

Dusk couldn't sleep. She lay in her bed, tossing and turning for hours to no avail. The moonlight spread across her bedsheets. She stared at the offending orb in frustration, hoping it would tone down its pale glow. It ignored her completely.

“Don't make me get my Aunt to dim you, moon. I want to go to sleep.”

She flushed hotly. Talking to the moon was an utterly stupid thing to do and she knew it. But as reluctant as she was to admit it, she was easily angered and quick to be frustrated.

“Last chance, rock.”

The few clouds out in the sky moved away from the moon, releasing its full light onto the land below. It also ensured that Dusk's room was well lit, as some snide act of taunting.

Dusk imagined its general statement to be something along the lines of, “Make me.”

She promptly threw the covers off, slid out of the bed, and stormed off in a huff. “Stupid moon being a jerk...” she mumbled to herself.

The door swung open as quietly as she could manage. Her head poked out from behind the door, giving a thorough inspection to the balcony. The upwards stairs leading to the observatory were clear, as were the stairs leading down into the castle. In the center of the balcony was a chair occupied by one of the guards. Luckily, her guardian was facing the opposite direction, looking down the central space to the lower floor below.

Satisfied with her chances of going unnoticed, she tiptoed over to the stairs, carefully avoiding getting close to the chair.

“Princess Dusk.”

The little alicorn froze in place, eyes wide in shock. She was baffled that she was heard at all.

“Can I help you with something? Perhaps a story to help you sleep?” The pegasus mare walked over to the now deflated looking Princess, putting her hoof gently on her shoulder.

“I... I, uhm...”

“Yes?”

“I wanted to go talk to Aunt Celestia. I've been having trouble getting to sleep.”

The guard sighed, “Princess Celestia is busy with her evening schedule. I don't know if-”

“Please, Cloud Skimmer?”

Dusk gave the best pout she could manage; since she was scolded for forcing another guard to go shopping with her once, she wasn't allowed to 'give orders' any more. Which was fine, especially since the face usually worked better.

Cloud Skimmer cracked under the pressure, “I will ask. If she is too busy, we're coming straight back, understand?”

Dusk nodded happily.

The guard led the way down the spiral staircase, making the usual turn at the bottom towards the main hallway. The lights were dim, with only torches being lit for illumination. Dusk looked up and down the hallway, but there was no one else in the halls. She was getting nervous walking through the halls.

She moved her body closer to the guard. “Is it normally this quiet?” She asked.

The guard shook her head, “No.”

Cloud Skimmer's wings slowly stretched to their fullest length, dwarfing the alicorn filly, who cowered into the mare's hind legs. The blades on her wings gleamed in the torch light. The mare blocked out the sounds of the filly's raspy breaths.

Silence.

Shuffling.

Silence.

She whipped around the corner, preparing to dodge and strike her foe. But nopony occupied the hallway. Only the shadows ruled over the hall, ending in the door leading outside. She turned to look down the other end of the hallway - but it was also empty, save for the guards patrolling the main entrance.

She pulled her wings back into place, forcing the blades back into their sheaths before stretching her wings once more.

“Dusk?” she looked back at the filly. The little princess sat on the cold floor, trembling uncontrollably, her eyes transfixed on Cloud Skimmer’s wings. Her freakishly long wings. “It’s ok. No one is here to hurt you.”

Dusk didn’t move. She didn’t even blink.

Cloud Skimmer gently nudged her with her nose, “Don’t you still want to see your Aunt?”

She nodded slightly, averting her gaze to the floor.

“Here,” She picked up Dusk by the crook of her neck, placing her on her back. The princess eyed her wings cautiously.

“They won’t hurt you when they’re covered. The covers only open when I want them to.”

Dusk hesitantly put a hoof on the smooth metal coverings, before relaxing. Out of all of the guards in the castle, Cloud Skimmer had the largest wingspan - thus the biggest weapons. She was a master at using them as well. It was intimidating, even without her armor on, when she opened her wings.

