”

They nodded, both moving in one fluid motion. It was a little creepy to watch, actually—had the guards formed some kind of hivemind when I’d had my back turned? “It has, Miss Sparkle,” they answered in unison.

“Okay. Thank you.”

They opened the doors for me, and I strode through.

A small herd of ponies had gathered around a well-appointed, solid table placed just below Her throne. They all looked up—a collage of coat colors, manes, horns, and wings—as the grand doors creaked open, signifying my arrival. It was difficult not to feel small in the presence of such important ponies, in such a critical place, but I had to believe in Her faith in me. It was all I could cling to.

A multitude of hushed whispers erupted among the ponies upon seeing me. I couldn’t tell what they were saying, but I couldn’t let it bother me. I kept walking, the distance feeling like dozens of miles, towards the front of the room, where a choice of two seats awaited me: Princess Celestia’s throne or a simple, plush pillow.

After a moment's deliberation, I sat on the cushion, feeling it sink under my weight somewhat. I spotted a few nods around the table—most of them seemed to approve of me sitting with them rather than putting myself above them. Well, that was a start.

“H-hello, everypony. I’m Twilight Sparkle, Princess Celestia’s student. She... She sent me here with a message for you all...” I levitated the scroll, hoping that seeing Her seal on the scroll would calm my nerves. A few murmurs went around the table; they knew as well as I did that Her seal was difficult if not impossible to duplicate. Although a simple thing in appearance, it required tremendous amounts of magic to create, far beyond even my abilities. I had tried once as a joke; thankfully She had forgiven me, as She always had.

“Why hasn’t she raised the sun?” one of them asked.

“It should all be explained in this.” I broke the seal, unrolled it, and began to read.

“To my court: I’m sure you’re all wondering why Twilight Sparkle is before you, reading this proclamation. I’m sure you’ve heard rumors and unofficial reports, and a full one will be made available to you soon, but I was attacked by Nightmare Moon—the Mare in the Moon—just before the Summer Sun Celebration. I was left weakened, but thanks in large part to the efforts of my pupil Twilight Sparkle, I was able to escape banishment in the sun...” I paused; my pupils shrank to tiny pinpricks. “She... she was trapped in the sun?” I shivered. Being bound, helpless, in the very thing you were born to guide across the heavens? What a horrific fate.

Noticing a few urging motions to continue, I did so. “I was able to escape banishment in the sun and re-imprison Nightmare Moon someplace a bit more secure. However, doing so left me in an extremely weakened state. I will recover, given time, but I will not be able to raise the sun for a brief period.”

Worried murmurs broke out as expressions of hope on equine faces turned to alarm. I lowered the scroll. “Don’t worry, everypony. I spoke to her not too long ago, and She’ll recover. She has a plan.”

I returned to the scroll. “In order to focus on my recovery, I am appointing Twilight Sparkle as regent of Equestria until such time that I can resume my duties. I expect you all to help with the day-to-day business of the country as much as you can—Twilight will need to spend a lot of time reassuring worried ponies that I’m okay. I’d do this myself if I could, but I think seeing a sunrise again needs to be my main focus.” Another burst of worried chatter came from the table.

“She’ll be fine, everypony. Trust me.” Once they stopped fretting, I returned to the final portion of the letter. “As you may have noticed, the Royal Guard looks a bit different now. They should now be much more capable of functioning at night, which sadly might be necessary for some time. They’re still the same ponies who have served Equestria loyally underneath that new armor, so don’t worry.

“Stay strong, my little ponies. I’ll be with you again soon. I’m counting on each and every one of you. Signed, Her Royal Highness Princess Celestia of Equestria.” I emphasized the last part, quickly surveying the table for any guilty looks that might clue me in to a traitor. However, I saw nothing but sincerity... unless court intrigue was so new to me that I couldn’t see past their masks of concern.

“Would you mind if I took a look at that, Miss Sparkle?” a bespectacled unicorn asked. I recognized him as one of the “regular” teachers at Princess Celestia’s School for Gifted Unicorns. Since I’d always had Her as my mentor, I didn’t know his name, but something about the tone of his blue fur seemed familiar, as though I had seen him years ago.

I relinquished my grip on the scroll, only for it to be caught in his magic. He floated it over and examined it closely, poring over every word. “It’s Princess Celestia’s writing, all right, and the seal appears genuine.”

A cold feeling of hurt throbbed in my chest. “Don’t you trust me?”

“I’m afraid it’s not a question of trust, Miss Sparkle. It’s more... a question of caution. And, forgive me for saying so, but showing up here wearing, well...” His eyes traced downwards on my body, and for a moment, I thought he was thinking something obscene, before I realized what he was getting at.

“Oh, this?” I brushed the moon collar with a hoof, feeling an electric thrill shoot through me from the contact. “I wear this...” Don’t say, “I wear this because I’m under a mind control spell put on me by the Mare in the Moon that’s still kind of in effect, but it’s okay because I think of Princess Celestia as my Mistress now and obey her at the drop of a crown,” Twilight. What do I take these ponies for, crazy? Sudden inspiration struck. “I wear this because... to remind me of what I must fight.”

“Fight?” a noble asked.

“Yes... fight.” I nodded. “I wear this as a reminder of the temptation to take the easy way out, the temptation to just give up and let those who would see Equestria fall win. Just

think: right now, crops are withering in this long night, and everything and everyone who depends on those plants—us included—is in greater peril the longer this lasts. Sure, I could just roll over and meekly submit to a malevolent force, letting it have its way with me and Equestria, doing... d-doing whatever it wants.”

My voice warbled as the memory of my corrupted doppelganger forcing herself on me rose from the depths of my mind, lavishing kiss after loving kiss upon me regardless of my feelings; I summoned all the willpower I had to force those thoughts away. I had to focus. Had to be strong for Her.

“But no! I will not yield so easily to that seemingly gentle night. The night has its place... but we need the sun. We need Princess Celestia. And I’m going to do all I can to make sure she can focus on getting healthy again by doing the best I can at what she has asked me to do. Are you with me?” I felt a bit cliché, pointing a hoof at the collected government officials of Canterlot (minus Her, of course), but it seemed like the thing to do.

For a few tense moments, nopony moved. Then, slowly, one by one, each pony stomped their hooves in approval; a few even cheered! I had always prided myself on my speaking abilities.

“Not bad for a novice orator!”

“Inspiring.”

“Equestria is in good hooves until Her Majesty recovers.”

“I’m behind you all the way, Miss Sparkle!”

A frown came over my face as I realized that any of those ponies—these ponies who were cheering my heartfelt speech—could be one of the traitors She was trying to find.

What followed was a flurry of activity; there were forms to sign, regalia to be made (even though I insisted She would be fine before long), and many hurried lectures that were essentially a crash course in Equestrian government. I knew the basics of how our government worked, but my studies were on magic, not civics, so many of these facts were new to me. More than once, I found myself wondering how I was going to handle being regent with so many things to remember.

Time and again, when I’d voice my concern, the pony speaking to me would smile, offer assurances, and say to not worry about the section of the government they oversaw. This

made me worry. If all these ponies were to intend to try anything to seize power, I'd be none the wiser; yet they all seemed so trustworthy, knowledgeable, and honest! Was this the sort of thing that Princess Celestia had to deal with on a daily basis?

The rest of the "day" was a blur of different coats, manes, cutie marks, and races of petitioners, all with the same questions: "Is Princess Celestia okay? When will she be coming back? Will the sun rise soon?" All the while, I remained on a throne I was not worthy to sit in, feeling inadequate. Still, I reasoned, it was good to know my place.

I smiled as best I could and offered reassuring answers, but as the hours—I assume they were hours, at least—dragged on, I found myself inwardly growing more and more impatient with these ponies. When could I see my precious Mistress again? Still, I soldiered on. I had to do my best for Her.

Finally, the end of the "day," blessed relief that it would be, arrived. I knew I had a few more ponies to deal with, but I was exhausted.

I turned to one of the guards perpetually standing near the throne. "Sorry, but could you start informing ponies that I won't be seeing any more petitioners?"

He nodded and moved towards the door; several of his fellows joined him, and they began gently herding protesting ponies out of the throne room.

I climbed down off my Mistress' too-large throne with a sigh of relief. It had felt strange—wrong, even—to have sat on that throne, unable to fill it properly, for hours on end, pretending to be as wise as Celestia. Gratefully, I shuffled away from the seat I was unworthy of filling, off to Her chambers to see what She had discovered. No doubt all of Her court wanted to pat me on the back for my "stupendous" and "amazing" job I had done filling Her horseshoes. Well, I wasn't going to have it. No pony was as important as Her. No pony.

Soon, I found myself before the impressive double doors that led to Her chambers. The guards posted outside both gave me a nod, recognizing my new rank. It still felt strange, getting deference from every pony; I was nothing compared to Her magnificence. Less than nothing, even.

I lifted a hoof and knocked, figuring I'd keep up the charade. "P-Princess? I hope I'm not disturbing you... are you well enough for me to come in?"

In what was probably an affected tone, She answered with a rasp, "Yes... Twilight. Do... do come in."

I slipped inside, careful not to let the guards see even a hint of the room. As ever, they stood somberly, staring into their silent surroundings. I smiled. Those guards... they'd never change.

I closed the door behind me and stared into the darkened room. "I... Princess? Are you here?"

"Of course, Twilight. I knew you'd be coming." With a flash from Her grand horn, light flooded into the room, revealing its familiar trappings of cushy comfort. She Herself sat on a pile of cushions. With an incline of the head, She invited me to join Her. I gratefully did so, flipping my tiny crown off my head and flopping onto the cushion. I nuzzled into Her warm, welcoming coat, relishing the feeling of safety and security from being so close to Her.

"Twilight," that melodious, perfect, angelic voice said.

"Yes?" Regretfully, I removed my muzzle from Her sweet coat to stare upward into Her beautiful purple eyes.

"About the traitor hunt..."

"Oh... I'm sorry. I couldn't find any! Everypony seemed honest enough. I'll try harder, I promise!"

A smile more radiant than the dawn and a light chuckle as airy as a breeze answered my plea for clemency. "Oh, Twilight, it's quite all right. You see..." She lowered Her voice to a whisper. "I found the traitors myself."

My eyes widened and my ears shot upwards. What ponies would dare try to disrespect Princess Celestia like that? Who could be so despicable, so low, so heretical? "Who is it?"

She leaned in further, so close I felt hot blasts of exhalation from Her muzzle. She glanced around quickly, as though expecting an assassin to leap from the shadows any moment. "My entire court," She whispered.

My mouth hung open. "Wh-what?"

Her eyes glanced downward in shame. "Yes, Twilight." She turned her head away minutely, as though ashamed that She had led some of Her ponies astray. "I'm afraid I misjudged them all. Every last one is plotting to take you out of the picture and have my caretaker 'tragically' misdiagnose me so I die in my sleep." Her grin—an out-of-place,

predatory curl of dark pleasure—spoke volumes of victory. “Little did they suspect that there were no nurses or doctors to bribe, so they were making inquiries just so I could catch them red-hooved.”

“B-but... my... my brother is... is... he’s one of those ponies...” It seemed impossible. Shining Armor, party to a plot to murder both his little sister and Her? I turned away, sniffing. It was all too difficult to process; what had my life become?

“Twilight, look at me.”

I obeyed instantaneously.

“I know it’s hard. I know it’s downright *cruel* to ask you to do more than you’ve done... but I need you to help me stop them. Help me save Equestria... and our lives in the process.”

“Of course. Anything. What do you need me to do?” My crisis of faith aside, self-preservation—and preserving Her life, of course—still ranked pretty high on my “to do” list. Even beyond my own puny life, I would die for Her. My life would eventually end anyway, but Hers had years and years—perhaps all the years that would ever happen for all I knew—left. The world would not be the same without such a perfect pony.

“I need you to meet with my court—they probably want to talk to you anyway, advance their plan—and call them to a secret meeting here in three hours.”

“I... here? Are you—”

“Yes. Tell them that I have recovered enough to see them all again, and I have joyous news to share with them all.” A wan smile played over Her face. “Most joyous news.”

“Oh, it’s a trap! I get it. I suppose you’ll be recruiting members of the Guard to storm in?”

Her smile grew warm as She directed it at me. “As ever, you catch on quickly, my faithful student. I will, of course, want you there as well—I may need your help if they try to resist. Can I count on you?”

Not one thought flickered through my mind before I settled on my answer. “Always, Princess. I’ll go tell them.” I rose, feeling downright giddy. This would all be over soon.

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I stood next to Princess Celestia, anxiously awaiting the arrival of the traitorous court. I had, for the purpose of this rank I still disliked, donned my miniature crown and stood poised to welcome all Her “guests.”

