

League of Discord
Chapter 8: Clothed in Nightmares

Celestia waited patiently for the foreigners to arrive. She had decided to wait for the second group to come before summoning them before her, after divine monarch had returned from dealing with the latest parasprite infestation. The letters she had received from Twilight Sparkle had contained in-depth descriptions of the travelers, including diagrams. Celestia suspected her pupil was far, far too fond of diagrams at times. She would have to speak with her later about being concise later.

Celestia snapped to attention as the escort guard she had sent walked into the door, followed by six ponies that did not belong in Equestria. To the average citizen of Equestria, the differences might have just been one of the myriad quirks of the colorful ponies resident in her kingdom, but to Celestia, the alien nature of the six in front of her was as plain as the marks on their flanks. The white unicorn with the bracer seemed innocent enough, or at least oblivious enough. However, the other two unicorns reeked of combat magic, and the pegasus had the nerve to wear weaponry, however broken, in her presence, lying rather obviously to the guards about its true nature. Celestia did not fear anything as mundane as physical harm, though, so she had allowed it. Truth be told, it was the last two, the earth ponies, that worried her. The crimson one with the bottle of who-knows-what on his back was already unnaturally large, but massive could only describe the other, and both of them seemed like they were hiding something. The dark brown earth pony only stood about a head shorter than Celestia herself, and alicorns by nature were giants compared to normal ponies. Nasus' gaze met the Princess' own, and she found herself somewhat unnerved, though her own eyes did not falter in return. The six travelers bowed as they reached the throne.

Celestia did not show any of her concern though. She was, after all, the primary ruler of Equestria, and the custodian of the sun, and she conducted herself with the propriety thereof. “Rise, and welcome travelers, to Canterlot and to the Royal Court. I hope you have found your accommodations to your liking thus far?”

Swain gave his best winning smile. “The rooms were luxurious, Your Majesty, and your guard as courteous and professional as I have ever seen. I am sure my companions feel the same.”

Celestia felt a surge of distaste. Swain reminded her too well of the sycophantic nobles of the Royal Court, ever-vigilant for an opportunity to dip into the treasury. She returned Swain's smile with her own, equal parts regality and friendliness. “I am pleased to hear that. Forgive me for skipping further pleasantries, though. I'm sure you know why you're hear. I'm happy to say that I have already devoted the top minds at the University of Canterlot to finding a way to send you home. I'm sure they will have a solution in no time.”

“If I may, Princess, I already have significant knowledge of the magic that backfired to bring us here. I believe I can be of some contribution to their efforts.” Ryze adjusted the scroll on his back as he waited for a response.

Celestia nodded. “This makes sense. I will have an escort direct you to the university research laboratories after we conclude our meeting. Is there anything else?”

Singed raised his head. “Forgive me, Princess. I do not mean to impose, but I was wondering if perhaps I might receive transport to the forest known as Everfree. I am a chemist by trade, and I have heard of some interesting plants native to the area I would like to collect samples of while your researchers are doing their work. Perhaps I could share some of the fruits of my labors with researchers here? I understand your student, Twilight Sparkle has already sent you the recipes for some basic potions that my world has created, but I feel if I were given the opportunity to do some research with plants from Everfree Forest, both of our peoples might be able to benefit from combining my knowledge with the intrinsically magical nature of the flora and fauna here. I do not mean to sound arrogant, but I assure you, I am quite an accomplished chemist.”

Silent alarms rang in Celestia's mind, but she could not pinpoint the source of her anxiety. “The Everfree Forest is beyond Equestrian control and maintenance, and the creatures within are characteristically hostile and formidable to the unprepared.”

“Rest assured, Your Majesty, my companion is very capable of preserving himself without damaging the environment around him. I will also accompany him if it reassures you. I am a proficient magic-user in my homeland, and together I am sure we will be more than a match for anything that the Everfree sees fit to pit us against,” Swain quipped reassuringly. His raven cawed inquisitively at Swain, who petted it gently.

