

A mass of shadow drifted over the ice of a frozen lake. Not a great cloud that loomed over it menacingly, but merely a dark mist that couldn't settle. It shifted, some parts of it rising up as if attempting to climb towards something higher, and other parts continuing to move outwards, trying to draw the whole mass towards the horizon. None of the mist seemed to agree on where to go though. It wasn't of one mind. It was fractured.

This was all that was left of the former King Sombra. A gaseous entity that could barely move itself, alone in a frozen wasteland. The lake was all ice, and where there wasn't ice, there was snow. Even looking upwards, all one would see would be more snow, falling from clouds high above them. Not a storm, or a blizzard. Just like Sombra himself, it was slow and quiet. Not doing it much. It was merely *there*.

In the haze of Sombra's consciousness, he tried to focus on his surroundings. He perceived the snow and the ice, but he couldn't feel any of it. He was without a sense of touch, but not without sight. Though his body was physically destroyed (again), he could recreate it. He was attempting to do so right now.

A little bit of shadow had formed a pair of green eyes, and they drifted at the forefront of the dark mist. He had no eyelids, so didn't blink. Instead, he just swiveled the reconstructed eyeballs around to look in all directions, desperately searching for something familiar.

One of his eyes began floating away in an eastern direction, carried by the chill winds. He pulled it back to himself. It was difficult to hold all his pieces together. Even more than it was before that light had hit him.

Don't think about it.

Sombra let out a kind of rumbling noise. It was meant to be a sigh, but it didn't sound like one. He hadn't any mouth to sigh with. Trying to correct that, he drew in some more of the shadow that and manifested some facsimile of one. He placed it just below the eyes. He considered trying to form the rest of his face now. Did he have the energy for it?

Only one way to find out.

The facial structure was difficult. Hard to recreate from memory. Sombra spent enough time in life staring into his mirror to know what he looked like, but he had a distinctive face. Getting the details right put extra strain on him. He didn't want to be an amorphous, vaguely pony-like ghost again. He wanted to be himself. And being himself took strength he simply didn't have.

The old king groaned, and it sounded like a groan this time. He made a muzzle, and skin, or at least something that looked like it. He wasn't *really* making a body, after all. Just the appearance of one. He would never have a body again. All he wanted was to put his own mind at ease.

When at last he had made something that could reasonably be passed as a face, it fell down. He laid his "head" on its side, resting on the ice. He winced, realising that he was still hornless, but sighed again in full knowledge that there was nothing he could do about it. Even this was too much. He was too weak.

Him. Weak. Sombra had despised the weak. He had lived by the code that the strong survived because they were fit to rule, and the weak lived only to serve and died alone and forgotten. That's how it had been when he ruled the Crystal Empire, and now it was happening to him. Now he was the weak one, and sure enough, he was dying alone.

A bitter chuckle escaped his mouth. He closed his eyes and remembered his life. All conquest and seeking power. Crystals and slaves. His single-minded obsession with seizing control and proving his philosophy to Equestria, the land that had cast him out. And those princesses that just *couldn't see that he was right*.

He *was* right. Sombra was certain of it. He was always right. He may have died trying to prove his worldview, but he *had* proved it. Just look at him now. If he were stronger then he would have beaten Celestia and Luna, and he would rule while they would be dead, or be living as his slaves.

He liked to think that he could have taken them as slaves. He had such great affection for them before. Especially dear Celestia... So noble. So selfless. So naive. She was a good pony, unlike him. He almost didn't want to take that innocence away from her. It was actually quite charming how certain she was of the good in everypony.

Lies, of course. Sombra did not believe foolishness. If ponies were so good, then the three tribes would never have been at war at all. It was threat from a supernatural force that brought them all together, not any notions that they really did all need to get along. Windigos fed off of hatred and conflict. The great anthem of peace and friendship they spouted wasn't good nature. It was just another weapon, only turned towards a different enemy.

He would have put an end to that. Sombra's experiments with the crystals could have done so much more. Ponies wouldn't have needed to lie to themselves if he had been allowed to finish. He would have rid the world of all that wished his kind harm. Ponies would not need to fear windigos. They wouldn't need to fear griffins, nor dragons, nor the beasts of Everfree, nor the other demons that tormented them, whether they lived high above in the cosmos or in the deepest depths of the ocean.

Can't rest forever. Need to keep moving.

The head lifted itself off of the ice. Sombra looked around him again. He couldn't tell which direction the Crystal Empire was. He could not even tell where he had landed. Alas, though he had walked this land himself, back when he was still a unicorn and not a shadowy monster, the terrain had changed in the years he had been away.

There was no way of knowing which way was the right way to go. All he could do was pick a direction, start moving, and hope that he stumbled across something soon. So that was what he did.