Two platoons of Royal Guards were waiting on standby just down the hall, and an emergency squad was lurking in Celestia’s voluminous closet. How all four of them had managed to fit in there, I’d never know. Still, some anxiety refused to die: what if things got violent? I was no soldier; I’d never even had to defend myself. My hooves quaked; all things considered, I had led a pretty sheltered life in Canterlot. Danger, real danger, had lurked right here in the castle, and I had never known.

I shifted, nuzzling Princess Celestia briefly. “I’m... I’m scared, Princess.”

She turned to me, quirking an eyebrow. “Why, we’ll be fine, my little pony. Don’t worry—they won’t know what’s going to hit them until it’s far too late. And we’ll be safe. Trust in me, and in the guards—both have protected you and Equestria since before you were born.”

My shoulders slumped as I let out a tense breath I hadn’t realized I’d been holding. “Okay. You will go easy on them, won’t you? I mean... I know my brother is a good pony, at least! I’m sure there’s some reason behind him doing this!”

My fear returned tenfold as She said nothing, instead fixing Her face into Her usual mask of serenity.

We waited for several minutes in silence. Abruptly, She spoke. “Come to think of it, Twilight, maybe you should be the one to greet them.” Upon seeing my terror-filled look inspired by the thought of being alone with all those dangerous ponies, She chuckled. “Oh, I’ll be just on the balcony, and the Guard team will come out of the closet and help you if things get dangerous.” She raised her voice. “Right?”

“Yes, ma’am!” the four stallions chorused.

I chuckled in spite of myself; they hadn’t caught one of the Princess’ famous jokes. “Okay. Just... don’t go too far, okay?”

“I promise.” Suddenly, she vanished before my eyes.

“Wh...” I shook my head. It was probably just some advanced form of teleportation, or maybe She could bend the light around Her magical aura to hide Her magic. I couldn’t risk any early arrivals hearing me talking to myself and getting spooked.

So I sat, listening for the faint, muffled sounds of the nearby guards breathing. Shining Armor had once told me that they had a special breathing exercise for situ—no. Best not to think about him. That would only make this harder. But how could my brother—my kind, gentle brother—be one of the traitors?

Eventually, the ponies started filtering in. I nodded to each of them in turn as they gave me slight bows. They all took up various positions around the room, clearly unused to meeting here. Judging by the gawks on some of their faces, they had never been in Her chambers before.

Either that, or they were just looking for places to hide an assassin.

Shining Armor arrived and made a beeline for me. I winced inwardly; would I have to lie to him? “Twiley, the crown looks good on you,” he whispered, sitting down on a nearby cushion.

I gave him an awkward smile. “I just hope I don’t have to get used to it. Today’s been exhausting... well, if I can even call it a day.”

The smiles on both our faces vanished. “So what’s this all about? Has Celestia recovered so soon? Is she going to raise the sun right here?”

Those wide blue eyes of his begged for answers. Answers he wouldn’t like. Answers that I could not give. She would not allow me to give them. “Sorry... She doesn’t want me to talk about it. The Princess would explain it better anyway.”

“A surprise, huh?” He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Well, okay then.” Thankfully, he seemed content with that and relaxed as others filtered in.

I gazed across the room, taking in all the curious glances directed towards me. I kept a friendly—or what I hoped passed for friendly, given the mortal terror that beat through my veins—smile on my face, nodding when they would offer some small gesture of deference in return. I just wanted to go back to how things used to be—none of this regent stuff, none of this “fearing for my life” business: I was ready to be done with it and just go back to being a faithful student of magic under Her watchful protection.

One of the door guards gave me a knowing nod. Everypony had arrived.

I motioned for him to shut the door—against eavesdropping, of course, not because I was setting a trap for ponies who were plotting to kill me for their own personal gain, such a thing would be completely ridiculous and *oh Celestia was I really doing this?* I

inhaled and exhaled deeply to calm my nerves. Everything would be all right. She had said so, and She was never wrong.

“Hello, everypony. I’m sure you’re all wondering why you were called here today—tonight?” A few of them chuckled at my unintentional joke, although a few fearful eyes flicked over to the windows’ view of the eternal night. “First of all, I must thank you all for preparing me for my duties as Regent on such short notice. I am forever in all of your debt.”

Faint murmurs of “It was nothing,” and other such sentiments arose from prideful mouths.

I continued. “I know it’s been a long night for us all—Celestia knows I could use some sleep—but I felt that we all needed to hear what I and the Princess have gathered you here to hear. Princess Celestia has shown remarkable improvement since I spoke with you all and read Her proclamation, and She’s eager to speak with you all.” I coughed, hoping nopony thought my over-emphasis of “her” and “she” was strange. Cursed magic. “And so, without any more delays or ados, it is my great pleasure to introduce my teacher, Her Royal Highness Princess Celestia of Equestria!”

I threw open the blinds and windowpanes She was hiding behind, expecting to hear polite applause and some cheers. Instead, a room full of shocked gasps answered me. I took a quick glance, but all I saw was Princess Celestia. Sure, She had a rather stern expression on Her face, no doubt in preparation for a stern talking-to, but there was nothing to be afraid of.

“N... Nightmare Moon,” a pony breathed.

I rounded on him. “What are you talking about? Have you gone crazy? That’s Princess Celestia, as sure as I’m talking to you!”

Princess Celestia advanced into the room, and all pandemonium broke out. Terrified ponies screaming insanity about Her being the Mare in the Moon ran for the door, only to be met by the Royal Guards who had been lurking just outside; the reinforcements surged in to support their comrades. The loyal guards, I noted with satisfaction, were holding back the traitors well. Other nobles went for the windows, but I quickly slammed those shut with magic fields, trapping them between my Mistress and Her guards.

Shining Armor, looking furiously everywhere, kept screaming, “Stand down! Stand down!” at the guards who were starting to haul away some of the more panicked ponies. None heeded his order, and he rounded on me.

“Twilight Sparkle, what have you done?! Are you crazy? You’ve betrayed us all!”

I glared back at him, matching him intensity for intensity. “No. I’ve saved us all.” I softened my gaze. “Don’t worry, I know you probably didn’t *want* to be in on this. We’ll stop them.” I spread my forelegs, offering him a hug. “It’s okay now.”

Instead, he rushed the space between us and started shaking me, rattling my unprepared body to and fro with his strength. “Twilight, what’s happened to you?! Why are you helping Nightmare Moon? Wake up... *wake up!* Twiley, *please!*”

“M-Mistress, help me!” I cried in desperation. For all I knew, he was going to start choking me.

Shining Armor was hefted off the ground effortlessly by Her magic, and She stepped forward, gazing at him with a smug expression. “I’m afraid your sister can’t help you. She knows who her princess is.”

Shining grit his teeth, rage building behind his normally placid face. With a cry, he lit up his horn and tried to break free, but a smug Princess Celestia held him fast. His desperation growing, he took a quick glance at me before saying, “You monster! What have you done to her?!”

I rushed to just below him. “She hasn’t done anything to me! Please, stop this craziness—you’re scaring me! It’s *okay* now! You don’t have to pretend to be their friends any more. You’re safe!”

She smiled, stressing and emphasizing Her words more forcefully than I had ever heard Her do. “Why, what an *inconsiderate* brother you are. Making his sister fret like that... can’t you see the poor thing is *distressed*? You should just declare your allegiance to *me* and calm the poor thing’s nerves.” A small wisp of Her magic reached over and stroked my mane gently.

He spat on Her face. “Never!”

It was true. I shuddered in fear. The one pony I thought would never betray Equestria was in league with its enemies. What had happened to my life? To everypony’s life?

He turned to me, ignoring my quailing. “Don’t worry, Twilight. I don’t know what she’s done to you, but I’ll save you! Nightmare Moon won’t—“

Something inside me broke. “That’s *Princess Celestia!* Have you all gone blind or do you just think I’m an idiot?! It’s like I don’t even know you any more! Don’t talk about saving me.” I walked up to my Mistress, who draped a protective wing around me. “I’m fine right here. This is where I belong. I thought you of all ponies would understand that.”

“Oh, Twilight,” he whispered, tears pooling in his eyes.

“Take him away!” Princess Celestia commanded, glee resounding in Her voice as She released him from her magic. All the other courtiers had been hauled out of the room, presumably to the dungeons, where She would give them a stern talking-to once they’d broken free of their mass hysteria. Forty guards surged forward, swarming my brother and ensuring he could not break free.

“That’s Nightmare Moon! Please, believe me!” Shining Armor cried, his eyes frantically searching for somepony, anypony to help him, before settling on me. “Twiley—please. Help your brother,” he whispered as the guards started to drag him through the door. His lips quivered; misery was etched into every line of his face.

I stepped forward, motioning for the guards to stand aside. They did so, although they remained tense and ready to spring into action if needed. Shining stood under his own power, his ears standing straighter as I walked to him. “Twiley...”

In the midst of Her guards, I hugged him, offering him my support. “Don’t worry, big brother. I forgive you.” I felt him tense in my forelegs, and suddenly the guards shoved me away as they sprang to restrain a panicking Shining Armor. My brother was strong, but not even he could fight forty Royal Guards at once. Eventually, his bruised body was held in their triumphant hooves.

His head hung in defeat, the former captain of the royal guard was hauled away to answer for his sins against Her.

“I win,” Princess Celestia whispered behind me. “I win!” She laughed, gently at first, but it grew into a cackle of terrible power. Lightning crackled in the sky, silhouetting Her triumphant form.

My heart skipped a beat—She was so authoritative. I liked it. Daring to let myself revel as She was, I joined in Her laughter. Once She stopped, and nothing but pure joy was written on Her beautiful face, I said, “We win, Princess! We... we stopped them!”

Equestria is safe.” Daring even further, I darted up and nuzzled Her, expecting an affectionate return from Her. My eyes closed, letting me immerse myself fully in Her scent, the feel of Her coat.

However, I felt nothing but the air on my back in return.

“Get away from me, foal.” My mentor’s voice cut the air, a sudden blade of ice thrust into the warm body of my happiness.

I acquiesced, backing away and casting my opened eyes downward. “W-what did I do, Mistress?”

“Nothing. You have done well.”

I looked up, eyes shining in gratitude. “Oh, thank you, M—”

“I have no further need of you. Begone.” Her stare, as emotionless as the very walls of the room we stood in, shook me to my core.

“W—but I—b-b-but I—”

“Did you not hear me? I said... *begone, foal!*” She rushed forward, blinking through the distance between us in an instant. Before I had time to even breathe again, one of Her hooves slammed into my midsection, sending me skidding across the suddenly burning carpet before my spine slammed into a wall.

I looked up from my prone position, my tail and legs curling underneath me meekly; I shivered despite myself, feeling cold and abandoned. “M... Mistress, please... what have I done to displease you? Have I... haven’t I done everything you... you wanted? Please, I just... I just want to make you happy...” I swallowed, feeling my shame slide down my gullet as tears broke free of my eyes. My voice took on a rasp as desperation tinted my voice. “You’ve always been the most important pony in my life. I... please, I don’t know what my lowly self has done to anger you, and I’m sorry I failed you, but I... I... Please, just let me go on being your faithful... faithful...” A foreign voice whispered the word “slave” in my mind, but I simply let my plea trail into silence, hoping my mournful expression would do the rest.

She turned away from me without so much as a shadow of regret passing over Her glorious face and addressed Her guards. “Remove this miserable excuse for a pony from my sight.”

As the hard hooves of the guards resounded softly on the carpeted floor, I closed my eyes, resigning myself to my fate.

I didn't know how, I didn't know why, but I had failed Her.

I offered no resistance as the guards dragged me from Her presence. My sight, shocked by Her outburst, lazily drifted downward, coming to rest on my back two legs as the guards dragged me to my fate.

Drag. Scrape. Drag drag scrape.

What did anything matter anymore? I had failed Her somehow. If She did not want me around, my life had no meaning, no value, no purpose. Everything I did, every breath I took, was solely for Her benefit. If She saw no more use for me, was there a point in continuing on?

My life had not truly begun until She had raised the sun before me, inspiring me to study magic. I had spent the rest of my youth chasing the sun—chasing a dream that on some level I knew to be impossible—but like any optimistic foal, I thought I had to try.

When She took me under Her wing—even given me my cutie mark when I submitted to Her power silencing my own wild torrent of raw magical ability—I had wanted nothing more. Nothing more but to be at Her side, learning whatever I could from Her. If I couldn't reach the sun, I could at least bask in its life-giving, all-powerful glory, a plant straining for sustenance.

Drag. Scrape. Drag scrape.

Even now, I only wanted to help. No pony was as important as Her—particularly a lowly servant like me.

Drag. Scrape. Drag.

My body went limp, causing the guards' movement to stutter for a moment as I became entirely dead weight. Even my ears felt unwilling to hold themselves up; if it were possible for a healthy horn to sag in lack of excitement, mine would have. Ignoring their muttered curses, I considered my position. She thought nothing of me now. Sure, had I wanted to, I could have shoved away the guards in a burst of magic and ran to Her, begged for Her forgiveness, and maybe prevail upon Her infinite mercy to spare me...

