

The moon had risen and set five times since the nightmares first began. Five nights punctuated by cries of fear. Five long stretches of darkness where everypony huddled in their beds with the lights on, too afraid to lay down and return to sleep. The days should have brought relief. Should have given the residents of Ponyville a chance to reassure themselves and catch up on lost sleep. Dreams lost power under the penetrating glare of the sun after all. Yet the nightmares persisted. Those who lay down to nap and recover soon became entangled in the horror of the dreamscape. The lack of sleep was accentuated by worry over fading cutie marks. The town grew brittle. Small disagreements that should have been politely resolved festered into bitter arguments. Arguments escalated into confrontations.

For six days the library had been a bustle of activity. Every book even remotely relating to cutie marks was examined front to back. Tomes of history were dusted off and studied. Books on the nature of magic, the mind, and even a foal's stories were read in detail. Twilight had lost no time in writing to princess Celestia asking for help. She had received a reply within minutes. It had been examined by the entire group until they could all recite it almost verbatim.

My faithful student,

It grieves me that I cannot come to you personally in your time of need. If the situation at Canterlot were any different I assure that this reply would have been delivered in person. Unfortunately it seems that the malady that has befallen you, your friends, and the whole town of Ponyville has also taken my sister. I cannot leave her side. Do not despair though. I have ordered the scholars to scour every document in the royal library. I have also commissioned professors of every kind to set aside their own work and devote themselves to discovering what is happening. As soon as they discover any possible lead I will let you know.

-Princess Celestia

Nothing further had been heard for five days. The friends continued to suffer each night, fears that seemed specially tailored for each filling their minds if they so much as nodded off. Their cutie marks had faded a little more after each occasion and now bore a resemblance to a painting left out in the sun. They had all taken to staying in the library so that they could support each other after each dream. For Applejack and Rainbow Dash it was relatively easy. Once they had verified that none of their friends had perished, they found it simple to calm down. Pinkie Pie, Twilight, and Rarity all took a little more persuasion. They needed either forgiveness or reassurance and a hot cup of tea. Fluttershy took the worst of it. Every time the gentle filly woke screaming it took almost an hour to start to settle her. Twilight, despairing of her friend's suffering, located a spell to stave off sleep. Spike had grumbled at first about being constantly awoken by one scared pony or another. The severity of the situation soon dawned on him and he devoted himself to assisting in whatever ways he could.

The friends studied and prayed for word from Canterlot.

“There you go Fluttershy...that should last you another...” Twilight Sparkle looked at the clock on the wall and groaned. “Hour or so.”

“Thank you. I'm sorry to be such a bother but the dreams-”

“We understand. It's fine.” Twilight said, drawing her friend into a hug. “They just affect you more than anyone else, that's all.”

As the gentle pegasi went back to studying a text about hallucinogenic plants Twilight let out a sigh and slumped forward. She accepted a cup of tea from Spike with a soft thank you. Why was the magic so hard? True, she had never gone on so little sleep before. Also true, she

had never been more afraid to lose control. Every time she had reached inside herself to cast a spell she had felt a twinge of fear. What if this was the spell that went horribly wrong? Even the simple alertness spell seemed to be extremely difficult to cast, almost as if she had lost some of her talent. The teacup fell from her hoof, forgotten in the severity of the thought that had struck her. Her cutie mark was fading. Her powers were weakening.

“Girls.” She said. “Girls I need you all to stop what you’re doing.”

Her friends looked at her with a mixture of confusion and exhaustion. Rainbow Dash shrugged at Applejack.

“Girls, what are cutie marks?”

“Uh...you feelin’ alright there Twilight? Cutie marks are them things ya’ got on yer flank. Ya’ know, the ones that’re disappearin’?”

“No, I mean what are they? What do they represent.”

“Oooh! I know the answer! Oh pick me!” Pinkie Pie said, a hint of her normal self shining through the almost humorless mask that had taken her over. She gave a little giggle and a satisfied bounce. “Cutie marks represent our special talent! What we’re best at!”

“Exactly.” Twilight said. She couldn’t believe how simple the answer was. Their cutie marks were tied to their abilities, what they were best suited at. “I need everypony here to do what they’re best at.”