“Alright. Let’s go!” Cloud Skimmer whispered, breaking off into a trot. She varied her movements, bouncing Dusk up and down like see-saw. Dusk hung on tight, slowly regaining her former state of happiness. She even let out a giggle when Cloud Skimmer launched herself toward the main hall.

The ruckus nearly gave the guards a heart attack as Dusk and Cloud Skimmer barrelled into the chamber without so much as an announcement. A few of them glared at Cloud Skimmer, causing the mare to deadpan and blush simultaneously.

“What?” She asked.

A few of them rolled their eyes and went back to their former focus. Granite, standing guard in front of the throne room, facehoofed.

“Princess Dusk would like an audience with Princess Celestia,” she began. “Is she available?”

“Of course she is. Night court ended at midnight. You know: four hours **after** Princess Dusk’s bedtime.” He pointed at Dusk for further emphasis.

“I can’t fall asleep,” Dusk said, quietly. “That’s why I’m here.”

Granite sighed, nodding to the other guard reluctantly. They opened to doors to the throne room and let them inside.

A small table was set up by the throne room, with figurines dotting its surface, barely poking out from beneath the heaps of scrolls. Standing on one end of the table was Celestia, reading through a scroll while she placed more figurines onto the table. On the other end was a neat pile of read scrolls.

Cloud Skimmer cleared her throat. “Your majesty.”

Celestia nearly jumped in place. She moved her eyes from the scroll she was reading to the newcomers. “Good evening Cloud Skimmer. May I ask why Dusk is with you and not in bed?”

Dusk hopped off of the guards back and sprinted over to Celestia. The princess smiled and bent down to nuzzle her niece, all the while using her magic to cover the table with some of the used scrolls.

“She was having trouble sleeping and-”

“I wanted to come see you, because I thought maybe you could help,” Dawn interjected. She decided the moon could be spared - just this once.

“Have you tried drinking a glass of water?”

“Three! I even drank one upside down and another while laying down sideways.”

Celestia giggled a little, “Have you been reading *Cures That Ail and Turn You Pale?*”

“Yes, wait- how do you know that?”

“That’s an old joke remedy book a former student of mine wrote. Its a classic. But unfortunately none of the cures are real. Just pranks.”

Dusk hung her head, “I was wondering why it told me to sleep on books..”

“Why don’t you go back and think about an island - far, far away from here. A place with beautiful beaches. The place where the cooks get starfruit from.”

A big smile formed on Dusk’s face. She loved starfruit - its shape, taste, even the whole exotic mystery of how it was discovered. All the books on the subject were in her room for a full month before she was forced to bring them back. Dusk nodded.

“Good night Dusk-” Celestia lowered her head to nuzzle Dusk. But she snapped her head up to the sound of the doors in the main hall slamming open. There were several shouts from outside the doors.

Dusk started to back up towards the throne. Celestia put a hoof on her head, “I need you to follow Cloud Skimmer back to your room and I will come to tuck you in a little later. Can you do that for me?”

Dusk nodded, her eyes still focused on the front doors.

“Cloud Skimmer. If you would?”

The pegasus nodded curtly, lifting Dawn onto her back before taking off through a side exit.

“I DIDN’T DO ANYTHING WRONG! LET ME GO!!”

The screams echoed through the hallways. Dusk clung tighter to Cloud Skimmer, practically digging her hooves into the space between her armor. The sound of the royal doors shutting echoed through the halls, followed by a dead silence.

Cloud Skimmer carried a terrified Dusk back up the tower stairs, slipping into her room. She lay the filly on the bed, covering her with her blanket.

The moonlight had dimmed significantly from the new cloud cover. *Must be a storm coming*, Cloud Skimmer thought. “If you need anything, I’ll be outside.”

Dusk nodded, turning her back to the window. Cloud Skimmer walked back over to the door, opening it wide enough to pass through to the other side.

“Wait,” Dusk whispered. Cloud Skimmer turned to look at the young princess. “Can you stay here with me?”

The pegasus closed the door and sat down beside her charge, placing a gentle hoof through her mane. She removed her helmet and set it at the end of the bed.

