

Draft - The Monster in the Twilight

-tropes-

TVtropes core code (obsolete)

->A pure sledgehammer of energy smashed Celestia to the ground as the bubble of magic around Twilight burst. Half-molten stones from the tower exploded away into the distance, the roof canted sideways until a thread of pure light lanced down from above, vaporizing the remaining tiles and enveloping Twilight Sparkle in a ball of solar plasma that began to grow.

->"Celestia": She's tapping the sun! What have I created?

"[[<http://www.fimfiction.net/story/78582/the-monster-in-the-twilight> The Monster in the Twilight]]" is a "WesternAnimation/MyLittlePonyFriendshipsMagic" action/adventure/alternative universe fanfic. The entrance exam for Princess Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns turns tragic when the young Twilight Sparkle experiences a disastrous magical surge, culminating in a runaway spell that nearly destroys Canterlot. To save the city, Celestia teleports the mortally-wounded young unicorn into the Everfree Forest, where [[spoiler: she is rescued and raised by Zecora, who has been sent from Zebria to stop Nightmare Moon when she returns.]]

A retelling of the first two episodes of the first season, where a desperate Princess Celestia is forced to take a great gamble in order to bring her sister, Luna back from the grip of Nightmare Moon. Where a feral Twilight Sparkle roams the Everfree Forest in mortal terror of her past, and a power that defies control. Where Princess Cadence and Queen Chrysalis clash, and only one will walk away. New heroes rise to take up the Elements of Harmony in an epic final clash inside the decaying Castle of the Royal Pony Sisters.

Will the Night last forever?

Warning: Many of the Tropes listed below are spoilers, and have not been tagged.

" Original story created: " Jan 21, 2013

!!This fanfic contains examples of:

* BrokenBird: Twilight has both mental and physical damage from the failed exam, making her terrified of everypony and not in control of her resulting power. She calls herself Monster now.

** LittleMissBadass: Don't back Monster into a corner. Just. Don't.

** EnfantTerrible: During her entry exam magical flare, she [[spoiler: tries to pull the sun down on Canterlot]] even though she is just a filly.

* DontYouDarePityMe: Trixie

* MyDeathsJustTheBeginning: The Changeling Queen, who gets a StrikeMeDownWithAllOfYourHatred moment when gloating to Monster. Bad idea.

- ** FaceDeathWithDignity: The Queen. Of course, she has a plan involving a SelfSacrificeScheme
- ** MadeOfIron: Not quite enough to survive the destruction of her hive. But close.
- ** NiceJobBreakingItHero: Monster breaking the changeling hive which was healing her.
- ** ThereIsNoKillLikeOverkill: When Monster turns her entire hive into [[spoiler: Nitrocellulose. Then ignites it. While inside. And surviving.]]
- ** ThePowerOfLove: Monster shows she can tap the hive's own power supply.
- * PropheciesAreAlwaysRight: If you predict the future by the stars, what happens when somebody moves them? [[spoiler: Making Zecora travel to Equestria ten years ahead of schedule.]]
- * ReminiscingAboutYourVictims: Nightmare does this to both Celestia and Luna frequently, to stir up anger and manipulate them.
- * StrikeMeDownWithAllOfYourHatred: Used by the Changeling Queen against Monster, and by Nightmare against Luna, Celestia, "and" Monster. Mixed results.
- ** HoistByHisOwnPetard: What happens to Nightmare when [[spoiler: she smites Trixie for impudence.]]
- ** NiceJobFixingItVillain: Nightmare can't take over Monster until her old body is destroyed, so she decides to [[spoiler: lead Monster to the Elements of Harmony, thinking that Monster will be unable to use them correctly and vaporize Luna. She's wrong.]]
- * SpeechImpediment: Twist lips and Monster has both brain damage and mouth damage.
- * YouCantFightFate: If Fate is determined by the movement of the stars, what happens when you hold them still?

-tropes-

The Monster in the Twilight (thanks to M1Garand for pointing me to Twilight the Terrible)

-short summary-

Twilight Sparkle's brilliant mind was gone, burned away by her own power when she nearly destroyed Canterlot ten years ago. Now there is a monster prowling the Everfree. And it is starting to remember what true power felt like.

-summary-

We all know the story of how the Princess' young student and five friends defeated Nightmare Moon, and brought Princess Luna back to our lands. But what if the tale were false? What if the young Twilight Sparkle on the event of her entrance exam had not been rescued by Princess Celestia, but instead lost her mind among the power of her youthful surge, and had to be sent away, far away before she could destroy all of Canterlot with her newfound power? Now the feral unicorn prowling the Everfree Forest only vaguely remembers her past, slipping away from constant terrifying attempts to capture her.

And she is beginning to remember what true power felt like.

-beginning-
-Chapter 1 -

[center]The Monster in the Twilight
[color=red]Sunburn[/color][[/center]
[hr]

Princess Celestia paced the quiet paths between buildings in her School for Gifted Unicorns, trying not to display the nervous tension that ate at her soul. Nearly a thousand years had passed since Luna had been corrupted by Nightmare and sent to exile in the moon. No, that was not right. Celestia had been the one to use the Elements on her own sister; she had picked them up and placed them around her own neck willingly, not knowing if their power would kill her little sister, or turn her to stone forever. It was her fault Luna had been corrupted; she had seen all the signs as Luna drifted farther and farther away, until it seemed as if they were on opposite sides of the planet, not simply in separate wings of the castle.

A thousand years of exile. The Prophecy was very clear, although celestial bodies did not mark time in the way of mortals. Every year at the Summer Sun Celebration she felt the fear of uncertainty. Every night when she raised the moon, she could feel the unbroken rage and hatred of the beast locked within. The tiny touch of her sister in that dark maelstrom could easily be her own imagination. Nightmare's return would spell the doom of not only Luna and Celestia, but every living being on the planet. All of her precious ponies would die in darkness and ice, while the rest of the world burned.

[i]This would not be.[/i]

Her gaze returned unbidden to the tower where her last dozen or so hopes for salvation were undergoing testing. The dragon's egg had been nearly impossible to obtain. Imprisoned within its unnaturally thick shell was a tiny life, much like her own sister was enfolded by the wings of Nightmare. It would take a powerful yet delicate touch, even stronger than her own, to open that shell, yet save the life within. A touch that could wield the Element of Magic. A touch that could save her sister.

Magic had rules; it lived and breathed. All of the Elements would fight fiercely to be with the one they represented, but Magic ruled them all. When she had raised their power against her sister, they had fought her, twisting and writhing in agony even as their power blasted forth, then withdrawing from her once the cruel deed was complete. She had returned to the throne room of the Castle of the Two Sisters many times over the centuries to beg their forgiveness, but they showed no response to her pleas. Five inert lumps of stone now sat on a platform awaiting

Luna's return; only the Element of Magic was missing. Without Magic, that is all the rest of the Elements would ever be, and the world would die in fire and ice.

They should have been done with the tests by now. A dozen little fillies and colts trying a task not even a Princess could accomplish, a dozen little broken hearts as they trudged out of the test knowing failure. Still, she would break a thousand times their number to save — No! That way led to madness and death. If this failed, she would be forced to fight the Nightmare with no reservations, no restrictions. No mercy. Her sister would be lost in the conflict, whether destroyed long ago or consumed in the battle, it would not matter. Celestia had commanded the unlimited power of the sun for centuries. As her last living action, she would draw the darkness into her very soul and fling herself into her beloved sun, locking the Nightmare away forever. The era of the Two Sisters would end, but the world would go on.

There would still be a Princess to raise the sun and moon. Mi Amore Cadenza was a soft thing, filled with love and compassion. She would care for all of her little ponies when their Princess of the Sun was gone.

The very fabric of the universe seemed to recoil beneath her as an explosion of rainbow light lit the entire sky. As if it were an echo, an incandescent blast of magical power poured out from the testing tower across the entire school. For a long moment, she could do nothing but stand on the path and look up at the tower in disbelief, the rain of broken glass shards around her seeming as harmless feathers. There was hope.

A second shattering wave of magic broke over her as a dragon burst from the roof of the tower, its green eyes whirling in confusion as the newborn mind behind them clawed for sentience.

[i]It's too much. Too fast. She'll burn herself out![/i]

Teleportation was out of the question with the blasts of power that emerged from the tower. Celestia flung herself forward into the air, breaking through the staggering waves of power horn-first. There was no time for subtlety. There was no time. The very stones of the tower wall burst into the air with her magical blow, allowing Celestia to pass through the hole and skid to a halt inside the testing room. A sphere of incandescent power floated near one end, the purple filly inside almost invisible against the blinding glare. Twilight Sparkle. She had been the most powerful of Celestia's prospects, nurtured with royal care, foalsat by her own niece, given every single book and lesson available. She was hope incarnate.

Celestia moved hesitantly forward, ignoring the supervising teachers floating in their own bubbles of magic behind her, ignoring the pair of cacti sitting silently in the parental observation area, ignoring everything in the world except the little filly who would be able to save her sister. The cascading waves of power emerging from the little filly crested across her chest with an intensity sufficient to be incredibly painful even to her alicorn body; the pain the little filly was in must have been excruciating. She must have been nearly at the end of the energy her little

body could hold; in just a few moments she would begin to overchannel, and that could be dangerous to unicorns many times her age. Celestia placed a gentle hoof on the filly's shoulder and gave a light tug to her spell. Most adolescent unicorn Flares were delicate things, disruptable with the lightest touch, but this bubble of power was like poking a rock. A second more forceful jab gave no better result, and Celestia felt the chill touch of doubt.

The already incandescent blaze of power from the filly doubled, then doubled again as tendrils of blackened indigo power lashed out, latching onto the supervising teachers and Celestia herself, drawing magic into themselves. Celestia lashed back in surprise, truncating the tendrils before they could drain the teachers dry, and teleporting them all to the safely reinforced waiting room below, even the transformed cacti. The giant dragon filling half of the room shrank, dwindling as the filly withdrew its unnatural power to fuel her unmanageable Flare. Without a source of power, in moments she would draw her power to insignificance and fall unconscious. It was dangerous, but less risky than—

A pure sledgehammer of energy smashed Celestia to the ground as the bubble of magic around Twilight burst. Half-molten stones from the tower exploded away into the distance, the roof canted sideways until a thread of pure light lanced down from above, vaporizing the remaining tiles and enveloping Twilight Sparkle in a ball of solar plasma that began to grow.

[i]She's tapping the sun! What have I created?[/i]

A rain of molten rock continued to fall as Celestia fought the small filly for control. The incandescent solar beam wavered, splashing around the top of the tower like some cosmic fire hose and blowing huge holes in the surrounding buildings. Twilight had the power, but Celestia had millennia of experience. Bit by painful bit, the Princess of the Sun wrested control back from Twilight, until in desperation the little filly reached for the blazing solar orb—

And pulled.

The mindless scream of pain from the little filly tore at her heart. There was no intelligence in that cry, only the insane screech of power burning out neurons, a young and promising mind vanishing in a cascade of power not even an alicorn could control. Even though the resulting gush of hot plasma that swept down onto the city was diffused and unfocused, she could hear panicked ponies throughout the city fleeing the streets for the temporary shelter of buildings. In minutes, the sun would fall upon the city and kill every living thing it touched except Celestia. She could feel her own power growing as the sun grew nearer, but not rapidly enough to counter the similarly growing power controlled by the screaming filly. It would be so easy to lunge forward, to drive her horn deep into the small chest and take her life as she had done to countless soldiers centuries ago. The equation was simple. One life against the life of a city. One dead child. She was almost dead already. The power she channeled burned at her flesh like parchment in a furnace, her mane flickered with fire and her tail was almost gone.

Celestia lunged forward, lowering her horn.

-End chapter 1 -

-Chapter 2 -

[center]The Monster in the Twilight

[color=brown]Hope[/color][[/center]

[hr]

Royal Guards cascaded out of the sky around the school, each darting about to check for wounded or dead. Princess Celestia stood alone on the half-molten stub of the tower, looking off into the distant Everfree Forest. Her actions had killed every pony in the tower, a dozen students and their parents blown to plasma or buried in molten rock below. They would be only the first to die if Nightmare were to return unchecked, but still their deaths bit deep holes within her immortal heart. Even then, she did not have the nerve to actually kill. In the fraction of a second it took her to lunge forward, the mindless husk who had once been her best hope for saving her sister had just [i]looked[/i] at her.

It was as if there was a tiny spark of life still trapped inside the monster, so much like her own sister trapped in the Nightmare. If she did not have the will to slay this one to save the city, how would she be able to kill her own sister to save the world? The lunge had turned into a spell, wrapping around the tiny burning creature and teleporting it deep within the Everfree Forest, where even the basic laws of magic were warped and distorted beyond any reason. Twilight would be jarred out of her Flare, her magic spell snuffed as a candle. And she would die. Alone and in agony, consumed by her magic. Just like Luna.

“There’s something under here! Get some guards to move these blocks! Hurry!”

A small cluster of guards were desperately digging at the collapsed wall of the tower annex, where the reinforced waiting room used to be until a jet of solar plasma blew off the roof in an avalanche of huge stones. The heavy building stones that were supposed to ensure their safety had undoubtedly crushed the children to a horrid red mess she had seen far too often over her uncounted years. Still, a sudden shout of joy lifted her dismal mood as a small sobbing voice was heard. Then another. She never even noticed herself moving until she appeared behind her loyal soldiers as they passed one small filly after another out of a hole in the wall. Only after all the small ones had been passed to safety, did parents begin to emerge. She could not help but match faces to names as they blinked in the warm sunshine. Every face took a small pebble off the weight crushing her heart, every cry of joy as a filly or colt was reunited with their parents gave her hope until there were only two sets of parents remaining, waiting in vain for children who would never again be seen alive.

“Son,” called out a guard into the dark hole. “Can you make it out of the hole?”

"My shield will collapse if I move," came a thready male reply that she recognized as Shining Armor, the last surviving child of Night Light and Twilight Velvet. "Did they all get out? I can't hold this much longer."

"Stand back," commanded Princess Celestia to the guards, who parted before her. The rubble glowed with her magical golden power, causing half-molten stones to separate like taffy and lift into the sky, vanishing with sharp popping noises. As one shifting stone after another vanished, a pink hemisphere of magic was revealed until finally the exhausted unicorn colt inside released his spell, sliding to the ground with a crashing thud.

"Shining Armor!" The piercing shriek of her niece corresponded with a pink thunderbolt of feathers who collided with the colt at a velocity that could not have been safe. Princess Mi Amore Cadenza clutched the semi-conscious colt with a fervent emotion that sent several of the nearby guards stumbling backwards. "Oh, Shiny! What happened? Where's Twilight?!"

"Twilight Sparkle is gone." Princess Celestia walked carefully to her Cadenza's side and bowed her head. "She Flared disastrously during her test. I've never seen anything like it before, she overpowered me and... drew upon the sun for power." Princess Cadenza gasped in horror as Celestia continued, "No pony can contain that amount of power and remain sane. I'm afraid it destroyed her mind and nearly killed her."

"Nearly?" The flicker of hope in that one word drove a dagger of despair into Celestia's heart.

"I transported her deep inside the Everfree Forest to break her hold on the sun, or we all would have died. There's nothing left of the filly you used to foalsit; she's gone from us now. Her mind was destroyed by the power she touched, ever so briefly in her panic. You have to let her go."

"NO!" The Princess of Love turned to Celestia with blazing eyes. "She's the most special unicorn I've ever known. I'm going after her."

"You can't bring her back, Mi Amore. If she is still alive by some chance, bringing her out of the Everfree could doom us all. She grabbed the [i]sun[i] away from me, don't you understand?! She's more dangerous than you could possibly imagine!"

"I'm going, and you're not stopping me." The emotion radiating away from Princess Cadenza was almost visible as she glared at her aunt.

"I'm going with you," rasped Shining Armor in a near growl while staggering to his hooves. The falling rubble had carved shallow grooves across his back and one cheek, while dried blood caked his blue mane across one eye, but the remaining eye locked to hers with an iron determination. "If Twily is hurt, she may lash out. My shield may be able to protect us."

She wanted to call out to her guards to restrain the young fools before they could pursue this insane path, but she restrained herself. Deep in her heart, she knew they were right. If she had the moral strength, she would go with them herself, to mourn over the body if Twilight Sparkle had died, or to drive a blade through her heart to end her torment if she was still a danger. Instead, she sent the remainder of her Royal Guard to protect them.

There was nothing left to do here. The rubble was silent as a tomb, with the only sounds being Twilight's parents sobbing along with the Lulamoon's. The little blue filly had not been inside Shining Armor's shield spell when the building collapsed. Both her body and the baby dragon were probably buried under tons of rock. The Princess released her iron control long enough for one tear to fall in memory of them both. And paused.

There was a spell being cast inside the rubble.

It was a weak and gentle tingle of power, felt through her hooves more than horn, almost as if the source were directly beside her. Celestia released her power gently, flowing across the broken stone blocks as a soft golden fog until it swirled and coalesced around the base of two huge stones that had fallen against each other. With the most delicate of magical touches, she unwound the invisibility spell, revealing a small blue filly wrapped almost all the way around the baby dragon, both of them tightly tucked into the shallow niche which had saved their lives.

"Trixie," she whispered with relief. "It's safe now. You can come out."

The trembling little filly shook her head vigorously, and whispered back without opening her eyes, "Spike and I are hiding."

"Don't you want to show your parents your new cutie mark?"

The little blue filly gasped, looking at the crescent moon and wand mark on her flank. "Spike! I got my cutie mark! Momma! Papa! Look at me!"

Princess Celestia felt a lurch in her chest at the crescent moon of sparkles on Trixie's flanks, so much like the moon adorning her own sister. "Trixie Lulamoon, you have a very special gift. Most adult unicorns could never cast an invisibility spell on themselves. But you need to learn to tame your abilities through focused study."

