

## **DEEP DARK**

### **Chapter 8: Cordiara**

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“*WHAT!?*” Twilight shrieked in shock. A few things Twilight knew to be true: magic followed specific laws and the will of a unicorn’s mind; four types of ponies existed; when a pony dies, they’re buried in the earth; and none of this allowed a pony to simply rise from the dead! “That’s not scientifically possible!” the unicorn twitched, trying her best to grasp even the idea, much less the actual physical proof directly in front of her, of an undead army. “They’re not scientifically possible!”

Nightmare Moon turned from watching the last of the Army of Midnight pass and raised an eyebrow at Twilight. “Oh, you poor mare, you have absolutely no clue what’s going on right now, do you?” she taunted with a haughty laugh. “You think that everything in this world should fit into your personal grasp of reality? That is simply laughable!”

Twilight snorted with indignation while turning the possibilities of what she’d just seen over in her mind, “I’ll have you know that I’ve read every book in my library at least thrice, and the books not in the Restricted Archives section of Canterlot’s Royal Library multiple times! I’m quite well read.” She posed with her head held high, proud as she could be of her literary accomplishments.

Instead of her expected praises, a bout of snorting laughter brought a gasp from Twilight’s lips. “What’s so funny!?” she demanded, forcing a glare at the cackling Nightmare.

“Oh, you silly, deluded little foal,” the alicorn mocked with a derisive sneer. “Do you *honestly* believe everything you read?”

“Well, no...” Twilight started.

Nightmare Moon thrust her head forward to glare menacingly into Twilight’s eyes. “Then what makes you think every piece of ‘science’ and ‘history’ is true? That everything you know to be truth is such?”

The mage took an unsure step back and darted her eyes around, trying her best to avoid the Nightmare’s arctic gaze. “But... that can’t be! Why should I ever doubt Starswirl the Bearded, Sotrotes, or even Pri- Er, Celestia!?”

The Bringer of Night snorted and turned away, ignoring the rapidly receding army to walk out into the middle of the road. “If you are truly my sister’s daughter, and my niece, as little as that title means to me, then you will understand soon enough.”

“Understand what?” Twilight demanded as she galloped after the alicorn. *What does she mean? What does she know that I don't? Or shouldn't?*

A knowing smirk adorned Nightmare Moon's face. “That is the question, is it not?” She shifted her mane to hide her features from Twilight. “And you expect me to simply tell you what lay hidden within the Archives, and of my own memories just like that? You *must* be delusional!”

Stopping in place, Twilight flattened her ears, dumbfounded. She thought quickly, darting her gaze across the dirt road. *What I know may not be true? On the one hoof, I can ignore that and have it gnaw at me for however long, or... Ugh! Just one more string she gets to attach to me!* “Wait!” Twilight exclaimed, reaching out a hoof towards Nightmare Moon as she walked away. *Why must she taunt me so!? This will probably doom me to the pits of Tartarus.*

The Nightmare continued her brisk stride, forcing Twilight to trot after her to keep pace. “What do you want, Twilight Sparkle?” she muttered with a long-suffering sigh, her hooves raising puffs of dust with each step.

Twilight bit her lip and she ran up beside the Midnight Queen, attempting to peer around her starry mane. *Alright, here goes.* With a deep breath she said, “Nightmare, my entire desire is the pursuit of knowledge. I would do anything to-”

“*NO!*” Nightmare hissed, stomping her forehoof in agitation. “Never say such a thing to me unless you are prepared for the consequences. You *know* the price you'd have to pay for my knowledge.” With a dismissive flick of her tail, the Midnight Queen shifted into her night-sky cloud form and drifted a distance ahead before reforming, leaving Twilight behind.

*What does she me-* Twilight thought, then flinched as the realization hit her. *Oh, yeah, that. Wait... Why can't she do that cloud thingy to get to wherever we are going? It certainly would be quicker that way if she... stored me in her mane and did that.* Twilight shook the thought from her head and swiftly galloped ahead to close the distance. When she finally slowed down beside Nightmare, the unicorn noticed her staring off into the forest with an intense glare, focused on something deep within it.

Then, suddenly, Nightmare Moon shifted into her night-sky form and darted into the forest, bringing a gasp from Twilight's lips.

“Hey! Wait!” she yelled, galloping into the forest after the alicorn, keeping her eyes on the direction Nightmare went while weaving between trees and through underbrush. *Where is she going!?*

However, the thin wisp of night sky easily vanished amongst the trees. *No no nononono!*

*If I can't find her, I'll be lost here!* Twilight continued dashing through the forest, throwing her gaze in all directions in an attempt to find where the alicorn had fled to.

*Where are you!?* she thought in panic, then burst through a particularly thick patch of underbrush, only to slip down the steep hill it hid with a shriek. Narrowly missing saplings and larger trunks and earning herself several scratches from thorny bushes in her path, Twilight finally managed to grasp onto a low branch with her teeth.

Slowly getting to her hooves while keeping the branch in her teeth, Twilight steadied herself before releasing it and taking a look around. Not far from her, the decline leveled off before becoming a sharp drop that terminated in a small river with a well-worn bank. Peeking over the edge, she teleported down to the shore, then sighed and glanced about again.

*Alright, that was way too close. Serves me right for barreling off without watching where I was going.* She could see only the thick forest, the cliff face, and an immense cave set into the cliffside. *I'm lost... Alright, think Twilight. Nightmare Moon **had** to have gone somewhere nearby! She definitely flew in this direction!*

As if in an answer to her unsaid prayers, a familiar cackle echoed from within the cavern. *There!* she thought excitedly, trotting to the cave entrance. Within, a deep shadow overtook everything, made deeper still by the unrelenting night. Even the gentle light of the moon barely cut into it. Deep in the system, however, Twilight could barely make out a small glimmer, as if from torch light.

Lighting her horn, the unicorn trotted into the mouth of the cave and down the tunnel, avoiding boulders and the occasional stalagmite in the consuming darkness. *Nearly... there.* She heard the sounds of conversation coming from ahead, though the mage couldn't make them out.

As the light became brighter, Twilight could make out more details of the cave tunnel she ran through. *Scratches on the walls. Evidence of thrown aside boulders, shattered stalagmites and stalactites, and great gouges in the floor I have to avoid. This sounds like the home of ...*

*A dragon!* Twilight Sparkle finished her thought, bursting out into the light and nearly slamming into a crystalline magic shield that had been erected around the immense cavern she found herself in. Ahead of her, in the distance, Twilight sighted Nightmare Moon, without her saddlebags, pacing warily near an ancient black dragon who was lying on an immense pile of gold and jewels.

*Dear Celestia, he's **massive!** He has to be the oldest dragon I've ever seen!* she thought in shock, her eyes going wide before she overheard the conversation going on.

"...thought I wouldn't remember you, Demon Spawn?" the dragon growled, his gaze fixed on the pacing Nightmare Moon.

The alicorn smiled wickedly. “Oh, no no no. I imagine you remember just fine, just as I remember you. Stalliongrad, was it? A foolhardy drake looking to stand up for my sister. I remember that as ending quite well for you!”

The dragon snarled, baring his lengthy fangs and flexing his claws through the gold. “Yes, I recall that. And I recall leaving several marks on your *divine* persona. Come to finish the job then, Mare of Dreams?”

*Wait, he’s **that** dragon!?! But... but... Nightmare Moon killed him over a thousand years ago! This doesn’t make any sense!* Twilight pondered in confusion, unable to wrap her mind around the present events.

Nightmare Moon barked a sharp laugh and stamped her hoof, “Oh, you poor little hatchling. Of course not! I came to find out why this little spot felt oh so familiar to me!” She cackled again, her mirth echoing within the cavern. “It even looks like we have a little audience, don’t you agree, Curthan?”

The massive dragon Curthan hissed in annoyance and turned his gaze to Twilight, “A fine snack once I deal with you, Truth Hider.”

Twilight eeped and fell back on her haunches, the saddlebags tumbling free. *A snack? A **snack!**? Oh boy, as if things couldn’t get any worse, now a dragon wants to eat me. Alright, calm down, Twilight. Nightmare Moon constructed a shield that should keep him inside. She swallowed nervously, I hope.*

With her ears flattened, Nightmare Moon narrowed her eyes and glared at Curthan. “One, you will have to go through me first. And two, she’s mine, you little *hatchling*. I will see you dead for good before you ever touch a single strand of her mane.”

“Oh? I’ll take that as a challenge, Demonspawn. You see, I was stupid in attempting to fight you the first time we clashed. But now I have the upper hand.” Curthan stood, lifting his gigantic bulk from the pile of treasure, gold tinkling as it fell from his body. “Your death for what you have done comes now!”

“Perfect,” the mare muttered, parting her grin. Instead of the normal teeth a pony should have, Nightmare Moon’s were revealed to instead be rows of dagger-like fangs.

*That can’t be right, Twilight surmised, squinting to see if it was simply a trick of the light. I’ve seen her teeth before and they were never that way!*

Curthan’s massive claws rose up and slashed at the alicorn, meeting nothing but smoke instead of the flesh he expected. Nightmare Moon’s body seemed to flow around his claws,

writhing about before reforming. Except now her mane and tail were no longer billowy clouds of night. Instead, they writhed about as numerous thick tendrils.

“Losing your touch, Curthan? I could swear I remember you laying at *least* one mark on me during our first battle. Have you grown soft?” Nightmare Moon mocked the confused dragon, her mane snaking in all directions. Her smile grew wider, defying all biological standards that a face should have. Instead, it continued to expand until Twilight swore the Mare of the Night’s head became hinged. The teeth enlarged further still while her eyes became wide with glee.

Curthan immediately noticed the changes and blasted a roar of challenge at the Nightmare, leaping from his gold pile to strike at her again. This time, however, his blow landed, leaving a deep gash in Nightmare Moon’s flank.

Jumping away with great flap of her wings, Nightmare never lost her wicked smile as she turned to glance at the wound. As blood seeped down her leg, she cackled loud and deep while the slash shifted and closed for one second, then re-opened, revealing a giant mouth with more fangs. It gnashed while she smirked up at Curthan. “You see, I’ve learned quite a bit since we last fought.”

Recoiling slightly from the sight, Curthan snapped his jaws, “You truly are a monster of nightmares! I shall cleanse you from this world!” Inhaling, he breathed out a torrent of flame that washed over the alicorn, hiding her from view until he finished.

As Twilight watched the flames slowly dissipate from where she stood, she suddenly found herself rooted in place by an indescribable feeling of fear. *Wh-what’s happening!?*

The little smoke resulting from the fire rose away, revealing a grotesque sight. Instead of Nightmare Moon standing unharmed, or as a burned body, something else entirely took her place.