“Is my mommy going to be ok?”

The question caught Cloud Skimmer off guard. There were many aspects of that she would rather not talk about. Princess Luna’s catatonic walk around the castle garden every night at the exact same time. Spouts of muttering or anguish at random intervals in the day. A constant watch

was needed to stay over her, to ensure she stayed in the castle. Yet-

“I wish Dawn was still here,” Dusk sniffled, suddenly overcome with her own loneliness. “Mom is gone, Aunt Celestia is almost always gone or busy looking for Dawn, and I still don’t know about anything!”

Cloud Skimmer gently pulled her close. She knew it was hard for Dusk to be thrust into the middle of this... this- There were no words she could use to describe what was happening. She bit her lip, trying to think of something to say. Ultimately there was nothing. Nothing that could help ease the pain of loss.

“I want Dawn back! I want my mommy!”

Dusk’s words lost coherency, replaced by heaving sobs. All the while Cloud Skimmer gently stroked her mane, doing her best to show her some compassion. Slowly but surely, her crying slowed, replaced by the steady rise and fall of her breathing under the blankets.

Cloud Skimmer stayed for a while, watching over her. There was a light knock on the door.

The mare looked up from the bed as the door opened just enough to reveal Nightwind, waiting patiently outside. She rose quietly from the bed and slipped out into the hallway, leaving the young princess to her dreams.

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Dusk found herself sitting on the shore of the ocean. She couldn’t remember how she got here, or even **when** she got here. The last thing she remembered was... something. Whatever it was barely registered in her mind.

She rose to her hooves, brushing off the sand now thoroughly embedded in her coat. Glancing around, she noticed it wasn’t just the shore - she was on a small island. It was thin - she was definitely able to see to the other side. But the island also stretched for quite a while. One round hill sat in the center, complete with a little shack and a few trees, filled with-

“Starfruit!” Dusk exclaimed, pounding up the hill towards one of the smaller trees. She jumped up to try and grab one of the fruits and soundlessly landed flat on her face. Her eyes narrowed. Magic enveloped her horn, sending a bolt of magic at the fruit. It snapped off under the force of the blow, arcing into the air, and landing in the ocean. Her eye twitched involuntarily.

“Good evening, Princess Dusk.”

The filly whipped around. The voice had come from the other side of the shack. A unicorn with a bronze colored coat and deep brown mane popped her head around the corner.

"Hungry?" The unicorn asked.

Dusk hesitantly walked over to the other side of the shack, readying more raw magic, just in case. On the other side were several hammocks set up between a few trees. There was also a small fire pit with a spit hanging above it. Several fruit shish kebabs rotated over the flames while the juice bubbled and sizzled.

The unicorn stood inside what she had mistaken for a shack - it was really more of a lean-to. Dusk had read about those in a camping book, before. She also recognized several different tools mentioned in the same book - a walking stick, retractable bit-knife, even a small fire starter kit.

"I think they're just about ready," she said again trotting back to the fire. One of the shish kebabs floated over to her waiting mouth. Her eyes closed in delight. "Perfect!"

The rest of the food floated onto a polished stone plate. Dusk eyed the food hungrily.

"Dig in! Don't be shy."

Dusk obliged her wishes, cleaning one off in record speed before tossing the used stick into the fire. "Who are you? Where are we?"

The unicorn smiled, picking the next piece of fruit off of the stick. "Lik'tria," she spoke in a strange accent.

Dusk looked a little taken aback. "Licktrea?"

The unicorn snorted, trying to hold back her laughter, "If only Ylldrid heard that. She'd be rolling on the floor for a week." She calmed herself down, taking deep breaths. "That is my true name. It means 'Master of Magic.' But ponykind knows me only as the Element of Magic."

Dusk dropped the shish kebab she was about to eat.

"You cried out for me in your anguish, so I helped you here - your dream world."

The filly struggled to put her thoughts into coherent speech. "So... you are a pony."

"Yes."

"And in real life, you're a tiara."

"Correct! It's much better than being a rock," Magic beamed happily.