"I don't like to study," said Trixie with a defiant grin. "Uncle says I'm a natural."

[i]Even more like my sister than before.[/i]

"Well, then. How would you like to become my personal protégé at the school?"

"Can I keep Spike?" The little blue unicorn still had not released her vice-like hold on the baby

dragon, as if she were afraid he would vanish into thin air without physical contact.

“Most certainly.” Princess Celestia smiled down at her new student, trying not to cry.

Deep within the Everfree Forest, a small broken creature crawled under a bush and cried in her stead.

-End chapter 2 -

-Chapter 3 -

[center]The Monster in the Twilight

[color=olive]Plans[/color][[/center]

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Ever since the land of Zebrica was created by the spirits as a place for the zebra to live, there had been those who knew things nozebra had knowledge of, and spoke with things nozebra could see. They were called the Imetabiriwa, the Wise Ones. At first, they were shunned from the tribes while they traveled the paths and byways that linked the whole of the land together, their hooves passing over the ground as they chanted their chants. It was said an Imetabiriwa met on the road gave good luck to the traveler, and in a way that was true, for they were the ones whose hooves spoke to the earth spirits. The earth spirits would speak to the dangers, both monsters and predators, and warn them away from these paths, keeping them far from where the zebra trod. And so did the zebra prosper and multiply.

Over time, the suspicious tribes began to quarrel and fight. They resented the Imetabiriwa giving their wisdom to all the tribes without restraint, and they attempted to control their movements. The spirits of the land grew restless without the touch of their hooves, and discord spread to all that the land touched, from the sky to the sea. Monsters fed upon the zebra for generations as the tribes hoarded their wisdom from each other, and the zebra dwindled in numbers.

Finally an Imetabiriwa na Anga, a Wise One of the Sky, revealed herself to the zebra nations. She spoke of a great calamity foretold in the stars that would destroy the world. The zebra scoffed at her words, but the Imetabiriwa knew that she spoke truly, and they prepared. On the day she prophesied, the sun stopped in the sky, and the Angani Moto, the dreaded Sky Fire, fell upon the zebra and the land. Only the prayers and chants of thousands of Imetabiriwa drove the fiery wrath away, and that night the zebra nation took the shape it still holds today.

Deep in these plains of the Zebrican homeland, in a small area created by the intersection of the zebra tribes, there was a small pool of water. Nozebra drank of its bitter waters, for it was told to

be formed from the tears of the gods themselves, and to drink of it, even a drop, would doom the drinker to a cursed life. Even the small lizards and insects that occupied the sharp rocks around the pool avoided it, leaving a bubble of silence perfect for meditation.

In a circle drawn in the dust to one side of the pool, a zebra of indeterminate age rested in the moonlight to recover her strength. Chosen by the wise Imetabiriwa na Anga herself for a task that would occupy her entire life for the next ten rains, the responsibility of the world rested on her shoulders. The dreaded Angani Moto had been prophesied to return, and this time not all the prayers and chants of the Imetabiriwa would be able to stop it. Only one zebra could be sent to the far side of the world, to deal with the Evil One who had been vanquished to the moon by the powers of the Imetabiriwa a thousand rains ago.

The days drew near, and soon she would shed her name of Kikao the Wanderer forever, and trot among the spirits to the far end of the world. The rituals had begun a month ago. She had a single drop from the sacred pool placed in each eye so she could see what could not be seen, and been washed in the water of the Great River Ki so the spirits would be unable to harm her. For a full week, she had been buried in the soft earth of the sacred circle of stones so that the very earth would know her scent, and now she rested under the glow of the moon, so she would be able to understand her enemy, and draw power from her. Years of study under the greatest zebra minds had laid the groundwork for her destiny, but many years remained. Each of the Great Tribes would send their wisest to teach her for a full year, sharing ancient secrets that each tribe hoarded carefully from all others, for if she failed in her task, the world would die. If she succeeded, she could never return to her home, for her mind would hold secrets that all tribes would kill to possess, or to keep other tribes from possessing. She would truly then be Zecora, the Lonely One.

The light of the moon seemed to waver for a minute, and Kikao looked up with a frown. A ripple flickered through the sky ever so slowly, moving the stars to one side or another, several even bumping together and flaring up with light. She remained stationary, unmoving for a period of time as the stars slowly rotated and the moon flowed through the sky. "What is it you fear, my old friend? Do you see something that might bring your end?" The moon did not answer for her as it did for the Imetabiriwa na Anga, or at least she claimed. The image of the horned one looked troubled somehow, and Kikao sung the Song of Rising that the zebra always chanted at dusk and dawn to hurry the heavenly bodies along their way.

Jua wa siku,
Mwezi wa usiku,
Wakati wako umepita,
Hoja juu,
Kupitisha
Kupitisha [size=10](*)[/size]

The sounds of galloping hooves preceded the arrival of the elderly Imetabiriwa na Anga, as she

wheezed asthmatically upon skidding to a halt and knocking dust all over Kikao's coat.

"What do you think, are you a fool?
The stars have changed, now move it, mule!"

Kikao got up from her kneeling position and addressed her elder respectfully.

"What rush is there for me to go?
The moon is still up there, you know."

"Ow!" Kikao glared at the old zebra who waved her staff and threatened another whack about the ears to the impudent youngster. "Cow," she muttered.

"There is no TIME! Your fate has changed!
The stars themselves have rearranged!" The old zebra pointed into the sky away from the moon.

"There, you stupid mare!"

Kikao gasped in fright at the scrambled jumble that had once been an orderly cluster of predictions, now spitting and tossed about in a course that should have taken years to continue.

"My respected elder, you are entirely right
I must be gone on this very night
This disruption has my liver scared
Please tell me all is being prepared?"

The old zebra scoffed and spat into the dust.

"Yes, yes, you stupid fool
We are not plain and simple tools
Come, Zecora, if She will survive
By morning's light, you must arrive
The spirits of earth shall move you and me
Upon dawn, you will see the Everfree."

"You?" Kikao gazed at the old zebra, grown milky eyed with age but still filled with an energy she could never attain. "Too?"

The old zebra paused in her agitation, to place a dusty hoof upon Kikao's shoulder.

"Your name I give to you today
To wait would be a fools delay
I go with you to the spirit's door
But when you emerge, I shall be no more

A price will be paid for our urgent need
The spirits have spoken, and I agreed
My years here are gone, my wisdom spent
I give my soul gladly, once your spirit is sent.”

[center] * * * [/center]

In the middle of the Zebrikan nation, near the mountain range known as the Spine of the World, is a simple flat stone the size of a large corral. Generations of zebra Imetabiriwa have inscribed runes of great power into the deep bones of the earth there, to the point where not a single spot of stone remains untouched. A rush of zebras swarmed around it, gathering objects and boxes, books and scrolls of ancient lore, all of which had been considered not important enough to be inventoried in the years remaining before they would be needed.

They were needed now.

The center of the stone held a large cast-iron pot, the only iron item in the entire collection of items, which heaped high and threatened to cascade down the sides. Without time to consider the relative importance of things, everything that could be thought useful had been thrown together at once, and the newly named Zecora looked at the mess with only a minor twitch of irritability.

“We must be off now!” snapped the Imetabiriwa na Anga as she settled into the empty space remaining next to Zecora. “Have them start, you useless cow.”

Hundreds of Imetabiriwa began to dance and sing around the outside of the circle, calling upon the spirits of the earth and air in the ways that had been done for thousands of years. Slowly, the dust of the ground they kicked up began to settle across the heap of items, while the air grew thick and cloying. For hours they danced in the whirling dust, unable to see each other or anything else until dawn broke, and the rays of sunlight shone down onto an empty stone.

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(*) Sun of day, Moon of night, Your time has passed, move on, pass

-End chapter 3 -

-Chapter 4 -

[center]The Monster in the Twilight

[color=red]Hunted[/color][[/center]

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The Everfree Forest was alive.

Not in the sense of having lungs, a heart, and various squishy bits wrapped in a fragile shell, but alive with motion and life across miles of swamp, forest and grassland. Every inch of the Everfree either buzzed, or stung, or bit, or clawed in an unending fight for survival. Not all the life was small, either. Hydras lurked beneath the shallow pools, manticores made their dens among the thick forest scrub, snakes as large as houses slowly wound their way through the bracken, while star-beasts curled in their dens to sleep away the centuries. The outpouring of magical energies from millennia ago still echoed in the very soil and resonated across the waters, bringing forth creatures from the muck and mire that had only previously been seen in nightmares.

Still, within that primordial chaos of reddened claw and sharpened tooth, there was order. The Ursa drowsing in her den was not attacked by the other lesser beasts; the Hydra kept his distance from the Urlock^(*), and the Wyvern hers. Over the centuries, many researchers had plumbed the depths of the forest⁽¹⁾, seeking knowledge of its secrets, but they all came to the same conclusion after even a short period within its shifting borders: Leave.

Some researchers ignored the subtle suggestion, staying for years in the mysterious swamps and forests for whatever reason. Those who looked for their own advantage, seeking ways to exploit the resources and secrets of the magic-soaked land, seemed to vanish into thin air over time, leaving only slightly damp spots and abandoned camps. Those who truly wanted to understand heard a different voice calling to them, saying: Stay.

Biologists know the larger an organism grows, the slower it reacts to stimuli. Mosquitos can react before a slap is even halfway to them, while Mountainosaurs⁽²⁾ tend to go centuries between pain and reaction, to the great relief of miners who may not even realize their mistake. One would think a single being the size of the Everfree would be even slower to react to a foreign body intruding on its territory.

One would be wrong.

[center] * * * [/center]

The small group of Royal Guard trudging cautiously through the Everfree bore almost no resemblance to the shining white and grey ponies clad in golden armor who decorated the Canterlot castle in such great abundance. Not a single gleam of gold broke their carefully camouflaged bodies, clad universally in green and brown mottled armor that only vaguely resembled that of their normal jobs.

All of them were past that young and fearless age where no danger could be considered actually dangerous, and only other ponies ever got killed. Some of them passed it by themselves, some by traveling into the Everfree one too many times and seeing things they really should not have seen at that age.

Two ponies in particular stood out. The first one was far too pink, female, and winged to be a normal Royal Guard, even though she was clad in exactly the same embrace of mottled steel, marked in tiny places by repaired damages indicating potentially lethal blows turned aside. The tiara indicating her place as royalty was likewise missing, replaced by a neatly-fitting helm with cheek and nasal guards, and her delicate hooves encased in armor up to her shins. On her back was a small bag, containing a lumpy object that she touched gently on occasion, blinking back tears.

The second pony almost fit in. Although he was clad in the same mottled armor and what little showed of his shining white coat was smeared with a noxious coat of brown goop like the others, he was a unicorn much older than his companions in age. To his misfortune, he was far younger than them in other regards, which showed in the rather negligent way he regarded his dangerous surroundings and the sharp tone he took with the Princess.

“Princess Cadence, with all due respect, I think this charade has gone on far enough.” Baron Chrysanthemum spoke quietly, but still loudly enough that both Cadence and her husband gave him identical looks of irritation. “There is nothing at all out here to see but endless swamp and biting insects. Parliament has far too long tolerated your husband’s frivolous habit of monster hunting in this forest. You’ve been traveling out here every few months with a Royal Guard protective detail for over ten years now, and have yet to adequately inform us why. My committee oversees the budget for your guard, and I assure you—”

“Sergeant Chives,” said Shining Armor in a commanding tone that brooked no discussion. “Keep our guest out of my mane, and quiet.”

“Yessir.” The burly earth pony that stepped to the baron’s side was even bulkier than his counterparts, with heavier armor that seemed softer on the surface as if it were insulated, and with a magic suppressing horn-ring with throwing handles slung on each flank. Chives appeared to have the dangerous task of either attempting to fling his weapon over the horn of an opposing unicorn, thus rendering it magically helpless, or the extremely dangerous task of galloping right up to his prey to apply the ring directly. From his attitude, it appeared the sergeant was more than willing to apply his skills to either the fictional creature they supposedly were tracking, or any annoying nobleponies who were along for the trip.

The baron stewed in anger but held back his tongue. There would be plenty of time when they returned to Canterlot to properly respond to this slight. A hefty cut in the Royal Guard allowance for the young Princess and her wastrel husband would be a nice starting spot, followed by massive budget cuts in the ludicrous amount of bits used to create these ridiculous suits of armor. Admittedly they were comfortable, even though he had to take all the straps out to make this set fit.

It was only blind chance that he had heard of this latest hunting expedition at the same time one

of the 'Prince Consort's' minions had taken ill. The baron had been waiting in the chariots when they tromped out in the morning dew, determined to fight tooth and hoof to oversee another one of these boondoggle trips, and had been greatly surprised when the only response he had gotten out of Shining Armor was an extremely short glare. Half of the guards that accompanied them were not even on the ground, simply content to drift aimlessly around the Everfree sky like vultures over the ground-bound ponies, nearly invisible against the sky in their slate-grey uniforms.

Baron Chrysanthemum fell into reluctant step with the hefty guard, noticing his eyes were in constant motion, scanning the thick forest as if it were actually dangerous. With a light flick of his horn, he cast a quick spell while keeping an eye on the Princess and her Consort to make certain they would not notice.

"Sergeant Chives," he whispered. "I put a privacy spell on us, so we can talk without being overheard."

The guard gave him a quick glance during his scanning of the area. "I ain't supposed to talk."

"Well, you're supposed to keep me out of Shining Armor's mane, and if you won't talk to me, I'm going to talk to him again."

The guard thought on the idea for a while, finally giving a nod. "K. But only on my conditions. First, you obey the captain and what I say immediately, without question, no matter how dumb it may sound."

"I most certainly will not! I am the Baron of—"

The earth pony cut him off. "Look, Pops. You do everything the captain says, when he says it, and you might just get out of this thing alive if we find Monster. He says flatten, you better be so flat that earthworms will think you're short. You understand?"

His first instinctual response damped quickly as the baron took another look around at the guards. Not a single one of them was paying him the least bit of attention. Every single one was looking out into the woods as if they knew they were being watched by something that scared the horseshoes off them.

"I suppose. What else?"

"What else, sir. Right?"

The baron ground his teeth briefly. "I will not call you sir. I will go as far as to call you sergeant."

"That'll do. Second, you use that point on top of your head to cast anything but a stunning spell

on little Monster, and Captain Shining Armor will rip it off your head and stick it up your... Well, you won't like it. I don't care how scared you are, you put one scratch on Monster's hide and you're a dead pony, and I mean dead, gone, and I'll help bury what's left of the body."

The sinking feeling that Chives was telling the truth from experience began to soak in, and the baron looked out into the forest nervously as they walked. "Yes, Sergeant Chives."

"Thirdly, you screw up the captain's chance to catch Monster, and there will be no hole deep enough to hide you. There is one reason and one reason only we have eight unicorns including you in our merry little band, and only two earth ponies. If the captain needs help with his shield, it is your [i]job[/i] to pour as much power into his spell as you can."

Startled, the baron stared at Captain Shining Armor, who was whispering something to his wife at the head of the column. "But he can shield an entire [i]city[/i]. With his wife to back him up, nothing could break through his spell."

The guard chuckled grimly. "Your magic is severely warped out here. The other unicorns say it takes a [i]lot[/i] more effort to cast even simple spells in the Everfree without a lot of practice, and your recharge rate is out of whack. The Princess and Captain Shining Armor have that kind of practice and more. They've been doing this nearly twelve years, and so far they've gotten Monster inside his shield four times. Twice she tricked her way out, and twice she broke out. I was in one of the breakouts, and I can tell you, I never want to see that again. If they can get her down unconscious or stunned, I can put this baby on her horn, and Monster should turn into a kitty cat." He patted the fat magic suppression donut on his flank fondly. "Celestia tested and approved."

A voice inside his helmet crackled to life. "Captain, I might have something."

One extremely careful hour later, the group edged up onto a small ridge that overlooked a shallow pool and a sparkling stream. The slow circling of pegasi overhead had stopped, from the possibility their prey might spot them and escape before the slower ground-bound ponies could reach their destination.

"See anything?" whispered one of the guards before being hushed.

"I see her," whispered a guard with a set of binoculars. "Or at least her magic. Purple aura around roots by the riverba — There she goes!"

"Shield!" shouted Shining Armor as the pink hemisphere of his shield spell dropped around the area.

"I think I got the teleport damper up quick enough," panted Princess Cadence as she poured energy into her magic. "There's... Ow! She's loose! Ow!" The Princess tumbled to one side,

holding her head as purple sparks flew from her horn.

-CRACK-

The ear-splitting sound of air being cloven in twain by a powerful teleportation spell echoed around the inside of the nearly half-mile in diameter bubble, followed by a second explosive sound, and a third, until the ground beneath them shook with a rolling thunder of sequential detonations. Baron Chrysanthemum covered his ears with his hooves like the rest of the guards until the noise died away, leaving Shining Armor with a grim smile.

"No weak spots in the shield this time, sis. Cadence, it's your call. She's inside the shield somewhere. What now?"

"Now we wait. She's very frightened."

"[i]She's[/i] very frightened?" croaked Baron Chrysanthemum before he realized he was talking.

"Yes she is," said Princess Cadence levelly. "Now shush. She's close. That's good."

"We're trapped in here with it, and you say that's a [i]good[/i] thing?" Baron Chrysanthemum stared in amazement as the Princess reached into her bag and removed an object with her magic. "You're going to fight that thing with an ugly stuffed animal?"

"We're not going to fight her. We're going to talk with her."

The baron glanced nervously out into the forest. "So what do we do?"

"Wait." The Princess placed the stuffed animal down in front of her and began to hum a foal's lullaby.

"For how long?"

"Until she moves."

"How long is that going to take?"

"As long as it takes."