The creature standing before Curthan had the basic shape of an alicorn, yet shadowy tendrils and tentacles sprouted from almost every square inch of its body. Where they didn’t sprout, gaping maws lined with dagger-like fangs lashed out at anything nearby. And the head... or what was meant to be the head instead seemed more-like a carnivorous flower, its petals spread wide and coated with more teeth than Twilight could count.

“Do you like my new look, Curthan? I made it just for you!” the monstrosity uttered in a voice that sounded like bones grinding down to dust.

With the sight of what Nightmare Moon became, the fear impulse struck Twilight harder than ever before, locking up her entire body and clouding her thoughts. *I-it m-must be a f-f-fear aur-aura!*

The creature Nightmare Moon had become turned and gazed without eyes at Twilight Sparkle. With the added pressure from the aura, she lost all control, her mind locking down tight and a warm wetness spreading down her rear legs.

“Perfect,” Nightmare Moon muttered, turning her head back to Curthan at the sound of a clinking noise. He had backed up to the piles of treasure, his eyes wide not in fear, but from being startled. “Not so perfect. What’s the matter, Curthan? Don’t you like my new look?”

He finally stood his ground and raised his head high with a noble arch to his neck, “You think I can be swayed that easily, Fiend of Night!? Your magic won’t affect me as it does my future snack! Your candle will be snuffed out, just as I should have done so long ago!”

With her tentacles thrashing in readiness, Nightmare Moon changed her stance to prepare for the coming battle. “Then come and get me! Show me that you can take down a goddess!”

Growling, Curthan leapt forward. Ready for him, she lashed out with the tendrils, but missed when he darted to the side with surprising agility. Curthan bit down on the clump of tentacles and chomped clean through them, bringing a shriek of pain from Nightmare’s lips. Black ichor dripped from the tips of the wounded appendages. A triumphant chuckle broke from Curthan’s maw before the mass of writhing tentacles in his mouth melted and began eating into his tongue, teeth, and scales.

His laugh quickly turning into a roar of pain, the dragon flailed his head, sending disintegrating bits of black tissue flying in all directions. With Curthan distracted, Nightmare Moon quickly closed the distance between them and whipped several more of the thick tendrils forward to slap against his chest, creating great rifts in the protective scales. However, instead of any kind of bodily fluid leaking from the wounds, a bright light emitted outward.

Managing to ignore his pain for a moment, Curthan jumped back with a flap of his leathery wings. “How!? How are you able to do such a thing!?” he yelled out, brushing away the last bits of tentacle to reveal more of the brilliant gashes around his mouth.

Laughing not from her petal-mouth, but instead the many mouths strewn across her body Nightmare Moon haughtily replied in chorus, “It didn’t take me long to figure out! And now I know what to do with your kind. The Pure will know that standing against me will not be beneficial to them!”

Finally, Curthan showed fear on his face, knowing that no matter what he did to Nightmare Moon, she was ready for him, and he would only end up injured or worse from the ordeal. “I... I... surrender! Leave me be and let me continue living! I beg of you! Mercy!”

Nightmare Moon advanced to the gold pile, her head-petals closing somewhat to speak, instead of the many mouths on her body. “No, I think not. You attacked me, you threatened my subject, and you threaten my kingdom! No, your life... or rather unlife is mine, hatchling!”

For a moment, Curthan forgot his wounds and seemed to be taken aback. Then he barked a mighty laugh and spread coins across the stone floor as he took a defensive stance. “Oh, that is rich! You think the nearby city is part of *your* kingdom!? You delude yourself! And I will defend myself to my very last breath for your failure to accept my surrender!”

“Oh?” Nightmare Moon questioned, thoughts roiling within her head. “Then you seem to misunderstand your history quite a bit.” Around her, a dark miasma exuded from her being, casting the air around her into shadow. Her tentacles extruded themselves all around her, sliding across the floor in an ever-widening circle.

Curthan, with a quick swipe of his claws, flung a large mound of his hoard at Nightmare Moon, the gold pelting heavily against her body and bruising the tendrils. Withdrawing the appendages, she used her wings to shield herself against the onslaught, allowing Curthan his opening.

A quick intake of breath and swift exhale bathed the mutated alicorn in white-hot flames, melting the gold strewn about as well as burning away the tentacles coating her body. Shrieking in agony, Nightmare stumbled out of the fire, many of the tentacles having been burned to mere stumps or even lumps of scorched flesh.

From Twilight’s point of view, even within her fear-induced state, she quickly surmised, *She’s using immense amounts of magic to do this!* Then, watching as Nightmare stumbled for a second, the unicorn battered at the aura’s effects, attempting to regain control of herself. *She can’t keep this up for much longer!*

Even with the severe damage done to her, the smoking Nightmare Moon turned and stared defiantly at Curthan, “Is that the best an ancient can dole out?”

Curthan circled the mare with triumph in his eyes. “Now who’s on the defensive, *monster!* You refused my surrender, and so I refuse you victory!” Reaching out, he swatted the exhausted alicorn and sent her flying across the chamber to crash into the side of the shield. Collapsing to the stone floor, Nightmare Moon unsteadily climbed to her hooves and glared at Curthan.

“If you want me, then come and get me. Your main course can start with me, if you can stomach this pony!” Lifting her forehoof, it elongated into a lengthy ebon blade. The effort proved too much for her and she stumbled to her knees, burned tentacles crumbling to dust from the impact.

Curthan took his time stomping across the chamber, his face no longer showing the pain of his wounds. Instead, a boastful grin lay plastered over it. “Oh, how long have I waited for this moment, Mare of Lies!” Reaching her, he stood above her as he basked in the glory of his deed. “Your terror ends now!”

He bent his head down to snap her up in his jaws, only to be surprised when she jumped up with astonishing strength despite her injuries and jammed the blade into his throat, snapping it off at the hoof. “Next time...” Her breath came in deep pants as she spoke, “You will remember why you call me the Mare of Lies.”

Curthan’s body convulsed as the blade branched in all directions through the dragon’s body, many times breaking through the scales to birth more light-emitting wounds. A roar of extreme torment tore from his throat as he fell backwards, and then onto his side as he clawed at the wounds. Finally, with one last shudder, his body fell still while the blade evaporated into smoke.

Nightmare Moon watched as, little by little, Curthan’s body dissolved, then she collapsed, taking in ragged gasps.

For Twilight, the aura lessened enough for her to regain control of most of her thoughts. *It-it’s over? Oh dear Celestia! I... I... I don't even know what to think of what I just saw, it's too horrible to describe! How could she do such a thing!?* She turned her eyes to the dragon’s corpse, disgusted and yet oddly fascinated by it. Twilight noticed not that Nightmare had caught her breath and stood up, walking toward her location.

With great effort, Twilight pulled her eyes away from Curthan’s disintegrating remains to instead lock her gaze on Nightmare Moon. Before her, the shield vanished, leaving the changed alicorn to approach Twilight. *D-dear Celestia! She’s coming for me next!* Twilight trembled in thought, shutting her eyes tight.

Instead, Twilight felt her body relax as the fear aura vanished. Relief spread through her body, nearly causing her to collapse in place, despite how bad of an idea that would have been. Opening one eye at a time, she gasped as Nightmare Moon’s normal form stood before her, no longer the monstrosity that had killed Curthan. Or, at least, the changed monstrosity. *I don’t think I’ll ever see her the same way again, or want to fight her if she can do those things!*

Wrinkling her muzzle in disdain, Nightmare Moon walked a wide berth around Twilight and dismissively snorted, “Get yourself cleaned up, foal! And next time, learn to control your body!”

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*Point to myself, Nightmare Moon contemplated. Next time I do battle with a dragon, I should do it with a strategy that doesn’t leave me completely exhausted afterward.* She felt like



a beaten rag, her joints and muscles aching. Nothing a little rest wouldn't fix, but apparently a side effect from her changes, as well as the intense beating she received.

She lay against a tree, watching Twilight bathe in the stream ahead, their saddlebags set off to the side out of the way. *I will have to use that aura more often, but more subtly. A little fear can heavily influence decisions, but too much, or the wrong amount, can lead to the opposite effect. Or, in that mare's case, locking up and wetting herself. I do not think I should let her live it down.* Nightmare smirked to herself, anticipating the slight torment that she would bring Twilight by letting her constantly remember the embarrassing situation.

*She will make a fine addition to my retinue. Not as far as in that little universe my sister imagined, but certainly my second-in-command if it comes to that. I shall have to see. For now...* The Moon Goddess let out a yawn and stretched her forehooves. *When she finishes, I will have her set up the tent. I feel a nap is in order to restore my power. And after that, finding out whatever it is I feel nearby. Is it the town Curthan mentioned?*

Unfurling her wings tiredly to the sides, Nightmare Moon observed Twilight walk out of the stream and shake herself dry. "Twilight Sparkle, set up the tent, I require rest."

The unicorn started and stared wide-eyed at her for a moment, before swallowing and giving a nod, lifting the tent block out of the bag. *Well, well. It seems that aura, coupled with what I did to Curthan, had a beneficial effect on her. I wonder how long it'll last.* She chuckled softly to herself, imagining the applications of the aura, especially to the six ponies who'd defeated her. *Though, her will is strong, so I do not believe she'll be this way for long. Once she comes out of shock, she'll probably be herself again.*

Before her, the tent unfolded from the block and inflated to its full size. Standing, she hobbled over the the tent and slipped into the doorway, nearly stumbling twice over the strewn cushions as she made her way over to her sleeping alcove. Out of the corner of her eye, Nightmare noted Twilight entering with the saddlebags hovering before her and setting them into a corner, then tiptoeing her way to the bookcase.

Slipping into the alcove and sliding the curtains closed, Nightmare Moon flumped down and phased her armor off, setting it aside. *A few hours of rest should do me well.*

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The sudden awareness shook the drowsiness from Nightmare Moon as she awoke. Immediately, the near lack of sensory input brought her full attention to the fore. *Wh- Where am I!?* she thought panickedly as intense cold penetrated her form, freezing her to the marrow and causing her bones to feel as if they would shatter at the slightest touch.