Drag. Scrape.

But that wasn't what She wanted.

Foolish. Pathetic.

Their steps quickened. Drag. Scrape. Drag drag scrape.

Stupid. Pitiful.

Scrape.

Worthless. Wasteful.

Their steps stopped, and I was heaved unceremoniously onto a hard stone floor. The air rushed out of me as my stomach slammed onto it and I rolled into the wall, eliciting a fresh flare of pain from my already justly abused spine.

My eyes remained glued to the floor, studying the lines of the tile and their accumulated grime with empathy. There was no point in moving if She wished me to remain here. Instead, I would simply remain, collecting moss and dirt, as She wished me to.

The guards popped a tray of food in. The unappetizing aroma of a daisy sandwich left out in the heat too long filled my nostrils. “Eat it,” the guard said.

My head remained on the ground. What good was there in eating? I’d failed everyone. Just when I thought I had had a chance at redemption for giving my very self so freely to Nightmare Moon as I had, Princess Celestia had discarded me for being a failure.

One of the guards scoffed. “Suit yourself.” I heard their twin quartets of steps fade into the distance.

As I laid there, focusing on nothing but Her, as was fitting and proper, I heard echos of the two guards chattering.

“Imagine. The regent being a traitor.” Desperately, I wished to meld into the stones—letting ponies walk all over me sounded better than my current position. Was I still too full of myself to help Princess Celestia to the best of my meager ability? “I saw that one back when she was a filly. It’s really a shame, trying to ruin all of Equestria like that. She used to be such a nice little foal, all smiles for us guards...”

A snort from his comrade. “I always knew there were something off about that filly.”

“So, have you heard anything from the Cloudsdale squads?”

The guard nickered in a short, irritated burst. “Oh, the rebellion’s still giving us trouble there. Those ponies don’t know when to quit. That one pretending to be a Wonderbolt among them. Dunno why she’d want to do that when they all joined the Shadowbolts, but anypony crazy enough to try to rebel against the crown’s gotta have a few screws loose anyway, I figure.”

“At least the other rebel-held territories are falling easily enough.”

“Yeah.”

All was silent: apparently, that was all they had to say.

As I studied the floor, I pondered what I’d just heard. A pony pretending to be a Wonderbolt? Rebellion running rampant in Equestria? I deflated a bit more; such things were beyond my ken. All I could do was to return to Her side. If I begged for her mercy, showed Her the depths of my devotion, then perhaps She would show me mercy.

I had to believe that. I had to. I touched a trembling hoof to my necklace, which glowed with a soothing light, reassuring me of my faith in Her.

• • •

### **Mistress. Mistress.**

That word, that perfect, absolute representation of **Her**—boomed in my head. The sound of my own voice, my own subordinate name, seemed muted, tinier somehow. It was fitting, really: i was of no significance next to **Her**, so what right did i have to equate myself with **Her** in my own mind? Such selfishness could not be allowed if i were to regain **Her** good graces.

Days, weeks—for all i knew, even months—passed, and i rarely ate or drank; though the sun refused to rise, the constant glow of the symbol of my link to my **Mistress** kept my conviction strong and my love ever growing. The endless night grew colder and colder, and my breath came out in misting puffs. Every now and then—it was difficult to tell time with the moon always hanging in the sky—the guards would come in and force me to take in nourishment, over my protests, which were halfhearted at best. If **She** was forcing me to eat, then **She** still cared about me! Even if it was just making sure i didn’t die, **She** still cared!

This elation quickly wore off, however, as the guards forcing food and water down my throat became a chore rather than a joyous occasion. About a week after they’d started

forcing me to eat at least once per day, one of the guards asked, “Why aren’t you eating anything, you stupid mare?”

i turned to him, meeting his golden eyes with my own, no-doubt-sunken gaze. “Because **She** did not tell me to,” i told him, explaining the obvious truth. Clearly, **She** was just holding me here until **She** thought of further ways i could serve **Her**.

Why, if i squinted long enough, this cell became an elegant chamber high in one of the castle’s towers, and the guards my concerned coltservants. Yes, i was an important pony: i was **Her** faithful student, after all! Even if i had fallen from **Her** favor, i was still **Her** most loyal of servants. The posh place was perhaps beyond my station, but a mare took what luxury she could get. It wasn’t like i deserved to be punished because i was a filthy failure who was not worthy to lick **Her** hooves but i still wanted to if it would earn me forgiveness and i i i i would do anything and—

The guard chuckled, his silky butler outfit clinking as his whole body shook. “Wow, the stories were true.”

i chose not to dignify that with a response. The guar—servants continued force-fee—offering me only the finest of half-rot—gourmet daisy sandwiches, divine enough to even grace **Her** lips. Ah, how **She** spoiled such a pitiful pony who disappointed **Her** and then was thrown in the dungeons and forgotten about like a **naughty naughty filly who must be punished failure failure** and it was all what i deserved and then i’d die alone and **She** would remember me after i was gone oh yes **She** would remember what a good and faithful servant i had been and a good student besides and I had only wanted what was best for **Her Her Her Her Her** i only wanted **Her Her Her Her Her** why did **She** leave me alone i didn’t have anypony else and the darkness is pushing in and i’m so cold and lonely in this world because ponies aren’t as easy as books but **She** was different and **She** was like a book that never ended that i’d read long after i’d memorized even though i’d never finish it no pony could know another completely, particularly not **Her** and won’t **She** just come and give me a hug and i just want to be loved and **She She She**—

“Ugh! In Nightmare’s name, just shut up!” a guard roared, slapping me on the muzzle, sending a few drops of blood splattering onto the floor. Reality came swimming back—cold, harsh reality, and tears swam to my eyes.

“i... i’m sorry.”

“Aw, look, you made the Princess’ pet cry,” a different guard remarked. This triggered a round of chuckles from his comrades, even as they tried to force food down my unworthy throat.

Pet. Pet? Was that what **She** wanted of me?

“Great, now she’s rambling again,” the first guard muttered. “Let’s hurry up and finish.”

Moments later, they finished forcing me to eat and left, leaving me to my musing.

Pet? Was that how everypony saw me? How **She** saw me? Unbidden, one of my hooves brushed the choker i wore; a shudder ran through my body as my hoof caressed its smooth finish. Maybe i was a pet. A loyal pet at her **Mistress**’ beck and call, ready to do **Her** bidding at the merest gesture. Still, when **Her** wishes were “stay out of my sight,” what was a loyal pet to do?

“Sit, pet! Stay!” The guards howled with laughter as they left.

i lowered myself back down to the floor, back into the comfortable position i spent most of my time waiting for **Her** to save me from what **She** had done. Why act on my own? All i had to do was to follow what **She** wished because **She** knew far better than a lowly pony such as i what was best.

What did **She** wish? All i wanted was to be with **Her**. “Tell me what to do, Princess Celestia,” i whispered to the floor, hoping against reason for someone, something, to tell me what to do. “If i’m... if being your... p-pet is what you want from me, then that’s what i’ll do. Just tell me how to live my life. Tell me what i should study next, what i should do next.” An idle hoof traced the contours of a tile not worn to nothingness. “Doing what You told me to is always what i’ve done best. i see that now. i was not worthy to act on my own. i presumed too much when i forgave my brother.”

i curled into a ball. “i’m a waste of a pony. i’m not worthy to serve. i’m not worthy to kiss Her hooves.”

If i wasn’t good for that, what was i good for? i’d failed **Her**. Right when **She** had needed me the most, i had let **Her** down. All i could do was wait until **She** decided to forgive me. That was **Her** wish, and **Her** wishes were all that mattered.

Following orders felt good. Following orders felt right. i could do no good on my own, but as a trusty tool wielded by **Her** under **Her** close orders, i could do great things. And if i labored for **Her**, that was all i needed. What were my own needs before **Her** concerns? i

was just one pony; **She** was the world. The soothing light from my lunar necklace intensified, as though encouraging my wise and correct reasoning. My body, in its weakness, grew weary from the night's devotions.

My eyelids closed, and i drifted into a sleep as empty as my own ambitions.

• • •

A huge crash sounded, rousing me from my slumber. Panicked shouts echoed from down the hallway. i remained limp on the floor. These things did not concern me; **She** was probably not here, so i had no reason to take interest.

After a few minutes, the noise died, and the subtle swishing of air near me told me that I had been visited by a pegasus. This, too, did not matter. Unless... i glanced up, hoping against hope that **She** had changed **Her** perfect will and released me from **Her** dungeons in a truly dramatic fashion, as **She** was wont to do.

Instead, a pony in a Wonderbolt costume stared at me from behind her goggles; her mouth was set in grim determination. There was no horn on her rainbow-maned head, so I sat my own back down, waiting for **Her**, new orders, or death.

“Sheesh, Twilight, most ponies are a little more *grateful* when they’re rescued!” the Wonderbolt said in a familiar voice brimming with confidence.

i snorted. “Rescue me from what? My own failure?”

She touched down, her padded hooves barely audible in the silence of the unending night of the prisons. “Oh, come on! This is no time for moping around! Equestria needs you! Princess Celestia needs you!”

In an instant, i teleported outside the bars in a flash of magic. “What? She needs me? Did She send you here? What’s wrong? What can i do?”

Rainbow Dash grinned. “And here I thought I was gonna have to drag you. Seriously, though—you *are* loyal to Princess Celestia, right?”

i nodded. “i feel horrible about what happened before... Princess Celestia changed the magic on this so i’m loyal to Her now.” i brushed my lunar necklace, blushing as i noticed a flicker of confusion behind Dash’s goggles. My terms of respect had become even more pronounced in my speech, it seemed.

“Wait, so you mean you’ve got a way to get in touch with her?!” She leaned in, her eyes sparkling with a hope beyond hope.

After a pause of confusion spent leaning back from that intense gaze, i nodded. Of course i could speak to **Her**.

Rainbow Dash cheered. “Awesome! And don’t worry about before. I knew that couldn’t have been you. It was just all that weird hocus pocus on that necklace. I mean, we’re friends, right?” She beckoned for me to follow and walked off towards what appeared to be a blank wall.

“Friends...” i murmured, feeling a swell of emotion not unlike that which i felt for my **Mistress** within me. So long as **She** came first, friends wouldn’t hurt. Friends could even be nice.

“Come on, Twilight!” Rainbow Dash yelled, waving a costumed hoof.

i left the scene of my misery behind, feeling my spirits improving with each step. **She** would surely be pleased if i could show **Her** at least one pony survived my mistakes, even though i didn’t know how she had gotten her hooves on a Wonderbolts costume. Never once did it cross my mind that Dash was the traitor the guards had spoken of; she was far too loyal of a friend to do that.

Right?

• • •

“So...” we both said at once as we walked down a secret passage Dash had opened.

“You first,” i said, noting with something akin to pride how instinctual letting others have their way was getting; if **She** wanted me to be a pet, i’d make myself the ideal of one.

“So, Twilight... doesn’t it bother you that you’re still under that magic mumbo-jumbo? I mean, I know you probably know about that stuff yourself, but it’s messing with your head, even if it is for Princess Celestia. Doesn’t that bother you?” She kept her eyes forward, focusing on picking us a path through the occasional bit of rubble as we moved forward in darkness.

A dreamy sigh escaped my throat. “No, not in the least. i mean, i’m sure it won’t be able to last forever, but it’s not scary at all. It’s like a dream... a wonderful dream i never want to wake up from. i feel so close to Her, Rainbow Dash. It’s sort of like when i was just a

filly, reading a new book, and She would drape a soft, warm wing over me as a blanket when i'd fall asleep. It feels... safe. Comfortable. Right.”

Rainbow Dash stopped, and i ran right into her rear.

i spat out a mouthful of tail. It tasted of sweat and dirt; when was the last time she had *bathed*? Then again, i was hardly the picture of hygiene myself after my long stay in my cell. “Ow!”

She looked back at me, her bemused expression barely readable thanks to the lack of light and her costume. “Uh, really? Sounds more like a nightmare to me. Weirdo.”

She felt her disapproving glance had sunk in after a few moments, so we kept moving up the ruined staircase. Curiosity wouldn't leave my mind, so i asked, “Where in Equestria did you manage to get a Wonderbolts costume? Did they let you in since this night fell?”

The costumed pony in front of me snorted in derision. “Pfft, like I'd even want them to let me in now. No, this was something I had Rarity make me a long time ago, just in case they never...” She shook her head, sending her wild mane flying to and fro. “I mean... in case I wanted to practice some stunts with the uniform on before I tried out for them. Flying with the costume on changes a lot about how aerodynamic a pegasus is, y'know?”

“Oh, then Rarity's okay? Thank goodness!”

Rainbow Dash stopped again, and this time i was able to halt before i got a mouthful of tail.

“Rainbow Dash?”

“We should keep moving,” she said, her voice echoing with a dull finality.