[center] * * * [/center]

Baron Chrysanthemum huddled with the rest of the guards, all studiously observing as much of the forest as possible. Few words had been spoken among them since Shining Armor had cast his protective shield around the immediate forested vicinity, mostly 'Do you see anything?' and

‘No. Do you?’ It took little effort to convert his privacy spell into an eavesdropping spell, and he quietly listened in on the conversation the Princess was having with her husband.

“Cadence, are you certain you’re going to be all right?”

“Shiny, honey. Don’t worry. I’m only a few months along with the foal, and this is as important to me as it is to you. Do you think we finally have a chance at breaking through to her?”

“Maybe. She didn’t seem to be trying the strength of my shield spell today. Perhaps—”

An anguished cry of pain roared out from the surrounding forest, a bellow straight from the soul of some giant beast in terrible agony. The ground shook as a giant tree as thick as a full-grown pony ripped itself from the earth and flew at the pink shield spell, gathering immense velocity in flight.

[size=24]-BONG-[/size]

The world seemed to tilt sideways for a moment as the shell flared a brilliant pink, tumbling all the guards along the ground like bowling pins. Shining Armor winced in pain as his four hooves plowed a path through the rugged sod, dragged by the immense power released on his shield.

“Captain! I see her!” one of the unicorn guards shouted while holding onto a tree for stability.

“By the pool!”

“I’ve got the shield,” he gasped. “Stun spells only! Volley fire!”

Baron Chrysanthemum stumbled to the ridge and aimed his horn at the pool in the bottom of the valley like the rest of the guards. The air was filled with stunning spells pounding downrange, and he fumbled with the awkward feeling that gripped his own unfamiliar spell before Sergeant Chives caught him in a long, flying tackle, screaming, “DOWN!”

The world turned white with splinters and smoke as the baron gasped for breath, half trapped under the hefty earth pony. His ears were ringing, and the tree he had just been using for cover was snapped off just a few feet above the ground by what appeared to have been a small forest moving at high speed.

“I told you to stay DOWN!” bellowed the sergeant, grabbing the baron by the mane and shoving his head back down just in time to miss a second shattering blast of magic-propelled trees and boulders that smashed into the ridge protecting their group, this time just a bit lower. “Monster likes to shoot twice!” he shouted with a grin.

“Princess down!”

"I'm all right!" came an almost immediate response from behind a pile of trees glowing bright blue with alicorn magic as they were thrown to one side. "Shiny!"

"I'm fine," shouted Shining Armor just a bit too loudly, pulling his hooves out of the holes they had dug when he was dragged across the clearing. "That was just a warning shot."

"She's going for an overload!" One of the guards pointed at a section of shield that had taken on a purple glow as rocks and trees began to streak across the sky, pounding into the rapidly weakening section while Shining Armor buckled to his knees in recoil.

"Suppression squad, down into the valley!" snapped Princess Cadence, suddenly looking much older. "Get those rings on her while she's concentrating. The rest of you, support Shining! We've got to keep the shield up!" The Princess leaned into her husband, actually crossing horns with him and pushing into her magic with an intensity that made the air shimmer with pink. The rest of the unicorn guards followed suit, pouring their own magic in turn into the shield spell. The baron tried to focus on adding his magic to the spell while Sergeant Chives and his counterpart galloped into the maelstrom of smoke that just moments ago was a peaceful valley. The incandescent glare from the overstressed shield flared abruptly as a second stentorian bellow of rage sounded from inside the valley, and then an almost soundless explosion of light threw all of them through the air.

The Baron's ears had quit ringing by the time he staggered to his hooves, picking his way out of a pile of shattered trees with the rest of the unicorn guards. Princess Cadence had already taken to the air after a momentary hesitation between flying down into the smoke-filled valley and staying with her husband, her mind apparently made up by the whip-crack of a teleportation spell in the distance.

"She's gone. Again." The Princess stumbled on landing and flung herself into Shining Armor's embrace with a sob. "I lost her!"

The baron shivered in fear as he limped past shattered rocks and trees to look down into the once peaceful valley. A hole that could have held several buildings in Canterlot had been casually dug out of the backslope of the hillside opposite them, cut off in a razor-sharp curve from where it intersected with Shining Armor's shield. At the bottom of the hole, water hissed into steam as it dripped onto the red-hot rocks that littered the ground. Occasionally one would explode with the temperature change, making sharp little cracking noises that spat rocky fragments around the bottom of the hole. Not a single intact tree remained within the area covered by the shield spell, only snapped trunks and discarded root balls, including a forest giant that would have been old in his grandparent's days, smashed into a half-dozen chunks and still smoldering.

"What kind of monster could do all this?" asked Baron Chrysanthemum, coughing a little from the smoke.

Shining Armor loomed up beside him, looking down into the destroyed valley without a single tear forming in his eyes. “That [i]monster[/i] is my sister.”

[hr]

(*) You don’t want to know.

(1) A notable number of which wound up plumbing the depths of the forest creatures’ digestive systems.

(2) Only slightly different from real mountains.

-End chapter 4 - (G)

-Chapter 5- published 1/29/13

[center]The Monster in the Twilight

[color=orange]Loyalty[/color][[/center]

[hr]

“Apple Bloom! Where’re ya headed?” The call of the young farmer in the general direction of her little sister echoed across the whole of the farm, causing the little yellow filly to turn around on the road and huff in exasperation.

“Just over to a friend’s house to do homework!” she called back. “I’ll be back by supper!”

“You do that. Big Mac and I are gonna be working the south field until late. Got quite a crop setting on blossoms, and we wanna make sure there aint no bugs in ‘em. You be careful now, and stay away from the Everfree. Someponies reported seeing the monster in there just last week, and I don’t want ya anywhere near it, ya hear?”

“I hear ya, sis!” The little filly trotted away down the road, continuing only until she was out of sight of her sister, before doubling back along a thinly-trod path. Sweet Apple Acres actually butted up against the Everfree Forest along the Zapapple tree line, but this early in the season they were still skeletally bare and somewhat creepy. As she approached the forest, she began to dart from bush to bush, finally slipping up to a familiar evergreen bush and tunneling underneath the soft branches into the dark interior.

“Monster? Are you in here?” It had been over a week since Apple Bloom had seen Monster, about the time the Royal Guard came through Ponyville on one of their periodic searches of the Everfree. No pony ever said it out loud, but dozens of strangely armored pegasi and unicorns led by a Princess was a terrifying sight, even if they were supposedly just looking for dangerous monsters in the Everfree. Apple Bloom knew better. Whatever monsters there were in the dark forest seemed even more afraid of ponies than ponies were afraid of them. Even the hydras in the swamp fled in terror when they spotted anything with hooves. She was afraid she knew who the Royal Guard were really hunting: Monster.

The little filly's encounter with the frightened creature started last fall when she had fallen asleep on top of a perfectly good pile of leaves and lost her backpack. The next day when she returned to the tree to search for it, she found it sitting on top of the pile, all neat and clean with the homework inside completed and the apple fritter she had been saving for later gone. To a little filly, this was a dream come true; just leave homework under the tree and the next day it was all done, perfectly, with all of the problems worked out in excruciating detail. After a week, she had picked up her homework, finding it undone with a little notation in the margin labeled 'too easy.'

"The homework monster needs fed," she had declared, bringing back not only her homework the next day, but two books from the school library. She had been rewarded by a completed homework page and a small note.

[quote] more please[/quote]

Nothing dangerous would ever say 'please,' she thought, checking out two more books from the library.

Eventually by the time winter was nearly over, she had nearly exhausted the school library and had resorted to checking out books at the town library. Miss Dewey was always nice as could be about it, but she felt a little nervous about lugging books around with titles like [i]Pre-Classical Unicorns and Their Accomplishments[/i] or [i]Seventy Simple Spells for Simpletons[/i]^(*). Her routine had been simple: Drop off the book bag with uncompleted homework and a book after school before heading out to go crusading with her friends, and pick up the completed homework and the bag now filled with yesterday's books on the way to school. The ease of the procedure made her sloppy, and Miss Cheerilee had suddenly gotten suspicious when she turned in the answer to 'What is the sum of the numbers 1 through 6' as $S = (n/2)(A + T) = (6/2)(1+6) = (3)(7) = 21$.

Because there was not enough time to recopy her homework and add a few mistakes in the morning before school, even the simple logic of young students determined she needed to pick it up in the evening, when it was still 'fresh.' So that evening, with a bag full of apple fritters, she sat her homework and book bag in the customary spot, and vanished into a nearby large bush to observe. She had every intention of inviting Scootaloo and Sweetie Belle, if only Scoots could stay quiet and Sweetie Belle could survive returning home covered in twigs. If it had worked, she had plans of setting up a real concealed blind with observation peepholes and camouflage netting, and possibly a muzzle for Scootaloo.

The first hour passed without any observations of homework monsters of any type. She passed the time scribbling plans for a blind and nibbling on fritters.

The second hour passed much the same, but it was getting late, and she was strangely enough

out of fritters despite being quite certain she had packed enough, so she decided to pick up her bag and head home. There had been a noise when she picked up her bag, a small one that could have been easily overlooked by anybody but a small nervous filly in a rapidly darkening wood. It sounded a little like a whine, as if a small puppy were begging at the table. It grew in strength as she began to carry the book bag away, and on a whim, she turned around and returned, listening to the whine grow softer, like a game of Hot and Cold. The growing darkness only amplified her terror when she finally realized the whining noise was coming from the [i]very bush she had been hiding in.[/i]

Five minutes later, she was at home, upstairs, and under the covers.

The next day Cheerilee was relieved that her initial suspicions of cheating were unfounded. The homework Apple Bloom turned in was so bad, it could have been copied off of Scootaloo⁽¹⁾.

It took three more days before Apple Bloom worked up the nerve to return to the homework spot, this time poking the bush with a long stick before setting out her 'monster bait' and settling into the bush to wait. She had brought a book to read, and a couple fritters to nibble on, but was too nervous to do either. Instead she simply shivered in the cold, trying to listen for every rustle and creak in the very rustley and creaky forest.

At first when the book she was holding twitched, she paid it no attention. The shivers from the snow and nerves made it feel like a boulder in her hooves anyway. It could have just been a twitch. Then came the very quiet and terrified sounding voice. "Buk?"

She almost ran again, except the voice sounded even more afraid than she was. Ever so slowly, she placed the book on the dirt, and pushed it in the direction of the voice. "Monster?" she whispered. "Would you like the book?"

With a purple blur, the book zipped into the darkness and the sounds of fleeing hooves vanished into the dark forest. When she finally got up the nerve to look, she found the book Monster had brought back sitting in the slightly-warm depression under her bush where the creature must have been sitting, watching her every move since she had arrived.

Over the next few months, she spent every hour she could find sequestered away in the bush, slowly gaining the trust of Monster. Her friends in the Cutie Mark Crusaders complained that she spent so much time 'studying' they did not have enough time for any good cutie mark gaining activities. It hurt to lie to them, but ever since she had discovered Monster, she knew the frightened creature needed the companionship she could provide more than anything else in the world.

A faint rustling in the bushes made her heart skip a beat. After such a long absence, Monster was always skittish and twitchy. It took long minutes before the tip of a slightly glowing horn poked out of the darkness under the bush. She always had a glow about the battered

protuberance, even if it was firefly-like and just at the needle-sharp tip. Although a nearly uniform brilliant white, the large horn as a whole had a somewhat mottled appearance, as if chips and needle-like splinters of it had been fractured away and regrown over the course of years of abuse. The top of her head slowly emerged next, nearly covered in snow-white hairs with just the slightest tinges of purple in a color gradient that grew in darkness as her patchy coat continued down to nearly completely purple at the muzzle and neck.

The eyes were what Apple Bloom had still not gotten used to. Her pupils were nearly completely black from the shadows she preferred to hide inside, with only the smallest purple ring around their outside edge. Neither eye tracked together, and they never seemed to be looking directly at Apple Bloom, but somehow she knew every single motion she made was being tracked and analyzed in the likely event Monster thought she needed to flee.

"It's okay," whispered Apple Bloom. "You're safe here."

Ever so slowly the rest of the unicorn emerged into the dim light under the bush. Large patches of dark colors across her coat appeared at first glance to be mud or some forest plants rubbed into her flank in dirty smears of ochre, vermillion and brown, but on closer examination they were actually areas where her coat had been burned away, grown back in patches of ugly scar tissue. Almost lost behind the scars on her flank was the tattered remains of a cutie mark, vaguely resembling one glaring red star like a blotch of blood surrounded by five small white stars.

What little remained of her tail was but a stub with a few loose hairs clinging to it, grown much longer than her patchy mane. From the top of her head all the way down her neck, what parts of her mane remained were neatly shorn down nearly flush with her coat. It was this basic grooming that first made Apple Bloom eerily aware of a fact she did not like to think about: Monster had another friend.

The creature crawled flat against the ground up to the little filly and nosed her saddlebag gently with a small, hopeful grunt. Her little dark nose twitched, and a faint line of drool leaked out from between her jaws. "Eritterr," she grunted, one eye looking up in the general direction of Apple Bloom.

"What do we say?" Apple Bloom asked gently, removing her saddlebags and reaching inside.

"Owww." The short stub of a tail beat vigorously against the forest litter and her rear end waved back and forth.

"The word is not 'Now.' The word is 'Please.'" Apple Bloom frowned slightly at the adult-sized pony looming over her as she pulled out the warm apple fritter. "You know you can say it. You're not an animal."

“Haaaam.” The stub of a tail quit thumping against the ground and the big purple eyes grew mournful. “Haaam toooo. Haaammnaauulll.”

“Animals don’t read.” Apple Bloom pulled a book out of her bag and squinted at the big words in the title as if that would make them easier to pronounce. “Canterlot: Equestria’s Crown Jewel of Culture. I think that means they’ve got a lot of gems there. But if you’re just an animal, I guess I’ll have to take it back to the library.”

thump The short, stubby tail thumped against the ground once, as the creature tried again to use big purple eyes on Apple Bloom, which would have worked better if she had been able to use them both at the same time on the same target. *thump* *thump* *thump*

“Phhhhlzzzzeeee.”

“The book or the fritter?” Apple Bloom grinned as the creature’s tail thumped energetically against the ground.

“Bofff.” The little filly grinned as Monster grabbed the offered fritter, pausing instead of jamming the whole thing into her mouth to gently take a delicate, most definitely non-animal bite. The warm, sugary goodness overwhelmed what little control the scarred unicorn had, and the rest of the fritter vanished in three more quick bites. A purple aura surrounded the book and gently tugged, unable to make it move because of a little yellow hoof still holding it to the ground.

“You know the rule.”

Monster tugged gently again before sighing and pulling another book out of the shadows. “Raaayhhhidde.”

“Trade. Right. I can’t afford to buy you nearly as many books as you read; I’m just a little filly.” Monster just grunted in response, swapping books by almost dropping the old book at her hooves and clutching the new book to her chest with a deep, appreciative sniff.

“Buks,” declared Monster gleefully. “Buks, buks, buks!”

Apple Bloom giggled at the grinning unicorn. “I hope you’re happy. I’ve got story problems for homework today.”

“Buks fuhhhst,” said Monster firmly, sitting the book down on the ground and settling in beside Apple Bloom. “Buks!” She stared at the little filly, who remained sitting quietly and not moving until Monster suddenly blurted out, “Anks. Ank ooouuu.”

“You’re welcome. All right, I’ll read with you first.” The little filly settled down next to the unicorn and nodded. “Go ahead.” A delicate violet aura surrounded the front cover of the book and

opened it up to a beautiful print of the city of Canterlot, spread out in all its tower-covered and waterfall-strewn glory.

“Canterlot,” read Apple Bloom carefully. “The capital of Equestria and the hub of the civilized world. In these maj-es-tek towers live the cream of Equestrian so-sigh-et-ee, dead-ek-ate-ed to — What’s wrong?” The unicorn had frozen in fear, looking at the book as if it were a venomous snake⁽²⁾.

“Don’t be afraid,” whispered Apple Bloom, gently touching her on the shoulder. “It’s just a book. I’ll close it for—” One scarred purple hoof darted out and stopped the filly before she could even touch the cover. The unicorn’s breath was coming in short pants and both eyes were locked onto a particular image in the book. Slowly she moved her hoof over to the book and poked the picture, softly as if she expected the image to become real under her touch. Her body was tense as a board and the hoof gently trembled as she traced the horn and wings of Princess Celestia, caught in flight over the city.

“That’s Princess Celestia,” whispered Apple Bloom. “Do you know her?”

“Hurt.” The word from Monster was almost perfectly clear, without a hint of her speech impediment but laced throughout with unbearable pain. “Kill.”

There was a slight sound of rustling leaves outside of their hiding place.

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(*) With less than a year to go before retirement, Miss Dewey could not care less what books anypony checked out of the library.

(1) It was.

(2) Not entirely true. A snake of any variety would have been vaporized by this point.

-End chapter 5-

-Chapter 6-

[center]The Monster in the Twilight

[color=orange]Generosity[/color][[/center]

[hr]

“It ain’t right,” complained Scootaloo, bouncing a ball idly against the wall of the tree clubhouse. “She’s gone off somewhere to do homework [i]again[/i]. Why can’t she ever do homework with us?”

“You do homework?” asked Sweetie Belle with a tilt to her head as she tried to imagine the words ‘study’ and ‘Scootaloo’ in the same sentence.

“Well, when I can. I’m busy a lot, what with helping out at the shop and crusading with my friends.” Scootaloo gave up on the ball and trotted over to the clubhouse balcony to look out across Sweet Apple Acres and think out loud. “So who does she do homework with, anyway?”

“I don’t know.” Sweetie Belle joined her fellow crusader on the balcony. “Who do you think? Diamond Tiara?”

“Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon hate our guts.”