Celestia still felt an unidentifiable unease at conceding to the request, but she did not wish to dismiss the opportunity to get both of these ponies away from her court. She was sure that any influence they had over those around them couldn't be healthy for her subjects, so reluctantly, she gave way. “Very well. However, I insist that one of my Royal Guard accompanies you, for the purpose of facilitating necessary communication between your group and Canterlot, so that you might know when we have found a way to send you home.”

Swain nodded, annoyed at the hindrance, but still willing to take what he could get. The guard would be dealt with appropriately at a later point. Celestia signaled to a nearby unicorn dressed in the armor of the Royal Guard, and whispered a few words to him. The guard nodded, and trotted toward the ornate double doors that led away from the throne room. “This way, gentlecolts. It's a bit of a trip, so it's best we start packing straight away.” His two charges nodded, and followed him out of the room.

Celestia couldn't help but note Nasus' suspicious glance at the two retreating forms. It seemed she was not the only one who didn't trust those two, but perhaps he had tangible reasons...

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Nasus sat, taking in the peaceful scenery of the Canterlot Royal Gardens, extending his senses into the environment around him, feeling within and without the life that he was surrounded with. As immersed as he was, though, he wasn't surprised when the alicorn landed behind him. Celestia stared out at the gardens. “Beautiful, aren't they? I commissioned the gardens from some of the best artistic minds in Equestria at the time, and at times flew across the world itself to retrieve certain rare species. It was always my belief that those who choose to live on this cold mountain with me and my sister should not be separated from nature, for it is in that innate connection that ponies thrive. You seem like the sort to appreciate the concept.”

Nasus nodded. “The world that I was living on before I was sent here would be better for such a connection, though it does exist in places. Though, I do not think that this discussion is why you are here. Beings such as you and I need not dance around the matter at hand. If there is a lesson immortality has taught me, surrounded by those constrained by time, is that every second is blessed. What troubles you, Princess?”

The Princess only let her shock cover her face for a few seconds before regaining her composure, letting out a dignified chuckle. “I cannot say I was expecting to find another immortal any time soon. It is a pity you are right about our seconds being blessed, though, else I would sit and discuss many things with you as days innumerable passed. Alas, it cannot be. I must say, your two companions, Swain and Singed, worry me. A lesson immortality has taught me is never to ignore your instincts, and my instincts cry against letting those two wander about my land. I am not a tyrant, though, and intruding too much into the affairs of others is a swift way down a dark path.”

The Curator of the Sands nodded. “Your mistrust is not misplaced, I fear, but I cannot fathom their intentions. Those two care more for their own goals than for the well-being of the world around them, though. Let us hope that we swiftly are returned to a world more capable of dealing with ones such as those.”

“Indeed.”

The sky-carriage touched down at the edge of the Everfree Forest at midday. Singed and Swain thanked the two pegasi operating it before stepping off. The unicorn guard assigned to them silently followed as Singed purposefully meandered around, stopping to gather plants and stuff them into pouches he had attached along the strap that secured his bottle to his back. The guard didn't notice the subtle cues that Swain directed to Singed along the way though, nor did he realize the reasoning behind the chemist's corresponding navigational changes.

It was about two hours before Swain gave one last nod to Singed, who bent down to pick up another plant, secretly opening a smaller bottle that began to leak a colorless, odorless gas. He then casually redirected his path in front of their escort. It was right as a bleak-looking, abandoned castle came into view that the pair heard a telltale thump. Neither of them missed a beat.

While Singed stayed behind, keeping the unconscious guard, Swain ventured forth, hurriedly limping along toward his prize. The general's route was direct and efficient. The Castle of the Royal Pony Sisters was already somewhat simplistic in design, and Discord's instructions had been specific. It wasn't long before Swain stood in a decrepit tower, the hoofprints of those who had more recently been here still visible in the thick layer of dust that had settled over everything...or at least, almost everything. Gleaming in the darkness, a silvery shimmer caught Swain's eye. The armor looked like a compromise between the showy nature of royalty and the spartan nature of a combatant, and it permeated the room with silky strands of magical residue that drew Swain like a moth to a candle. He couldn't help himself; the thought of the reward promised to him elicited a dark chuckle as he gathered the armor into his saddlebags.