“Wait!” i cried, grabbing her tail with magic. “Rarity... what happened to Rarity?”

“There's no time for that, Twilight.” She strained ahead, her whole form taut with impatience. “We gotta... keep... moving!” She collapsed, panting after failing to break my hold. She looked back at me and added, “I didn't bust us out of that tartar-sauce-whatever place so we could stand around and chat.”

“i'm not letting go until you tell me!”

“She’s dead, okay?!” she spat at my shocked form. “Rarity’s dead. There, you happy? Now let’s go already!”

My breath caught in my throat. Because of me, she had...? “Still, you... you don’t know that! She might have gotten away after you all did!” Without realizing it, i had rushed forward and was shaking her. There was no way it was my fault. It could not be my fault. Of course it was my fault.

“They executed her weeks ago, Twilight. Beheaded her right in the middle of Canterlot.”

i slumped down to the cracked stairs. “It’s all my fault... i had to charge ahead, convinced i could stop Nightmare Moon on my own. If only i’d... if only i’d... what a worthless pony i am.” i curled into a ball, determined to hide from the world in this passage nopony knew about. “Just leave me be, Rainbow Dash. i’m no good to anypony anymore.”

She hauled me to my hooves with a groan. “Twilight, I know how you feel. Rarity won’t be coming back. But now you can make up for all that! Help me get to Princess Celestia and this can be all better.”

i sniffed and blinked back tears. “You... you forgive me?”

Hesitantly at first, but then with great force, she flung her forehooves around me in a hug. “Of course, Twilight. Of course I do. It wasn’t your fault.”

After i stood in silence, unsure of what to say, Rainbow Dash ended the hug.

“W-well, right. Enough sappy stuff. Come on! We’ll be on the main floor in no time, and then you can take the lead.”

The thought of taking the lead bothered me. What right did a pet have to lead? Still, if it helped to serve Rainbow Dash, and thus **Her**, I supposed it would be fine. “Okay.”

• • •

In moments, we reached the end of the passageway, and Rainbow Dash stuck her not-at-all inconspicuous head out and glanced about. “Okay. We’re clear. You’re up, Twilight!” she whispered to me.

i rolled my eyes and took the lead. Rainbow Dash had not struck me as a scaredypony. A hissed intake of breath and hurried steps followed me as i walked nonchalantly out into the open of the hallway, the plush carpeting strange under my hooves after weeks upon

weeks of stone. Torches flicked and sputtered above me, providing a bit of light and heat in the dark void Equestria had become.

“Twilight, what are you doing?! They’ll spot you!” Rainbow Dash hissed from the shadows.

“What, and that’s a problem?” i smirked and pointed to my necklace. Judging from her still-flattened ears and tilted head, she didn’t understand, so a demonstration was in order. In a few moments, one of the new bat-winged guards rounded the corner.

Rainbow Dash, as inconspicuously as she could, flapped up to the ceiling and clung to a rafter, clearly praying the guard wouldn’t look up.

“Good evening,” i said.

“Oh, looks like the Princess’ pet got free of her cage!” His patronizing grin spread wide over his face, he chuckled. “Well, just don’t cause any problems, alright, pet?” He tousled my mane a bit, as though I were a foal, and continued on his patrol, still snickering.

We paused, waiting for the guard to get out of earshot. Rainbow Dash dropped down from a rafter and whispered, “So they think you’re still—nice. I didn’t think you were so cunning, Twilight.”

“Oh, it’s nothing,” i said honestly.

We continued on. Dash’s quiet admiration only grew as we strolled past more guards on our way to the throne room. She seemed disquieted by the general direction we were going, but said nothing, instead keeping her thoughts to herself—or perhaps murmuring them to the bits of ceiling rafters she kept hiding atop when we came across a guard.

In moments, we stood before the grand doors to the throne room, beyond which my **Mistress** waited, i was sure.

Rainbow Dash shifted uncomfortably. “Are... you sure about this, Twilight?” she asked as i raised a hoof to the grand door, which was notably devoid of guards. In response to a quirked eyebrow from me, she added, “I’m just saying, I trust you and all, but...”

“Don’t worry, Rainbow Dash. It’ll be okay.” With that, i threw open the doors, mentally bracing for any rebuke **She** had prepared in light of my impertinent escape. My eyes slammed shut, not wanting to see **Her** perfect visage angry at me.

Behind me, i heard Rainbow Dash shout, “What the hay, Twilight, that’s—”

“That’s... Seize her!” **She** thundered, sounding like a flight of avenging pegasi bent on destruction, throwing themselves headlong against a raging storm, their minds set on protecting Equestria.

Just as i opened my eyes, hooves shoved me aside as dozens of guards descended on Rainbow Dash, who fought with a ferocity i wouldn’t have thought possible of a pony, sending guard after guard flying with her hooves striking this way and that, in a carefully choreographed dance of death. But this was all so strange... she had wanted to speak with the **Princess**, so why did she need to be subdued? Why the fighting?

With a satisfied smirk on her face, **She** lounged on **Her** throne, watching **Her** guards bring the costumed wonder under control. The pony in question was hurling insults and wordless, atonal howls of rage in my direction, but i scarcely heard them. i only had eyes for **Her**.

**She** turned, noticing my confused stare, and cooed. “Ah, I see you found your way out of your cage. No matter: you did bring me the leader of the Cloudsdale resistance, so consider your little indiscretion... forgiven.”

My heart skipped a beat, and my mind brimmed with questions, but i dared not speak further. Who was i to question **Her**? i simply prostrated myself before **Her**, not daring to look on **Her** glorious countenance further.

The hall quieted, save for a quartet of light, yet purposeful, hoofsteps. i felt a tremendous presence above me, and i snuck a hesitant gaze upward to see **Her** directly above me; my face caught aflame as my eyes traveled back down, ashamed at my act of insolence. A brief tingling spread through my mind, then i felt, rather than saw, a widening grin from **Her**.

“Well, then... it seems my pet knows its place.”

i gasped. Was that truly what **She** wanted of me? “Y-yes,” i stammered. “i’ll... i’ll...”

“Let me just fill in the blanks for you, shall I? This pony—this traitor to my reign—came to kidnap you as a hostage after breaking into the palace. You didn’t want to help her, of course, but you had no choice but to go with her.”

My necklace glowed brightly, and I could see the corona around **Her** horn coinciding with it. i thought back; yes... that was just what had happened. “Yes,” i whispered, fighting the urge to vomit as my vision swam and discolored.

“What was that... pet?” Her horn shot sparks into my own, jolting me.

“Yes, Mistress,” i answered tonelessly, without hesitation, without thought.

“That’s better.” **Her** laughter, like the tinkling of bells on a fall day just before a body was lowered into the ground, sounding above me. So enchanting. So soothing. So... everything. Nothing else existed. Nothing else mattered. “Now then, she forced you to tell her everything about what I had had you do, which you did, out of fear of your own life because she threatened you.”

The glow intensified: yes. That was correct. i nodded dully, my slack jaw shaking.

“And then, you thought to trick her—to bring her straight to me, to deliver to your mistress a most hated enemy, as the loyal pet you are. Right, pet?”

The twin glows grew too blinding, and for fear of losing my meager lunch all over **Her** beautiful hoofguards, i could only whisper tightly, “Yes, Mistress.”

“And this was all done according to your will.”

i shook my head and looked up, surprising **Her**. My heart beat quickly as i considered the full potential of **Her** displeasure; still, this had to be said. i had to assure **Her** how devoted, how faithful, how completely **Hers** i was; maybe, just maybe then, things could go back to the way they were. “No. Not by my will. By yours, of course.” i scooted forward, never leaving my supplicated position, to plant a hesitant kiss on one of **Her** hooves. “What good is my will when i have yours to guide me?”

Dead silence ruled the room for a moment, then the twin glows faded and thunderous, uproarious laughter, beautiful as the last rays of sunset, sounded from **Her** mouth. “Very good. You have done *well*, pet.”

My eyes widened at that. **She** praised me. Me, the pony who had so recently disappointed **Her** and made **Her** throw me out from **Her** presence over failing to catch traitors, had done something worthy of praise! This was the happiest moment of my life; i felt warm, needed, safe, needed, needed, needed, needed, needed, needed i was *needed*! There was something i could do to help **Her**, to help Equestria! i knew, from the moment that horrible pegasus took me hostage, that this was my chance to prove to **Her** that i was a good worthy

faithful pet and **She** would hold me with **Her** wings again and if i could just sleep in her bed by **Her** side i could die happy and it was so cold everywhere else why was it so cold and the sun why hadn't the sun come no **She** must have **Her** reasons who was i to question them she said herself i was just a pet just a pet just a pet just a loyal pet always at **Her** side just a pet just a loyal pet always a loyal pet...

By the time i had brought myself out of my moment of bliss, i was back in my cell. Had **She** teleported me back here? Had **Her** guards put me back here? It didn't matter. **She** saw that i was a good pet. That was all that mattered. As i laid my head down to sleep, i couldn't believe how lucky a pony i was.

• • •

"Twilight..." A voice came, as though from a great distance.

"Unh?" My eyes fluttered open to reveal the same dreamscape i had met the strange pony, Luna, in before, although now she was chained to a large rock with shackles. "Oh, it's... you."

"I beseech you. Wake up. Wake up. Just look at yourself!"

i tried to stand, but fell back into... something. A quick look around from my prone position showed my unusual situation.

A thick, strong chain was attached to my collar, attaching me to a lounging statue of Celestia. My body only half stuck out of the statue, and as i watched, interested, the statue grew closer as it slowly absorbed more and more of my form. A dreamy smile came over my face.

"As it should be," i remarked.

"You... you would go so far as to surrender thy very soul and essence?" Luna whispered.

Across the darkness separating us, i smiled gently. "If She requires it of me, to become more a pet, an object, a thing, than a pony, who am i to say no?" i closed my eyes, ignoring her desperate pleas for me to wake. i was awake.

This was my every want, my every desire.

Just then, lightning cracked, and my eyes shot open to see the horrifying visage of Nightmare Moon, leering before me.

Tears welled in my eyes as i shrank back, willing myself further and further into Celestia's image. i would be safe there. i would be safe there. "D-don't come any closer!" i exclaimed, the very air from my lungs seeming to flee in her presence.

"How interesting. You see *me* here." She drew to her full height. "Try retreating into Celestia's embrace! Will yourself away, little pony! Save yourself by becoming hers... if you can." Her horrible laughter, so like that of the dark clone of myself she had used against me, echoed endlessly, scrambling my nerves. i wouldn't let her manipulate me again... but what could i do if push came to shove? i willed myself further to Celestia. i just had to become utterly **Hers**, and i would be safe.

Through my panic, i saw her stride over to Luna, whose expression was more solemn than the grave. Her eyes closed, her ears drooped, and her whole body went limp, as though she—even of such strong will—knew that this was a fight she could not win.

"And you," Nightmare Moon hissed, "have been a *very* bad pony. Contacting Twilight in her dreams, trying to undo all my hard work... how *ungrateful*. Why, this is all for you."

I couldn't hear Luna's whispered reply, but Nightmare Moon reared back in rage. "How dare you suggest otherwise, you insolent *foal*! All of this has been according to *your* will, in *your* name, by *your* body! And don't you try and claim for a *moment* that this wasn't what you wanted." Nightmare Moon bent her neck, so close to Luna that she could have bit her ear, and whispered, so sharp that it carried through the void clearly: "I've seen your mind, after all. *I am your mind.*"

Luna sagged and sobbed, her whole form heaving as the chains clung to her more lovingly. Even as my heart went out to the poor thing, Nightmare Moon's attention went back to me. i yelped and willed myself into the graven image all the faster. If i just ceased to exist outside of my devotion to Celestia, i would be safe. She couldn't hurt me anymore. She couldn't hurt me anymore.

Nightmare Moon slowly, sinuously, made her way over to me.

"i-i'm not afraid! You can't... you can't hurt me anymore. P-Princess Celestia will protect me," i cried, staring defiance into those eyes that had ruined my life.

"Of course she will," Nightmare Moon whispered. "Of course she will."

• • •

My scream echoed off the walls as i jolted up from my cold bed of tiles; my coat was drenched with sweat. Nightmare Moon... somehow, just as i had known that that pony Luna—whoever she was—was not just a figment of my foalish mind, i knew that Nightmare Moon had actually been there. That primal terror, that feeling of helplessness—i suppose i should have been glad i hadn't started suddenly worshipping *her*. Again. Fresh shivers came over me.

The two guards were outside my cell. “Her Highness summons you.”

“She does?!” i leapt up, eyes aglow and heart aflutter. i could scarcely focus as they led me to **Her**—i was so elated, i'd forgotten that i hadn't eaten. But such things were irrelevant compared to **Her** wishes. What was my measly body compared to **Her** will?