The shadow that made up his body now began drifting again. This time it moved as one, guided by a single force of will. Sombra chose to keep going in the direction he was already facing. The lake's shore was close, or at least it seemed like it was. That was the first thing he needed to do. He needed to get off the lake.

Sombra's head floated forwards, but the rest of the shadow actually went past him, so that he was no longer at the front of it. Instead, he drew himself up, making a kind of tower out of the dark material so that he could get a better view of his surroundings. He was like a hydra's head on the end of a long neck, only missing his brothers.

He looked down at himself as he floated off the lake. He remembered when all this was flesh and blood. Once, he had been real. Now he was a ghost. That was what Celestia and her sister had done to him. They beat him, and then they proved to him what he had always believed. Even Celestia, the most kind-hearted of them all, had the malice in her to do this to him.

Memories played back. The former unicorn remembered the first time he had come face to face with true power. All of his experiments could never have produced such a torture. The twisting agony, the way he had felt his very being broken down into its base components... and then he had been trapped in the ice.

There was a small mercy. The royal sisters had seen fit to at least put him to sleep. He had spent a millenium immobile in a dark crevice, but he hadn't been awake through it. The old king was glad for that. Such a prison would have driven him mad. He would have rather died than experience such a thing.

He was dying though, wasn't he? He looked at the edges of the cloud of darkness, and saw the energy bleeding off. It was gradual. A few little wisps at a time at best. It was going to get worse though. His imprisonment in the ice had served a secondary purpose that he had never realised until he was at the Empire's gates again. It stopped his condition from deteriorating faster.

The truth was, Sombra was dead the moment that rainbow had hit him. It was so deceptively inviting. Warm and colourful and promising a better future. To him though, it had been poison. His body was torn apart and dissolved into shadow, and now the shadow was fading, as shadow tended to do when exposed to light. It was a slow, pathetic end to his existence.

And the worst part was that he knew he couldn't stop it.

Perhaps before he'd have been able to. Immediately after breaking out of the ice, he had been just as strong as he was a thousand years ago, like nothing had changed. Yet even then he noticed the differences. The way he had to consciously remember to hold himself together as one mass. The way he had to expend effort to put on the appearance of a physical form. And the fact that no matter what he tried, he was still just a ghost.

Right before the end, he had been able to bring himself almost the whole way back. His body appeared just as it had in life. He was surprised at the time. He hadn't thought he could manage it. It wasn't his body, but at that moment, he'd had hope that he could make it be his again. There was that possibility, however slim, that he could have brought himself back to mortal life if only he could have taken the crystal heart back.

But he had failed. There was nothing but failure. And now he would never get that close again. His strength had been sapped already by recreating that body, and then he had lost even more when that body was blown apart.

Sombra held no false hopes. He was going to die out here.

His ghostly form continued to drift. The cold was no obstacle, so he paid it no mind. The real problem was how fast he was losing energy. Sure, right *now* he was a giant shadow monster, but he was shrinking all the time as he lost more and more of himself. Maybe it wouldn't be noticeable to somepony observing, but he could feel it. Unlike the atrocious weather, he was *very* aware of his rapidly decaying condition.

Don't think about it.

He began climbing a slope. The terrain was uneven here. He thought of his adventures in this strange land all those years ago. Was this where he had made camp and watched those eagles? Underneath all this snow, was he following that same winding trail? Was the lake he had been floating over before the same one he had filled his water canisters from once upon a time?

Unlikely. This region was huge. There were hundreds of small lakes and slopes around. He was just grasping at straws now.

Sombra snorted and pressed forwards. The snow was picking up out here, becoming more of a blizzard. Again, he couldn't feel the cold and the snow just phased through him, but it did make it harder to see, so it was still a problem. If only he had his horn still, he could clear a path, or at least light the way.

The long neck that was holding up Sombra's head collapsed back into the rest of the body, and the old king put his focus on reconstruction once again. With a swirl, a bit of the shadowy energy formed into a curved red horn atop his head. If he had lungs, Sombra might have gasped for breath after such a feat. Instead, he was just left with the feeling of temporary exhaustion and no way to relieve it.

Can't rest forever. Need to keep moving.

The ghostly horn lit up as he continued to push through the snowstorm. It felt familiar and comforting to use spells again. Even though his horn wasn't physically real, it could do the job. This was real magic. And what's more, magical power came from the soul, and this stuff that he was made of wasn't his soul. It was just his body turned into something wretched. His attempts to manipulate the shadow and his magic drew from different sources.

It was a grim thought that the only thing he could take comfort in was that using magic to light his way *wasn't* making him die faster.

Don't think about it.

Suddenly, a drop. Sombra came to a stop as the land did, and he found himself looking over the edge of a steep cliff. It wasn't that high a fall, but he was still caught off guard by it. He hadn't been paying attention to his surroundings. He hadn't watched his path. Stupid. Careless.

But I must go down.