*What's going on? I... I can't see! I can't hear! **Where am I!? What's going on!?*** Her thoughts became frantic and jumbled as she attempted to recall past events. *I... I... calm down,*

*calm down! There's an explanation for everything! Deep breaths, deep... I can't breathe. I can't breathe!*

An overwhelming wave of panic struck the alicorn. Her present circumstances only put her into more of a panic. She felt paralyzed, frozen in place and yet every nerve, limb, and cell of her body felt inflamed with the agony of the bone-splitting cold. Nightmare Moon wished she could clench her teeth, her muscles, *something* to aid against the pain. *The last thing I knew, I was fighting my rebellious upstart of a sister when she found the Elements, and then... No. NO!*

The sudden realization of her fate simultaneously enraged and terrified the alicorn. The thought that her sister may have defeated her, in some inconceivable way, sent chills through Nightmare Moon's frozen form. *That foal! When I discover the spell she used to do whatever it was to me, I will do more than just force her to Slumber! She will rue the day she betrayed me!* Digging deep into her mind and ignoring the dormant ball of thoughts that was her other half, the Nightmare gathered what little strength she had left, then stretched out with her thoughts. All around her body, or whatever she existed within, lay an empty and lonely expanse.

Stretching her reserves to their limits, she expanded until she met not only the boundaries of her prison, but also the magical barrier preventing her from leaving. She skidded along its mirror-like surface, attempting to find cracks in the barrier or the folds of a formed spell, or some sort of foothold, and found nothing. Saving her energy, Nightmare Moon retreated back into her body and set about discovering the location of her prison.

With a feeling of gritted teeth, the Nightmare swam through the intense, cold-driven pain to gather her thoughts. *I can't see, hear, or feel anything more than this blasted cold. Oh, my sister, you will pay dearly! I don't know what happened in those final moments, but she must have found a way to imprison me in the Northern Reaches. No. My prison is too familiar.* She ran through a mental list of all the places she knew of in which she could possibly be imprisoned. At last it dawned on her. *My moon. That bucking **foal** banished and imprisoned me within my moon!* Her rage ignited and she blasted at the walls of her prison, squandering the little power remaining to try weakening the barrier, to little effect.

Eventually, the mare exhausted her fury and fell back into a deep slumber, waking again an unknown amount of time later.

Minutes passed, then days and weeks. Years followed. Over time, intense hunger gnawed at Nightmare Moon's frozen stomach, while the sense of dehydration clouded her mind. She knew this to be a punishment set by her Haven-damned sister, to have no body, yet to feel everything from one. Her rage cooled to be replaced by endless remorse and sorrow.

*I... I don't wish to be imprisoned any longer. Please, Celestia, Altair, anypony who can hear me... I want to be free.*

*I'm sorry.*

Nightmare Moon started awake and frantically glanced about. It all seemed so real. Even though she recalled dreaming this before as Luna, it also came from her perspective. Reaching up with a hoof, the Nightmare surprisingly discovered her cheeks to be damp and her eyes puffy. *I- I've never cried. Curse you, Luna, for passing your weak emotions onto me!*

Reminiscing on the whys of her transformation, Nightmare Moon stared at her stored armor in quiet thought. *I never deserved that punishment! A thousand years of torture and everlasting loneliness!* She ground her teeth in anger, then shivered as the memory of intense cold permeated her body. She shoved the curtains of the sleeping alcove aside, shuddering again as the cooler air from within the tent brushed against her.

Stepping out of the nook and leaving her armor behind, the Queen of the Night stumbled once before managing to right herself. Her mind lay nearly in chaos as she walked around the strewn pillows and past Twilight Sparkle, who lay oblivious to all else while buried in her book.

Nightmare slipped out the front flaps of the tent and drew in on herself from the wind blowing through the trees. Glancing up, she could just barely spot her moon through the trees, half covered by a thin, drifting cloud. *That foolish sister of mine. She'll destroy both Equestria and Trelaria with her foolishness. The temperature is already dropping. I want to get warm again. I HAVE to get warm!*

She collapsed atop the forest loam, her coat trembling as the remembered chill penetrated through her form. Focusing her magic, Nightmare ignited the air before her with a fwoosh, the intense flames throwing immense shadows through the trees. Pulling herself closer to the flames and ignoring the heat they radiated, Nightmare Moon curled herself up near them as she peered off into the distance.

*I know there are those out there who love me and care for my night, but my own sister only cares for the other side of me, even though she grew up with me, too!* A rustling behind her drew the alicorn from her thoughts, and without looking she muttered enough to be heard, "So. Twilight Sparkle, you have had several chances to be rid of me, to return me to Luna. Even now, while I am vulnerable. Why have you not?"

She slowly turned her head and fixed sorrow-filled eyes on the lavender unicorn. Twilight's head poked out of the tent flaps, curiosity and just a touch of fear on her face. "Why? There is no need to fear me right now, you are not my enemy. Yet." she asked again. *Why does this nightmare of mine have my emotions in such a riotous mess?*

"The thought has crossed my mind," Twilight admitted, taking a several steps out, yet keeping her distance from Nightmare. "Especially after I witnessed what you did with that

dragon. But right now we need your power to help make things right.”

Nightmare sighed in exasperation and rolled her eyes, lowering her head in annoyance. “Yes, yes, and then you and your *friends* will simply gather the Elements and get rid of me. Again.”

Twilight remained silent for a moment, then flicked her tail and attempted to slink back to the tent. “Ahahaha, yes, well, I think I hear my book calling me. So I’ll just be on my way and-”

“Wait,” Nightmare Moon asserted. “I have a question for you.” She twisted her head away to instead peer into the heart of the fire driving away the memories of bitter cold. “What are things like with your brother?”

Taken aback by the sudden interest in her familial relations, Twilight took a step forward and raised an eyebrow in confusion. “Why... do you ask? I did not believe you would be one to inquire about me in such a way.”

Lowering her head, the alicorn gritted her teeth before replying, “My own sister despises me with all her heart. Her own sibling!” Lashing her tail, she shouted just as Twilight opened her mouth to speak. “Stop! I *know* what you mean to say. You’ve read that damnable book, you know exactly who I am! I *am* Luna, and she is me. Imagine that some creature who appeared just like you held your brother’s entire love, but he cared not an iota for you.”

Twilight froze, uncertain of what to say. Silence reigned for a good minute before her voice returned. “I would not know what that is like, Nightmare. I love my brother with all my heart, and he loves me. I rarely ever get to see him anymore, but I know we’re in each others’ thoughts.”

Nightmare Moon refused to speak, rolling her thoughts about in her head. Finally, she sighed, “Twilight, our pasts may be badly entwined, but I am lonely. Go, grab your book and keep me company for this night until I feel ready for us to continue our journey.”

Retreating a step, Twilight glanced about with uncertainty, “I don’t find the idea of doing such to be-”

The Queen of Night settled her head down on her forehooves and with barely restrained annoyance hissed, “*Please.*”

Without a word, Twilight twirled and re-entered the tent. A moment later, she re-emerged with her horn lit, carrying her book to settle down a pony-length from the Nightmare.

The mare in return breathed a deep sigh, casting her eyes past the flames into the forest. With her senses she drifted out beyond their miniscule clearing and probed a distance away, attempting to confirm her earlier suspicions. *I know I sensed something out there. And if it's what I believe it is, I should easily be able to take Twilight under my wing with her near me.*

Her magical senses told her that *something* lay out there amidst the forest, yet that something either existed as an anomaly screwing with her magic, or was hidden. *Maybe...* Stretching out with other senses and staring in the direction of the anomaly, she opened her mind to detect the dreams of any creatures living there.

Immediately Nightmare's thoughts became touched by the minds of a small batch of ponies. She blinked out of a daze and wondered, *That can't be right. This is currently what would be night. Where are all the dreams? They're definitely equine, but I will have to look into this.* "Twilight."

Twilight's head darted up from her book and she placed a hoof on the page to mark her page. With her ears flat, she tilted her head in annoyance and replied, "Yes, Nightmare Moon? I am quite busy studying an array of spells I've never seen before."

Nightmare smirked and replied, "Stretch out with your magical senses to the northeast, in the direction the road heads. Tell me what you find." She awaited Twilight's response as the unicorn shut her eyes and pulsed magic into her horn, lighting it with a gentle glow.

For several long minutes Nightmare Moon watched on as Twilight's eyes shifted under her eyelids and her horn's shimmering changed in intensity. Finally, the mare opened her eyes and stared at the alicorn in confusion, "Nothing. There's nothing out there. It feels like there should be, but I can't seem to find out why."

"That's what I thought. Imagine something, Twilight," Nightmare Moon started, then grinned to herself. "We come across a very well equipped army of all kinds of ponies *claiming* to march under my name. Except I just arrived the day before. Meaning..."

"...That wherever they disembarked from must be nearby!" Twilight finished excitedly.

Nightmare snorted in annoyance at being interrupted, "Yes, that. So whatever is out there, possibly the capital city of Trelaria, is hidden from normal and magical sight. Else I would have seen it long ago." *Still, a nice deduction on her part, but I will have to teach her that interrupting her Queen will be frowned on.*

Twilight hopped to her hooves and slammed the book shut, giddiness driving her sudden change in mood. "What are we waiting for, then!?! Let's get moving! The sooner we get there, the sooner we'll have warm meals, warm beds, and the ability to find out what's going on!"

Nightmare Moon climbed to her hooves and twisted, brushing bits of loam from her coat with her tail. “*Not* so fast. There is one thing that needs to happen beforehand. Your safety. The... my subjects, I should call them, see you as part of the ‘Land of the Living.’” The Nightmare barked forth a short laugh, startling Twilight. “I *must* change that.”

Dropping the book in shock, Twilight took a few steps back, her eyes wide in terror, “Y-you mean to kill me, then!?”

“*What!?*” the Queen drew back in alarm, then chuckled in annoyed amusement. “Oh, no no no,” she whispered, slowly advancing toward Twilight. “I mean to give you my protection. None of my other subjects would ever think to harm you, for what I may do to them if they attempt.”

Twilight anxiously laughed as if she knew that all along. “Yes, well, I still don’t see what you mean,” she admitted, retreating from Nightmare Moon one step at a time. “I mean, is there some sort of magic or armor that can do such?”

“You *could* say that,” Nightmare smugly returned, her eyes menacing in the firelight. “It involves a great deal of magic, but I do believe it will be quite... *beneficial* for the both of us.”

Twilight darted her eyes about, slipping to the other side of the fire, placing it between Nightmare Moon and herself. “Then why do you act like you’re stalking me?”

Hissing in frustration, Nightmare Moon shouted, infusing her words with power and fear, “**Twilight Sparkle, you will stand still right this instant, or else I will throw you to the soldiers myself!**”

Twilight froze in place, her eyes bulging as Nightmare’s magics struck and dazed her. This permitted Nightmare Moon enough time to dart around the fire and wrap Twilight’s body and horn in her mane, leaving just the unicorn’s eyes free of the billowing cloud. “These will protect you, and keep you nicely bound to me, I do believe.”

The enchantment over Twilight swiftly wore off and she stared up at Nightmare Moon in fear.