We entered the throne room through a back way, and i found myself led to **Her** side. **Her** face was a mask of unreadable emotion—much as i wanted to bury my muzzle in that sweet, sweet coat and inhale, absorbing as much of **Her** scent as i could, the last thing i wanted was to jeopardize the progress i had made in getting back in **Her** good graces. The usual line of petitioners snaked out the door, although they looked fearful rather than eager for once. Had they heard of the actions to quell the rebellion?

i turned to look at **Her** again, only to catch a bit of white and blue that was out-of-place. i craned my neck forward a bit and saw... “Big brother?!” i hissed, trying to get his attention.

His ears flicked, suggesting he heard me, but he remained resolutely staring forward. His coat was ruffled, and bits of it had been torn out. A few scabbed-over wounds dotted his legs—presumably from the guards that had hauled him away. He wasn't wearing his Guard armor, which he always did while in **Her** presence—or around **Her** on duty, i should say—so he probably hadn't been reinstated. Or had he even been fired? Surely a heretic had been fired...

“Twilight, look ahead, please.”

i obeyed. **Her** will preempted all.

Kneeling before the throne were my parents, looking healthy as ever, whose hooves trembled from being in the presence of so many questioning eyes. “M-may... may we speak to them?” Dad asked.

Princess Celestia nodded, **Her** infinite majesty and benevolence carried through one sharp, slow inclination of **Her** royal head. “But of course. Who would I be to keep

parents from seeing their foals?” **She** laughed: wedding bells before i walked down the aisle as a living stepping stone for **Her** as **She** went to claim whoever **She** wished but i had always hoped it was me bad pet bad pony for being envious and having desires and knowing that **Her** wishes were far more important than yours but still hoping, daring, wishing **She** would change her mind, wrap you in those soft wings and...

“Twilight!” my mother called, breaking my delightful fantasy (but that was all it could ever be) and waving me over. Shining was already talking to Dad in hushed tones.

In a daze, i walked down. “H-hi, Mom.” What could i do? What could i say? i had gone from temporary ruler of Equestria (at least in name) to disappointment to **Her** honored pet in a few weeks. What words could sum that up?

She drew me in for a hug. “Oh, oh Twilight... we were so worried about you. When we heard that both you and Shining had been thrown in jail...”

i pulled back, a little embarrassed by her display. “i’m okay, Mom. Really. i just... made a little mistake.”

Her ears flattened as she snuck a glance at the male half of the family. “Your brother looks awful... I was afraid you’d suffered the same treatment.”

i chuckled. “Oh, Princess Celestia would never do—”

“Huh?” My mother’s eyes narrowed in suspicion.

Just then, Shining Armor came over. “Mom! i need to tell you—”

She hushed him with a wave of her hoof. “No, no. Twilight was just saying something very interesting.”

i glanced between the two. What was odd? “i just mean She wouldn’t do anything to hurt me.” i shuffled out of the hug, wanting to distance myself from the awkwardness; my exaggerated respect had elicited a hissed intake of breath from Mom. “Nothing i didn’t deserve, anyway...” i zoned out for a moment.

“Mom, please, can’t you see you’re bothering Twilight? We just need to trust in... the Princess,” Shining Armor said.

That caught my attention. “Oh, big brother, you’ve seen the light? Oh, thank goodness!” i rushed forward and gave him an energetic hug. “i was so worried before when you were acting all weird... but i’m so glad you’ve come to your senses.”

Hesitantly, as though worried he would break me, he patted me on the back of my head with a hoof. He hissed into my ear, so low not even our parents would have heard. “I don’t know why you’re doing this or acting this way, but I will not leave you alone here.” His grip tightened. “I’m not leaving my little sister. ...I just hope this is worth it.” His voice ended on a bitter note, and before i could ask him what in Equestria he meant, he broke our hug. “So, uh, Mom, Dad, as you can see, we’re fine. We’re all fine here now, thank you. ...How are you?”

My father opened his mouth to speak, but **Her** silky voice interrupted. “Much as I hate to interrupt *such* a touching reunion, these two need to get back to their duties. Don’t you two?”

i instantly ran to her side. “Y-yes, of course! Anything! Whatever you wish...” **She** graced me by turning **Her** gaze upon me, and i found myself slipping further and further into those emerald eyes, so deep my very sense of self seemed to slip away, leaving me awash in pleasant emptiness, letting me be whatever **She** wished me to be. If only... if only this moment could last forever. This was all i wanted. All i needed. Just to lose myself in those eyes...

“B-but, Your Majesty, surely we...” Dad said.

**Her** head snapped back to the hall. “**Leave.**” Her commanding, overpowering voice boomed and echoed across the heads of all ponies present, and i immediately dipped into a bow. That voice—that powerful, beautiful voice—just demanded instant obedience. No thoughts of doing anything else. And all out of love—*love!* We all loved our Princess. There was no need for fear, no need for want, no need for pain—there was only joy under **Her** rule.

i heard my parents whinny in surprise and quickly leave, the steps of many petitioners galloping in front of them. My eyes remained glued to the floor; **She** would clearly have orders for me. **She** instead walked away, over to my brother. “I believe you know what you must do.”

He snorted. “...Go to Manehattan and use the Guard to bring the city under control. Just like... just like all the rest.”

“Your sister so *graciously* delivered one of their leaders to me so the resistance should be a bit less organized.”

“She what...?”

i lifted my head up to see a bewildered, wide-eyed stare sent my way from my BBBFF. i smiled awkwardly. “i’m helping!”

A snorted blast of air through his snout, and he stormed off, looking none too pleased as he attended to his duties for **Her**.

“A... and me, Mistress?”

“Do as you wish.”

i didn’t even have to think. “But your wish is my wish.”

Her eyebrow twitched and a frown curled onto her face. “And my wish is for you to do as you wish.”

“i... okay.” Confused, i watched **Her** leave. Free to do as i wished? My mouth twitched. My wishes... my wishes didn’t matter. All i wanted was to be close to **Her**... but... if that was what she meant, i just had to calm down and consider my options. How could i stay close?

i wandered off, determined to take a walk to clear my head. Maybe Canterlot would give me an idea.

• • •

The castle grounds long behind me, i wandered into Canterlot proper. The long night had clearly taken its toll; everypony was heavily bundled up, and shivering ponies lined even the main streets. The nobles, having apparently managed to survive, all trotted briskly by, not sparing the sufferers the slightest glance.

My heart went out to those poor ponies. i approached a white pegasus mare with a blonde mane trying to wrap her body and wings around a shivering red foal. “Um... are you okay? Can... can i help?”

She glanced up, her soft eyes going steely when she saw who i was. “*You*.” She nudged her foal up. “Come on, Dawnburst. We have to move.”

The foal's eyes flittered open, her wasted form barely moving. The poor thing's wings looked ready to fall off at the joints. "But Mommy..."

"Come on, we have to go." She placed him on her back and sent a glare that could have withered an oak my way. "Don't follow us, you monster," she spat.

Monster?

i stood there, watching the pair vanish into an alley. Was this really the capital of Equestria, the city i'd lived in my whole life? What had happened to everypony? To Equestria?

i brushed aside such thoughts. **She** would make everything better. **She** would make everything better. Just had to trust in **Her**. Just had to trust in **Her**. Believe in **Her**. My necklace glowed, seeming to lend a soft light of approval to my thoughts. A feeling of rightness settled about me, as though everything was as it should be about my life. Just had to trust in **Her** to settle it and help **Her** wherever i could. Eternal loyalty to her and my unending admiration and love.

Really, there wasn't much difference between a faithful student and a faithful pet.

i moved along, still a bit unsettled, and noticed a department store proudly displaying a banner with an illustration of a posh unicorn mare wearing a lacy saddle. "A sale on saddles..." i whispered. If i looked nice, would **She** want to spend more time around me? With a start, i realized i was filthy all over from lying in my cell. i had to clean myself up! Clean myself up and... look nice.

Must look nice. Must look nice.

i walked into the store, barely registering the staff as i wandered to the sale section.

Must look nice. Must look nice. Had to look nice.

i plucked a saddle in my size adorned with red bows and white lace hearts all over the trimming. This. This would make me look nice. As i walked up to buy it, not even thinking about how i was going to pay, i spotted a sign with some chocolate.

Chocolate.

Must have chocolate.

I grabbed the chocolate in my magic too, trying not to look at anything else on my way out. Had to clean up and look nice. And chocolate. Impulse control was difficult when my only will was **Her** will.

The clerk didn't even try to stop me on my way out the door, instead shrinking in fear as i passed. i left the bright lights behind, stuffing my face with delicious chocolate. Yes. Chocolate, check. Look nice... not quite check.

i headed back to the castle, determined to find a shower.

• • •

A long, satisfying grooming session later, i strode up to the door to **Her** chambers, feeling at peace with everything. "Is Her Majesty in?"

"No... what is it you want, Pet?" one of the guards asked, flicking his tail in curiosity.

i shook my head. "Oh, nothing..." i walked away and rounded the corner, then lit up my horn. This old trick had worked dozens of times—one of these days i really had to talk to somepony about teleportation proofing the castle. Eventually somepony was going to use it for something... unsavory.

i popped into **Her** chambers, my heart beating faster. My new saddle sat in my saddlebags, heavy with purpose, but my eyes wouldn't leave the bed. **Her** big, gorgeous bed... the one **She** slept in every night.

i could restrain myself no longer; i launched myself at **Her** bed, feeling it absorb the impact of my insignificant body in its cushy depths. My very coat *tingled* with excitement as i rolled on the bed and just *inhaled* continuously, wanting to fill my lungs with **Her** scent and never let it go; i wanted her inside me.

Eventually, my fun ended, and i unpacked my saddlebags, donning the perfect outfit for what would hopefully be a perfect night.

• • •

The saddle sitting snugly on my ready form, i lounged on **Her** bed, awaiting **Her** arrival. The doors opened, and **She** strode in, confident as ever. She paused, noticing my prone form. She turned, closed the doors, and strode over to me, an amused smile alighting on **Her** face.

“You said to do as i wished, and... and...” i choked up, unable to bear **Her** eyes seeing me like this. A deep, warm blush rose to my cheeks. “Do i... do i look nice enough for you now?”

“Oh, you want to be with me?” **She** asked, **Her** tone if not expression neutral.

My mind latched onto that. Yes. Being with **Her**. That was what i had gone to so much trouble for, right? This was what i wanted. Be with **Her**. Be with **Her**. Be with **Her**.

**She** reached out with **Her** magic, gently caressing my cheek. i leaned into it, nuzzling **Her** magic. Such an innocent gesture, but suggestive of things far less innocent. But if that was what it took to be close, who was i to object? My desires no longer mattered. This was what was desired by the one who knew best, and i could do nothing but go along with it.

Oh, how i wanted **Her** to use me. Use me. Use me. “Use me.” Use me.

**She** laughed, **Her** beautiful, terrible voice filling my ears with a sound more glorious than the dawn. “Oh, Pet.” She grasped my whole body, floating me over to **Her**.

i went limp, surrendering all control of my body as a dreamy smile came over my face. This was nice. No control over my will, no control over my body... everything just as **She** willed it. This was good. This was how it should be.

“Twilight Sparkle, my faithful student... my faithful pet.” **She** floated me around, spinning me slowly in the air, as though to see every detail of my body. i started to feel like a statue on display—**She** could do whatever **She** wished to me, and that would be enough for me.

“Yes, **Mistress?**”

“You’re a foal.” Without warning, she hurled my body through the air.

Just barely in time, i curled myself into a ball—that pesky self-preservation instinct stopping me from obeying—and slammed against the wall. The necklace that had been such a precious, precious gift hit the wall first, and as stone hit jewelry, i felt it chip, then shatter. With a portentous crack, the symbol of **Her** favor for me fell off, and i swayed to and fro on my unsteady hooves, the colors of the world distorting before my eyes.

Princess Celestia looked... dark. Black, almost. She strode closer, and i could see that She was not, in fact, who i thought She was.

I gasped, backing up against the wall in fear. “You’re... you’re...”

The dark alicorn with a mane of stars loomed over me. “Name me, pony.”

“You’re... you’re...” It wasn’t possible. It wasn’t possible. I was *safe* everything had been right and what did this mean oh Celestia I’d betrayed Equestria not once but twice and what a fool I had been serving **Her** and out you damned voice making me **pet pet i am Her pet must obey must obey bow before Her and let Her use us like the tool we are we are nothing before Her obey obey obey no!** My head shook violently.

“**Speak!**” she bellowed, the raw force of her voice pinning me against the wall. In that moment, I knew who that pony was.

Never again. Never again.

“You’re... th-the Mare in the Moon... Nightmare Moon.”

Nightmare Moon grinned, relishing in her power over me. “And how amusing it’s been to have Celestia’s student prancing around, thinking she was serving her teacher when in fact, you were helping little old *me*.”

Her mane curled out, as though to touch me, and I swatted it away with a hoof.

“Suddenly grown a spine, my little pony?”