“Twist?”

“No, Twist’s sister lives over her candy shop. Apple Bloom would smell like candy when she got back from doing homework. You don’t think the reason she’s so secretive is because she’s over at a—” Scootaloo shuddered “—colt’s house, do you?”

“You mean like Featherweight? He’s not so bad, for a colt. But his whole house smells like photo developing fluid. Apple Bloom smells more like dirt and plants when she gets back from homeworking.” It was Sweetie Belle’s turn to shudder. “Rarity would dunk me in the tub and scrub me for hours if I came home like that.”

[center] * * * [/center]

Scootaloo gave Sweetie Belle a ride back to the Carousel Boutique, but without the additional presence of Apple Bloom, the extra speed she was able to squeeze out of the scooter just did not seem worth it. There was still an hour before she was supposed to be back at the machine shop to help Aunt Quick Fix clean up the tools and things before dinner. It did not leave much time for cutie mark searching, but plenty of time to travel out to Sweet Apple Acres to talk to Apple Bloom. She was looking forward to using her favorite path and setting a new solo speed record.

Five minutes later as she pulled herself out of a thorny bush by the roadside, all thoughts of setting a new speed record were gone from her mind. Setting broken bones, maybe. A quick inventory of limbs and pains showed nothing missing or bent in the wrong direction, except the back wheel of her scooter was even more twisted than before.

[i]That’ll cut into my top speed something terrible. It’s a good thing I’ve been saving up my bits from what Auntie pays me for cleaning up the machine shop. What’s this? [/i]

A number of small hoofprints on what appeared to be a path to the side of the road caught her interest. Scootaloo carefully placed her hoof alongside one the other small hoofprints to find the prints had a little nick on the side just like where Apple Bloom had nicked her hoof falling off the wagon last week. After brief consideration of the small path that led in the direction of the

Everfree Forest, the little filly shook her head.

“Apple Bloom? What are you doing in the forest?” she whispered to herself, looking down the path before slinging the scooter over her shoulder and trotting confidently in pursuit of her friend.

[center] * * * [/center]

The trail seemed to have been trod a great number of times by tiny little hooves or Scootaloo would never have been able to follow it. Occasionally in damp spots along the trail she would stop and try one of the techniques of tracking she had learned from the ‘Action, Danger Ranger’ series of books. Stop. Squint at the tracks. Declare something about them. So far she determined that Apple Bloom liked to jump in mud puddles just like she did. There was a certain feeling about passing through the border of the Everfree Forest, a light tickle about the wings that gave warning about landing on any clouds to experienced pegasi, but to Scootaloo it just felt like an itch.

Eventually the well-trod trail ended, not in a clearing or some interesting place, but a bush. A plain, ordinary, green bush. Scootaloo scratched her head and kicked over a nearby clump of blown leaves. This was a waste of time. A light nibble proved the theory that it was an ice-cream bush false, and a quick trip around the bush showed no other trails.

[i]Only one way to find out if she’s in there.[/i]

Scootaloo shoved her head inside the bush and yelled, “Hey AppleBlooOOOHHHMYYYAARRRHGG!!!!” With a piercing scream, the filly launched backwards out of the bush, fleeing up the path in a panic-driven gallop that did not touch the ground for yards at a time. An explosive bang from behind accelerated her gait to dangerous levels, even for Scootaloo. Wings buzzing faster than she had ever flapped before, her hooves spraying dirt in all directions, she barely avoided colliding with trees and rocks until she fell out onto the main road, far away in a scramble of legs, panting so hard the world seemed to be fading in and out.

When she had finally caught her breath and gotten a tentative grip on her panic, her eyes wanted to go in three directions. She could flee to Sweet Apple Acres and get Big Macintosh to go rescue Apple Bloom from... having a book read to her by a monster. Suddenly, none of the other options sounded sensible either.

It was a monster, there was no doubt of that. Looking like it had been patched together from the bodies of dead ponies and given life by a crazed unicorn in a lightning storm, it certainly fit the ideal model of one. All it needed was to stagger down the main street of Ponyville, chasing little fillies to gobble up, and it would be perfect.

She was not going to volunteer to be the chased filly.

The problem with that theory was the book. Reading a book while curled up on the ground was most definitely not monster behavior. None of the stories she had ever read had a monster in them who tortured their victims by [i]reading[/i] to them, although it did sound a little bit scary, in particular if there was a test at the end. Then again, monsters had to have something to do when they were not stumbling through town, groaning and stomping in pursuit of little foals to gobble up. Maybe they had their own towns, and sent their own children to creepy schools where they learned to be properly scary monsters too. **[size=10](*)[/size]** She shuddered at the thought of big monsters giving homework to little monsters; it was bad enough when Miss Cheerilee gave out homework.

Scootaloo thought on the dilemma. This was starting to suspiciously resemble a story problem, except school never was interesting enough to have a problem like this. She could picture Miss Cheerilee at the front of the classroom.

[i]Class, we are going to have a pop quiz. While traveling through a forest that you were not supposed to be in, you discover a horrible, scary monster reading a book with one of your friends. Do you:

- A) Run away, screaming.
- B) Scream, and run away.
- C) Run away without screaming, saving your strength for running.
- D) Freeze in terror. [/i]

She knew either A or B was the correct answer, but she always guessed wrong on tests. With this test, she would not get her usual F or D, but an E.A.T.E.N.

Another thought sprang to mind: What if it was a cookbook?! The monster could have been sitting down with Apple Bloom, trying to figure out just how to properly cook her.

Or it could have been a puzzle book, and she was making Apple Bloom solve a puzzle before she was released.

Or it could have been an appointment book, if the monster was really busy and needed to find a place on its schedule. 'Consume small filly. Monday, 3:15-4:20'

The second problem was Apple Bloom, who had been lying quietly next to the monster, looking in the book, which was the first problem. If the problems started to resemble the Commutative Property, she was going to scream.

But then again, that might explain Apple Bloom's sudden scholastic talents. Maybe instead of [i]being[/i] captured by the monster, maybe she had [i]captured[/i] the monster and was forcing it to do her homework. The sheer brilliance of the idea blinded her momentarily, until a second

blinding flash of inspiration hit.

[i]She was keeping her captive homework-writing monster a secret![/i]

This was the ultimate betrayal of friendship. No greater criminal conspiracy could be considered. There was only one thing to do. Only one pony she could trust with this earth-shattering news.

Scootaloo put her scooter down on the road and began to drive at a suicidal pace.

In the small clearing inside the Everfree Forest, there lay half of a picture book sliced in two as if by some impossibly sharp razor. And on the pages remaining, small drops of blood began to appear, ever so slowly.

[hr]

(*) Possibly a school for ghouls in a land of perpetual

[url=<http://www.fimfiction.net/story/58325/the-nightmare-before-night>]Nightmare Night[/url].

-End chapter 6-

-Chapter 7-

[center]The Monster in the Twilight

[color=red]Honesty[/color][[/center]

[hr]

“Welcome to Carousel Boutique, where everything is — Oh! Hello, Scootaloo.”

“No time to talk,” gasped the little pegasus filly, darting past Rarity and up the stairs. “Crusader business.”

“Scootaloo,” called Rarity with a note of concern. “Sweetie Belle is doing her homework right now before bedtime.”

“Come on!” shouted Scootaloo as she darted down the stairs, her little unicorn friend close

behind. “Apple Bloom. Caught. Homework. Hurry!” They had their helmets on before reaching the door, and the scooter and wagon were blasting down the road at a blistering pace before Rarity could even get to her boutique door to call out. Slightly disappointed, she returned to her work. They were a good little bunch of fillies and should be home before bedtime, although she could not remember the last time Scootaloo looked this eager to do homework.

[center] * * * [/center]

What most ponies called Timber Wolves were actually less wolf, and more timber. Not all of the trees in the Everfree were ‘nice’ trees; some of them drew magic from deep underground reservoirs of hatred and bitter pain. Sometimes the magic killed the tree and froze the dead body into a rictus of agony; sometimes the tree was able to concentrate the magic in a limb and drop it. The creature that resulted when these limbs gathered together into one location was an amalgam of the forest magic itself, little mobile knots of hatred on four limbs with fangs and claws. They acted like wolves because they ‘thought’ they were wolves, gathering together in cords to hunt whatever creature crossed their path with generalized indifference to their ability to actually digest their prey. There was a certain joy they took in pursuit, perhaps feeding off the fear of the frightened creatures while howling through the forest.

Monster was afraid.

The hammering spike of raw terror that surged through her body before she teleported away was like the scent of a fine apéritif, wafting through the trees to the Timber Wolves in their lairs scattered throughout the forest. Had Shining Armor and Princess Cadence returned to any of the sites where they had encountered Monster recently, they would have found dozens of the fierce beasts sniffing around. The scent of fear and destruction drew them together for tens of miles. In some small section of their magical intelligence, they knew to avoid Monster when she lurked through the forest. Even the clopping of pony hooves caused them to cringe back into the scrub, the sight of purple drove them into panic-filled flight. But after she was gone...

[center] * * * [/center]

“Apple Bloom!” Scootaloo called out carefully as she approached the site of her recent encounter with the terrifying monster. Something appeared to have taken an enormous bite out of one side of the bush, as if a monster had simply eaten foliage and soil together without chewing. “Apple Bloom, are you in there?”

“What?” The little yellow filly poked her nose out of the bush before bounding over to her friends. “What are you two doing out here? Don’t you know it’s dangerous to be in the Everfree Forest?”

Sweetie Belle thought about that for a moment. “But you’re in the Everfree Forest.”

Scotaloo gasped and pointed. “Apple Bloom, what happened to your ear?” A ragged brown line of dried blood adorned the right side of the filly’s face, and the tip of that ear appeared ever so slightly shorter.

“I dunno. I musta cut it on something when Monster ran away. [i]Somepony[i] scared the crabapples out of her.” Apple Bloom glared at the orange pegasus filly, who was caught between indignant and embarrassed.

“Wait a minute.” Sweetie Belle looked around the clearing and backed up a few steps in the direction of the path. “There’s a monster here?”

With a sigh, Apple Bloom filled her friends in on her ‘other’ friend. Scotaloo seemed more interested in the homework end of the discussion while Sweetie Belle was simply aghast, or agasp, or something starting with an ‘a’ that her sister had once used to describe breathing really heavy. When Apple Bloom finished, she promptly added, “And we’re going to go tell somepony about this, right now!”

“What about the homework?” asked Scotaloo, seeing hours of worthwhile cutie mark crusading spiraling down the drain and replaced by desktop drudgery.

“Well, I ain’t going,” said Apple Bloom, plunking her rump down and crossing her forelegs. “Monster ain’t dangerous—” She glanced at the crater that had replaced half of the bush “—much. She’s just afraid. We go tell big ponies about her, and they’ll come a rushing out here and scare her even more.”

“You gotta come with us, Apple Bloom. You’re the one who knows Monster. If she’s a good monster like you say, they’ll believe you. We’ll all be there to back you up.”

“All of us?” asked Scotaloo. “I’ve got to get back to the shop to help clean up and—”

“No! She’s scared, and I’m going to be here for her when she comes back. I don’t care how long it takes.” Unconsciously, all three fillies looked at the lengthening shadows that had begun to transform the frightening forest. “She’s afraid of the dark, too,” Apple Bloom added.

“Does your monster ever stay late in the forest?” asked Scotaloo, looking around the forest clearing for signs of glowing eyes or sharp teeth.

“No. She normally leaves by now to go home. I-I suppose...” Apple Bloom crawled back in the bush and emerged with a mangled pile of pages that used to be a book until something chopped it cleanly in half. “I better take this too, so she don’t worry none afore I come back in the morning. I still don’t think talking to big ponies about her is a good idea.”

“It isn’t right to keep this a secret,” said Sweetie Belle firmly despite Scotaloo’s anguished

expression. "I'll go without you if I have to, but it has to be done."

"All of us or nothing," said Apple Bloom solidly. "Cutie Mark Crusaders stick together no matter what!"

Scootaloo looked at the mangled book as if it were going to bite her. "Does that mean we have to go with you to the library when you show what's left of that book to Miss Dewey too?"

[center] * * * [/center]

"...and that's when we came back here to tell you, Madam Mayor. I swear, it's the truth." Sweetie Belle nodded sharply, followed by her two friends.

The Mayor fought to keep a yawn suppressed, and took a surreptitious glance at the setting sun. As if it were not bad enough that the tiny town bordered on the Everfree Forest, ever since that weird place had become less monster-filled, the town's inhabitants had begun to poke about inside even more. When things inevitably went wrong, they came trotting to her, of course.

Not settling for seeing actual dangers, now the three tiny terrors who seemed to be behind most of the real disasters in town had decided to make up an imaginary friend. And, of course, bug her about it. If only they were not so adorably cute, she might have been able to be angry at the little tikes. There was really only one way to handle this and still get to bed at a reasonable time.

"Very interesting, my little ponies," said the Mayor, nodding her head and taking great effort to get just the right amount of sympathy in her voice. "I had no idea there was a Homework Monster inside the Everfree. My, that place just gets more strange every day. It's probably for the good that the monster ran away; your teacher assigns you homework for a reason, after all. Now I want you to do two things. First, you must never go into the Everfree Forest again without somepony older to accompany you. And second, I want you all three to go home and tell them what you told me. Can I get you to promise, please?"

"We will," they chorused in a dull monotone, obviously thinking of the upcoming consequences.

[center] * * * [/center]

"...so sis, you believe me. Right?"

"Of course I believe you," chimed Rarity, administering the bathtub brush as a world-class conductor in front of the Phillyharmonic, with an entire orchestra of bubbles in the tub and one small soggy filly as an audience. "Now hold still, while I put in the conditioner. Otherwise your mane is just going to tangle something fierce!"

[center] * * * [/center]

“...and after promising never to return, the Homework Monster went back into the forest and the three little fillies never saw it again. The end.”

“That’s nice, Scootaloo.” Aunt Quick Fix gave her favorite niece a warm nuzzle that smelled faintly of axle grease and cloud repellent before tucking the covers up under her chin and turning off the light. “You certainly have a vivid imagination.”

[center] * * * [/center]

“...so I just gotta go back and see if she’s all right tomorrow. She’s so skeered I just don’t know what to do! Can you help me, sis?”

“Well, ah don’t know for certain.” Applejack rubbed her chin in thought. “There’s a heap of critters in them woods that’re real dangerous. That’s why we made you promise to stay out of them in the first place. If you did see some critter like what you said, how could it survive out there without being awfully dangerous itself? I just don’t like it at all. What do you think, Mac?”

The big red stallion had been unusually quiet during Apple Bloom’s entire story, with occasional glances out the window at the night. A low overcast had been laid in for a late morning spring shower, and without the moon or stars shining down, the inky darkness outside seemed to suck in the light from the house like a hungry animal. Finally he shook his head. “Nope. Don’t like it one bit. Starting tomorrow, I’m walking you to school and back. If’n we can’t trust you no more, ah don’t want you hurt none by sneaking off into that durned forest.”

“But what about my friends?” wailed Apple Bloom.

“They’re just gonna have to play out here, if’n they can to be safe. That thing out there sounds lot like the critter that attacked me last fall.” The big red stallion shuddered and glanced out the window again.

“That’s not like Monster. She’s skeered of everything.” Apple Bloom worked up the biggest, saddest eyes she could and directed them against her big brother, who was ignoring her completely. Instead he shook silently as his mind went back to last fall, his big green eyes riveted to the window as if in deathly fear of seeing a flash of purple against the stygian darkness.

Drawn by the scent of blood and fear in the darkness of the forest clearing, the Timber Wolves

began to gather.

[hr]

-End chapter 7-

-Chapter 8-

[center]The Monster in the Twilight

[color=red]Kindness[/color][[/center]

[hr]

“Are you guyth thure thith ith thafe?” Twist trotted closely behind Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo down the narrow path leading deeper into the Everfree Forest, her eyes wide with fear as she twitched away from the sound of every broken twig or animal call.

Scootaloo rolled her eyes. “It’s perfectly safe. Apple Bloom has been coming down here for weeks to meet with Monster.” The little orange filly jumped over a few tree limbs **that** had fallen over the path and kept walking, looking around eagerly in the afternoon sunlight.

Sweetie Belle hopped over the branches with a sigh. “It’s a shame how Apple Bloom’s family is punishing her for this. If we get Monster to go with us over to her house, we can show them she’s not dangerous. Maybe we can even get cookies.”

“I’ll try,” said Twist hesitantly as she stumbled over the tree branches on the path. “I thtill don’t know why you wanted my help. I’ll jutht get in the way.”

“Don’t be silly, Twist. Monster got spooked by Scootaloo, and I’m too afraid to talk with it. Her. You’ve made friends with everpony in school. Even Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon don’t really hate you that much.” Sweetie Belle grinned nervously. “Just think of her as a really new student. Who’s big. With scars. And who doesn’t talk very good. Scoots and I will be right over here in this bush if you need us.” They vanished into a nearby bush, leaving Twist all alone in the clearing.

“H-h-hello?” Twist crept around the damaged bush until all that could be seen was her bushy red mane trembling above the tattered branches. “I-ith anypony in here?”

“Apple Bloom said Monster’s really shy,” shouted Scootaloo over the bush. “She may be inside the bush, hiding!”

“Scootaloo!” shouted Sweetie Belle. “Stop yelling!”

“Right!” shouted Scootaloo. “Try not to make too much noise. And see if she knows how to

work out this week's spelling words."

"I don't think anypony ith in here," called Twist in a shaky voice.. "Thomething hath been clawing the ground around here. It'th all thcratchy."

"Awww!" groaned Scootaloo. "I was going to take her for a ride on my scooter too."

"Oh, like that will calm her down," scoffed Sweetie Belle, coughing as she waved a hoof. "Scootaloo, did you eat Mexicolt food yesterday?"