“What we’re best at?” Rainbow Dash said, flying off the floor and hovering. “How’s that going to help us?”

“I have an idea, but I need to test it out first. Everyone, outside.”

It was, Twilight decided, one of the greatest deductions she had ever made. It was also one of the most terrifying. In turn, every member of the group had attempted to do what they were most suited to. While it hadn’t been disastrous, it hadn’t been very pretty either. Rainbow Dash managed a passable aerial routine, gaining confidence with each successful basic maneuver. When she attempted to start doing more advanced stunts something went wrong. The agility that was evident just a few seconds before disappeared. She had landed in disgust, saying that it was lack of sleep. Twilight had ventured the opinion that it was the skills not of the young flier champion, but that of merely a competent weather pony. That had almost led to an argument but Spike interjected himself as the voice of reason. For everypony it was the same. Their skills and talents had degraded.

“Ah’ still don’t understand Twilight. What’s going on?” Applejack said after they had regrouped in the library.

“Whatever is making our cutie marks disappear isn’t just giving us nightmares. It’s stealing who we are.”

Your Royal Highness Princess Celestia,

We have uncovered an extremely disturbing fact concerning the recent turn of events. It seems that not only are cutie marks disappearing but the associated talents that go with them. While initially only a theory, repeated tests and inquiries through town have shown that everypony has lost a measure of skill they once possessed. Personalities, which should be unaffected by this, are being severely distorted by the plague of nightmares gripping the area. Upon further study it has also been discovered that ponies without a strong support network have suffered more than those with close friends and family. Indeed, my friends and I still have

the clearest cutie marks and retain the most skill. With your permission I would like to utilize the elements of harmony in an attempt to drive off whatever is besieging us. Please respond quickly, as we don't know how much time we have left.

Your faithful student,

Twilight Sparkle

“Send it Spike.”

The little dragon ignited the letter and the friends watched it curl into wisps of magical smoke.

“What do we do now? Surely we don't just sit around and wait?” Rarity asked as the last fragment of smoke had dissipated.

“No. Until we hear from Princess-” Twilight began.

“Incoming!” Spike said right before unleashing a belch of flame.

A furred scroll with the royal seal appeared in the air. Twilight lunged for it and caught it before it was halfway to the ground. She unrolled it and began reading out loud.

My faithful student,

You have permission to take any needed measures to battle this threat. I trust your judgment completely.

The first line was crammed in between the greeting and the rest of the text, as if it were added while someone was already in the process of finishing a letter.

The librarians at the Muskoxtonic University in Arkhoof have managed to locate a tome that might contain valuable information. The scholars were hesitant to part with the book, claiming extreme risk to the world. Once the situation was explained they set about preparing it for transport immediately. Its advanced age and extremely powerful nature prevent magical delivery unfortunately. I have already dispatched the Thunderbolts to retrieve it. You should be receiving it within a few hours of this letter.

Princess Celestia-

“OK girls, we know what we need to do.” Twilight said as she laid the scroll aside.

“Hold on a sec sugar. The Princess didn't say Muskoxtonic University did she?”

Applejack asked, a note of concern in her voice.

“That's what it sounded like.”

“Well...ah' don' know if that's such a good idea.”

“And why not?”

“Because...well...it...” Applejack trailed off, kicking at the floor.

“Because they might be sending us the Equinomicon!” Dash said, shooting Twilight a look of concern.

“The Equinomicon? Seriously?”

“What's the Equinomicon?” Rarity asked.

“Only the most evil book ever written! It contains powerful spells and speaks of monsters from beyond time and space!” Rainbow Dash responded. She looked at Applejack for support and the orange filly nodded. “They say that you can go mad just by looking at it!”

“That's a load of-”

“It's true! I read all about it.” Pinkie Pie said. “It has stuff like Ayah Ayah Cultpooloo Futagin and all kinds of weird stories about places that don't exist!”

“Exactly, it's all made up now if you'll just-”

“I heard that if you use the spells in it you can unlock the doorways to alternate dimensions.”

“Still not clear on what this Equinomicon thing is.”