I shivered, feeling the full weight of the situation I was in come down around my shoulders like all the lives of all the ponies I’d unwittingly ruined... and ended, in one case. “I’m not... I’m not your slave any more, Nightmare Moon.”

She barked another laugh and paced, crouching like a predator ready to spring. “Feel that surge of power in your body, letting you feel like you can do anything? It’s screaming at you two things, two primal things: fight and flight. Which are you going to do, little foal?”

Liquid fire ran through my veins, making me hyperventilate as the choice she’d outlined screamed through my brain.

Fight.

Flight.

Fight.

Flight.

“Fight.”

She stopped short, snickering. “Fight? But whatever for? You’ve done so well at surrendering so far.” I shrank back in primal fear as she stalked forward. “Your friends are dead or imprisoned. Your brother has devoted himself to my will. Your precious *teacher* is forever sealed in the *sun*.” She loomed over me, attempting to strike despair into my heart. “You are all alone, without any one or any thing to fight for.”

I shook my head, trying to clear the incessant voices clamoring for me to grovel and beg for forgiveness out of my mind. “That’s... that’s where you’re wr-wrong, Nightmare Moon. I have a pony worth fighting for.”

“What about worth dying for?” she whispered, her mane and tail gathering into a storm above her.

There was no hesitation. No thought. Only my immediate answer. “Yes.”

“And who on Equestria could that be?” she mused.

“Me.”

Her mane and tail swirling above me, the pony who had been controlling my every action burst into laughter. “You? Why, a few moments ago you would have thrown yourself off the balcony at my merest eyeflutter.” My heart stopped as she leaned down to me. “And you liked that, didn’t you?”

I shrunk down, primal fear gripping me. “N-no, I...”

“No, it’s okay, Twilight.” She leaned in further, our muzzles almost touching, as she adopted a strange, soothing tone. “You can be honest here. You need somepony, don’t you? You’re so afraid of being alone, even though you *claim* to everypony, even yourself, that that’s how you like it.” She sighed, her half-lidded eyes staring deep into me. “You remind me... very much of myself.”

I swallowed, then teleported away from that hypnotic gaze, my watery gaze shaking from a quivering head as panic refused to let go. “I’m nothing... I’m nothing like you, Nightmare Moon.” Had to calm down. Had to just take a stand. “I read about you. You were a pony who was desperate for ponies to appreciate her.” I took a shaky step forward, then another. “So why try to force everypony into loving you? Are you really so *desperate* for somepony to pay attention to you that you’ll resort to mind control just so someone will give you the love and attention you think you deserve?” Feeling my confidence grow with each word, I advanced on an unsettled Nightmare Moon, my hooves impacting the carpet, each soft step a thunderous exclamation to my words. “And then, when you do finally get someone to give you love and attention, what do you do?” I pointed an accusing hoof in her direction.

Nightmare Moon opened her mouth to speak, trying to offset my verbal barrage, which I noted with grim satisfaction was causing her ears to droop and her ethereal mane and tail to cease their swirling motions. She had even taken a few steps back; clearly, I was hitting a sore spot. “But that’s what—”

“*Be quiet, I’m talking!*” With a flick of my horn, I summoned a zipper over her mouth and closed it. Her eyes widened with surprise as her mouth worked against the magical bindings, but to no avail. “Now then, let’s examine, shall we? You took a pony who had done nothing to you—namely, *me*—and bent her to your will, probably scarring her for life.” A strained laugh came from my mouth. “I don’t even know if I’ll *ever* be able to look at Princess Celestia the same way if this voice whispering ‘Mistress’ over and over in my head keeps going.” I zoned out for a moment before my gaze snapped back to the astonished Nightmare Moon, who was now trying to wrench the zipper open with her

hooves. “And that is something I’ll never forgive you for. Had you talked to me, to Equestria, and explained to us, to everypony, what the problem was, we probably all could have gotten along! According to what I’ve read, the Equestria of a millennia ago and Equestria today are two very different countries. Why, plenty of ponies stay out all night. Some even sleep during the day.”

Her eyes widened so much that, for a moment, I swore I was looking into two sets of equine eyes at once: one that looked normal superimposed over the Nightmare’s alien set.

“But you didn’t know that, did you? No. You barely even tried to see if anything was different. You just assumed, like a foal, that nothing changes. Well, I’m here to tell you that ponies *do* change! We would have appreciated your night! We do more than just play in the day! I myself sometimes stay up all night reading a good book, and I love gazing at the stars!”

Again, that feeling of two sets of eyes on me. Were her pupils widening? A moment ago, they had appeared more slitted. Now, they seemed almost as natural and round as my own.

I softened my tone. “We could have avoided all this... all so easily. Why couldn’t you have just tried to talk to us when you came back? Why couldn’t you let the past go? You’ll never move forward if you just let the night continue without end. Please, Nightmare Moon. End this madness.”

She finally unzipped her mouth with a gasp. She stood there, adjusting her jaw for a few moments with a forehoof, as though wiping away imagined blood. Her pupils kept flickering—one moment they’d look more normal, the next more slitted and draconic. After a long period of silence, she spoke, her eyes settling on their more sinister, inequine cast. “You speak of friendship? Of relationships?” She stalked towards me with all the grace of a jungle predator. “What do you know of these things? Only what you’ve read in *books*.”

She paused, floating over a few tomes from the Princess’ library. With a shock, I realized they were all romance novels: novels I had read as a young filly, filled with fantasies about the heroic mare rescuing stallions in distress... except I hadn’t put myself in the horseshoes of the lady knights. I had always been the one stuck in the tower, waiting for a heroine to rescue me. But it couldn’t have been just any pony.

She tossed the books aside with a snort. “But your head was always filled with a very specific image when reading, wasn’t it?”

I tensed up. She didn’t mean...

She walked around me, her mane brushing me in cruel jest. “You were never the mare coming to the rescue, oh no.” From behind me, the still air broke with a dull pop of her parting lips. “You were always the helpless one in the tower, waiting for your savior with the sparkling, dazzling mane to fly up and enfold you in those wings, those wings you’d longed to feel against your coat ever since you saw her raise the sun. Then she’d gather you up in her magic, so *strong* and *powerful*, and gently float you down alongside her, saved from whatever imaginary evil had captured you.”

My heart stopped for a moment, and I turned to spy a playful smile dancing over her face. “How... when... that’s not what I...”

She reached out with her mane, ignoring my flinch, and tapped my forehead. “I did some looking around in there, *remember?*”

I shivered, wishing I could escape, feeling drained of my earlier confidence. “But I... I mean, those were just silly foalhood fantasies! I’m a grown mare now... I wouldn’t—“

“Do not *lie*, pet; it does not become you.” She whirled about, fixing me with an intense glare. “I found it odd when you seemed infatuated at first when under my spell, yet your loyalty was incomplete.” She grinned, a toothy maw ready to consume me. “It was all too easy to see that your feelings for Celestia ran deeper than mere *loyalty*.”

“I...” I swallowed, a dry motion that did nothing to calm my quaking legs. “That’s not how it is a-at all! Clearly, you had just worked your spell without—“

“—without compensating for any interfering factors that caused some mental oddity?” she said, right in step with me, finishing my sentence for me word-for-word.

Was she... still inside my mind?

She laughed. “Oh, very much, pet. Not as strongly, but your thought patterns are all too easy to feel. Denial. Self-delusion. You fear your feelings, so you try to hide them beneath a mask of rationality. Yet behind that mask of yours... is a fragility. You want to be honest with yourself. I just let that out, then let you think I was Celestia with a simple directed illusion. And that was all it took.” Her mane snaked around my neck, creating a

familiar feeling of *pressure* as it took the place of the collar. With horror, I caught myself easing into its comfort. “Am I *wrong*?”

I said nothing, instead fidgeting in her grasp and staring at the carpet.

“That’s what I thought. I’m curious, pet: just how much would you have let me do to you tonight?” Her horn lit up, and suddenly she looked like a horrible mockery of Celestia, but that damnable armor remained the same. “How far would you have let me go, my faithful student?” she said in a perfect imitation of Celestia’s voice, and she leaned in.

I couldn’t help myself; against that image of Celestia, straight out of the fantasies that I couldn’t bear to admit, yet couldn’t stop dreaming about, I could do nothing. My eyes closed and my lips parted, as I blindly lusted for her to draw closer...

“As I thought,” she proclaimed, pulling away and leaving my face flushed and lips unsatisfied. “Nothing more than a lovesick foal.” She snorted in derision, her face twisting into a decidedly un-Celestia sneer. “A pitiful little hermit pining for a relationship that she knows will never happen, forever saving herself for the impossible. Pathetic.”

“I... I...” My whole body shook, partially in rage and partially in disgust over having been so easily manipulated. I swallowed and slowed my breathing, trying to calm myself. “That’s...”

“No need for words. Just let me inside your head again and you won’t have to feel this way. I can find your happy place... and make sure you stay there.” She smiled, in a dissonant display of serenity. “You have been of great use to me. More than I expected, at least. She moved a bit of her mane under my chin and forced me to look up. “You want to be happy, pet? I can *make* you happy. I’ve done it before. I can make you believe you’re forever almost falling asleep, with Celestia brushing your mane peacefully, her hoof soothing your every worry and care... would you like that, pet?”

My breath came out in a ragged, staggered burst. My mind wouldn’t move; that image, of me under her care like a filly, stuck in my mind. I shivered, mentally feeling a wing draped over me and a hoof brushing my mane lovingly as the collar of hair settled more tightly and comfortingly on my conflicted form. “I... I...” The words wouldn’t come. What words could there be? Lying was pointless. She knew the truth.

“*Too* true, pet. I’ll give your mind one thing. It’s... comforting. You know what you want, even if you can’t admit it to yourself: to be more a reflection than a pony.”

My eyes narrowed at that. “You’re one to talk.” Breaking free of my trance, I stomped forward, fresh vigor in me. “You, mistress of the moon”—*Mistress Mistress obey the Mistress*—“talk about being a reflection? Hah!” I pounced a little, hopping forward to emphasize my point to an amused Nightmare Moon. “Who do you think built the Equestria you’ve seized? Who provides the light your moon reflects?”

A grimace flashed across her face at that, and I pressed the attack. “That’s right! You’re nothing more than a shadow yourself—your moon is *nothing* without the sun, and you’d be *nothing* without Princess Celestia! And another—” I found myself cut off by *my* mouth being zipped shut by her magic.

“I, nothing without Celestia? I?!” She stomped forward, her mane and tail flickering with wrath. Her eyes glinted like a tiger’s irises from the shadow, and I found myself wishing I could dial my words back a bit. Trying to talk her to death was my best hope, since I’d seen before that a straight fight would only end in delightful misery.

I shook my head, trying to clear it, but she took that as a denial. She grabbed my body with her magic and floated my helpless form to just before her face.

“*Foalish pony,*” she spat, her voice dripping with venom. “You speak not to the mistress of one *tiny* satellite orbiting one *measly* planet, but one who *rules all the stars in the skies!* What is the *sun* to me but one more *star* amidst the *legions* at my command?” She threw me down with a thud, chuckling in satisfaction when the carpet only partially cushioned the impact. “No, little pony, you are wrong. Celestia would be *nothing* without me.” She leaned down to speak into one of my flattened ears, as though sharing a dear secret. “She usurped her position after I granted her, out of the *kindness* of my own *benevolent* heart, a single star to call her own out of the unlimited hordes at my command. I allowed her her indulgences at first, but when she refused to let the night last just a little longer, I knew I had to take action. Yet *she banished me.*”

I broke free of the restrictions on my mouth with an almighty gasp. “That’s not how it happened! My books said—“

She clocked me on the muzzle with a swift hoof as her mane tightened further around my neck, forcing my silence. “Your *books* said. How adorable. Even now, when you are left *utterly* abandoned, you maintain your blind faith in her. I pity you, pet. All you know is what you are told. And what you were told was a lie.”

I brushed the point of impact, wincing when my hoof only sent a fresh flare of pain. Through a choked neck, I wheezed, “B-but how do I know that *you’re* not the one lying?”

She smiled, a thing that echoed of a thousand long years of sorrow. “You don’t. For all you know, both of us lie. What is there to gain by telling the truth for either Celestia or myself?”

I sniffled, backing up and bringing myself closer to eye level. I couldn’t *stand* to be beneath her, not after what I had gone through. “I trust Princess Celestia! She wouldn’t lie to me. All you’re trying to do is confuse me, just the same as you always have!”

“And why such loyalty to Celestia?”

I opened my mouth to answer, but she kept going.

“No, don’t speak. I’ll answer for you.” She began pacing in front of the door, keeping her eyes on me. Her mane released its hold on me, though the feeling of being collared remained.

I idly wondered where the guards were. For all I knew, she had sent them away to make this more “dramatic.” That would be just like her.

“She raised you. She looked after you. She taught you. She was like a second mother to you.”