"Me? She who smelt it, dealt it. I thought you were too ladylike to toot."

Twist had stopped cold once she came back around the mangled bush and was staring in Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo's direction, seemingly frozen in place. Both of the little fillies quit waving their hooves around to dissipate the noxious odor and slowly turned around to see a giant wolf made of jumbled together branches and chunks of splintered trees, glaring down at them. A green blast of thick fumes roiled out from underneath it, and the Timber Wolf lunged forward at the little fillies.

"AAAAAAHHHH!!" Scootaloo grabbed her friend and bolted straight at Twist, closely followed by the rumbling pile of angry branches. A second and third wolf rapidly began to gather themselves together on the path, and in the shadows around the forest clearing, angry yellow eyes began to appear.

"Scootaloostopwhatareyou — Oomph!" Twist fairly bounced as her friend body-checked her into the bush, dropping in on top of her with Sweetie Belle right behind.

"Thothe are Timber Wolths!" squealed Twist, still on the bottom side of the three-pony pileup.

"I know! Help me look for a secret door or a hidden tunnel or something!" Scootaloo began furiously digging around in the dirt under the bush.

"That's right! Apple Bloom said Monster just snuck into the bush without her seeing. There must be a tunnel under here!" Dirt fountained into the air as the three ponies dug furiously, the sound of growling growing nearer and nearer around their tattered bush. The cloying stench of decaying vegetation swept under the bush at the same time as one huge paw began to part the branches, slowly, as if to savor the screaming from the three fillies trapped inside.

The huge Timber Wolf was newly formed, or it would have understood why the rest of its fellow creatures suddenly cringed back into the forest as a small patchy unicorn came galloping into the clearing. One wolf who moved too slowly out of the way found its velocity abruptly increased to the point where air friction ignited the branches that made up its body before it struck a towering tree, spraying burning twigs and splinters out into the forest away from the

clearing.

Darkness skittered across the body of the running unicorn, a blackened aura that enveloped her horn and leapt out across the clearing even as the huge Timber Wolf brought one massive paw down to crush the little foals. Gravity seemed to flip beneath the beast as it tumbled backwards, rolling to an upright position and growling at the small creature who had somehow flung it away from its prey. Fear practically crystallized out of the air in the clearing, driven by the three tasty little creatures inside the bush, and cascading in waves off the larger one. It was a delightful feast, crowned by anger and rage that lit a fire inside the Timber Wolf with a tugging sensation.

A rather strange tugging sensation. In fact, it tugged at all of the wolf's body, from his bushy tail to each paw, drawing them all in the direction of the dark fire that had ignited in its chest. Gravity crushed it to the ground with a whine as the darkness flared with the snapping noise of small twigs, and then larger branches. The Timber Wolf struggled in vain as the insatiable tug increased, drawing its paws and head closer and closer to the chest until it looked like nothing more than a spherical ball of wood, outlined in black fire. A shrinking sphere.

Monster continued to focus her will on the shrinking darkness. [i] It hurt others. It would pay. It would not hurt anymore. It got what it deserved. [/i]

Her concentration was disrupted by a small tan thunderbolt on four legs that bowled into her side with an excited shriek of, "Thankyou! Thankyou! Thankyou!" She released her grip on the crushed Timber Wolf, now no more than a blackened smoking cinder lightly sprinkled with sparkles on the forest floor, and tried to see out from the red poofy mane that obscured her vision. It was strange. Only one other had ever held her this way. It was... nice. All the anger and fear that had coursed through her body and fed her magic felt like it was draining away, replaced by another kind of hunger. She sniffed. The red poofy mane smelled good, of flavors and tastes that tickled her memory. She sniffed again, this time using her magic ever so slightly. She smelled like 'bloom' and 'scoots' and 'sweetie' but not like 'mac' and 'sis.' She took another sniff, just in case, and her ears drooped. Her shoulder was wet. The good-smelling one was sad. Water leaked from the face when you were sad. The bitter smell of bloom's blood had been all over the bush when she returned. She had hurt bloom. The rising surge of magic inside her took a lot of will to fight back. The good-smelling one sobbing into her neck would be hurt if she fled. She tugged against the iron-like grip of the earth pony filly. Once she was at a safe distance, she could use her spell to flee.

"Sweetie Belle, did you see that?" Scootaloo hopped up and down energetically in the remnants of their bush. "That big wolf was like 'Zap!' and then Monster came running up and 'Pow!' and it got all dark and smoky and turned into a lump! That was so cool!! She's almost as cool as Rainbow Dash!" The little orange filly dashed out into the clearing to hop excitedly around her new hero while Sweetie Belle still huddled in the bottom of her hole with her forehooves over her head.

“Are we dead y-yet?”

[center] * * * [/center]

It took nearly an hour to calm down Twist enough to pry her off Monster’s neck, during which time they managed to find another intact bush large enough for the four of them to huddle under. Despite the really cool way she had chased away the Timber Wolves, Monster looked depressed and weepy, the way Auntie Fix always looked when her secret chocolate stash had been mysteriously depleted. There was no danger of running out of candy though, as each of them had one of Twist’s ever-present supplies of cinnamon sticks in their mouths while Sweetie Belle carefully described to Monster the horrible fate that had befallen Apple Bloom and the aggressively protective way Big Mac had been protecting her, even to the embarrassing point of being at the school during recess[¹].

Monster put her head down on the dirt under the bush and sighed. “mmm falt” The little stub of cinnamon stick vanished inside her mouth with a crunching sound, but even that did not seem to cheer her up any.

“It’t not your fault,” said Twist compassionately as she gently stuck a fresh cinnamon stick into Monster’s mouth.

“zzz too. hurt boom. hurt mac. hurt buk. haaammnaauulll.” Tears streamed down Monster’s face as her horn glowed briefly and a tattered half of a book plopped to the ground, sliced clean through as if by some impossibly sharp knife. “boom.”

“You mean a spell you cast could have hurt Apple Bloom like the book? That wasn’t your fault; you were just scared. My sister breaks things all the time when I make noise[²] around the house.”

“buk.” The remaining cinnamon stick vanished with a grinding noise and was quickly replaced.

“It’s just a dumb, old book,” scoffed Scootaloo, not spotting the spark of ire in Monster’s eyes at her heretical statement. “I’m the one who surprised you, so I’ll go buy a replacement at the bookstore. I’ve got some money saved up.”

“Thee, your problemth aren’t that bad.” Twist gently patted Monster’s short mane, holding onto her last cinnamon stick just in case. “Apple Bloom jutht got a little thcratch on her ear, so you didn’t hurt Big Mac that way.”

Monster shook her head, splattering tears across the ground. “did. thkaaarrreee.”

“You thcared Big Mac? He’t not thcared of anything.”

Monster glared at the ground, focusing her magic on a small patch of dirt. The soil seemed to boil, rising up and shaping together into a small shape of a stout familiar stallion, complete with the right coloring, harness and a feature the little fillies had never seen before. The violet magic around the clay doll sat it to one side as a matching purple unicorn figure began to take shape, and in a matter of moments, both statuettes sat next to each other.

“Cool.”

“Thweet.”

“What’s that underneath Big Mac?”

“Shh, Sweetie Belle. It’s like a puppet show.”

A gentle aura of magic surrounded the two figures, making the stallion bounce slowly along the ground while the unicorn hid behind a rock. Suddenly the unicorn doll hopped out from behind the rock to bounce around the red stallion, rubbing up against him and shoving her tail in his face. The stallion hopped around the ground, closely pursued by the unicorn until Monster threw the small doll of Big Mac outside the bush, and pushed the unicorn doll over on its side with an agonized sob.

“Oh. You wanted Big Mac to be your thpecial thomepony, and he ran away.”

“Well, duh.” Scootaloo crossed her forelegs and frowned. “It looks like she almost tackled him and rubbed her tail in his face. Ewww. I mean—” The little filly stammered as Monster collapsed on the ground and started to cry again “—that’s not how you make a special somepony.”

“Yeah,” said Sweetie Belle happily. “You need to dress up in a really fancy outfit.”

“And give them thweets and flowerth and cute little cardth,” said Twist.

“And roses. Auntie Fix says roses are the way to a stallion’s heart.” Scootaloo paused, thinking of the intended target. “But I think for Big Mac, you may want something that matches his interests better.”

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Morning dawned brightly over Sweet Apple Acres, the first thin beam of sunlight filtering through the tall tree outside of Big Mac’s bedroom and in through the window. Sunlight always brought him to that drowsy state of wakefulness that preceded the thought of the long line of chores awaiting his attention. He rolled out of bed to trudge to the bathroom, a routine that had occupied nearly his entire life at the farm ever since he had gotten old enough to put on a yoke and pull a plow. It was a welcome routine, so well-worn and polished that he could have followed it through pitch darkness by the familiar dents he had worn in the floorboards of the house. But today, something was different.

Contrary to popular opinion, Big McIntosh was not dumb. He was just very measured in the way he approached both problems and decisions. Without the need for checklists, he was fully able to run all the activities of a farm including the financial reports in a way that made the highly complex tasks appear almost nonexistent. Very few things surprised him in life, which is why when his mind finally managed to work out what was bothering him, he only paused momentarily in his tooth-brushing, finishing the rest of his bathroom activities before plodding back to his bedroom to double-check his observation.

It was still there. He had not put it there. It had not been there last night. And it certainly had not gotten up and walked there on its own. That meant somepony else had moved it there. He opened the window and picked an apple blossom off the tree outside, to give it a sniff and a taste. Neighagara Apple. There were forty-two of them in the far south-west field. And none of them by the house.

“AJ,” he called out, his voice only slightly quavery. “Since when do we have an apple tree outside mah winder?”

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(*) There were a lot of tree branches scattered around the forest clearing that had not been there the day before yesterday.

(1) Not that there was a chance of sneaking out during recess to go visit Monster anyway. Miss Cheerilee always kept Scootaloo’s scooter locked up during school hours, because of something she called ‘Liability Insurance.’

(2) Collapsing shelves, falling boxes, plates, cups... Gravity and Sweetie Belle were in constant conflict.

-End chapter 8-

-Chapter 9-

[center]The Monster in the Twilight

[color=Orange]Laughter[/color][hr]

[hr]

Big Mac trotted along the road back to Sweet Apple Acres with a weight of guilt crushing down across his back that weighed even more than his heavy wooden yoke tied to the rustiest plow on the farm. Little Apple Bloom had just looked so pathetic as she was dragged into the school house, swept along by her chattering, happy friends. It reminded him too much about how a sour crabapple vanishing into a cider press would ruin the whole batch.

His mind chewed on the problem in the background the same way he would have a planting schedule, carefully arranging the pieces into a frustrating puzzle that seemed to have all inside bits and no straight edges. It distracted him so much that he made a left turn without realizing his mistake, onto the same narrow path his sister had trod so many times. It was only as he trotted slowly into the devastated clearing that he slowed to a halt, looking at the damage.

The clearing that Apple Bloom had described was a mangled mess, with smoke and fire damage all over the surroundings but mostly focused in the direction of a giant tree with a blackened spot above his head where something had struck it at high speed, stripping away bark and leaves as a child would peel a twig. One blacked hoof-sized lump that looked like coal sat ominously in the middle of a burned out patch in the clearing, giving off an eerie dark glow that made him keep a safe distance.

He walked around cautiously, keeping an eye on the treacherous woods for even the slightest flicker of yellow eyes or purple hide while he paced out the size of the crater in the bush. He really did not expect to find anything, but a scrap of red in the trampled grass caught his eye. It was a small clay statue that looked suspiciously like himself. With one exception.

“Ah ain’t that—” he blurted out, before blushing and looking around the clearing, more afraid that somepony had heard him than of monsters. Moments later he trotted away back to the farm, the only evidence of his presence a small pile of dirt, as if a small object had been hastily buried.

[center] * * * [/center]

“It just ain’t fair!” Apple Bloom sulked at the picnic table with her friends, eating lunch in the bright spring sunshine. Out at the edge of the playground, her brother sat at a similar table, eating lunch with their teacher and occasionally casting glances in her direction as if she were going to run away. “Ever since they had to drag that big Neighagara apple tree back out to the southwest field and replant it, mah brother’s being even more of a pain in the patoot. He’s even gone and started locking the house up at night. I didn’t even know we had a lock on the door.”

“Monthter athked for you a lot,” said Twist quietly. “Thee really liketh my thalt water taffy, but thee kept one pieth back for you.”

“We tried to get her over to your house, but she just locks up and digs in her hooves,” Sweetie Belle huffed. “She won’t believe me that you want to see her, and my sister doesn’t believe me at all. It sounds like the only pony that believes us is Big Mac.”

Scootaloo frowned as she dug in her lunch bag. “Granola, bleah. And raisins. Does anybody have anything with sugar in it they want to trade?”

Sweetie Belle rolled her eyes. "Are you still miffed that she doesn't want to ride behind your scooter? I think that just shows she's smarter than she sounds."

"No, of course not." Scootaloo dumped the contents of her lunch bag out into a bowl all at once and sighed. Dehydrated banana chips, raisins, granola and bran flakes, but not a single chocolate chip. Aunt Quick Fix was on her diet again, and that meant everypony in the house was on a diet too.

"Thank you for replacing that book for me, Scootaloo. Did Monster like it?"

"No," she groused, nibbling at a clump of raisins. "I showed it to her and she took off running. I wonder if Monster would like banana chips?"

"Everypony liketh banana chipth," chirped Twist, peeling an orange.

"You want to trade?"

"I'm allergic. But thankth. You can have a couple sliceth of my orangth."

"Smile, girls!"

All four fillies turned to the camera with matching smiles a moment before the flash went off with an impressive wave of light that had all the other little ponies at the table blinking.

Featherweight trotted up to the table, carrying his camera and dragging his lunch bag.

"Anypony want to trade for some plums?"

"I'm good."

"Not me."

"Thorry."

"You want some granola?"

The awkward pegasus colt hesitated until he saw the look of disgust on Scootaloo's face when being faced by the horrible chewy cardboard health food. "Sure, but only if I can get a smile from you."

flash

Plum juice squirted across the table as Scootaloo attempted to fit a half-dozen plums in her mouth at once. "Thmommph kew Ffethherwet."

"You're welcome." *flash*

“Idea!” Sweetie Belle hopped off her bench and pushed Featherweight down at the table. “Hey Apple Bloom, I’ve got an idea.”

“Really? I never could have guessed.”

“You want your brother to see Monster is really nice, but Monster won’t go to your house. So why don’t we have Featherweight take some pictures of Monster being... non-monstrous, like... well, doing non-monster stuff. And things.” Sweetie Belle looked at Featherweight. “You know, right?”

“Oh, yeah! This is going to be awesome!” Featherweight exchanged a slightly sticky high-hoof with Scootaloo. “So who’s Monster?”

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“In here?” Featherweight peered down the shadowed path leading into the Everfree Forest
“This is going to be so cool.”

“Wait a minute, girls. And Featherweight.” Sweetie Belle stopped in the middle of the path and held up one hoof. “We promised the Mayor we wouldn’t go into the forest without an older pony with us.”

“Monster is older,” said Scootaloo. “She’s gotta be like fifty or something.”

“Oh. Okay then.”

It took nearly an hour for the little group of fillies (and one colt) to make it to the big bush they had met Monster at last time, mostly because Featherweight had to stop every few feet and take another picture of a flower or a creature. It turned out to be a bust. No Monster in the bush, or in the immediate area (which was carefully examined for loose branches first), or in the trees, or even with a little digging in the dirt to look for secret passages.

They did manage to get some nice pictures of them playing. Featherweight promised he would bring the photographs to leave by the bush next time they visited so that Monster could see what she had missed. And before they went home, they left a small paper sack behind with one smuggled lunch item each in it for Monster, just in case she came back when they were gone and wanted a snack.

Long after the happy shouts of the students had died away, a battered and scarred unicorn slipped unseen into the bush, and poked her nose into the small sack that smelled so good. The tiny black wrinkled fruits looked too much like rabbit pellets to eat, but the strange round purple fruit was delicious. Little purple drips of juice dropped onto her while eating, nearly matching the few unscarred portions of her coat and making her think of afternoon rains in a

long-forgotten place. She sat thoughtfully under the bush, finishing the rest of the fruits and tucking away two of the marvelously sticky white sticks for later, before looking at the seed that remained after the plum had been eaten.

When she had moved the pinkflower tree next to his sleeping tree, mac seemed to become very upset. He and sis had gone through a lot of work to dig it up and drag it all the way back to where she had gotten it. Maybe he didn't like pinkflower fruit. He would like this purple fruit. Then he would not be frightened anymore, and he would let bloom visit again. That would be good.

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Morning dawned brightly over Sweet Apple Acres, the first thin beam of sunlight filtering through the tall tree outside of Big Mac's bedroom and in through the window. Sunlight normally brought him to that drowsy state of wakefulness that preceded his thoughts of chores, but this morning brought him surging out of bed in a rapid gallop over to the window. He blinked, while trying not to hyperventilate.

It was back. He had not put it there. It had not been there last night. And he was certainly hoping it had not gotten up and walked there on its own, although he was starting to wonder.

He carefully opened his window, reaching out and removing a bright purple fruit from the impossible tree. It smelled like a plum, although plums were not normally as large as his hoof. Just to make sure it was really a plum, he gave it a taste. It certainly tasted like a plum. That only left one question he could not answer.

"AJ?" he called out, his voice sounding shrill in the morning air. "Now there's a plum tree outside mah winder!" He took another bite. "It's good, though."

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"Thanks a lot, girls. And you too, Featherweight." Apple Bloom sat sullenly at the picnic table with her friends, each of which had a substantial slice of plum they had been working their way through while becoming a little more purple together through splatter effects. Her own slice had hardly been touched, although her brother over across the playground had three of them that he was trying to explain to a couple of Canterlot unicorns from the Equestrian Department of Agriculture.