After a moment of intense concentration, Nightmare Moon disentwined her mane from around Twilight Sparkle’s body, leaving her free once again. Or mostly. Around Twilight’s neck lay a snug and glimmering breastplate reminiscent of the one Luna wore, and around her horn a ring of the darkest night.

“Now sleep,” She whispered, touching her mane to the tip of Twilight’s horn, with the unicorn collapsing where she stood in immediate slumber.

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Twilight groggily awoke, blinking sleep from her eyes as she discovered herself surrounded by a plethora of cushions. Around her, the tent's magical lights glowed dimly, set for the occupants' benefit during sleep. Through the dim illumination, Twilight's eyes scanned the room, coming to rest on Nightmare Moon sitting on her haunches as she read through the tome Celestia gave her.

In that instant, everything rushed back to Twilight. Their last conversation, the spell Nightmare worked on her, and her new permanent accessories. *What!?! No! Nonono! This is bad! This can't be happening!* She immediately reached up and grasped the collar with her forehooves, attempting to pull it off her neck. Crackling appeared over the collar's entire surface while it reacted as if Twilight were pulling apart two magnets. *It has to come off, it MUST come off!*

The more she tugged, however, the more the collar fought and the less ground she gained against it. Tears formed at the corner of her eyes while the collar showed her efforts to be futile. A sudden intense pain in her horn forced a cry of pain from her mouth and she released the accessory, instead to cradle the horn, and the now-felt inhibitor on it.

Glancing up through a haze of tears, Twilight barely made out the form of Nightmare Moon standing above her while withdrawing the hoof she had smacked the unicorn's horn with. "Why!?" she gasped out in pain and fear, uncertain of what may happen to her.

"Why?" Nightmare returned, standing menacingly before the unicorn. "Do you think I mean to make you my *pet* that easily? Over a simple life and death situation?" Nightmare Moon barked forth a raucous laugh before her expression turned to one of unamusement. "No, it is simply that, protection. If you haven't noticed, your inhibitor isn't doing anything of the sort. Oh no, my dear unicorn. I intend to make you mine through your complete agreement."

Standing unsteadily to her hooves, Twilight wiped her eyes and stared down at the snug collar around her neck, "Then what about the 'bound' to you, part? You can't simply tell me that's for my safety too?"

Another laugh and this time, the Nightmare smiled in genuine amusement. "Oh, no, that's definitely what it does. I never said the inhibitor and collar weren't functional. I can still control them, meaning I know exactly where you are at all times, and if you displease me, well..." A low rumble emanated from Nightmare Moon, reminiscent of a chuckle. "I don't think you'll want to displease me at all."

"But... but..." Twilight stuttered, her eyes wide in disbelief.

"Enough!" Nightmare Moon barked, slipping over to her sleeping alcove to float pieces of her armor over to her body, latching them about her form before sliding her helmet onto her

head and shifting it into place. Her mane wavered for a brief moment before resuming its billowous nature. "Get the tent packed up and take care of anything you may need to do. I don't wish for you to have any... *accidents* like before." She glared with a single eye at Twilight as she settled the inter-linking plates of her neck armor.

Twilight blushed and glanced away, instead walking away to grumble and peer at herself in a tiny wall-mounted mirror. *Great, so not only can she keep track of me, but I'm also apparently her personal servant now. Grumbling* in annoyance, she studied the collar decorating her neck, then glimpsed at her inhibitor. *I bet anypony else would have wet themselves in fear. Hard to avoid a magic-based aura meant to strike an intense feeling of fear in the area.*

A cloud of violet mist appeared behind Twilight and materialized into a very grim-faced Nightmare Moon. "Now, foal!"

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"Twilight, how far have you viewed that book my... *sister*," Nightmare Moon said with a touch of deplore. "...gave you, hm? I do believe you should read the entire thing just to understand our predicament."

"Well..." Twilight started, puffing under the weight of both saddlebags. She swore Nightmare Moon's bags grew heavier each time the unicorn carried them.

The two ponies traveled the roads again, after a short time in which Twilight dismantled and stored the tent while Nightmare Moon made herself presentable for her coming entrance into the city.

"I think we got to the portion after the Everlasting War finally ended and the months of reconstruction that followed. Why? Does it get..." Twilight swallowed with trepidation and turned to glance back at the saddlebag containing the tome. "Worse?"

Nightmare Moon flicked her head and took a cursory glance about the forest on either side of the dirt road. *Dirt or not, something feels strange about all this. It's currently the middle of the night, and I sensed few sleeping creatures beyond that barrier. Something is certainly going on.* "Much worse, my inquisitive unicorn. Much much worse. You truly have no idea as of yet what Erebus can do."

Twilight bit her lip and hovered the filigreed tome from her saddlebags, having to move Nightmare Moon's own to reach it. She eyed over its surface before peering down at the collar fit snugly around her neck, "And when will these things be removed?"

The alicorn rolled her eyes and smirked, "Oh, whenever the danger has passed or I no longer require your services." *Or never, depending on how things go. My sister will have to pry*



*her 'faithful student' from my grasp.*

“No longer require my services?” What the hay does that mean!?” Twilight demanded, pointing the book at Nightmare Moon with a snort.

Nightmare Moon leaned her head in close and whispered, “You will soon find out if we survive all this.” She then pulled away and shifted her mane to block Twilight from her view. “And I will answer no more on this matter! Now read, before I decide to have you do something more productive!”

“But-! ...*Fine*,” Twilight Sparkle growled, throwing open the book and staring into the pages with a determined glare.

Pulling her mane away and peering at Twilight out of the corner of her eye, Nightmare Moon nodded in satisfaction. *So she can take commands. This is good. The way to train any new acquisition is to start with small commands and work my way up to- What is this?* A noticeable change in the road drew her from her thoughts.

Lowering her head and examining the road’s surface while in transit, Nightmare Moon narrowed her eyes. *Something’s not...Aha!* She probed the surface with her magic, barely making out the outlines of an intricate and extremely hard to find illusion spell. Parting the veil of deception, the mare of darkness wished to bark a laugh. Beneath their feet past the illusion lay well-worn cobblestones. *We’re close.*

Taking a brief glance at Twilight, Nightmare Moon calculated the distance to whatever lay hidden nearby. *By the feeling of my magic earlier compared to now, and the speed we’re going... It should take us no longer than half an hour to reach the barrier, and no less than twenty minutes at the least. And by the looks of little Twilight over there, she’s reaching the end of those accounts. This will be fun to behold.*

Scanning the skies above, Nightmare Moon sighted stars, their names automatically coming to her mind. Then, she locked her eyes on her moon, and a flash of anger coursed through her. *Damn that sister of mine! My moon has been corrupted by memories of my imprisonment. I can’t ever look upon its visage the same again,* she thought with a bitter stomp of her hoof.

The mare remained silent while they continued their journey, her thoughts jumping from one topic to another in abject boredom. She started out of her thoughts when she heard Twilight gasp. Raising an eyebrow and glancing to the side, Nightmare smiled to herself the moment she noticed that the unicorn had finished the story with puffy eyes.

*Time to set a little lesson into motion. One that shall be QUITE fun to behold.*

“Nightmare Moon, I...” Twilight started, then swiveled her head in every direction searching for the alicorn. The road and surrounding forest remained clear of any other life.

“Did I really become so engrossed in that tome that I lost her?” she wondered aloud, wiping her eyes with her knee as she stopped in place. Slipping the book into her bag and shifting to settle the two saddlebags into a more comfortable position, she spun in position to watch out for Nightmare Moon. “Come on, this isn’t funny in the least!”

Nearby, an inky pool of shadow formed and began spreading across the surface of the road, drawing Twilight’s attention. “This *can’t* be good,” she muttered, scrabbling back from the rippling puddle.

Faster than she could react, the pool darted across the road’s surface and circled around Twilight to entrap her. Her eyes wide with fear, she bit her lip and frantically scanned for an escape route, with none to be found. “Ohhh, bad day! Wait, calm down Twilight, Nightmare said this Celestia-damned collar would protect me,” she whispered, her heart pounding frantically in her chest.

**“There is little that could ever protect you from me, little pony,”** a voice boomed, freezing Twilight’s breath and thoughts. All at once, immense walls sprung from the shadowy pool and converged overhead, trapping her within the darkness.

Roaming her eyes over the enclosure, Twilight glanced down and suddenly yelped in a mix of surprise and fear. All around her, the shadows moved in, concealing the road beneath her hooves.

“Ahaha, alright Nightmare, you can stop joking around now, you’ve scared me, please come out,” she begged, backing up until her flanks pressed up against the featureless wall.

**“Joke? Scared? You know nothing of fear, Twilight Sparkle, Daughter of Celestia. There are many things in this world, including me, which no amount of fear could ever save you from.”**

Before Twilight, the shadows roiled until a creature born of nightmares rose from its rippling surface. “*Erebus!*” she hissed.

The nightmarish abomination chuckled dryly, his rotting limbs shaking in amusement. **“Indeed. So, Daughter of Celestia. Have you learned anything from that book of yours?”**

“*Yes!*” Twilight screamed at him, shaking in fear at the powerful being walking closer to her. An intense stench of decay and death wafted from around his body, clogging Twilight’s nostrils with the clinging miasma. “I’ve learned that...” Twilight gagged, then took a short breath

before continuing. "...learned that you're a despicable and heartless creature only playing with us!"

"**Oh?**" Erebus taunted, standing mere feet from the unicorn, his frightening empty-eyed visage boring holes into Twilight's soul. "**And what do you mean to do about it?**"

"I..." Twilight Sparkle shut her eyes and cowered back. "I don't know..." she whispered.

"And that is exactly what we're dealing with, Twilight Sparkle. An immensely powerful being, more powerful than even my sister and myself. One that is able to aid in the destruction of half the world, and is likely playing with us."

"Wha-?" Twilight replied flabbergasted. She opened her eyes and let out a surprised yelp to find Nightmare Moon towering above her, everything back to the way it was. "But... That was... What happened... *Whaaaaa!?*"

"Yes, yes, it was all an elaborate daydream concocted by me," Nightmare Moon explained in annoyance. "Now, if you please, I've journeyed quite a distance with a whining unicorn by my side. We're at the end of our journey."

"Wait!" Twilight exclaimed, hopping to her hooves and nearly dislodging the saddlebags from her haunches. "I have so many questions about what was in that book, and what you meant about Erebus!"

"And those will have to wait. I want to rest my hooves, fill my belly with a warm meal, and snooze in front of a fireplace, but we all can't have what we want, now can we?" Nightmare Moon replied in exasperation, then turned and stepped forward several feet. *Let's see where this leads...* She pushed past the barrier into the unknown.