It wasn't like falling would hurt him. There wasn't any problem in just spilling over the side and letting gravity do the work for him. Not like he had many alternatives right this—

Wait.

The former king almost had to do a double take as he looked out into the distance. Out there, what were those? What were those dark lines trailing across the ice? They were perfectly parallel, and looked like they were... Could it be?

Without a second thought, Sombra pushed himself over the edge of the cliff. Head first, he jumped out into the emptiness, a trail of shadow following behind him. To his slight annoyance, he didn't drop like a solid mass would. He fell just like he normally moved; by floating.

This did allow him to at least cover some distance though. Rather than plummeting and being forced to make his way across the ice to reach what he had seen, he was able to glide halfway to it, like a pegasus. Well, actually nothing like a pegasus, but that's what he was thinking of at the time.

As he touched down again, Sombra manifested a hoof. Not just a hoof, but a whole foreleg in fact. His right. Then he made his left as well. Then the hind legs. He wasn't sure why he was doing all this right now. He just really wanted to walk again.

Or run.

He galloped across the snowy wasteland as fast as he could. The shadowy cloud still billowed behind him as he ran. He hadn't used all of it, and there was still some clustered in the middle of him between the legs and his head.

Looking down at it for a second, Sombra shaped it into a torso. Just the outside this time though. No attempt was made to recreate internal organs to simulate a heartbeat or breathing. That had probably been the most exhausting part of all last time, and really, what was the point?

Almost there...

He reached the tracks. He had seen them before. They led right up to that station just outside the Crystal Empire. The purple unicorn and her friends, including that lizard, had used it to come here. He'd passed the station and these tracks on his way to the Empire. He'd had his fight with the white one near them. He knew exactly what they were, and what they were for.

Whichever direction it was going, sooner or a later a train was going to pass through here.

The dark unicorn (for he did now resemble a unicorn again), fell over and landed on his back, lying in the snow. He let out a slight chuckle, weary and tired, but relieved. Perhaps he wouldn't die alone after all. Maybe, if he was very lucky, and the train came by soon, he could stop them. And then he could die in the presence of ponies.

Granted, they would probably hate him if any of them recognised him, and they'd probably just be the same kind of worthless weaklings he hated as well, but it was something. He'd got his wish to

look like himself again. When he died, he would die looking like a unicorn. His other request was to simply not die alone. One of his other requests, at least. The third was for him to just not die at all, but that was expecting too much.

Sombra sat up again and inspected himself, searching for imperfections. Everything looked like how it was supposed to, on the outside at any rate. Except his flank. It was missing his cutie mark. How odd. And there was the remaining shadow clouds that were still attached to him. They were mostly flowing from the end of his mane and tail. He gave a wry smile as he realised it looked just like the ethereal manes of the princesses.

Still, that wasn't his look, and Sombra reigned them in and drew the darkness back into himself. Since his torso was just a hollow shell, he stored it away in there to let it fester.

There was a whistling in the distance. The dark unicorn twisted his head in the direction of the noise. The blizzard was still terrible, so he had to squint to make it out, but the train was definitely coming. It was a gaudy thing, colourful and loud, but he couldn't have been happier to see it. For once, the tyrant of the Crystal Empire grinned not with maliciousness or murderous intent, but actual joy.

He stood in the middle of the train tracks and planted his hooves. He had to stop this train. Horn pointed to the sky, he released a burst of magical fireworks so immense that not even the snowstorm could have obscured it. And once he'd shot one round of them, he didn't want to stop. He had to make sure they knew he was here. So he threw out some more.

Ahead of him, he could hear a grinding, screeching sound. The train was putting on its brakes, but it was still going way too fast to stop in time. However, it was stopping. They didn't intend to just go past him.

Graciously, Sombra stepped off the tracks and let the engine pass him by. Most of the carriages did too. But they were visibly slowing. A few hundred yards down the line, it finally came to a halt. In the middle of nowhere, the train sat motionless, waiting for him. He began trotting towards it, grin still plastered on his face.

One of the back carriages opened up, and he saw the figure of a pony emerge and begin approaching him too. Earth pony, it looked like. They were carrying a lantern in their teeth. He tried to up his pace to meet the train pony sooner, but staggered unexpectedly. He looked down, and saw that the end of his right forehoof had dissolved.

Not yet.

Scrunching his face up, he grunted with the strain as he used what little energy he had left to make another new hoof. He took another step forward and coughed, and wisps of shadow escaped from his mouth. He had minutes at best.

The earth pony with the lantern approached. It turned out to be a mare with a butter yellow coat and a white mane, who wore a little red cap on her head. She gave him a nervous smile and set down the lantern.

"You alright, stranger?" she asked.

Oh, Celestia. Talking. He was expected to talk. He didn't want to talk. He couldn't even speak confidently a thousand years ago when he actually knew all the intricacies of language. If he spoke now, it would probably sound archaic and weird.