Dusk facehooved. Hard. "But you're the hidden element! Shouldn't I have to, find you or something?"

Magic frowned slightly, "That... was different. Its a long story - one which is probably gone. The elements, myself included, are now intertwined with families. You share my power with your sister."

Dusk looked at the ground, making circles with her back hoof.

"You want to see her again, don't you?"

She nodded.

Magic smiled. "Lucky for us she's also asleep."

There was an audible snap as a tiny blur of dark blue whipped across the campsite, slamming into the water. The resulting splash nearly put out the fire. Dusk sprinted down the hill towards the shore, just as her sister was dragging herself out of the water.

"That is the last time I ever try to do that trick, right Aunt-"

Dawn never had the chance to finish her thought, as Dusk slammed into her chest, knocking them both into the water.

"Dawn! I'm so happy to see you! Ever since Discord took you-"

Dawn looked at her awkwardly, "Discord? I wasn't foalnapped. I left. Didn't you find that note I left you?"

Dusk stared at her sister, "You WHAT? You LEFT?"

"Give me a chance to explain-"

"MOM HAS GONE INSANE BECAUSE-"

Both of the fillies were lifted into the air, as zippers shut their mouths. Magic lowered the two to the ground, both still glaring hotly at one another. "I believe it's time we had a talk. Since I already know both sides of the argument from watching over the two of you, I have a feeling I know what is going on. It's nothing good either."

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"Did she kill him?"

Nightwind let out a deep breath and shook his head. "No. He's still alive."

Cloud Skimmer let out a sigh of relief. They were both still standing outside of Dusk's room,

speaking in whispers. She peered over the edge of the railing, setting her fine tuned ears to work listening for any movement at all. After a few moments she was satisfied and ensured that they were alone.

"I was terrified when you left. The way she's been acting since they found Thunder Cloud made me think she would really kill him. What happened to get him separated?"

"No specifics yet. I will be interrogating him starting tomorrow. We made sure the..." he swallowed hard. The very fact Celestia asked for someone like him was a cruel reminder that she had gone overboard. "The torturer has been cleared. By us."

Cloud Skimmer shivered and grew quiet. "She asked for what?"

He bit his lower lip, "Don't make me say it again. The point is, that we cleared him. He's with us now. Any pain will be simulated."

Thunder Cloud was a good pony and an excellent guard. The way he was about to be treated made her sick. But she knew it was essential to their plan. It would take a while to expose the source of control over Celestia. They needed to be patient.

"He is of little concern to us, now that he is safe. There is something much worse about to happen."

Cloud Skimmer deadpanned, "What? Did Starfall crawl out of his grave to join Discord and company?"

"Might as well have."

Cloud Skimmer was taken aback, "I was being sarcastic. You knew that, right?"

Nightwind grimaced.

"Oh Celestia, no."

"He's still dead, Cloud. But his war might have just been sleeping."

She looked at him at horror.

"Celestia found out Discord was running loose in the North. While I was gone, she was working with Bright Light to pin down his location. Apparently, he has control of the whole government. They've been talking to the Gryffons too."

"But, they've offered extra guards for the palace and the border towns. No group has attacked along the border since."

"It's only a concern. They pulled their ambassador yesterday, according to our spies." Nightwind wiped the sweat from his brow. "Since she confirmed the attack was coordinated by a Discord-controlled country, she sent them an ultimatum."

"No." Cloud Skimmer sat down on the floor. "After everything that was done to bring her back to stop the war? She's going to start one?"

"The North has 24 hours to surrender and rejoin Equestria. After that... we'll probably go to war."

Nightwind looked down at the trembling guard. The last war had almost taken her whole family. Her parents died fighting in Cloudsdale, and her older brother died on the frontlines outside Fillydelphia, trying to take the city.

Nightwind wrapped his forelegs around her neck as he gingerly kissed the top of her head.

"They'll send me away like they did to Star Gazer. Then you'll be left without a sister."

"If they send you away, I'll leave with you. Either we stay here and protect the Princesses, or we go to war together."