"You're welcome," said Scootaloo before going back to work on her plum.

"Ah was bein sarcastic," she snapped. "Big Mac put a chain on our front door now and bolted mah winder shut. He's plum spooked about that... plum."

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That afternoon's visit to the clearing was no more successful than the first, although they had to bring a much larger bag for the goodies to leave behind because of the plum, and Featherweight had brought a few dozen photos. The empty bag from last visit was neatly folded with a happy-face drawn on it, so Monster had at least been by, and liked what they did, but they all agreed that a happy-face on a bag would probably not change Big Mac's mind about keeping Apple Bloom imprisoned.

The clearing had lost some of its frightening mystery through exposure over the last few days. The fillies played tag among the trees at the edge of the clearing while Featherweight took pictures of them and all the numerous spring flowers in the area. There was a general agreement among them that the flowers were pretty, and it should be safe enough to take pictures, but nibbling was off the table. Picking, throwing, sniffing and weaving into garlands was seen as a generally safe activity, as well as taking pictures of the same activities, but when the time to leave came again, there was still no sign of Monster, and the little fillies (and one colt) left disappointed.

Once again after the shouts of excited students had died away, the battered and scarred unicorn silently emerged from the trees. She tucked the bag of goodies away, so they could be shared tonight at dinner. She would like the purple fruit, as well as the strange orange fruit, and the small red fruits with the big seeds and the little yellow discs that smelled funny. Maybe not the orange fruit. She disliked the color for some reason.

Monster looked through the second bag with a hiss of fascination. Little flat leaves with reflections of witht, and bloom, and the other strange little ones, all smiling. Some of the leaves had paintings of leaves. She tasted one, and spit it out. They did not smell like the flowers, or taste like them, but they looked like them. The little flashing box the happy feathered one carried must make them.

A bolt of excitement shot through Monster. She would be able to show wist and bloom and sweetie and scoots to her. Then she thought of mac, and how frightened he was of the purple fruit. mac and sis had dug it up and taken it out away from their sleeping tree, and put it in a big empty field of dirt. If mac did not like trees, why did they have their sleeping tree in the middle of so many of them? He looked even more frightened today, and hunched over bloom protectively when they went back to their sleeping tree. The little ones liked the flowers, so maybe mac would too.

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Morning dawned brightly over Sweet Apple Acres, the first thin beam of sunlight shining unimpaired into Big Mac's bedroom through the window. The drowsy state of wakefulness triggered in the big stallion turned almost instantly into a full-blown panic.

His entire bedroom was a giant wave of color. Blossoms and blooms of every possible hue and a few that seemed impossible lay hock-deep in waves of color that covered his floor, dresser, bed, windows and nearly obscured the door. As he rolled to his hooves and dashed around the room, the air grew almost solid with scent from the trampled flowers, a constant force right to the face that tunneled into the nasal cavity and proceeded to flip every single pleasure sensor it could reach. Breathing through the mouth did not help; the pollen grains that landed on his tongue brought a wave of saliva coursing through his mouth and tears streaming down his cheeks.

Taking a deep, pollen-laden breath, Big Mac yelled, "AJ! Get the durned shovel and don't ask why!"

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"So what exactly is anny-phil-aktic shock anyway?" asked Sweetie Belle at their lunch table. Big Mac was not at his customary table outside the playground area. Instead cousin Caramel was sitting there sullenly, reading a book while trying to figure out how he had been drafted into guard duty.

Apple Bloom shrugged. "Ah dunno. It musta been real serious. Caramel said he got like a dozen shots from the cute nurse, but he oughta be home tonight."

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Monster fairly writhed with agony at the edge of the forest. mac had looked so swollen and sick when sis had loaded him onto the wheeled thing and ran off to town. She had hurt him again with the flowers. Now he never would let bloom out to play. He might even die. While sis and mac were away from the house, she slipped back over and whisked all the flowers out of their sleeping tree, throwing them deep into the forest where they would not cause any more problems. Monster was bad. Monster hurt mac. Monster hurt bloom. Monster should go away. No pony would care. No, one would.

Monster hugged It. It did not hug back like twitth. It had been hugged so much, It was nearly flat. It once had a name, just like Monster. It understood when she talked to It. She wished It could talk back. She could feel things get better when she hugged It. It made memories of other really big ponies grow softer. It made them not afraid of Monster. As long as she had It, she was not afraid of them either. Except for the memory of a really big white pony who rose up into the sky, and brought the burning sun down on her.

Monster whimpered and hugged It until the bad memory went away. The bad memory happened more often now. She said it was because the stars hurt. They could not go where

they needed to go. Balance was upset. She talked a lot about balance. And darkness. And stars. Monster liked listening to her talk. She was friend, like bloom. If Monster went away forever, she would hurt. If Monster stayed, bloom would hurt. Monster hurt no matter what. At dark, Monster would go back to her. Leave bloom. Not hurt anymore.

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“Ya big galoot, I’m tellin ya, it’s got nothing to do with Apple Bloom’s monster. We live next to the Everfree Forest, so weird things happen. Now will ya get into the cart, please?”

“Nope.” Big Mac continued to plod down the road headed back to Sweet Apple Acres with his sister right behind, pulling an empty cart.

“The doctor said yer gonna be just fine, if’n ya take a break for a few days. Now am I gonna have to sit on you, or will I hafta get Granny to put ya in a headlock again?”

The big red stallion kept walking as if he had not heard anything, although his ears flattened back against his head.

[center] * * * [/center]

That night after the family had gone to bed, and he was sure they were all asleep, Big Mac lifted the blanket off his bed and quietly tiphoofed downstairs. In a few minutes, he was situated just below his bedroom window, with a shovel close to hoof, and a blanket to curl up inside. He liked the feeling of being outdoors at night where you could look up into the starry sky and see forever, and hear the far-off cries of mating hydras from deep within the Everfree. There had not been very many opportunities for him to do this when he was working until sunset and rising first thing in the morning. If that scary purple thing from the forest was doing these things to him, he would meet it like a stallion, outside of the house where the rest of the family would not get hurt. If it was something else, well, that’s what the familiar shovel was for. In all of his years living next to that cursed forest, he had never had to hit anything threatening more than once with a shovel. Sometimes he needed to get a new shovel afterwards, but one hit always did the trick. He settled into a comfortable position and waited.

[center] * * * [/center]

Monster was torn. mac had come back with sis, which made her glad. But he moved so slowly, like he was still in pain, and still looked around like he was afraid.

Monster took out the flat leaves with pictures of bloom and scoots and twitth. They all were smiling, but bloom did not look happy. The silly feather with his flashing box could make anypony smile. There were pictures of mac too, but he did not smile, even for feather. A dark weight seemed tied to Monster’s chest and she sank to the ground with the pictures around her.

Monster had done this. Monster was a scary Monster. Monster was bad.

Monster could get feather to use his flashy box to take a picture of Monster for mac, but that would only frighten him more. Monster should leave. If mac was scared of Monster, he would not be scared anymore. mac would be happy. bloom would be happy.

Something was wrong. mac was frightened of Monster, but mac was also big brother to bloom. Big brothers were never frightened.

Brother. That word brought back a memory that hugging It for a very long time could not make go all the way away. Brothers were strong. They did not need an It. mac had both sis and bloom to hug so he would not be afraid. Right?

There had to be something Monster could do.

Monster looked at It. She needed It. Without It, she would be afraid. Maybe if she hugged It a lot now, she would not need It for a while. She could let mac have It just for a while.

[center] * * * [/center]

Morning dawned brightly over Sweet Apple Acres, the first thin beam of sunlight shining across the hills into Big Mac's eyes, unhindered by trees, windows, or any other obstacle. Big Mac yawned and looked around, disappointed and embarrassed. He had fallen asleep outside while on watch. What a fearsome defender of his family he turned out to be. Tunneling back under his blankets would be futile. Applejack would probably be along in a few minutes to call him all kinds of silly names for sleeping out under the stars with only a thin blanket... Well, two blankets now. And a pillow. Which he had not brought outside with him last night.

Suddenly wide-awake, he looked around carefully for any misplaced trees or flowers. The only thing out of place was a grimy rag of some sort that had been stuffed down the inside of the blanket. It looked well-worn, as if it had originally been some sort of stuffed animal that had been stomped, dragged, carried, slept with, bathed with, cried on and hugged until all the stuffing had compressed into tiny little hard knots like marbles, and the covering had been ripped and patched and ripped and patched until almost none of whatever it was originally made out of was visible. If squinted at very hard, the locations of the eyes and tail could be made out only because there were two blotches at one end, and only one at the other.

He gave it a cautious sniff, fearful of the dirty cloth being a reeking mess, but he could only smell the forest mold, flowers, and a faint smell that he thought he recognized from last fall. The very fabric seemed permeated with the smell of absorbed fear and loneliness, of darkness kept away and strange noises in the night. Holding it, he could imagine a strong guardian and companion that would always be there to protect the owner. To play with her when nopony else would. Who would always listen, no matter how difficult it was to speak. To love, when nopony

else would.

The flat rag seemed to call out to him on some primal level at the very core of his being. After a quick glance around to make sure he was not being watched, he put it carefully to his chest, and gave it a little hug. Only a little one. Very small. And he knew.

Big Mac carefully gathered up his blankets and pillow, as well as the tattered doll, and returned to the house. A few minutes later, Apple Bloom was awoken by a light tapping at her door.

“Oh, it’s you. Come on in, Big Mac.” The little filly yawned and tumbled out of bed, smacking her lips and beginning her normal morning routine. “I’m sorry I overslept, just let me use the bathroom and brush my teeth—”

A big red foreleg swept her up as Big Mac gently hugged the little filly for a long, long time, finally setting her down with a sniff and a pat on the head. “Here,” he said, gently giving Apple Bloom the grubby scrap of cloth. “Your friend brought this to me. Ah think she needs it more than ah do. Why don’t you take it back to her?”

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-End chapter 9-

-Chapter 10-

[center]The Monster in the Twilight

[color=red]Summer[/color][[/center]

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The setting sun rested at the horizon behind a gentle bank of pastel clouds arranged in long stripes of soft violet and mauve. The evening weather team had made a creation of prismatic beauty more glorious than words could describe, but some of the most deadly creatures in Equestria had beautiful colors too, and that did not make them less lethal. The Solarium stretched out from the tallest tower in the south side of the castle, wide glass windows allowing the sunlight to fill the cheerful room with a happy glow at all times of the day except when the rain or clouds were heaviest. For some reason, the sun shining through the colorful clouds this evening brought the whole room to a reddish hue of freshly-spilled blood, backlighting crimson across the princess standing on the balcony in her white gown as if she had just committed some horrible murder.

Princess Celestia stood calmly, looking out across her kingdom to brace her mind before reluctantly raising her gaze to her golden orb. The demands on her waning strength were far worse than any of the ponies of the city could ever be allowed to know. Even her cooperative sun was getting more difficult to move.

She gently laid the sun down below the horizon with a bare touch of her magic, treasuring the peace inherent in the moment before turning to her nemesis. At first the silvery globe of the moon gave no resistance, sliding up to crest above the horizon so smoothly Celestia was positive something had gone horribly wrong. Then a brutally strong wave of vile hatred and spite blasted over her, forcing the princess to her knees on the cold tiles of the balcony.

[i]Hello sister. I've missed you so much.[/i]

"You are not my sister," she snarled, forcing more power into lifting the suddenly leaden moon while rising to her hooves with her mane snapping in the ethereal breeze.

A light cackling seemed to fill her head while the moon remained stubbornly stuck at the horizon. [i]Oh, she's still in here, you old fossil. She's just being very, very quiet. Do you think she will come out and play when I have you helpless at my hooves, begging for your pitiful life?[/i]

"You are not getting out of your prison, you heartless liar! I'll hold you there until the stars burn to ashes before you hurt my ponies!" Inch by inch, the reluctant moon ascended into the star-strewn sky as Celestia traced its path with her horn, the cords of muscles in her slender neck standing out like knotted cables.

[i]This year I shall feast upon your bitter defeat, and enfold your beloved ponies in Night Eternal.[/i]

"Over. My. Dead. Body," panted Celestia, her sides heaving with exertion. Foam flecked the creamy ivory lace of her dress which she wore to conceal the protruding ribs and gaunt sides that had slowly crept up on her over the last stressful years, but the fatigue in her cracking voice was unmistakable, and no amount of makeup could disguise the toll placed on her immortal frame.

[i]Oh, look. My stars have moved again.[/i]

"No!" Ever so slowly the star moved back to the location it had occupied rather impatiently for the last two years. "Stay!" Celestia wavered uncertainly on shaking legs, wheezing for breath while glaring at the night sky as if daring the heavens to misbehave. Finally she bowed her head as tears fought their way out, overcoming her weakened resolve with grief. For nearly an hour she stood under the night sky, the silent stars the only visible witness to the slow drip of tears falling to the ground, before the princess turned her back on the darkness and her lost sister, traveling back into the castle with slow, plodding hooves to leave the Solarium empty and cold.

Long after the slow steps of the princess had died out, the quiet click of smaller hoofsteps echoed quietly around the room. They followed the same path the princess took, the door

seeming to open and close by itself without a pony to be seen, leaving only the cold stars shining down into the room.

As one star began to inexorably move.

[center]-----[/center]

"I notice you've got quite a bunch of my students going out to Sweet Apple Acres just about every afternoon, Big Mac." Cheerilee took another bite of her dried apple chips and waved at the happy horde of students at the picnic tables, all eating their own lunches and chattering among themselves. The spring sunshine was warm, and lunch hour had gotten ever so slightly longer ever since Big Mac had started taking his lunch at the school with their teacher. In short, it was a perfect day in Ponyville that only proclaimed more perfect days to follow.

"Eeyup," said the quiet stallion, digging into a gigantic salad with a plum to one side for dessert.

"How in Equestria do you keep up with all of them?"

Big Mac appeared thoughtful for a while, as several pounds of lettuce, radishes and a tomato were properly processed by his massive jaws. Granny had impressed good table manners into the young colt, and it was not proper to speak with your mouth full unless you really liked limping for a few days.

"They got a friend."

"Well, some of my students have had imaginary friends before. Diamond Tiara used to write about 'Prince Amber,' and Snails once turned in a report called 'My Father, Snailzilla,' but I've never seen one imaginary friend for five different little ponies before."

Big Mac considered the pause in the conversation, and deduced a response was required.

"Nope."

"They each seem to be imagining this 'Monster' differently, but it has made a positive difference in their work at school. Twist is bringing in all kinds of different treats to share, Apple Bloom hasn't been late once, Sweetie Belle has been turning in the most imaginative creative writing projects, and Featherweight seems to have taken up photo editing. He's gotten really good at it. I've sent some of his best 'monster' pictures in to the Equestrian Enquirer contest. All of their homework has improved dramatically too. Even Scootaloo, and I never thought I would say that."

"Eeyup. Do you wanna split a plum for dessert?"

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click *click* *click*

"Wow."

"Oh, they're tho cute."

"Are you sure this is safe?"

"This is so awesome!"

The mother manticore looked suspiciously at the small knot of strange creatures making the annoying noises at the edge of her forest clearing. Her three small cubs were happily rolling around in the spring sunshine, joyfully clawing, maiming, mangling and stabbing at each other with the enthusiasm that only youth could bring, paying little heed to their mother who continued to make little 'harumph' noises and annoyed snorts. Finally she had enough of the interference. Moving slowly as not to scatter her cubs, she advanced with deliberate steps on the intruders, only to come to an abrupt stop as the larger one in the group advanced in front of the small ones.

click *click* *click* *click*

"Ooo, look at the muscles on her."

"She's bigger than Big Mac."

"Those are beautiful eyes."

"Do you think we could pet her?"

The manticore paused, looking at the familiar creature with an unchanged expression of malice before giving a huff of exasperation and turning back to her own cubs. She had met the creature before, and if she was that difficult to deal with on her own, the manticore had no intention of threatening the creature's little cubs.

click *click* *click*

"Hey Monster, can you get the mother manticore to turn sideways? I didn't get a good shot of her profile."

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The last white root at the edge of the stream slowly pulled free of the mud, drifting up the bank wrapped in purple magic to where three ponies sat with a nearly-full basket. Twist caught it as it floated up, giving it a good shake to get the last of the mud off before tucking it into the basket and tying down the cover.

"Thank you Monthter. I think Pinkie Pie ith going to flip when the tasteth cupcaketh with thith grated on top. It'th cold and hot at the thame time. I just don't underthtand why we had to thtay all the way up here when picking them?"

Monster gave feather a little bump and nodded at the middle of the wide stream. The little colt always got so excited when he got a chance to make a picture, and this was going to be good. She really liked the pictures, and had been very excited when Monster had begun bringing them home. She was happy. twitht was happy. feather was happy. Monster was happy. There were only a few creatures that were not going to be happy, and that was just too bad. They could go get lunch somewhere else.

Once she was sure the little colt had his flashing box out and pointed the right way, she picked up a stick with her magic and threw it out into the water.

Everfree Freshwater Crocodiles were very quiet predators, able to move almost tracelessly through the mossy water of the forest as they detected the small vibrations of animals near the water's edge. They were also very competitive for food, so when the stick splashed into the water, all three of the crocs lunged to the surface with jaws agape, lashing about viciously in search of their prey.

"Cool!" *click* *click* *click*

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"Wheeee!!!" screamed Scootaloo, flying almost effortlessly around the forest clearing, making a one-and-a-half flip before ricocheting off a tall branch. "I love it!" Four little ground-bound students winced in sympathetic pain as moments later the little orange pegasus rebounded off a tree branch in what seemed to be the only way she could change directions in the air. "Yahoo!"