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"*What do you mean that ponies are complaining of the sun always being up!? That plants are starting to wilt!? That the temperatures are rising!?* *Of course this is happening! It is meant to!*" Solar Flare shrieked at her Ministers, stamping her hoof and cracking the white granite beside her administrative cushion. "I mean to bring Equestria and its neighbors to their knees, to bow before their **true** Empress!"

Gasps came from around the table and many of the Ministers shared worried glances. Nothing of this sort had *ever* been proposed by Celestia.

"Is there something *wrong*, Split Banner!?" Solar Flare demanded, focusing her intense gaze on one of her Ministers.

Selected out, he shook his head and flashed his Empress a nervous smile, "Erm, no, my

Queen. We're just unsure of your decisions. Part of our job is to question everything you do, after all." The others nodded in agreement before turning to gaze fearfully at the alicorn.

Solar Flare settled back, thinking, "That is indeed true. But understand, question me too much and I may take that as a sign that things need to change. If that is all on today's agenda, I have another appointment I must get to."

The Ministers shook their heads and gathered up their documents and other personal effects, many giving a sigh of relief that Solar Flare noted.

"Dismissed!" she exclaimed, standing and walking out of the chambers, ignoring the Ministers as they retreated through their own exit. *Tiresome foals. If I didn't need them to aid me with the bureaucratic day-to-day workings, I'd have them all executed for incompetence. Maybe I will have to find a new set of Ministers ready to take charge under my new regime.*

Walking at a brisk pace through the halls, Solar Flare's thinking brought her to ignore any of the other ponies making sure to stay out of her way and their fearful bows. She also did not notice the sweat on their brows from the intensity of the sun shining through the open window panes.

A few moments later, Solar Flare stepped through the door of one of her meeting rooms and closed it behind her. She turned to stare at the stallion within, dressed in his ceremonial armor. "Captain Shining Armor."

Shining armor stepped forth and kneeled before Solar Flare, "Pr-Er, Empress. You wished to see me? Is it news concerning my sister?" He glanced up, worry etched along his face.

"The news is the same, Captain, I still have no word on where my renegade sister has taken my student. No, I have different news for you." She gestures to the cushions and settled on the largest. "Sit, we have much to discuss."

Shining Armor rose from his bow and took his place across from the alicorn, his curiosity evident. "How may I serve, Empress Solar Flare?" It was obvious he still wasn't used to calling Celestia by a different name and title.

"First thing's first, I am attempting to track Twilight's location and having little success. Secondly, before the meeting planned in a couple days time as a formality, I must bring something to your attention." Conjuring a map of Equestria and a current duty roster of the Royal Guard, Solar Flare stretched them out across the floor and pinned them down. "Equestria needs to expand its borders, so you will be in charge of finding and recruiting new soldiers for the Guard and training them."

Shining Armor, after staring at the map for a moment, blinked and stood up in shock.

“Wait, are you implying that we are going to war? Pri- Empress, we’ve had relative peace for-”

Solar Flare hissed and rose to her full height, “That is *enough*, Captain! We must prepare ourselves! Outside of Canterlot’s walls, my sister runs rampant as a renegade. A thousand years ago, she caused a war!” Stamping her hoof, the cushion burst open beneath the force of the blow and spread everywhere. “And now, not only is she free, but we have other enemies to worry about. The Guards must be increased to preserve the safety of Canterlot and all of Equestria!”

Noticing his Empress’ mood at the moment, Shining Armor wisely bowed to her. “I understand. I will make it my duty to increase the Guard. Will the other Captains know of this?”

Calming down and settling back onto an undamaged cushion, Solar briskly nodded, “The other Captains will be informed at the Formal meeting. Your job is to recruit. Theirs will be to formulate plans of defense and to follow my other orders.”

Keeping his face passive, Shining threw his gaze over the proffered map and reports, then returned it to his ruler. He studied her with an outwardly calm appearance, as if weighing his options, then responded, “I will do my best to serve you, Empress Solar Flare.”

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Shining Armor seethed as he stalked across the Guard training grounds to the barracks. Something was completely wrong with his meeting with Celestia. Or as she called herself now, Solar Flare. *Something is extremely amiss. The Princess has never ordered me to increase the Guard, at least not for these reasons. Then there’s the fact that she was hiding something about Twiley. What did Twilight do to bring her own teacher to hide her whereabouts?*

“Captain!” a voice cried out, drawing his attention. In the distance, a squad of Guards trained across the grounds, while two of Shining’s Lieutenants galloped over to him.

“Yes, Crimson Shield?” Shining asked in a weary state. “Please make it quick, my meeting with the Empress has tried my nerves.”

Crimson Shield and Staggered Force slowed as they reached their Captain, their armor still pristine even in the elevated heat of the stationary sun. “That’s exactly what we wish to discuss with you,” Staggered explained, barely containing his curiosity. “What was so important that she had to shoehorn an informal meeting into your busy schedule?”

Rubbing his temples, Shining Armor grimaced. Ever since his wedding and the Changelings, he’d grown susceptible to migraines from the amount of time he’d held the shield around Canterlot. Enough stress would surely bring them on. “We need to raise the recruitment for the Guard and prepare them for training. *Apparently* we’re going to secure the outer provinces. If I didn’t know better, I’d say something replaced the Princess. Except...”

Crimson gasped and held up a hoof, "Wait. Wait wait wait. We're supposed to do *what?* The last time we *ever* needed to actively recruit for the guard was over thirty years ago." She glanced sidelong at Staggered, worried over the news. "Which means there's more to this than she's letting on."

Staring past the two pegasi, Shining watched the squad practice marching in formation. "Exactly. And then I have no real proof of anything that's happened. A couple days ago, she was the Princess. And now suddenly Princess Luna and the Elements, including my sister, are missing and she's proclaimed herself as Empress and Luna as a rebel?"

Staggered Force shielded his eyes with a forehoof and stared into the sky. "I don't doubt something's happened. Except I know for sure the Empress is Celestia. No pony else can control the sun, and our defense spells for finding if any pony in the castle has been replaced haven't gone off." He lowered the hoof and stared at his Captain in thought. "So what do we do?"

Shining Armor sighed, feeling the beginnings of a migraine, "What I've been ordered to do. We will open active recruitment. I have to stay and train the new recruits. You both, however, will go to Ponyville and find out what, if anything, they may know. Be discreet, no uniforms. We don't need Solar Flare needing any excuses to do with us as she did Prince Blueblood. To think he'd want us to deal with a 'disturbance caused by the same mares who destroyed the Gala.'"

Staggered and Crimson both saluted, hooves pressed against their breastplates. "Yes, Captain!" they cried in unison.

"Dismissed," Shining barked, then turned away to walk slowly towards the barracks, a thought worming its way through his mind. *Staggered Force is correct, of course. We've detected nothing out of the ordinary. And yet... Solar Flare obviously hid several details about Twiley. She knows something she's not telling me.*

Slipping into the barracks' entrance, he made his way through the empty halls to his spartan quarters. Even though his rise in stature to Prince after his marriage to Princess Cadence granted him quarters within the castle, Shining preferred to bivouac with the troops under his command.

Sitting at his desk and staring at the amounts of reports, as well as imagining the work he'd have to get his new orders out, he groaned. *We're possibly looking at an invasion of the outer principalities. Or possibly some information the Empress hasn't shared with me about one of the other nations, possibly the Griffins. Relations have always been tense with them.*

Lifting the top report, Shining Armor skimmed over the latest quartermaster reports, his thoughts still going over the details from the meeting. *I'll eat my crest if Staggered and Crimson do not find something out in Ponyville. Spike keeps good track on what Twiley does, he should*

*be able to easily give us the information.*

The next scroll, and the dozen after that included the latest Guard movements as well as stations, and he barely had to read it, already knowing the plans by heart. *So many things going on. Princess Luna missing, Princess Celestia's change of name and appearance. The eternal sun hanging in the sky, and Empress Solar Flare's claim to be the single ruler of Equestria. It's almost like the account Twilight sent me of... Wait...*

He dropped the scrolls in shock, ignoring the mess to instead race to the chest in front of his bed and throw it open. After much rustling through his belongings, Shining Armor withdrew a scroll containing Twilight's seal. Unrolling it, he read through his sister's writing. *It's all here. How Princess Luna became Nightmare Moon and attempted to bring eternal night. It all matches up! But then this begs the question.*

*If what's happened to Princess Celestia is the same as what happened to Princess Luna, what could have caused it? Or whom?*

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"Ugh..." Twilight groaned as she wobbled on her hooves. "Can we never do that again, please?" Passing through the barrier knocked the unicorn for a loop, confuzzling her senses and balance.

"Be glad that's all it did," Nightmare Moon replied grimly, staring straight ahead. "Without my touch on you, you never would have walked through the barrier. Or maybe would have been killed by it. I'm not quite sure, yet."

Twilight clenched her teeth and rode the wave of confusing senses, sitting down to prevent herself from falling over and ignoring the fact that her saddlebags nearly slipped off. "Great, something I have to thank you about."

"I'm not too worried right now about that, Twilight Sparkle. I do believe there is something you should be paying attention to right now," Nightmare responded.

"And just what exa-" the unicorn started, cracking an eye open to glance in Nightmare Moon's direction. The scene left her speechless.

Half a hoofball field away from the mages, an immense ivy-covered wall of dark granite rose above the surrounding fields. The walls all appeared to be crafted of one piece, as she could find no seams or any other evidence of mortar having been used. From the invisible barrier to the wall, all trees and underbrush were gone, instead leaving short-cut grass to yield line of sight on anything passing through. Sentries marched atop the walls, mere shadows in the night. Nightmare Moon took a special interest in them, narrowing her eyes in quiet contemplation.

Regaining her senses, Twilight examined the wall, noticing how it stretched in each direction. *It's a massive city! This is amazing!* Standing back to her hooves, the unicorn found the ground beneath them to be cobblestone and not dirt. *When did this happen!?! Nightmare Moon has a lot of questions she must answer when I get the chance. I-WHA!?*

Nightmare Moon interrupted Twilight's train of thought by grasping the unicorn in the violet glow of her magic. With a powerful flap of her wings, the mare launched herself high into the air, Twilight drifting along side her with her hooves scrabbling. *This is not how ponies are meant to fly! ESPECIALLY unicorns!* Then, she found herself shoved atop the alicorn's back, a precarious position if she weren't held down by magic.

"I want a good view of what I'm supposedly meant to rule over. Stay there, don't make a sound. I would rather not have to deal with pissed off guards." Nightmare Moon yelled over the sound of rushing wind as her wings took them up and over the wall, bringing the continued attention of the guards, who all raised a massive cheer.