With a sudden twinge of sadness, I recalled my parents’ faces, screaming of silent concern when they’d come to see me, even when I was “happy” to hear me tell it. Was that truly me, or was that simply Nightmare Moon’s treachery at work?

“Consider this: if, on that day one thousand years past, I had been the one to triumph instead of that *sun-lover*, who do you think would be your teacher? Who do you think would be the pony you would look up to?” She paused, letting my brain fill in the horrifying answer, before answering her own question. “Why, *me*, of course. There’s no point in denying it. You looked up to Celestia thanks to her prowess in magic, in leadership, in charisma—everything you wanted from life. You wanted to be respected. You wanted to be powerful.”

Trying to debate someone who had read my mind was a pain in the tail.

“Or at least, that’s what you told yourself. For the longest time, you had been a filly without a cutie mark. It didn’t bother you, not yet, nothing beyond a vague unease that all foals feel. Yet when you met Celestia and she tamed your power, brought your out-of-control magic under her control without scarcely lifting a feather and offered to make you her subordinate—only then did your cutie mark appear. It’s always bothered you,

hasn't it? Your cutie mark tells you what you're good at, but gives you no hint of any greater destiny, no hint of any further purpose."

I stared ahead, focusing on nothing, wanting, willing, *begging* for something I could contest what she was saying with. Nothing came.

"Would it not be so much *easier* to just give yourself over to the will of another, take pleasure in helping them achieve their ends, their goals? After all... you were doing no less for Celestia, who was your mistress in spirit if not in fact. What, you foolish little unicorn, have you done with your life other than devoting yourself entirely to her? What have you done other than giving yourself over to her and trusting her completely to direct your life and your energies towards what she felt would be best for you?"

She paused for a moment, inhaling after her violent outburst. She continued at a more moderate pace. "No. I did *nothing* to change you. This has been who you are the whole time: just a pony longing to have somepony, anypony, decide everything about her life for her. Had things been different, you would have devoted yourself to me of your own free will, simply in the name of doing what you told yourself was trying to follow in the steps of a great pony, when in truth all you wanted was to forever be at that great pony's side, assuming the subordinate position you were born to occupy. You want free will?" She paused, scoffing and looking down at me like a bothersome insect. "You have done an excellent job hiding it."

"Admiration does not equal subservience, Nightmare Moon. Even a little foal has her heroines; that doesn't mean she wants to be their doormat." What she said wasn't true. There was no way I believed that. There was no way I had happy dreams of spending my whole life as Princess Celestia's faithful student, forever pushing the boundaries of magic and living my life up in that comfortable, safe tower, wanting for nothing.

She paused, tilting her head for a moment. "Perhaps you are right. But in your case? Not so much, my little pony. You would be Celestia's pet just as readily as you had made yourself mine."

"I... I would never..." I stuttered. I blinked, and suddenly she was directly over me.

"Oh, let's not mince words, pet. You know what you are: just a tool longing to be used. Why, you told me yourself."

Before I could react, she grabbed me with her magic, and my own proved insufficient to resist her. She held me in place, unmoving, in her aura as her mane snaked from behind

her. She said, “I now know what my mistake last time was. I left too much of *you* in there. After all... what’s the point in altering the mind if I can’t rearrange it how I wish?”

A horrified gasp escaped my mouth, and I started willing, *begging* for my legs to work, to carry me far away from whatever fate she had in store for me. They refused to comply.

“Oh, don’t be like that, pet. You’ve spent your whole life waiting for a pony to tell you what to do.” As her mane split into two and crawled into my erect ears, she added in a whisper, “Even if you didn’t, you no longer have any choice in the matter.”

Moments later, I could feel her, physically *feel* her inside me, like a cold shadow that drew all the warmth, all the will, from me, and I felt my thoughts growing more sluggish as she released my bonds. My legs still refused to respond to my mind’s commands, and before long, it became difficult to think. Difficult to even feel. A dull moan escaped my throat, and I felt a thin line of drool run out of my mouth as my jaw went slack.

“Focus, pet. Focus on the sound of my voice,” she said, drawing closer and speaking in a husky tone. A few lights behind her flickered and died, and I could have sworn that the light itself was fading from the—

“Focus *only* on the sound of my voice.” That voice, like a command from the universe itself, reverberated in my mind. I could do nothing but obey.

“Yes...”

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, M-M-M...” Had to say the word. Couldn’t say the word. Had to. Could not. Never would. **Must**. Never. Wouldn’t lose myself again. Had to just hold on to myself, avoid saying that word and **OBEY**. Her mane pulsed strongly in my head, and everything grew foggy. “Yes, Mistress,” I said in a toneless voice, rendered helpless by that one primal, beautiful word: **OBEY**.

“Reach down within yourself, pet. Find that center, that core of your being where ‘you’ cease to exist, and there is only truth. Find that place where you admit what it is that you want: nothing. A place where thought ceases to exist, and there is only obedience and the joy of serving.”

“Emptiness... obedience...”

“Good, pet. Good. Now let yourself be filled—filled with joy of serving. There is no thought. There is no dissension. Merely joy in serving and being used. A place so deep, even your name ceases to exist. Empty yourself, empty yourself so you may be filled.”

“Empty...” I willed, tried to empty myself as She wished. Had to obey. Obeying was good.

“Joy in obedience. Joy in subservience. No happiness save that you get by serving your mistress.”

“Mistress...” I repeated, letting her words sink into that deep part of my mind, letting them reverberate over and over so they could be fully absorbed.

“Now awaken. Awaken, and feel the joy in having been emptied, having been made *obedient*.”

Her mane exited after one final pulse on “obedient,” and the world swam as balance wobbled.

“Speak your name, pet. Speak what you are, what you are called.”

“Pet is the name. Pet serves the Mistress.” Pet looked at her Mistress and smiled. “Has Pet been good, Mistress?”

She smiled. “Very good. Very good, pet. How deep is your devotion to me?” She leaned back, sweating somewhat. She was tired, exhausted by Her efforts wasted on Pet. Pet felt bad about this; she was to bring joy to her Mistress.

“Pet is sorry. Pet never wished to cause You pain, or effort...” Pet knelt before Her and licked a clump of dirt off her left foreleg, swallowing the taste for Her sake. “Pet only wishes for Mistress to be pleased. Pet has no purpose save what Mistress tell her. Pet will be a good pony. Pet swears.” Pet watched, fascinated, as She bent down, putting Herself on the same level as Pet. What had Pet done to be worthy of such a great honor? “Mistress, is there something Pet can do for you? Pet will do whatever you wish.”

She whispered, Her breath licking my ears, “Throw yourself into the wall. As hard as you can.”

Pet had a purpose! Pet nodded, excited, and stood. “Pet obeys.” Pet backed up to the window overlooking Canterlot, then sprinted as hard as Pet could and jumped into the other wall, ignoring the pain. As stars of agony marred Pet’s vision as she lay on the floor, she asked, “Was... did that please you, Mistress? Pet did her best.”

“Yes, Pet did well. Pet did very well,” She answered from across the room with a giggle.

Joy bloomed within Pet. Pet’s Mistress had praised her! Pet had done well; Pet was a good pony. Pet allowed herself a smile as she recovered from her task. Pet was a good pony. All was right in Pet’s world. Pet was a good pony.

“Now, Pet. Who is your mistress?” She asked, walking over to where Pet lay.

Pet looked at Her flowing mane, kind red eyes, and bright tail, and smiled. Pet knew exactly who she obeyed. “Princess Celestia, Mistress...”

Her eyes flashed with anger as She stomped a hoof, shaking the room. Apparently Pet’s answer had not been good enough. Before Pet’s astonished eyes, Her very form changed to that of a darker, more sinister-looking pony, with a mane and tail of stars and eyes like a dragon’s. “And now? Who do you obey?!”

“Pet obeys... Pet obeys...” Some small *spark*, a fire that would not go out, kept leaping in the way of the name. Pet frowned, but the spark would not allow her to speak. She coughed, hoping to avoid Her wrath by pretending her throat needed clearing. She, being the perfect pony She was, would see through it, but Pet had never been a bright pony, just one very good at doing what she had been told. “Why, Pet obeys... you, of course,” Pet said, noting with alarm her voice warbling with uncertainty.

That was not good enough. Pet’s Mistress floated her up to eye level and shouted, “*Speak my name, Pet! Speak it like the tool, like the foal you are!*”

Pet felt something strange happen. In the midst of her perfect emptiness, the spark surged forward, becoming a bonfire filling the void. This was no longer Nothing; it was Something. Something that was not Pet. “My name... my name is...”

“What?” the pony before my eyes boomed.

**“My name is Twilight Sparkle!”** I screamed, letting the sheer rage that had fueled my resurgence flow through my horn and out toward the pony who could be nothing but the purest embodiment of evil, breaking her grasp on me. To Tartarus with talking. To Tartarus with trying to be nice. Vengeance was all my mind screamed for. She needed to *suffer* for everything she’d done to me. A beam shot from my horn, aimed straight at her black heart. I would make her pay, or die trying.

Her eyes widened, and she erected a shield, although I noted that my beam strained against it for all it was worth. “Where... where did this *strength* come from?”

I felt my eyes go white with pure magic as they had a few times before in my life when raw magic had been mine to command, to bend to *my* will, to use as *I* saw fit. This—this was *my* talent.

And it would be my talent, my will, that saved me.

“You’re wrong, Nightmare Moon!” I shouted over the crackling sound of our magics. Cracks appeared in her shield. “I am no one’s slave, no one’s pet: not yours, not Celestia’s, not anypony’s! I am *me*, and I will cling to what has always made me me.” Something settled on my head, something cold and metallic that came to rest just above my horn, but I scarcely took notice of it. “*Magic.*”

Nightmare Moon’s eyes shot open with something akin to fear—an emotion I took great pleasure in seeing my tormentor show. “Is that... an Element of Harmony? But... how?”

“And now, Nightmare Moon!” I shouted, feeling even my voice resonate with mana. “You *fall!*” At last, my beam cracked through her shield, and with a serene smile on my face, I watched my beam burn a perfectly cylindrical hole through her in less than a second.

She sputtered, spitting up blood, as she staggered backwards and through the glass of the window, her eyes rolling back as she fell out the window and down to Canterlot below.

The trance faded, and I fell to my haunches, exhausted, letting out a tremendous exhale, feeling my surge of strength fade. “It’s over... it’s finally over...” I dragged myself to the unbroken window, looking up at the moon, behind which I imagined Princess Celestia captive in the sun. “I did it, Princess. I nearly died, and I’ve caused untold damage to so many ponies’ lives... but I did it. Equestria... Equestria is safe.” My jaw tightened audibly.

“I’ll find a way to get you back, don’t worry. Even if it takes my whole life, I’ll get you back. I swear it. I’ll tear down the sky, I’ll rend the earth and magic itself if I have to... but I will save you.”

I examined the faint reflection of myself in the remnants of the other window, and noted with surprise that some sort of tiara had found its way onto my head, coming to rest just above my horn. Its gold band stretched beyond my head a bit, as though it had been made for a bigger pony. Sapphires were inlaid into the band. Thinly worked gold spidered up from the band to encase a six-pointed amethyst which, upon reflection, reminded me a lot of the center part of my cutie mark. “Now where did you come from?”

I whispered. Nightmare Moon had called it “an Element of Harmony,” but I thought she had crushed the Elements right after she...

I put the line of inquiry out of my mind with a horrified shudder. Thinking of a time when seeing that horrible monster had inspired utter devotion probably wasn't the best idea. I turned to the Princess' books, now confronted with the monumental task of how to bring her back from the sun. Were the Elements of Harmony the keys to her prison? How would I even know what to do? Oh, if only she'd left some kind of hint or instructions...

“So I could just obey them?” I muttered. This was the downside of free will: sometimes having to tackle a problem on one's own. Much as I wanted to spit in the face of everything Nightmare Moon had said and more or less proven about me, a “By the way, Twilight, here's how to release me from the sun and bring light literally back to Equestria after having your psyche broken dozens of times after you make a horrible mistake” list appearing out of the frigid air would have been a welcome sight.

I shivered, feeling a fresh blast of cold night come through the broken window. Somepony would have to fix that later. With a groan, I realized I'd be back to my role as regent—if Equestria would even have me after what I'd done. “Not likely,” I muttered, thinking back to how terrified everypony on the streets of Canterlot had been of me. What horrors had she attributed to my name?

Magic seized me, and I found myself staring at my right forehoof, straining to reach my own face with murderous intent. I couldn't move a muscle, and it was only through a tremendous force of will that I kept my own hoof from slamming into my face. “Wh-who...” I stammered, unable to believe the easy answer the dark corona of the magic offered. There was no way she could have survived that.

“Miss me?” Nightmare Moon purred as she spun me to face her, my twitching hoof still trying to dig its way into my eye.