As she slowly descended to the ground despite the frantic blur of little filly wings, the rest of her friends gave a sigh of relief. "Hey, that wasn't five minutes! Well, maybe," Scootaloo continued as Monster tapped a small hourglass on loan from Twist's kitchen. The purple magic around the little filly gently landed her in front of an open book, and with a last longing look at the open sky, she put a hoof on the top of the chapter heading and began to read, while Monster turned over the hourglass.

"And when they got to the top of the hill, they counted... themselves: one, two, three, four. 'Now where in the wold... world is that pokey little pony?' they... wondered." Behind her, Monster looked down and smiled despite the strange memories the book evoked of a pony with a purple and white striped mane, and a voice much like mom.

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The little waterfall in the forest clearing opened up into a wide, shallow pool that drained into a fairly large pond colored in traditional deep Everfree green. The crystal-clear water cascaded down the short cliff-face and fell into the shallow pool, spraying a cool mist that pushed back the steamy heat of the summer, as well as making almost musical tones as the falling water sprayed

off the stones below. Monster moved to the far end of the shallow pool at the edge of the lake, staying on the ground at the edge of the water while nodding at the five little ponies, indicating the pool was safe.

“Yea!” shouted Sweetie Belle, jumping from the shore onto one of the hundreds of flat stepping stones that were scattered all across the shallow pool. “Best first day of summer vacation ever! Thank you, Monster!” The little unicorn stopped and began to hop up and down on the stepping stone with joy, listening to the musical note it made. “Hey guys! See if the rest of them make music like this.” In moments, all five of the little ponies were happily bouncing from musical stone to musical stone through the mists of the waterfall, laughing and screaming in joy as the stones rang with the notes of a childish symphony to the joys of summer.

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Deep in the lake, a nameless^(*) monstrosity stirred from under the lake mud and began to ooze to the surface. The Song of Summoning was being played, and deeply ingrained reflexes from before recorded history drove it ever so slowly to the surface, drawing near the place where the sacrifice would be offered. In a glacial movement, it extended an eyestalk above the surface of the lake to examine the area, to ensure its arrival would be timed correctly.

There were several participants striking the Summoning Stones in a discordant melody that brought out thoughts that had been buried in its sluggish mind since the Night of Creation. And sitting to one side on dry land, was The Watcher Who Gave Pain. Almost unconsciously, the abomination rubbed the still raw stubs of two tentacles that still had many centuries of growth before they would regain their normal length. Perhaps that was not the Song of Summoning after all. The little creatures dancing on the stones were not wearing dark cloaks, it was not night, and the notes of the song were nowhere near correct. It decided instead to settle down in the shallow mud to wait, something it had gotten quite good at over many centuries of practice. No pony but the creature noticed the tip of one tentacle tapping ever so gently against a rock in time with the happy song the little creatures were playing on the Stones. And when the occasional beach ball or frisbee flew out into the deep water, no pony noticed that their rapid return was not accompanied by Monster’s violet magical aura, but by a quick flip of a tentacle instead.

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(*) Not an Urlock. Too small.

-End chapter 10-

-Chapter 11-

[center]The Monster in the Twilight

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The treehouse that overlooked Sweet Apple Acres was normally a place for the Cutie Mark Crusaders to plan their latest assault on the dull, everyday life of Ponyville citizens, documented by Featherweight, and with Twist on location for apologies, bandages and recovery candy. Today it was more a child's refuge from the hectic adult activity of the Summer Sun Festival, as the entire town turned out to decorate and prepare for the widely anticipated and unprecedented [i]third[/i] yearly visit by Princess Celestia. Unfortunately that included the not-so widely anticipated visit by her personal student, who was responsible — as much as that word ever applied to her — for making sure all the preparations were in place. To make it worse, she preferred to take two days to do a job that should have only taken her a few hours.

“Ah feels like we're in prison,” moped Apple Bloom. “If it's not bad enough that durned blue braggart is out at our farm again this year, ‘samplin’ our food and complaining about her life, now Applejack made me promise to stay in one of my friends’ houses until the festival tonight. Just ‘cause I went and hid all the bottles[**size=10**](1)[/size] afore she drunk ‘em up again like last year.”

“It's not my fault either,” grumbled Sweetie Belle. “Rarity locked up the boutique, and made me promise to stay with you all day, just because I tried to help with the decorations at the Summer Sun Festival again.”

Featherweight patted her gently on the shoulder. “I got a good picture of Spike putting out the fire this time. Not nearly as much stuff burned as last year.”

“Don't worry, Sweetie Belle.” Scootaloo put on her helmet and grinned. “We can see about breaking our best time between our houses.”

“With all the traffic from the fethtival? I thought I'd be thtepped on jutht getting to the clubhouth,” said Twist with a shudder. “Why don't we go over to the mathine thhop and thee what we can build?”

“No, Trixie ruined that too,” complained Scootaloo. “Every year she has her chariot taken into my Aunt's shop to be ‘Detailed,’ but this year she threw a fit and gave my aunt a retraining order against us.” The little orange pegasus scowled into crossed forelegs and harrumphed. “She doesn't even tip. I thought for sure last year we'd get at least a dozen bits for the waxing we did on it.”

“Well, we did wax the floorboards,” said Sweetie Belle. “And she slipped and fell out when the

guards took off.”

Scootaloo scoffed. “They hadn’t even gotten over the roofline. And that wheel was probably going to fall off anyway. Her grabbing onto it didn’t help.”

Featherweight chimed in, “At least I got a good shot, even if the newspaper didn’t want to print it.”

“Thee liked my candieth thith year,” said Twist energetically, until she drooped at the memory of the aftermath. “I didn’t know thee wath allergic to banannath too⁽²⁾. I think thee hath a hat full of thoth rethtraining orders. I got two.”

“Well, we can’t hide out here all day,” said Scootaloo, looking outside at the bright, sunny day that just begged to be enjoyed.

“aaan ooo,” mumbled Monster in the corner, buried in a book. Through Scootaloo’s careful scrounging of yard sales and the used bookstore, the clubhouse had accumulated a substantial, although eclectic, book collection that could (if looked at in bad light) be called a library. And subsequently had acquired (if looked at in a very bad light, or preferably complete darkness) what could be called a librarian.

“I know what we can do,” announced Scootaloo. “Remember last year when Princess Celestia visited, and she met with all kinds of ponies? This year we can introduce Monster to her. The Princess is just about the neatest, most kind pony in the whole world. I’ll bet she could help Monster get over her fear of... well, everything.” Hiding in the corner, Monster whimpered faintly and tried to vanish behind her book.

“Are you thure that would be a good idea?” asked Twist. “Monthter can be frightened by about everypony.” Sensing the rising levels of stress in the corner, Twist trotted over and offered a licorice stick to the frightened unicorn, which seemed to help, as did a second.

“Yeah, she kind of had a bad reaction to the picture of—” Apple Bloom glanced at Monster and lowered her voice “—you-know-who. I mean she’s royalty, about everypony gets all flustered and nervous around her.”

Sweetie Belle sighed in resignation. “I think she’s been sick lately too. My sis has dashed off to Canterlot a couple of times this year on a ‘Royal Emergency.’ It’s supposed to be a secret, but the Prin — I mean you-know-who — has lost a lot of weight. The fashion magazines have gone just berzerk about skinny models this year.”

“Tell me about it,” complained Scootaloo with a confirming growl from her stomach. “Aunt Fix has been on her diet forever! If it wasn’t for Twist, I would have forgotten what chocolate tastes like by now.” With a glance at the shivering Monster curled up with her books, Scootaloo

opened her saddlebags and held out a small box. "Would you like one?"

A violet aura wrapped precisely around one of the two remaining chocolate cherries and conveyed it to an appropriate fate. While Monster chewed with a look of positive bliss across her battered face, she groaned in pleasure. "mmmmooooommm"

"You want one for your mom too?" Scootaloo gave a longing look at the last chocolate, and stuffed the lid back on the box before pushing it over to Monster. "Go ahead." The whole group watched as the box levitated up, and then seemed to pass through a razor-thin gap in the world, vanishing from view. It was very cool no matter how many times they had seen it.

"Did your mom teach you how to do that?" asked Sweetie Belle with a note of depression. She still could not do any more than just sparks with her horn, while the other unicorns in their class were all the way up to writing. Dinky could even juggle, although just muffins. Monster's head bobbed in the affirmative.

"I know what we can do! Road trip!" shouted Scootaloo, digging into the chaotic mess of rain coats, galoshes, and sweaters that filled one corner of the clubhouse⁽³⁾, flinging on her saddlebags and grabbing for her scooter. "It solves all our problems. We can go out to Monster's house for the afternoon to get away from being underhoof in town, and have an adventure in the process! How are we set for supplies?"

"A dozen cupcaketh and about a pound of jawbreakerth," said Twist, tossing on her own saddlebags.

"Fourteen image crystals and a telephoto lens," said Featherweight, hefting his bulging saddlebags on over his photographer's vest. "And some pictures."

"Well, Applejack did make me promise to stay at a friend's house, and Monster is a friend," said Apple Bloom after due consideration. "I'll fill up my bags with Early Delicious on the way. How about you, Sweetie Belle?"

"Rarity packed me a quiche, and some broccoli florets. But I traded some of the chocolate-dipped Sweet Dreams Oatie-Nuttie bars from her stash for my Lo-Fat Alfalfa Chews. That way she can't cheat on her diet anymore."

"All right! Cutie Mark Crusaders House Visit!"

"Doesn't really have a ring to it," said Sweetie Belle with a frown.

[center] * * * [/center]

"Why won't you ride in the wagon? We could go so much faster," grouched Scootaloo, plodding

along at a snail's pace behind Monster, with the rest of the students either in the wagon or flying along behind, taking pictures. Their guide into the Everfree simply grunted and carefully skirted a field of blue flowers, taking very specific care to make sure Scootaloo followed in her hoofprints. Monster seemed to be preoccupied, not showing any interest in the handsome large river serpent they passed by **(4)** or the narrow cliff they skirted **(5)**. Even when they traveled by a bunch of scary dead trees frozen into expressions of terror **(6)**, she just kept plodding onward. The only sign Monster was even aware of being followed was the violet aura that grabbed Scootaloo's scooter when she stopped to get a better look. It took over an hour of travel through the forest's dangerous entertainments before the narrow path went over a low hill, and the little fillies all gasped at what they saw **(7)**.

"You live in an abandoned castle," sighed Sweetie Belle in a romantic reverie, looking at the shattered towers and overgrown walls that surrounded a huge castle, with broken windows, and collapsed roofs on all of the huge buildings, the vast majority of which had completely fallen to neglect and years of overgrowth.

"It's a real fixer-upper," said Twist, once she had recovered from slack-jawed amazement.

"Oh, horsefeathers," said Scootaloo with a dismissive wave. "My aunt could have the whole thing in perfect condition inside a week." The deep rumble of a collapsing building raised dust in a wide cloud in the distance as a tower slowly slid to the ground in a pile of broken masonry. "Well, maybe two weeks. She'd have to get an estimate from the insurance company first."

"It don't got no way to get to it," said Apple Bloom, looking at the broken rope bridge that dangled down into a fog-filled ravine between them and the mysterious castle.

"What do you mean?" asked Featherweight, floating closer as he tried to get the best angle on the sun for a photo of the collapsed walls. "It's just... Oh, yeah. No wings."

Further study of the huge ruined castle was placed on hold by an embarrassed clearing of the throat by Monster, who was standing by a thick rose hedge that took up most of the side of the road. For some reason, she was picking roses off of it one at a time and floating them over to her friends.

"kkhhheyy," rasped Monster, taking one of the flowers and eating it as an example.

"Icky is right!" declared Sweetie Belle, sticking her tongue out with half of the rose still on it. "They're bitter. Alright, alright, I'll eat it," she continued at Monster's firm gaze. "They probably have vitamins or mini-rals in them."

Once she had made sure every one of them had eaten a rose, Monster brushed up against the thick rosebush which seemingly recoiled at her touch, leaving a pony-sized hole in the prickly

branches. With a smug expression, she led them all through the bush, although each of the little ponies shied away from the thorny branches which barely touched them gently on the side, as if they were just combing their manes. They emerged on the other side of the hedge in front of an immensely thick tree, which towered up above the encircling rosebush with obvious signs of open windows and a solid-looking door.

"Well. I suppose it's almost as cool as living in an abandoned castle," said Scootaloo, looking up into the huge tree.

"Are you kidding?" Sweetie Belle nearly did a backflip on the grassy ground around the tree. "She lives in a giant tree house [i]right next to a giant unexplored castle![/i] How much cooler could it get?"

Featherweight flapped higher to look over the top of the thorny wall at the castle in question. "It could have ninja ponies in it."

"Or pirates," suggested Scootaloo. "Sky pirates with their airships in the treetop."

"Or thpooky ghothtth in the cathle bathement," added Twist.

"Or could there be, a zebra in this tree?"

"Naa," scoffed Scootaloo. "Zebra's aren't as cool as ghost ninja pirates. Hey, wait."

As one, the entire group turned to look at the strange striped pony standing in the doorway to the treehouse. She looked almost exactly like the zebra picture in their world history book, except for the single gold ring around her neck, and one around her ankle. Two large gold hoop earrings completed the outfit, which contrasted well against her two-color coat and her short-cropped mane. Monster sat rather nervously at her hooves, trading glances back and forth between the zebra and her friends with a look that the little students quickly recognized as an 'I didn't get permission before bringing you over' plea.

"Hello, Mrs. Monster," said Sweetie Belle, trying to sound like her big sister did when she met important clients. "Is Mister Monster at home?"

"What's this? Is it a monster you think I be? Just because I live in a protected tree?" The zebra mare looked down at the little fillies with a twinkle in her eye. "Please forgive me my jest, dears. It's just been so long since I've had guests here. Friends of my little Flower you must be, having traveled so far to reach our tree."

"Flower?" asked Scootaloo, wrinkling her face up in disgust while Monster appeared to be finding a nearby blade of grass positively fascinating.

"I am Zecora, of the Forest Everfree," said the zebra with a nod of her head. "I am a zebra, as any fool can plainly see."

"I can see that," said Scootaloo.

"This is my daughter, adopted as she may be. I named her Flower, to which she disagrees." Behind the zebra's back, Monster stuck her tongue out and made a gagging face.

Sweetie Belle asked, "Is your husband a zebra too?"

"No, only my little Flower and I reside here. Alone, for we have no stallion inside, I fear."

"You talk neat," said Twist, trotting up with a grin. "My name is Twittht."

"I'm Scootaloo, Ma'am."

"My name is Sweetie Belle."

"Ah'm Apple Bloom."

"Yes, my little Flower has shown me many pictures of all of you. Although, of that one, we have very few." The zebra looked up rather purposefully at Featherweight, who suddenly looked stricken.

"Um. Hi. I'm Featherweight. And. Um. We don't have to rhyme when talking to you, do we? Because not much rhymes with my name."

"Of course not, it is just a convention to which I pay little attention. I do not wish to offend, but it would be best if you descend. It is not safe for you to fly around. The thorns protect only those who walk upon the ground."

"Hey, wait a minute." Featherweight looked down at them, then over at the castle and asked, "If I could have just flown over the thorn bush, why did I have to eat that nasty flower too?"

[center] * * * [/center]

The inside of the tree home was just as exciting as they thought, with strange spooky masks and shelves filled with fascinating bottles and powders. The five little ponies had a great time exploring the mysterious rooms and little nooks, looking out the windows at the strange castle ruins, and examining Monster's collection of 'Buks' even though they were all written in a language they could not read. For some reason, their explorations stopped at the well-stocked basement root cellar filled with boring old roots and plants, and Zecora was very stern about keeping them all out of her workroom. Once their initial burst of energy had started to die down,

the zebra gathered the little ponies all up and sat them down in the largest room available for a talk.

The older zebra spoke of ancient times, nearly twelve years ago when the spirits of the sky had foretold great disaster for all of the world, and how she had been chosen to travel here by way of the spirits of the earth to prevent it. When she first had arrived in the ruins of the castle across the ravine, she had discovered her little 'Flower' gravely wounded and near death, but with her care the little pony had survived. She detailed how they left the ruins because of the effects they seemed to have on 'Flower' and the general sense of unease about being in a place that not even the normal creatures of the forest wanted to call home. And for the last twelve seasons, the two of them had lived a rather bumpy life here, in the middle of the hostile forest.

When she was done, the little ones promptly displayed their inability to concentrate on a long and boring story while being distracted by each other and the rest of the fascinating things in the room, by asking questions which had already been answered.

"So how come you don't still live in the spooky castle? That would be so cool," said Apple Bloom. "You said you talk to spirits, so if there were any ghosts, you could just tell them to leave."

Zecora suppressed a sigh of frustration. "There are things in those ruins, ponykind was not meant to know, so I packed up my things, and away we did go. There was much to take, so we could not go far. This tree was available, so now here we are. Although for the coming of darkness I was supposed to prepare, now it seems my only purpose is for Flower to care."

"How bad with Flower hurt?" asked Twist, trying not to look at Monster's disgusted reaction to her mother's choice in names.

The zebra drew the badly scarred unicorn closer with one hoof, and slowly began to stroke her short-cropped mane. "Her body was broken it appeared to me, but her heart was a greater loss I could see. A body is tough and can heal with only scars to show, but a mind is delicate and her recovery?" Zecora sighed and blinked away a tear. "We may never know."

The zebra leaned against her adopted child and sighed. "A mother I was not prepared to become, but once I was here, she needed me to be one. Our life together has not been without cost. Last fall, I had even thought she was lost."

"What happened?" asked Featherweight, still trying to get the correct exposure for the touching mother-daughter photograph.