When the guard woke up, he was greeted by the concerned faces of Swain and Singed, the later of which looked somewhat sheepish. “Forgive me, good stallion. It appears that some of these plants, if contained for long periods of time, emit gasses that must have rendered you unconscious. A fascinating phenomenon, to be certain, but I believe we should return to Canterlot to be sure that you have no lasting damage to your lungs or nervous system.” The guard nodded groggily, and quickly composed and sent a message to Canterlot, his horn glowing as the parchment ignited in a magical green blaze.

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Riven blazed through the air, her target almost within her grasp. Rainbow Dash had been impressed with the rapid improvement of her protege's technique, but even so, she was a master at her craft. Right as the white-maned pegasus reached out to grab her teacher in mid-air, the latter almost effortlessly doubled her speed, doing a few loops around the confounded Riven as if to drive the point home.

Below them, Ezreal and Nasus lounged with Fluttershy, Twilight Sparkle, and Pinkie, though for the latter, the term lounge is used loosely, as Ponyville's partying expert felt more inclined to do cartwheels around the group while they sat so boringly still. Riven had suggested that the remaining, unoccupied champions return to Ponyville until another summons was made, and Celestia had no qualms about accepting, having spoken with Nasus enough to know that Riven was not a threat. Her brief time talking with the giant earth pony had been enlightening, and Nasus had told her many things about Runeterra, and a few things about his distant homeworld. Celestia had reminisced about the history of her rule over Equestria. Immortal beings are relatively rare, and Celestia had been delighted to speak with someone else who was roughly the same age, although when the subject came up, Nasus had to admit that he was slightly younger than the ruler, which Celestia laughed off, citing his harsher experiences as a better teacher than Celestia had. The Princess had been very pleased to find that her misgivings about Nasus seemed unfounded.

“So Nasus, if you don't mind me asking, if you don't eat food like we do, or your companions in their native forms, how do you sustain yourself?” Twilight looked up from the notepad on which she had been keeping her various observations about the foreigners.

Nasus sat up, and took a breath. “My species was created by beings far more powerful than I, many aeons ago, to protect and guide the humans native to my world. The humans called us Soul Eaters, after our ability to feed off of the auras and energies that every living thing gives out, though in desperate times, we have the ability to live up to our names. However, consuming the soul of a living creature is mostly unnecessary, as we are able to sustain ourselves freely off of the naturally discharged magical energy from any significant group of sentient beings that are not Soul Eaters, so building our civilization around the local humans meant that we never wanted for sustenance. Consuming the soul of a sentient being is considered monstrous, however, and consuming a soul that belonged to someone close to your strength can drive you insane. In combat, though, it is customary to take part of the defeated combatant's energy to fuel you in battle. The process by which we 'digest' also heals our bodies physically. A perk of being a Soul Eater is that because of the natural fluctuations and spikes in one's aura that combat causes, the mere act of combat allows us to replenish ourselves.” Nasus waited patiently while Twilight continued scribbling.

“I wonder what a soul tastes like...” Fluttershy looked mildly sickened by Pinkie's curious statement.

Nasus frowned at Fluttershy's nauseated manner. "The taking of a life is not something to be taken lightly, and that being said, the act of consuming more than a small portion of someone's magical energy or life force can be sickening. We are aware of the monstrous nature of our existence, and we are more than grateful to be able to live in peaceful symbiosis with humanity. However, our method of passively absorbing energy give an effect dependent on the overall mood of those emitting the energy. It can range from elation, serenity, or a feeling of overwhelming power."