*Cheering? But... why?* thought Twilight as she stared downwards over Nightmare Moon's side, uncomfortable in her position but glad she wouldn't fall off. Turning her attention elsewhere, her eyes widened in wonder at the panorama that stretched out from beneath the flying pair.

The city below stretched out in all directions, eventually ending at the shores of an immense sea lit by the moon. The cool-colored buildings stood no more than two and three stories high and possessed few corners, accentuating their inherent beauty. Nature presided all around the houses and other buildings. Roofs were capped in ivy that flowed down the walls, while flowers of a variant unknown to Twilight glowed in the moonlight and offered a soft illumination to everything around them. Balconies held personal gardens, while at the same time, larger flower gardens grew and prospered in small yards.

Twilight's gaze drifted over the scene beneath her as Nightmare Moon's wings flapped, bringing them to soar above the city. "It's beautiful," Twilight Sparkle remarked, awestruck.

"Indeed it is," Nightmare Moon replied over the wind whistling past. "More than I imagined. And it's mine. Something that is wholly mine..."

Far below, ponies filled the illuminated red cobblestone streets. Many rose their heads up to glance at the flying pair, cheers rising up in their wake. All around, the scent of water lay prevalent as evidenced by the numerous fountains dotting the city landscape. *I don't think even Cloudsdale gets to see this much water!*

"Where are we headed?" Twilight loudly asked.

Stabilizing her flight, Nightmare Moon leveled out and glided past crowds of ponies and



their abodes. “The castle up ahead, of course. You really should be more observant Twilight Sparkle, if you’re going to be of service to me.”

Twilight blinked, realizing that she had only checked to either side of the alicorn. Peering around the side of Nightmare Moon’s head not taken up by her billowing mane, Twilight gasped in awe. The two ponies were swiftly approaching an immense castle. The buildings below became more elaborate, showing that social hierarchy stood strong even in Trelaria. Up ahead, tall walls separated the castle courtyard and various outbuildings from the rest of the city; while the castle itself, appearing to be made of the same black granite as the city’s outer walls, took up a good portion of the grounds, it was bare of the same plant growth as the city. Instead, the plants seemed to be relegated to immense gardens strewn about the grounds.

The courtyard seemed to be split into several sections. By the shapes of what Twilight assumed to be guards and soldiers drilling below, she understood a large area to be for training and deployment. *Alright, what about the rest? What is with these ponies? I can barely make out a thing. Where are all the street lamps and such?*

Turning her gaze to other portions of the courtyard, Twilight gasped as Nightmare Moon banked and spiraled, dropping altitude to go for a landing. Ponies flocked to the courtyard, socializing and even leaving the immense portal for the throne room and main hall. Her eyes roaming past that, she took in the details of the rest of the massive construction. Everywhere, immense towers spanned and touched the sky with lights on in many of the windows that Twilight could see.

“*Stop fidgeting back there! You’re throwing off my balance! It’s hard enough to fly while having to carry you around!*” Nightmare angrily hissed.

Twilight started and hunched down on herself in embarrassment, “Sorry...”

Nightmare Moon snorted, continuing their descent in silence until finally she landed on the flagstones before the main entrance to the throne room. With her teeth sufficiently jarred, Twilight curiously lifted her head to peer around before she found herself unceremoniously thrown from the alicorn’s back.

“Ow! Hey!” Twilight complained, rubbing her flank before glancing up to notice Nightmare Moon studying one of the two guards stationed in front of the large doors. *What...?* She stood and rejoined the alicorn, studying the pony before her. The guard appeared as a pony, but... instead of regular feathers he possessed two leathery bat-like wings. Not just that, but his ears were tufted and he had dragon-like eyes. *Almost like... Nightmare Moon’s!*

His armor, while not as elaborate as the soldiers from the army, seemed almost fluid in its construction. While the main body of the protection extended across the stallion in segments, the breastplate itself flowed across his chest with a giant draconic eye in the center.

“Interesting” the alicorn muttered before turning away and marching through the open double doors.

Noticing Nightmare Moon’s advance, Twilight turned and bounded after her into the awaiting entrance of the castle. What awaited her within took her breath away for the second time in the hour.

Before her stretched the immense, albeit empty, throne chamber of the building. To either side of the room, large pillars of intricate design spiraled upwards into the night cloaked ceiling, while images of stars floated high overhead. Behind the pillars, vast stained-glass windows depicted what Twilight presumed to be ancient battles and deeds, and between the windows, tapestries adorned the walls showing off the same.

The floor consisted of the same black marble as the rest of the palace, except near the raised throne, where a midnight colored carpet covered the stairs leading to a mighty throne that lay empty. The throne itself was crafted of a material close in composition to polished obsidian.

*It’s almost like an exact opposite of Celestia’s throne room,* Twilight thought in amazement, her eyes darting about to gather all the details. *Where her castle emits warmth and love, and the merit of accomplishment, this place is almost alien, cold and calculating.*

“*Twilight*, you little foal, get up here this instant and stop lagging behind. My patience with you wears thin,” Nightmare Moon barked, startling Twilight from her musing.

That comment, in addition with the anger she already felt towards her treatment, finally pushed her over the edge and she stood fast, glaring at the Moon Goddess. “Nightmare Moon, *stop* this treatment right now! I have had it with being treated like a filly with no clue of the world around me! You do *not* own me! We’re partners in this and I am not your subordinate!”

Silence reigned for a couple moments before Nightmare Moon finally replied, her words coated in ice and dagger sharp. “I see. Well, it seems that some certain unicorn has gotten it into her head to *fight* me.” Nightmare turned and faced Twilight across the expanse of the throne room, her eyes blazing with cold malice. “It seems I was quite *wrong* in believing that you have learned your place. What a *delightful* turn of events this will be!” As Nightmare broke out in her raucous laughter, Twilight began to doubt her position.

*I think I’ve made a bad calculation on my part,* she thought just as the Nightmare’s magic grabbed ahold of her and drifted her through the air to bring her face to face with the alicorn. *A HUGE miscalculation!*

For a short moment, the alicorn said nothing, then finally hissed, “I shall *enjoy* breaking

you and making you *mine*, Twilight Sparkle. Celestia will never regain you.”

Twilight narrowed her eyes and replied, “I’d like to see you try!”

A brief chuckle escaped from the Bringer of Night’s lips and she sneered, “Exactly the response I was hoping for.”

Before Twilight could reply, the inhibitor suddenly activated, immediately shutting down her magic. At the same time, two tendrils snaked down from it and wrapped themselves around her muzzle, shutting it tight and preventing her from speaking.

“*Now*, I-” Nightmare Moon started before she was interrupted.

From behind one of the pillars, a cloaked stallion walked toward the throne and silently unstealthed a table next to it that bore a remarkable resemblance to an intricate chess-board. In one swift movement, a grey glow enveloped a piece that strangely looked like Twilight and moved her to another place on the board.

“We’ll discuss this, *later*,” she hissed.

Twilight felt jarred when Nightmare suddenly released her magic and dropped the unicorn to the floor, knocking the breath from her.

“May I *help* you?” the midnight alicorn demanded, whirling on the intruder.

“Actually,” the pony calmly said, “I believe it’s the other way around. I am the Luminary. How may I help *you*, my Queen?” His voice sounded noble, with the wisdom of generations behind it.

Nightmare Moon left Twilight to recover behind her and marched straight up the stairs to instead lay her eyes on the sudden appearance of the chessboard. For several long seconds, she studied the layout of the pieces, many of them quite familiar, as they were crafted in the image of the creatures they portrayed.

Grumbling quietly to herself, Twilight joined the alicorn, dark thoughts on how to change her back to Luna going through her mind as she shed the saddlebags. *What’s this chessboard about? I see... Myself, my friends... Luna and Celestia set off to the side? Well, I see Nightmare Moon taking Luna’s place, so that must mean.* Her eyes scanned the board and came to rest on an alicorn with a mane of flame. *No... mother... Luna was right!*

“Interesting setup,” the Nightmare remarked, her eyes roaming the pieces spread out below. “I must say, quite accurate. Several sides, some pieces that seem to play multiple factions. And numerous games in progress at the same time. From the looks of it, I seem to be joining this

side, I presume Trelaria, while in the act of capturing Twilight here, though in doing so, she'll fight me. Very interesting."

Though the Luminary's face lay cloaked in shadow, his muzzle lay bare, a smile having never left it. "Astute observation, my Queen. I simply play the game with what information I have at my disposal."

"Indeed. I am quite the chess player myself. Only one pony has ever defeated me. Now, I must ask," Nightmare Moon remarked, raising an eyebrow. "This is my throne, correct, and my nation to rule? Where are we now?"

The Luminary simply bowed his head and responded, "Quite correct, my liege. The throne is yours after your re-coronation ceremony. Welcome to Cordiara, the City of Twilight."

"Cordiara..." Nightmare Moon tested, rolling the word around. "A great name for a great city. Now, about this re-coronation of mine?"

This time, the Luminary bowed even deeper than before and his smile grew wider. "Everything is prepared, Eminence. The moment we felt your coming, the servants and Ministers prepared for your return. Your throne is prepared, as is your armor and bedchambers. We have prepared separate quarters for your..." he paused for a moment, then gave a brief chuckle. "Pet, I would believe. Do not worry, we have an assortment of garments waiting for her."

Twilight choked and muffledly exclaimed, "*MED!?*" She shook her head furiously, bringing another bout of laughter from both Nightmare Moon and the Luminary.

Eyeing Twilight in consideration, the alicorn said aside to the Luminary. "I do believe I like you already. Though..." she started, turning a calculating eye toward him. "I must know. What is your real name, and what is this about armor? Is my current set not enough?"

The stallion's smile faltered for one brief second, though Twilight believed she may have imagined it. "I meant no disrespect, my Queen. Luminary is both my name and title." He set a studious gaze on Nightmare Moon, his motions following the lines of her armor. "I must say, though, that your... protection is quite lacking. Very little is protected, and it looks more like parade gear, or that of our guards! I must say that all our past rulers have worn this armor. After all, it amplifies their magic and strengths."

Twilight turned away from the chessboard and ignored the conversation, her thoughts drawn inward. Stepping down the throne dais, she took one last look at the chess board. *If Celestia's a Nightmare now, what does that mean for Equestria? For ME!? I left Spike and everypony else behind in her hooves. What will happen to them?*

She turned her gaze to the starred ceiling. *Will Shining Armor be alright? What about my parents? What's the constant sun doing to the environment? Oh pony feathers, what about Applejack's farm? She barely makes ends meet as it is, what happens if her entire crop is destroyed?*

The unicorn fought back tears and grit her teeth, wishing she could just finish this ordeal. *And then there's me. I'm caught between a rock and a hard place. The residents of Trelaria obviously don't like the 'Living', whatever the hoof that means! And it doesn't help that Nightmare Moon is slowly drawing me into her clutches. I keep expecting her to give me one of those choices of hers.*

Turning her gaze back to the alicorn, Twilight Sparkle noticed a small army of servants, having come from two doors behind the dais, standing at attention. She dreaded when she would be given the choice. To either become the Nightmare's in one way or another, or some other unthinkable choice.