My spell *had* connected; her wing was folded over a bleeding hole in her chest, and her movement was unsteady. Even using her magic to control my body was causing a visible strain; sweat poured down her face, and her mane and tail had lost some of their luster.

“Impossible! That beam should have cut through your heart... if you even *have* one.” My hoof twitched its way closer to my hapless eye, no matter how much I blinked.

A raspy laugh escaped the wracked pony's lips. "I'm a goddess, Twilight Sparkle. It takes more than one shot."

"Yet apparently even 'goddesses' bleed. How's missing parts of some of your favorite organs?" I snapped. *Celestia*, but I was getting tired of hearing that voice.

She stepped forward, causing a thin trickle of blood to splatter on Princess Celestia's carpet. A pained wince emanated from her mouth, sounding for all the world like the sweetest music I had ever heard. "Unpleasant. It seems Celestia chose her pawn well."

I grunted. "Even a pawn can capture a princess in chess, if the player maneuvers correctly."

"Oh, this was check..." Another wince, which brought far too much pleasure to me, sounded as more of her sloshed out. "But hardly mate, my little pony. In case you haven't noticed, you're one of the last pieces on the board for Celestia. All I have to do is take you out of the picture and..."

I tried to light up my horn to summon something, anything, but nothing came. "What? Just going to try to warp my mind for some mockery of acceptance of you again?"

She staggered closer and knocked the tiara off my head with a swipe of a hoof. "Hardly." She paused, drawing in a few deep breaths, as she swayed on her hooves. "You've... proven *far* too risky for that." My hoof twitched closer; my eyelashes scraped its underside as I blinked.

"So what? Have me tear my own eyes out? Killing me gains you nothing! I'll just be a heroine, a martyr to the insurgence," I bluffed, knowing full well that my death would probably result in celebrations in the streets. Stupid magic making me this nightmare's right-hoof mare.

"No... I have something for more fun in mind." A twisted smile alighted on her face as she chuckled. "Bon voyage, Twilight Sparkle..." Her horn lit up with dark, distorted light.

The last thing I saw on Equestria was that grin that spoke volumes on cruelty and delight in the suffering of others—a thin-bladed knife that had just plunged itself into me. Against such a thing, I couldn't help myself.

I blinked.

• • •

When my eyes opened, I thought they hadn't opened at all: all was dark. I couldn't see a thing. I hesitantly put a hoof out, trying to feel for something, but met only air: cold, cold air that blew my mane and tail forward at violent speed, seeming to cut through to the bone.

I shivered. Why was it so cold? All the warmth was bleeding out of me, stolen by this oppressive gloom, yet the thought didn't bother me. Heat did not seem to matter here; I got the feeling not many things did. Wherever here was.

I saw nothing, knew nothing, but heard a great howling, a pitiful wailing that lodged itself inside my head. The howl was unlike any sound I had heard from anything equine or otherwise: it was horrifying, antithetical even, to my very being, yet it seemed to be calling me. If I strained my ears, I could hear a faint "Twilight..." amidst the metallic, alien screeching and wailing.

Drawn by the voice, I took a step, praying that my hoof would meet something solid; I could barely see the strands of my mane that were blowing in front of my face. Thinking became... difficult, my thoughts leaden and slow. Could only focus on the voice, drawing me onwards.

I took a step.

The voice became more calming, soothing, guiding. My eyelids drooped as I felt the by-now familiar sensation of something affecting my brain. Whatever. My defeat was total at this point.

I gave in.

Step.

Without warning, a light surged in front of me, a brilliant doorway that I couldn't take my eyes off of, nor see beyond. Normally, such light would have blinded me, but this one drew me ever further, almost soothing me just from its radiance.

"Go towards the light, huh?" I paused, feeling the clamor in my mind to go towards that doorway *right now* growing more insistent. "This one better not be a fake."

I chuckled, taking no amusement in the joke at my own expense. Fatigue ruled me; moments ago, I had wanted nothing more but to fall asleep, and although the chilled feeling stayed with me, it seemed... further away here. It was still present, but in the back

of my mind, noted with as much urgency as my need to buy more quills when I had a chance.

My eyes squinted into the light, trying to discern what lay behind it, but I might as well have tried to see through the sun. A weary sigh escaped me.

I stepped into the light.

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I tumbled down onto a hard surface, suddenly overcome by sweltering, present heat. “So hot...” I moaned, feeling my coat start to sizzle.

Hoofsteps, then a stuttered inhalation sounded from above me. “Oh, no. No, Twilight, no... no...” Magic surrounded me in a familiar aura of light and in moments, the heat seemed far away and bearable.

I looked up, to see— “Princess Celestia?”

My teacher stood before me, a haunted look that spoke of her untold years on her face. “Twilight, I... I never meant for this to happen, I...” Tears gathered in her eyes—more emotion than I’d seen her show in... well, ever. In a choked voice, she added, “It wasn’t supposed to end like this.” She walked over to me, her hooves echoing off the black substance we were on.

I scrambled to my hooves. “S-stay back!” Hyperventilation kicked in, and I backed up, noting with alarm the bright corona all around us, barely holding back the empty space beyond and the planet below.

She looked real. She looked real. This place looked real. But how could I trust *anything* my senses or my brain told me anymore?

“Twilight?” She took another step forward, her hoof coming down as though she were afraid of crushing an ant.

“I-I said stay back!” My breath was coming in short puffs now. “Who are you? What... what do you want from me?”

“Twilight, I can’t imagine what you’ve been through, but—“

“Well, of course not! Unless you actually *do* because you’re just another *illusion* because I can’t trust my brain and *who are you?!*”

“I’m... I’m your teacher, Twilight Sparkle. Princess Celestia.” A tear fell from her eye as she took another step. “Have you... forgotten?”

“Oh no, I remember! I remember it *all*.” Ignoring my suddenly twitching ear, I circled as best as I was able in the solar cage (or what my mind was telling me was a solar cage but then what if Nightmare Moon wants me to think that it’s a fake solar cage oh Celestia) to keep some distance between us. “I just... I can’t be sure what’s real anymore,” I whispered, as my shaking legs failed and I plopped to the ground, or what passed for it here. “I’m just... tired. I’ve been through so much...”

“Oh, Twilight...” With great care, she walked over to my shivering form and offered her wing. “Tell me what happened, Twilight.”

I rolled away from her pleading eyes and ignored the wing, as comforting as it looked. For all I knew, those were the wings of evil, waiting to drag me under once again.

“Twilight?”

No.

“Twilight, please...”

No pony will ever hurt me again. Sharing myself only brings misery.

“Please, say something,” she whispered.

Without turning to look at her, I stared through the light to the planet below. “I learned something, Princess Celestia. That’s good, right? Learning something?” I chuckled, feeling my body and mind finally starting to catch up to what had happened to me and realizing the breaking point had long since passed.

She lay down beside me, not offering the feathery hug out of deference. Maybe... maybe she was who she appeared to be. Maybe. “What’s that, my faithful student?”

“I learned the meaning of life.” Idly, I noted that the planet below looked dried from this angle.

“Oh?” Her voice was quiet, barely a breath in the stillness of the void.

“Life... is about pain. Suffering. Hurting others... and letting them hurt you. Nothing good ever comes from associating with others.” I paused, considering the bated breath of my mentor. “Before, when I was alone, my life was simple. Read books. Write reports. Send Spike out for supplies.” What had happened to the little guy? With a shake of my head, I realized I’d probably never know. Maybe it was better this way. “Sometimes have to ignore one of the other students. Share a meal with you.

“But at the end of the day, I knew that I was alone. And I was fine with that. I had my space, I had my tasks, I had my purpose. I had all the companionship I needed in you and in Spike. Then... that day came. I was shoved out of my little bubble. To ‘make friends.’”

I laughed: a cracked, high-pitched thing that sliced through the peace like an umbilical cord in the mess of afterbirth. “Make friends. All those ponies were crazy, but I kind of liked them... but what did I get in the end for my troubles? What did I get for caring for them? For caring for you?” I pointed the question straight at her, and she looked away, unable to meet my gaze. “Nothing but *pain*, Celestia. I was happier as just a student. I didn’t need friends. I didn’t need other ponies. Suffering and misery were all that other ponies had for me.

“I wish you’d never made me leave that tower. The world’s a bad place, princess, and it turns out I was right: I was better off a little lonely.”

She leaned in, softly nuzzling me, her tears falling on my coat as she draped a wing over me. I didn’t resist. “Twilight, please believe me, I never wanted this to happen. Something, somewhere, went horribly wrong. I can’t change the past, but I can try to ease your pain a little. It’s the least I can do. Do you... want me to try?” Her question was soft, hesitant, needing my consent before anything happened.

I nodded, sniffing. Anything to get rid of this horrible feeling of emptiness I couldn’t shake.

As her horn lit up, a curious feeling came over me. A tingle near my spine, then a sudden chill in my head, and without warning, I felt somepony in my head and ***Mistress Mistress Mistress Mistress Mistress exist to serve Pet is nothing nothing Pet Pet a Pet has no name*** just like that, flashes of happily serving, happily licking the hooves of that monster as She... I mean, she... crushed everything I loved came flooding back.

“*Stop!*” I screamed, flailing out with my forelegs, striking at Celestia, who quickly backed off. “Stop-hu-huh,” I bawled, curling into a tiny ball as tears flowed freely. Revulsion, like some slimy beast, crawled over every bit of my body, sending me into shivers. “Not like that. Not again. Not again. Not again. Won’t let it happen again.” Deep depression—feelings of utter worthlessness and a pervading, persistent sense of being *dirty*, washed over me. My vision swam before me—how was any of this real? A chill, a numbness set in. Detachment—never feeling anything, that could be my ally.

I was so *dirty*, so *disgusting*. “Not real. Not real, not real, I’m a good pony I’m a good pony I’m a good pony...” The emptiness grew, threatening to consume me. If only I could just turn myself off, divorce myself from these emotions that wounded me just like other ponies can’t trust them can’t trust myself had to be cold, empty, distant can’t care about anything make the pain go away even if the magic didn’t mean to reminded me of *serve serve offer yourself to Her*.

“Twilight... do you need me to...” That voice. Too melodic. Too sweet. Too caring. What did it hide?

I glanced up, and there she was: the dark copy of me, wings and all, ready to just corrupt me again. “Stay back! You’re not going to take me again! Never again!” I scrambled to my hooves, panting. “I’ll... I’ll kill you for what you did to me.” More shudders came over me. That tongue in my mouth, probing, changing, *betraying*, stealing, twisting, corrupting... “*I’ll kill you, you hear me?!*” I screamed, glaring death at the pony who was out to ruin my life again.

“Twilight, please. Calm down. It’s me: you’re *safe!*” Her wings flared out as she took a step.

“Safe? *Safe?!* Is that what you call being alone with you? What are you after this time? Need somepony to lick your guards’ hooves clean?! Somepony to b-b-be your p-p-pet...” ***Pet Pet be as a Pet to Her*** “*No!* I won’t... I’m n-n-not letting you! I refuse!” With a howl of rage, I threw myself at her, striking out with my hooves in every direction.

To my surprise, she stood there, stoically accepting every blow, not even flinching when I started going for her eyes. Tears flowed from her swelling eyes, and she whispered, “I accept my punishment.”

Eventually, my fit of rage ended, and I collapsed, exhausted. Another spasm came over me, and I was back to feeling *disgusting* again. I’d never be clean again. My vision swam as the dam burst, and my tears flowed freely.

What had I ever done to deserve this?

“I am so sorry, Twilight.” Princess Celestia joined me. *One eye was swollen shut.*

“Oh no, did I just... oh, Princess, I’m sorry, I didn’t... I couldn’t!” Bawling, I threw myself onto her, letting her sweet coat soak up my tears. “I thought... I thought you were... it was like it was all happening again.” I wrapped my forelegs around her tight, a foal frightened out of her wits again. “It was like I was there and she was going to... to...” I shivered again, heaving as my sorrow spilled itself. “I don’t know if I’ll ever feel clean again.”

Sniffles sounded from the pony I’d appropriated as my giant teddy bear. “This was never supposed to happen... what did I do wrong? What could I have done? Why? *Why?*”

There, in the center of the sun, we became sisters in sorrow for a very long time.

Eventually, when neither of us had any more tears to shed and we’d simply sat on our tiny platform, locked in a silent embrace, for time beyond counting, I asked, “Princess... What will happen to Equestria?”

A long silence ensued as we gazed at the dark, cold half of the planet. I shivered, the remnants of my panicked hallucination lingering in my mind.

“I... I don’t know, my faithful student.” Her expression was hollow, weighted, lined with a horrible responsibility she could no longer see to. “I don’t know.”

I gazed out into the void at Equestria below, feeling warmed by the feathery wing above me. Princess Celestia ran a gentle hoof through my mane, soothing my fractured nerves.

Still, maybe this wouldn’t be all bad...

An eternity with Her.