Nasus' treatment of the subject seemed to reassure the timid pegasus, and Twilight was more than delighted with the chance to research something probably nopony would ever be able to do again. Above them, Rainbow Dash got a little too careless, and with a splash into the nearby lake, Riven tackled her out of the sky, eliciting laughter from the bystanders. The sun began to set.

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Singed was ready. The sun had set by the time they had returned and finished preparations, and now Singed and Swain silently mulled over the directions given telepathically from a nearby Discord. Approaching an unmarked door, hidden out of the path of most ponies, the two began their plan. Singed lifted a small bottle to his lips, smiling in anticipation...

The reaction was instantaneous. Singed doubled over in pain, feeling as if his blood had been replaced with liquid fire, searing him from the inside. His glowing eyes flared like torches, attracting the attention of a nearby guard, who rushed over in concern. Singed staggered around as he tried to reestablish his sense of balance. Foam began dripping from his mouth, tiny flecks of it reaching Swain, who snorted in distaste. By now the unfortunate guard had reached the pair. "Sir, are you okay? What happened?" Singed finally stood still, and looked up at the guard, who stood, terrified speechless at the emotionless green orbs staring at him like a feral animal. Green liquid dripped from Singed's mouth. Swain nodded.

The guard had no time to react before Singed plowed both through him and through the nearby door, the wooden frame splintering as if it had been paper. Swain followed along, sidestepping the crumpled figure of the guard and the shattered pieces of the door frame. On and on the pair rushed, navigating a twisted labyrinth until they came across a thick metal door. Singed immediately began pounding on it, each impact from his hooves leaving a small dent in the metal. After a few seconds of this, a larger group of guards heard the noise and tracked it to its source. "Alert the Princesses!" Swain cursed himself as one of the group retreated before he could stop him.

In front of him, a group of mixed unicorns and pegasi leered at him with hostile eyes. Swain laughed. These guards had obviously never seen combat, and Swain knew they didn't stand a chance. The guard's hostility quickly morphed into horror as they saw what came next. Swain's body had begun to twist itself, and his raven was cackling madly. Talons erupted from his hooves as he stalked forward. Pitch black feathers began to cover his entire body, and soon his mouth was replaced with a wicked looking beak. The squad found themselves overshadowed by hideous wings, and a demonic laugh rasped forth as Swain's six eyes focused on his targets. The guards were paralyzed with fear at the nightmarish raven-pony monstrosity before them. Finally, one of the more intrepid of the group came to his senses and conjured a ball of fire. Swain roared in fury as his shoulder was singed, and raised a claw at the group. Talons emerged from the ground and rooted the guards in place, and they struggled

in vain as shadowy blobs fought their way free of Swain's disfigured body. The shadowy ravens cackled madly as they dived at the guards, tearing into them with wickedly sharp claws. As each raven made its rounds to and from Swain, the burn on his should gradually faded, and the guards felt weaker and weaker with each passing moment. As one pegasus managed to break free of his bindings, crawling away feebly, Swain's pet casually flew above him and began tormenting him with a sizzling beam of arcane energy. Swain moved in, ready to begin striking his final blows to the guardsponies. In the background he heard the sound of a door collapsing. Swain raised a claw...

Swain gasped in pain as he slammed into the wall, his form quickly writhing back into its original state. Celestia looked down on him with undiluted hatred. A smaller blue alicorn stood at her flank, leering with disgust. "Jericho Swain, you have attacked my guards and broken into-Oh, no...this is the room where...Stop him!" In a flash, Celestia had teleported to Singed and pinned him, who was cackling madly as he tossed his saddlebags to a statue on a pedestal in the center of the room. The stone cracked as the bags glowed briefly.

Discord erupted from his prison, grinning like a maniac. "Hellooooo, Equestria. It's time for some CHAOS!" In a flash, he, Singed, and Swain had vanished, leaving two dismayed princesses and a heavily wounded squad of guards behind.

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Twilight groaned, and rubbed her sore head. With horror, she realized where she was, and a dark voice sounded out. "Hello, dear Twilight. I'm back, and guess what? I have plans for you."