*Ugh, whatever am I going to do? If this... Cordiara is really hers, then she has an entire nation, with an army currently marching to Equestria! I have to escape to warn Celestia... or whoever she is now.* Twilight paced, worry plainly etched on her face while her jaws hurt from clenching her teeth.

*And even if I do escape, how will I manage to remove the inhibitor and collar?* She tried calling on her magic, grunting as she placed all her effort into it. Instead, she only managed to give herself a headache with nothing to show for her effort. The inhibitor effectively blocked everything.

*What if...* Twilight's heart leapt to her throat and stopped. *What if she does to me what she did with that dragon?* Just the thought of being in a battle against a full-strength Nightmare without not just her Element, but also her friends, made her wish to run.

Shaking such thoughts from her head, Twilight stomped the floor and glared at her slight reflection in the polish. *I have to keep it together! No matter what happens, there are worse things going on right now! Erebus is still on the loose, there's an army heading to Equestria, and we still have to find out what's going on!*

With firm resolve to see this through, Twilight Sparkle turned around and grim-facedly marched back up the dais and stood beside Nightmare Moon, her eyes wavering between her, the Luminary, and the chess board.

"Ah, just in time. I must be leaving, Twilight Sparkle. I must become ready for my re-coronation, and I wish for you to stay here and keep the Luminary company," Nightmare Moon said down to her, noticing the mage's presence. "He has strict orders to not allow you to leave. And believe me, you do not wish to disobey those orders." A wide grin plastered the

Nightmare's face, proving that this may be good advice to follow.

Hmphing, Twilight watched as a large detachment of the servants lead the alicorn deeper into the castle through a rear door. *Great, so now I'm left alone with some strange unicorn who has been told not to allow me to leave.*

“So.”

The single word drew Twilight's attention to him and she rose an eyebrow.

“You must be Twilight Sparkle. Nice to finally meet you. And from what I know of you, I do believe you'll make an excellent pet for my Queen. That is, if Erebus does not simply rid this world of you first.” That same insufferable and knowing smile stayed on his face the entire time, unnerving Twilight.

“*EWEUS!?*” Twilight tried to yell through the inhibitor. *He's working for that monster!?*

A hearty chuckle rang through the throne room and Luminary set his shadowed gaze on Twilight. “Oh, yes, he and I have worked together for years. I have agreed to allow Nightmare Moon any and all knowledge that I hold regarding what's going on.” He seemed to pause for a moment, then added, “After her re-coronation, of course. If she stays, she will bring a new age of triumph to Cordiara and *all* of Trelaria!”

Twilight growled and glared at him, wishing she could speak her mind at that very instant.

“Don't think I haven't forgotten my orders, Ms. Sparkle. Do you know what protects you from me? From all of Cordiara?”

Even beneath the hood of his cloak, Twilight could feel the heat of his gaze as she shook her head fearfully.

He jerked his head at her decorations and bared his teeth in a hostile grin. “The signs of ownership of our Queen. Believe me. Without them, and without Nightmare Moon's protection, you would be executed as an enemy of the state.”

Her face paled, and for once, Twilight felt relief at being under Nightmare Moon's wing.

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“The captain has requested for me to inform the lot of you that you will be released into my care and escorted to Cordiara,” the Lieutenant explained, having taken Rainbow Dash and the others aside. She turned her gaze to the passing army, envious of their continuation to glory.

“Understand something; as of right now, you are prisoners of war, but you will be treated kindly because our Queen has demanded it. However, any attempts to escape or attack me will be dealt with harshly, so...” she lit her horn and dropped the chains and binds from the five mares.

“Well thank ye kindly for releasing us from tho-” Applejack started before Rainbow Dash butted in.

“Where’s Twilight!?” she demanded, flying into the air and hovering just before the Lieutenant, shoving her face into the unicorn’s. Applejack suddenly bit the pegasus’ tail and yanked her back, giving her a glare.

Even through the helmet, her face remained serene, hiding any emotion. “I presume she is with our Queen as we speak.”

“Must you be so brutish, Rainbow? Nightmare Moon said she would all need us later, presumably to fight...” Rarity glanced aside at their captor. “You-Know-Who.” She then took a few steps forward and smiled warmly at the soldier, “I must thank you for finally releasing us from those dreadful bindings, Ms...?”

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Rainbow Dash whispered to Applejack, staring at the army out of the corner of her eye. “We have no idea if she’s telling the truth!”

“No, we don’t sugarcube. But ah think we oughta at least follow her. It’s better than what they planned ta do with us.” She then stared behind her at Fluttershy quaking under her tail. “Besides, none of us know what’s going on, ah’d rather get someplace safer, and this Cordiara place sounds like where we wanta’ be.”

Ignoring the two mares talking, the Lieutenant replied, “I am Lieutenant Arcane Barrage of her Majesty’s Midnight Legion. And...” Arcane stopped for a moment to think, “Rarity, if that’s the name I remember you giving. Cordiara is far from safe for your kind. That is why you’ll be properly marked once inside.”

“Marked? My dear, whatever could you possibly mean by that? I most certainly hope it involves nothing permanent!” Rarity protested with a quirked eyebrow.

“Permanent? Ah’d like to...” Applejack began.

“I’d like to see them try! They owe me a primary! Those aren’t easy to grow back, you know!” Rainbow Dash finished in a huff.

Staring between the ponies at the passing army, Arcane Barrage simply stated, “You

fought us, we fought back. Be glad a simple feather is all we took.”

“Why you-” Rainbow started before finding her mouth covered by Applejack’s hoof and one of Arcane’s blades hovering against her throat.

“Look, she meant nothing bah it. Ah think we should get going before hotter tempers break,” Applejack sweated, glaring at Rainbow out of the corner of her eye. “Besides, Ah want to get out of this forest and find someplace ta rest. And hopefully ta find Pinkie.”

“Yes... please. Can we go now?” Fluttershy whimpered, peering out from behind Applejack. “Something’s not right, all the animals are gone, and I hear no insects. It’s so... quiet.”

For a moment, nopony dared to breathe, their eyes shifting about nervously until Arcane finally removed the blade and socketed it within her armor. “We have a distance to go before we reach Cordiara. You will remain in front of me the entire way in clear view. You will speak to me only when spoken to. If I detect any amount of rebellion, I will be forced to take drastic actions.” She then crooked her head for the others to take their place ahead of her.

The four ponies shuffled warily ahead of Arcane, slowly making their way down the road while the Lieutenant took up position behind them. For all it seemed, it appeared they were marching toward the headsmare. The group made their way alongside the army, until finally all that remained were the supply carts. They stopped to pick up their saddlebags in silence, then continued onward, leaving the supply train behind.

After the army receded into the distance, and vanished, Applejack eyed their captor and leaned in to whisper to Rainbow, “Ah think we’re in a heapin’ pile of horseapples.”

“Ya think?” Rainbow Dash sarcastically replied.

“Applejack! Such language! I cannot believe that you would think things were so bad.” Rarity forcibly laughed, showing her unease. “We’re being taken to the same place Twilight is. And we’ll probably find Pinkie along the way, too!”

“Ah thi-”

“Did somepony say my name?”

Everypony started and leapt around in surprise. While Arcane drew her blades and hovered them about her in a defensive stance, the others all shouted, “Pinkie Pie!”

Staying her position and ready to attack the pink pony at any second, Arcane Barrage refused to take her eye off both her four prisoners and the new possible threat. “Is she one of yours?” she gruffly asked, ready to slay Pinkie Pie on the spot.



“Pinkie Pie, get over here now before somepony gets hurt!” Rarity demanded, sweat on her brow.

“Okie dokie lokie!” Pinkie Pie cheerfully exclaimed, trotting over to the others and allowing Arcane to slip her blades back onto her armor.

“Any more surprises I should be made aware of?” Arcane asked.

“Surprises? Ooo, I like surprises!” Pinkie piped up, bouncing around the mainly silent group. “Like how I know my Granny Pie is in the city ahead!”

Arcane jerked her head in the direction of the path, forcing the group of pastel equines to continue their travel, even while they all tried to get their comments in edgewise to Pinkie.

“Pinkie, where in Celestia’s name have ya been!?”

“Well, about time you showed up, Pinkie! I was thinking you’d miss the party!”

“Now Rainbow, you know we all got scattered around. Maybe Pinkie just evaded the ar-wait, did you say Granny Pie?”

“I think it’s nice that Pinkie Pie appeared. Now we just have to... gulp.. get Twilight away from Nightmare Moon... Oh dear.”

“Of course I said Granny Pie, silly!” Pinkie bounced alongside them, either ignoring their circumstances or blissfully unaware of them. “Ooo, a party? Are we throwing one for Miss Grouchypants behind us? Or, ooooo, is it for Queen Meanie? Cause I know the perfect party she needs to turn that frown upside down and then she can have punch and cake and presents and confetti in her mane and...” Pinkie continued to gabber on to the amusement of all but Arcane.

*Dear Queen, does this pony ever stop talking? the soldier grumbled to herself. Not only do I miss out on the glory of battle, I must foalsit the prisoners until my Queen is ready for them.* Arcane rolled her eyes and gagged at the thought of the pink pony talking on for the entire journey, but then blinked at the sudden realization, *On the other hoof, I finally have a chance to learn about Equestria! And... Oooo, Captain, you sly fox, this was your intention all along. You knew of my fascination for the Living.*

For a moment, Arcane possessed a hop in her step, until Rarity pointed out, “Well, darling! It seems that our company isn’t so bad, afterall. What has you so happy?”

*Stupid!* Arcane reprimanded herself, noticing that each of the ponies now stared at her. “What makes me happy is the thought of eventually getting to Cordiara and passing you off to an

underling,” she lied.

“And yer sure it’s not that we may know things that interest ya?” Applejack asked, raising an eyebrow in consideration.

“Wha, how did you kn-” Arcane started, then spotted the grins upon their muzzles. Letting loose a potent Trelarian oath, she grumbled, “Yes, fine. I’m interested in your lands.”

Rainbow Dash laughed and tapped Applejack in the shoulder with her wing, “Nice one, AJ!”