“Eugh. Girls. Calm down.” Twilight held up her hooves. She turned to Rarity. “The Equinomicon is the journal of Abdul Alhazard, the mad Arabian. It’s supposed to be this tome to ultimate power and describes a number of elder gods that will supposedly rise again to reclaim the world for themselves. It was MADE UP,” She shot a meaningful glance towards her other friends with these words, “by a horror writer around a hundred years ago. It is fiction.”

“But what about-”

“Fiction, Rainbow Dash.” Twilight said. She took a deep breath and let it out. “Now we have serious matters at hoof here. I need you all to gather your elements. Meet back here as fast as you can. Got it?”

“But what if-”

“Fiction. Not real. Go.”

It took longer than expected to gather the elements of harmony: Rainbow Dash’s reduced flying skills; Rarity’s inability to recall exactly where she had hidden the book; Pinkie Pie setting off the multiple layers of “traps” she had set up around hers; Fluttershy having a hard time getting past the nervous crowd of animals in and around her home; and Applejack running out of breath halfway back to Sweet Apple Acres, Twilight was nearly beside herself when her friends returned. They settled into formation, each wearing their respective element.

“Ready?” Twilight asked.

The answers all came in affirmative. The group reached deep within themselves, willing their element to come forth. The elements began to emerge and strength began to flow between each member of the group. It reinforced them, steadied them, and allowed them to draw deeper on their inner power. White light flooded the room. It cast every object into sharp relief before driving out any hint of shadow, except for one patch. Something crouched in the patch, something twisted and revolting. It swung its eyes towards the group, gibbering with hate, and pushed back. The light dimmed for a moment and then swelled, revealing the creature.

“We do not fear you.” The ponies spoke as one.

“Our strength is greater than yours. Together we are one. You have no power over us.”
The six voices rolled into one sound, mighty and terrible.

“You cannot harm us.”

The shadow thing swung its gaze towards each pony in turn, feeding back the fear it had fed on, trying to get one to break. Whenever the strength of one wavered, the others reinforced it.

“You will leave us. You will leave this place. You will return from whence you came.”

The thing shrank before the light, growing smaller, less frightening. It gave one last wailing cry, although it was hard to tell if it was fear or frustration. The group stepped forward and let out a single shout of laughter. As it burst into a million wisps of shadow the monster seemed to fill the room with a presence more ancient and powerful than even the strongest pony magic. The group pressed forward again. The will of the thing finally broke and it retreated into the darkness.

“Yay! We did it!” Pinkie Pie said, bouncing around the room. “We did it, we did it, we showed meany-mcnightmare... whatever it was that we were stronger! Wheeeee!”

“Yeah, alright!” Rainbow Dash slapped hooves with Applejack.

“Girls...” Twilight said, a note of apprehension in her voice.

“Oh yes we were incredible. Oh, oh Rarity did you see how we beat it?”

Rarity gave no response, her eyes fixed on her cutie mark.

“Rarity?”

“Girls.” Twilight was staring in horror at her own cutie mark.

“What?” The three celebrating ponies asked as one.

Twilight turned towards them, showing the starburst on her flank. It had become more vivid, clearer than it was earlier, but it was still slightly faded.

“What...but we...how...but the laugh...that don’t make no sense...” The trio said, words spilling over each other. Fluttershy looked closely at her own side and gave a meep of fear before dropping to the floor.

“Twilight...we did win right?” Rarity asked, her gaze still fixed on her faded diamonds.

“I...we banished it...but...”

“Then why aren’t our cutie marks restored?”

It hurt. It hurt in ways it hadn’t hurt since it’s banishment. Whatever had been unleashed against it, whatever power the ponies had mustered, it had been old magic. Powerful magic. If not for the fear from the town the thing probably would have been destroyed. And it was weakened. Oh yes, it was certainly weakened. It could feel itself being dragged back down into the deeper reaches of the cavern. Clawing at the stone, wailing and writhing, it watched the slim crescent of star filled sky above it disappear. Rock, long worn smooth by its endless pacing, replaced it.

But no matter. It had learned. In that brief instant before it had been banished from the presence of the six it had seen where they drew their strength. Fear alone would not be enough to subdue them. It began to pace around the circular corridor, feet sliding into familiar grooves in the rock. It was old, powerful magic, yes. But it was not quite as old, not quite as powerful as it. It would adapt. It would marshal it’s strength. When the time was right, it would destroy all who wore the mark.