"I..." he began, his voice a deep, throaty rumble. "I need... help..."

The mare looked concerned.

"What's wrong with ya? How long've you been out here in the cold?"

"I think... I think I'm dying..." Sombra answered.

Her eyes widened in alarm. At that moment, another forehoof dissolved, just a bit. The left one this time. The old king crumpled to the floor, landing on top of his foreleg and hiding it from the mare. He quickly focused on reforming it again as she began to panic.

"Oh! Uh...! Don't worry! I'll get you out of here!"

Running around to his side, she grabbed him with her hooves and hoisted him up again. She threw one around his neck and grabbed the lantern with her teeth again. Together, the two of them began slowly walking back towards the train.

"You'll be fine, mister," she assured him. "It's nice and warm inside the train! We're heading back to Equestria, and once we're out of here we can get you the help you need."

"Too late..." Sombra mumbled. "Already dead..."

"Don't talk nonsense. You'll be fine."

She soon took him back to the train and walked him up the steps into the empty back carriage. Inside, it was indeed a lot warmer, but it hardly mattered. Just as he didn't feel the cold, the warmth was just as meaningless to Sombra. This wasn't real skin. It didn't act like it. But it was lighter inside, and the chairs looked inviting at least.

"C'mon, sit down here."

The earth pony directed him to the nearest comfy looking seat. He didn't so much sit on it as he did sprawl across it with his forelegs dangling off the end.

"I'll go get help. You just rest."

The mare walked off, disappearing through the gangway connection into the next carriage. He closed his eyes. He had eyelids now, so he could do that. He needed to do that right now.

Is it time?

Yes, it seemed like it was time. This was the last place he ever expected his life to end, but there it was. The tomb of the great King Sombra: an empty train carriage.

For some reason, his mind drifted back to that camp he'd made in the wilderness long ago. The one where he'd seen the eagles. They were such majestic birds. He wasn't one for sentiment, but even he could appreciate the natural beauty in something like that. That was what the whole Crystal Empire was like, once...

"He's in here. Can you do anything for him?"

Sombra cracked an eye open, and saw the earth pony standing in the door between his carriage and the next. Surrounding her were several other mares. Familiar ones. He recognised the purple unicorn and the yellow pegasus and that pink thing. There were other indistinct blobs of colour too, but his eye was only partially open and his vision was obscured. Even despite everything, Sombra scowled.

"...Who is he?" asked Twilight Sparkle.

Suspicion was evident in her voice, though it was the cautious kind, not accusatory. He did look rather different without his royal garb. She probably couldn't be sure it was him.

"I don't know. Like I said, he was just standing around outside. He said he's dying."

Twilight sat down next to his chair.

"Hey."

Sombra was forced to fully open his eyes to acknowledge her. She gave him a reassuring smile.

"My name is Twilight Sparkle. I'm here to help. What's your name, mister?"

He let out a sigh. No point in identifying himself as Sombra now. He was into the last minutes of his life. Why spend them being subject to hatred and disgust?

"Star..."

He stopped himself. No. Even *that* old name would probably be recognised. History books and all.

"...Light. Starlight."

Twilight Sparkle continued to smile at him.

"Well, don't you worry, Starlight. We can help you. I'm not a healer, but I know a *few* spells for pain relief... And Fluttershy here is good at taking care of ponies."

The old king closed his eyes again.

"It doesn't hurt. It's just weakness."

He exhaled, and released another load of shadowy mist. Twilight stared as she saw it, and Sombra chuckled again.

"Too late for me. Should have been stronger..."

And those were his last words. The whole rest of his body collapsed into formless darkness again. It spread across the carriage, and the rest of the ponies all backed up out of there to avoid it. Twilight stood in the middle of it all, coughing and spluttering as she breathed in essence of Sombra. Tears welled up in her eyes, and she staggered out of there too.

The dark mist rolled across the floor for a while, but seemed to disperse on its own. No pony needed to open the windows or anything. It just went away of its own accord, vanishing in the light as shadow naturally did. Twilight remained leaning against a chair for a moment, trying to get her breath back. All her other friends were simply stunned.

"What was that, Twilight?" asked Pinkie Pie.

"I..." Twilight coughed again, loudly. "I don't know, Pinkie."

Rainbow Dash pushed through to get into the back carriage again. She stared at the seat where the dark unicorn had been lying not seconds ago. Now there was no trace of him.

"Was that guy... do you think that was...?"

No pony else said anything.

END.

Author's Note:

Another part of that "Secretverse" project I keep alluding to. So yes, this is technically in continuity with *House of Chaos*. Not that that has any bearing on the plot of either just yet, but you'll see where I'm going with all this in due time.

A big thanks to Mr. Spiffy and Garion for looking this over for me, and KitsuneRisu for the artwork.