“Indeed, that was nicely planned and-”

Arcane interrupted Rarity with a snort and barked order, “That’s it, we’re double-timing it to Cordiara! I want to see you all keeping pace ahead of me and sweating by the time we’re at the gates! Move it!” She even detached two of her blades to make a point that she was serious.

With the threat of the blades behind them evident, the five ponies broke into a canter with Arcane easily keeping stride. For a lengthy amount of time, the group of ponies strode on in silence, every so often throwing a concerned look back at Arcane.

Half an hour passed before Arcane finally yelled, “Halt!” This brought everypony skidding to a halt, with Pinkie Pie hopping over Applejack to avoid crashing into her. “We’re here, you will go no further until I have passed through.”

“Passed through? Passed through what!?” Rainbow Dash leapt into the air and crossed her hooves, evidently tiring of Arcane Barrage.

“Passed through this,” she replied, walking forward past her prisoners and through the barrier hiding Cordiara. She grinned to herself at the gasps she heard behind her. Then, while eyeing the parapets, she barked, “Come through! Stay ahead of me, make no threatening movements. You will not speak until we reach our destination.”

“Or what?” Rainbow provoked, flying through first before tumbling to the ground as the headache struck her. The others followed suit, quickly recovering from the pain.

“Or the guards will kill you where you stand. Your choice,” Arcane pointed out flatly, motioning toward the city walls and the guards stationed atop.

Peering at the wall through one eye, Rainbow’s ears flattened and she quickly glanced at the others, “Okay, I think we should probably behave and do as she says.”

“Mhm,” Applejack replied, flattening her hat to her head. “Ah agree completely.”

Pinkie Pie and Rarity nodded their heads in agreement, while Fluttershy just stared at Arcane with eyes the size of saucers. Arcane walked the distance to the gatehouse and to the guard stationed there. "I want a squad deployed to take these prisoners to a *good* tavern. I want them to be well protected for when our Queen will see need of them." She glanced back at the group of huddled ponies. "Make sure they're given the largest room, I want them all together and treated well. If anything happens to them, the Queen may see fit to dispose of us."

"Yes, Lieutenant!" The guard saluted and turned into the gatehouse.

*I do not think this will be the last time I see all of you,* Arcane Barrage concluded, scrutinizing the Equestrian ponies.

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Nightmare Moon sighed in content as every inch of her being was groomed to shining perfection. Every bit of dust and weariness from her journey was drained from her body at the exquisite care of her army of hoofmaidens. First, she had been lead through a series of hallways to a large chamber that appeared to be for the cleaning of dignitaries, ambassadors, and the highest classes of Cordiara.

After the delicate removal of her armor, a thorough and quite relaxing bath, and currently a finishing job of several maids brushing her coat into a luminescent sheen, Nightmare Moon did not think the day could get any better.

*There is much to think about: Twilight Sparkle and her place in this matter; the Luminary and what he knows; my sister and what she turned into; those other five foals who stopped me twice before.* The soon-to-be Queen of Cordiara breathed a sigh of contentment, having enjoyed the hours of grooming while her thoughts calmed and became soothed.

*That can all wait for later when I have the time in my own quarters. I will deal with Twilight first. Once she is firmly beneath my hoof, then I will deal with my Luminary and his part in this,* she thought, cracking an eye open to peer at the servants scurrying about. At one side of the room, a creak alerted her to the doors opening, allowing a very heavily-built unicorn entry. His magic pulled along a large mannequin coated in an elaborate armor obviously made for an alicorn.

She turned her head in interest to study the armor, only to have it forced back into position as a servant said, "Majesty, you must not move. We are not yet done with your grooming."

Hissing with displeasure, she stared at the armor out of the corner of her eye, attempting to discern details. It was not until the stallion brought it into full view did she draw in her breath at its construction. Ebon interlocking plates with flowing edges took up the entire set, meant to

draw the eyes along its entire length. All along the plates, designs reminiscent of rushing water streamed over each plate.

*It helps the flow of magic! Of course!* Nightmare Moon mentally deduced, already approving of the design that would in essence cover an entire alicorn's form. The helm existed as the crowning piece of the armor set, its curves and faceplate extenuating not just the entire set, but also the mare beneath, bringing an odd malevolent beauty to both the alicorn and armor. *A suit meant to show power and force, to bring fear to those who look upon it. I approve wholeheartedly!*

Nightmare's eyes widened in awe at not only the extravagant craftsmanship of the armor, but also the intricate detailing. *This must have taken decades to craft!* she thought in amazement.

As two of the servants brushing her chest moved to the side, the unicorn stepped forward and bowed deep before her.

"My Queen, it is the greatest honor I have ever had to present you with your vestments. I am Armored Security, craftsman of the Magismiths. I am in charge of keeping the Royal plate in top condition over the ages, as well as aiding in the creation of our armed forces' protection," he long-windedly explained, never taking his eyes off her hooves.

Raising an eyebrow and peering to either side, Nightmare Moon gestured for her attendants to back off. As they retreated in response and set about cleaning the area, she turned an appraising eye to the ancient suit of armor. "Is it time?" she asked the Magismith.

"Yes, my Lady," he replied, remaining bowed, then standing and turning to stare intently at the armor. His horn lit, and for a moment, the plate shuddered, then burst apart. The numerous segments drifted through the air and hovered around the Nightmare.

Standing to all fours, the alicorn stared straight ahead, prepared to be encased within the armor. *Alright, time to see just how powerful this armor really is.* All at once, segments darted in and stuck themselves to her coat with tiny jolts, then melded themselves to their neighboring pieces.

Her eyes wide in surprise, the goddess felt each piece link themselves to her, their power and sensory adding to her own. *Interesting, if only small parts of the armor do this, I can't imagine what the full thing will do!*

As each section connected to the rest, the Moon Goddess' awareness increased, until finally, the armor fully encased her body, from her head to her hooves. Taking a glance to a mirror across the room, she grinned at the imposing figure that stared back. Even the open areas of the helm revealed nothing, cloaked in shadow. Except for two violet glowing orbs she

presumed to be her eyes.

“You will have to be trained in the full use of your armor at a later time, of course, Your Maj-”

Nightmare twisted her head to glare at Armored Security, then spoke, “You doubt my ability to use this armor!?”

He swiftly bowed again and vigorously shook his head. “No, my Queen! I meant to say that it requires training to be able to fully use all of the armor’s features! Without knowing how to, you’d have to fumble your way to possibly devastating results!”

With a snort, Nightmare Moon finally conceded a nod. “Fine. Than what next?”

“Now,” he replied, “we await your coronation.”

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Throughout the immense throne room, and even spilling out into the courtyard beyond, gathered numerous ponies of all kinds whispering to each other in a hushed silence. Today, a momentous and Trelaria-wide event transpired. Not only would Trelaria be going to war against their age-old enemies, but their Queen would return to them, too!

The Night Guards stationed at every pillar, the entrance, and even the throne betrayed no emotion, yet they were as excited as any of the hushed participants. The Luminary and Twilight Sparkle, however, displayed their emotions outright.

He with his ever present grin, and she showing her nervousness while sitting on the elegant amethyst pillow set beside the throne for her use. The unicorn constantly darting her eyes to the guards present.

*Well, this shall certainly cause a ripple through Board, the Luminary thought from under his shadowed cowl. I do believe Erebus will be pleased at the change of events, thanks to Nightmare Moon’s unicorn companion. Without her, our Queen may never have returned.*

He scanned the crowd, taking notice of the self-entitled “elite” of Cordiara taking up the front sections nearest the throne. *Some things never change*, he snorted to himself. *No matter whether it’s a thousand years ago, or ten, it has always been the same. Let’s see how my Queen deals with them. It should be time.*

Turning his gaze to the throne, he suffered no disappointment when, atop the dais, a great cloud of night sky formed and writhed in all directions before coalescing. In its place stood an armored alicorn with her wings extended. All across the chambers, gasps came from the lips of ponies, while Twilight’s jaw dropped open in shock.

Immediately, all across the throne room ponies bowed, some more quickly than others with the elite bowing last. Even Twilight Sparkle forced herself to bow after receiving a glare from the Luminary.

*Not a bad choice for a subordinate, even if she is of the Living. She needs plenty of training, of course, but I can see her providing my Queen with plenty of amusement,* he thought, his smile growing broader.

Stepping forth, he rose his hoof to the audience, bringing the gasps and hurried whispers to a halt. “My fellow Trelarians! Long have I kept our ruler’s seat ready for when one would return to claim it, and long have I sat beside it awaiting that day!” he yelled out into the crowd beyond the dais.

Raising to his rear hooves, he threw both forelegs into the air in jubilation. “For millenia have we awaited the Return, and it shall be an occasion none of us will ever forget! May I have the greatest honor possible to announce to you your Queen and ruler...” He paused, then turned to the alicorn standing in front of the throne.

Under his cowl, Luminary’s horn lit and, out of thin air, an obsidian crown took form and floated down to rest itself atop her helmet. “...Nightmare Moon,” he finished.

Nightmare Moon rose her head and pointed her horn to the night-shrouded ceiling. A great burst of violet magic burst up and struck the ceiling. In the place that struck, a full moon appeared to shine its light down onto the throne.

Her armor gleaming and the detailed lines glowing in the gentle light, the Nightmare stood straight and announced in a majestic voice, “Hear your Queen, my subjects! Never again will the night abandon you for *any* reason! Never again will you walk alone through the fields of twilight! And never again...”

Nightmare Moon paused for one moment and narrowed her eyes, “...will the day ever hold us back. Let the Night stretch out across the land with its loving embrace!”

“Trelaria, I am home to stay!”

Amidst the intense cheers of the masses, a loud cackling laughter broke over the gathered ponies while lightning and thunder arced across the night-shrouded ceiling.

And while everypony celebrated, the Luminary could see Twilight out of the corner of his eye hunkering down on herself in worry.

*Oh, yes. Erebus will be so very pleased...*

## END CHAPTER 8

**(A/N)** I'm so sorry for this taking this long to get released! I've had real life going on, the release of various games, lack of want to write, and then just plain forgetfulness all working against me! Either way, this is my longest chapter yet, with the next chapter another interlude that should explain more. (Without all the comedy of Interlude 1, I should say.) **(Not if I can help it)** Either way, I should be releasing chapters more often now, so be prepared!

### **Behind the Scenes (in Pink!)**

**Right, so sorry for a lack of shenanigans in the behind the scenes, folks. Real life sucks acorns, and I haven't been in this doc for any more than editing. So I'm just going to leave [this clip](#) and be on my way.**

**Armored Security, huh? Would have sucked if he had failed as a smithy and had to, I dunno, wash dishes at a pub or something. Awkward...**