The zebra continued to gently stroke her daughter's mane while talking. "My little Flower was gone so long, I feared something terrible had gone wrong. A stallion she was in great need of, to feed her innermost greed, uh..." Zecora trailed off, her slow stroking of her daughter's mane

forgotten in the stunned look of ravenous curiosity from the five underage ponies and the raw embarrassment from 'Flower.'

"A tale not for small ears, more from me you shall not hear."

Apple Bloom, with a sneaking suspicion of just what had gone on between Monster and some unnamed stallion [size=10](8)[/size] last fall, attempted to turn the conversation back to more exciting cutie mark earning possibilities. "So when is this big disaster supposed to happen?"

Zecora produced a hoof-full of powder and blew it gently up into the air, where it formed into glittering stars against the ceiling. Indicating one particularly small cluster of stars, she intoned, "Two years ago is what we thought, but somehow the destruction has happened not. The stars that shine upon the night sky's face were to tell us both the time and the place." The indicated star shifted position slightly and moved. "Now the star which predicted this event, has moved to where it was supposed to be sent. So the disaster which was long delayed, will happen soon, to my great dismay."

"Any idea when?" asked Featherweight, checking his supply of extra image crystals just in case.

"Exactly when, I cannot say. It might even be today. The stars show both what was, and what will be, so precision is one thing I cannot see. Only an Imetabiriwa na Anga can talk with the stars, a gift that I must say is not one of ours."

The little ponies were distracted as the zebra and Monster suddenly looked to one side of the room where one of the large scary wooden masks was hanging on the wall. Zecora looked concerned, and spoke directly to the mask. "What is it you say, oh wise one of the air? There is nothing to fear, but we should still beware?"

Scootaloo gave a yawn and asked, "Zecora, who are you talking too?"

"Not all that exists are things you can see. There are some tricks here, within my tree."

The faint rattle and hissing of an object on the floor behind the small ponies drew Monster's attention. She got up to investigate, but stopped when Zecora abruptly held a hoof across her chest. "Did you not hear the words she said? If we interfere, they will all be dead." The zebra's gesture swept over the small ponies, all collapsing onto the floor with loud snores. "I know not what she has seen, but we must trust..." Wavering, the zebra fell to the floor with the small ponies, leaving Monster to collapse moments later as the sleeping gas took hold.

[center] * * * [/center]

It only took a few minutes for the sleeping gas residue to clear out of the tree before a series of identical white pegasi in golden armor began to slip in through the open windows to remove the

sleeping ponies back to the place where they would be imprisoned. The last white pegasus to leave the tree paused to extinguish the fire burning under a large pot in the workroom, and carefully checked the rest of the tree for untended fires. It would not do for any unwanted incident to alert Princess Cadence and her entourage to the upcoming ambush.

After all, the Queen of the Changelings had planned many years for this day. And everything was going to be perfect.

[hr]

(1) Not well enough.

(2) Really, she should have

[url=<http://evil-dec0y.deviantart.com/art/Trixie-Vs-Derpy-2-299770322?moodonly=24>] told somepony [/url]

(3) A place to quickly shed all those extra rain boots, coats and sweaters that big ponies tended to force little ponies to wear in the nicest of weather.

(4) With many photos taken, including several that looked suspiciously posed to get the best view of his fantastic mane and moustache.

(5) No pony admitted to being scared, although they all gave quite a few nervous looks down the cliff.

(6) Which probably would have been more scary in the dark.

(7) Except for Featherweight, who was too busy taking pictures.

(8) Most likely large, red, and very much related. Having grown up on a farm, she had a slightly more advanced idea of male-female relationships than her fellow students. Although the thought that her own brother might have been part of this 'relationship' was more than a little disconcerting.

Author note:

Time goes by in this chapter from late spring to summer June 21 is summer solstice. This chapter should end June 20

-End chapter 11-

-Chapter 12-

[center]The Monster in the Twilight

[color=black][b]Queen[/b][/color]/[center]

[hr]

If not for the need for concealment, the temporary changeling hive would have towered over the Everfree Forest. Thousands of trees for miles around had been chewed down by changeling drones and transported to the site, day and night for months in preparation for the invasion.

Ground into a fine paste by changeling magic and jaws, imbued with carefully hoarded love mixed with liberally applied changeling secretions, the wooden paste dried into cells and chambers for the thousands of changelings Queen Chrysalis had summoned from the farthest reaches of the land. There would be no second chances for this invasion. It would require overwhelming force to break the pony princess who ruled the land as well as a deception that cut right to the heart of the ancient ruler.

This was the day the younger alicorn would travel on her yearly trip away from Canterlot to Cavillia to prepare for the Summer Sun Celebration. She would arrive, as usual, with her entourage of guards and overstiff husband. Then a few days later, after making the usual visits and ceremonies, she would return back to Canterlot. Only the real Princess Cadence would be tucked safely away into a pod in the base of the hive, while the queen took her place in order to feast on the love of the Cavillian ponies for their sweet princess. When she 'returned' to Canterlot, it would be with an advance force of disguised drones as well as a belly filled with powerful love. The infiltrators in Canterlot had relayed back delightful news about the ancient princess' weakness, and Queen Chrysalis looked forward to the upcoming days when the pretentious lout who had stood in her way for so long would be nothing but food in a pod.

Then the true feasting would occur.

The rattle of chitin on the stairs cut short the wonderful thoughts Chrysalis was having about the love of thousands of ponies at her command, bringing her back to the sour reek of the new hive as well as the sweltering heat that even her open balcony could not dissipate. The changeling drone that simpered and bowed at the doorway was one of hundreds out searching the immediate area for guilty bystanders so that when Cadence and her guards were ambushed and dragged back to the hive, there would be no unfortunate witnesses. The drone reported the capture of seven ponies, five of them very young and two strange older ones, all of whom had been tucked into pods in the extraction chamber. Chrysalis took a deep breath to savor the feeling of young love filtering throughout the entire hive. There was nothing else like it on the planet. Perhaps when she took over Canterlot, she would have a special chamber built to hold only the small ones. They dreamed so vibrantly and spread their delicious love to the winds with wild abandon.

"Show me," she commanded the drone. "Start with the little ones."

It amused her that the drone took so much effort to change into the smaller forms. The little unicorn filly looked most usable for the invasion. With her green eyes she would not be noticed casting changeling magic. Still, it was difficult for her drones to hold shapes smaller than themselves, and the possibility of them popping out of their disguise prematurely was not worth the risk. She stopped the drone, who was in the form of an orange pegasus filly and trying hopelessly to fly. "Enough with this. Show me the two older ones."

The first form he changed into was hideous, even more so than the ponies were normally.

Warped and twisted with interlocking patches of scars and burns, it must have been some unfortunate wretch who fled into the Everfree rather than endure the taunts and insults of their perfect pony society. She needed bodies who would pass unnoticed in Canterlot, not cause other ponies to flee in disgust. "Show me the last one."

As the green fire of transformation died out, Queen Chrysalis looked in astonishment. "A zebra?" she blurted out loud. "Here?"

[center] * * * [/center]

The conversion chamber fairly glowed with power as the seven lumpy pods transferred their love through the hive. Five of them throbbed with brilliant light, their small inhabitants floating in the regenerative goo experiencing happy childish dreams that made the air of the small underground chamber feel filled with sunshine and laughter. The two larger pods remained stubbornly dim, barely able to sustain their glow. The supervising changeling gave one of the dim pods a poke with his hoof, in the age-old troubleshooting technique of minor physical violence. It did not help.

If he had been more observant, he would have noticed the inhabitant of the other pod had twisted around when being stuffed inside, so all four hooves were placed firmly against the thick pod skin, as if she wanted to maximize her hoof pressure against the membrane that imprisoned her.

The changeling chittered in irritation. The goo that filled the pods was difficult to create, using critically needed love that should properly be circulating through the hive and feeding the hunger of thousands of changeling drones, so they would be strong for the upcoming invasion. At least the other five were making up for these two stubborn old ponies. He gave the pod another poke, watching the scarred pony inside continue to writhe as if it were in pain. No creature should feel pain once they were placed in a pod, only pleasurable dreams as they relived their favorite memories of loved ones and happy times. This one must have been defective. It certainly looked weird and twisted enough to be sick or born strange. The pod goo was a powerful healing substance capable of accepting even mortally wounded ponies and keeping them healthy for many years of their captivity until they became too exhausted to be productive. Unfortunately it gave a slimy texture to the flesh after a few years, making an expended pony unsuitable for the larder. If this one was sick, it would not be healthy to eat either.

The scarred pony in the pod gave a convulsive heave, jamming hooves against the tough skin of the pod before thrashing about in what looked like death throes. His jagged horn was sharp enough and he knew the counterspell to penetrate the pod with one quick thrust and kill the stupid pony, but that would spoil the goo and the queen would undoubtedly be upset. There was a trick he had heard of once, called 'priming the pump' for some reason. If the pony would not release the love inside, sometimes a little jolt of love into them would unjam whatever was holding the precious substance back. There was certainly enough love coursing through the

chamber; noling would miss just a little bit. He focused a little thread of love from each of the little pods and began to channel it into the spasming creature, unaware of the deadly mistake he had just made.

[center] * * * [/center]

Monster was very small, and looked very strange. Her entire body was a uniform purple, with no scars or pains, and when she felt her head, her horn felt almost like a nub. The room she was in looked familiar, with a square soft lumpy thing to sleep on, and along the wall were boxy things filled with weird objects that opened at the touch of a hoof. The windows to the outside were covered in what looked like shiny solid air, and thick cloths blocked the sun.

Most importantly, there were shelves. With books. Lots of books. From the floor to the ceiling. Next to the sleeping pillow. On all the walls. Scattered across the floor. Monster even looked at the ceiling to make sure there were none there.

“Buks!” she cried, diving to the floor and rolling around with glee, unaware of the sounds of hoofsteps on the stairs outside her door. “Buks! Buks! Buks!”

[center] * * * [/center]

Darkness roiled about the moon, coiling in whorls and eddies like a wine-dark sea about the shoals and rocks of a dangerous coast. The Nightmare was impatient, despite the nearness of her release that coursed through every fiber of her being. Something new had been added to her long-planned revenge, a taste of fear that enlivened her dark soul. A new tiny prey to torture.

Long had Nightmare toyed with the simpering princess who previously owned this body, holding out the possibility of escape, only to consume more of the weak-minded fool’s power as she would rise to the bait. Over the centuries, she had grown bored with the game. Luna had embedded herself far too deeply in this body. Every time she could be lured into the open, another bit of her spirit would be consumed, true. But the remains of the alicorn princess constantly became more difficult to find, let alone provoke into foolishly striking out. This body had been weak even before suffering a thousand years of imprisonment. It would be foal’s play to lure the Sister of the Sun into attempting to sacrifice herself in order to save her precious little ponies, and with that sacrifice, the Nightmare would gain a new body, even more powerful than this one. Although it would have its own stubborn little resident to evict.

Plans change.

“Tell me, my little princess,” purred the Nightmare, pulling back the cloak of darkness from the Dreamscape just enough to show the little purple unicorn rolling among her precious books. “Do you think this one will do me even better as a vessel than your beloved sister? The power

is there, just waiting my guidance. And no troublesome little mind of any consequence to bother with. How delicious it will be to use the very tool your sister planned to use on me, to instead destroy the both of you. And soon. So very soon.”

[center] * * * [/center]

Monster looked up from her book-bath. She had heard something. A voice, just barely on the edge of hearing. Her head snapped around as the door to the room swung open, revealing a white unicorn colt with a disturbing smile.

“Hello Twilight Sparkle, my dear sister,” he purred. “So glad you feel at ease.”

[color=silver][i]run[/i][/color]

“I just have one little thing we need to do before you can relax in your books forever. It won’t take long,” he promised, moving closer in a sinuous fashion that was very un-colt like.

[color=silver][i]thou shouldst run now![/i][/color]

“Bad!” blurted Monster, backing into a bookcase and lighting her horn.

“You wouldn’t strike your own brother, now. Would you?” Dark fires seemed to burn in his eyes as he leaned in close, lighting his own horn with an indigo hue of magic in response.

[color=silver][i]no! run twilight![/i][/color]

Dark magic skittered across her purple coat, bringing a frosty chill to the room as she lowered her horn — then turned to one side to blow a hole in the wall, galloping through it and away as fast as her little filly hooves could carry her.

“Wait up, you impetuous brat!” The form of Shining Armor dissolved into black smoke and vanished out the hole in pursuit.

Monster kept her head down and ran like she had never run before, her little hooves tearing up divots in the grassy paths of the frightening town seemingly filled with ponies, every one of them adding another spike of terror surging through her tiny body. Their familiar faces seemed to tug at her memories, every look or call to her throwing her thoughts into chaos. Behind, the calls of the strangely familiar white colt continued, making her heart fling itself in two different directions.

[i]brother. brother is good. why run? no, that thing is not brother! [/i]

A familiar pink dome of force slammed down from above, dropping a wall right in front of her. With an animalistic snarl, she turned around, ripping nearby trees and paving stones into the air

to fight the pursuing creature.

[color=silver][i]no! thou must not fight her! she will consume you as she did me![/i]/color]

The white colt walked deliberately towards Monster, with measured steps and a cruel smile.

“Fight!” she growled weakly, glaring at the smiling white colt through a pink haze of pain.

[color=silver][i]no! please don't. she will devour you too. i have killed far too many with my hate. [/i]/color]

Monster whined and collapsed flat onto the ground, beating the stub of her tail against the ground in agony. Her head screamed in torturous pain like something had torn her skull open and was pouring salt into the wound. Blurred images of the white colt flashed before her, all of them smiling, but none of them with cruelty. It had to be a lie. They were all lies. All of the white and pink ponies flying through her mind shattered into pieces and were smashed back together again, stealing a precious bit of herself with every cycle. She was deaf to the sounds of the rocks and trees flung away in her torment, unable to see the look of pure pleasure on the white colt as she thrashed out her life on the grass.

The sharp tang of blood filled her mouth and nose, strangling her, flowing into her lungs in a gurgling sentence of death. Monster was going to die. Helpless. The normal low buzz of pain from her horn was gone, replaced by a white-hot spike that seemingly had been hammered into her skull in its place. Every minor ache or pain in her abused hide was slowly fizzing away in an acidic burning which covered her entire body with pain, a worse agony than the big white pony with wings had ever inflicted. To be wrapped again into the fiery embrace of the sun would have been a blessed respite, but even that was beyond her reach as the ball of fire seemed as distant as if it were hiding from her.

[color=silver][i]don't give up! [/i]/color]

On some level she was aware of the colt drawing even closer, wearing that same cruel smile as he luxuriated in her pain and impotence. The last sparks of resistance in her heart spluttered to a halt. She had lost. Even mom and bloom and twiht and the rest of her friends were gone from her, abandoned and forgotten. The hammering of her panicked heart slowed as the false colt leaned over to look into her eyes.

[color=silver][i]she lies! [/i]/color]

A black fire burned inside him, a cold blaze that shed no light or heat, only consumed into a heartless darkness and demanded more. An insatiable thirst for something it could not have, but was willing to destroy the whole world to prevent any others from having it. She knew that hunger well, having bathed in its light ever so briefly years ago, and never having known a

moments peace ever since. Perhaps now she would finally—

A hammerblow seemed to pin Monster to the ground as a coruscating blast of light smashed down from the sky. The colt fell backwards in shock, but the light did not hurt Monster. Instead it purged the pain from her soul while filling her very being with the peace she felt when being around bloom and the others. The swelling sense of pride when bloom stood up for her. The smile that feather could bring to her face, even when she didn't feel like it. The touch to her heart when scoots brought her precious treasures, and how she was always there for her. The melting of her insides with the love wrapped up inside every candy twit made. And the solid intransigence of sweetie who could not be distracted from telling things exactly the way she saw them. Power surged through her entire being in a ripple of ecstasy while the white colt cringed backwards with all of her pain shoved upon him.

She stood up in one long motion, ripping away the false image of a filly to feel the ground under her own warped hooves and the wind across her patchy coat.

“No.” Monster stood facing the stunned colt, finally recognizing the dream world around her for what it was. “Liar.”

[color=silver][i]don't fight her. escape while you can! [/i][/color]

The colt flared into indigo light, reappearing as a dark winged unicorn wrapped in armor, with the glowing slit eyes of a dragon. “You pitiful fool. Now you shall truly face the power of Night—”

Rearing up on her hind legs, Monster brought her horn down in one long swipe. The Dreamscape peeled away to both sides as she cascaded forward out of the changeling pod in a puddle of green goo. The corpse of the changeling caretaker sliced nearly in half cushioned her landing as she lay on the raw earth of the floor, hacking and gagging to get the rest of the goop out of her lungs.

“Bad,” she gasped, poking at the dead changeling. Looking around revealed no more of the creatures, and the one doorway into the room seemed empty for the moment. The underground world was painfully sharp in her vision, the pains and the clouds that fogged her brain much farther away, although not totally missing. She could see her friends in their own green pods, and mom strangely seeming quite comfortable in her own. The instinct to rage and destroy began to build up inside her chest, a pleasurable feeling of having things to destroy in all directions as far as she could sense. There was power wrapped in the walls of this place, just waiting to be tapped. She drank it in hungrily after her long starvation, exalting as the feeling of power once again coursed through her veins, filling every speck of her being with fury and revenge. The green of changeling magic wrapped her in its embrace, flaring every color of the rainbow as she stepped forward — with a crunching noise as her hoof crushed something on the floor.

She glanced down, irritated at the distraction only to recoil as she saw the fragmented bits of a broken camera under her hoof.

[i]Bugs hurt friends on purpose. Monster hurt friends by accident. Friends still hurt.[/i]

The force of destruction in her soul that screamed for release fought viciously as she began to force it down. Bit by bit, she wrapped the hatred in iron bands, forcing it to her will as she had never resisted it before. Erratic bursts of power slipped from her grasp and splattered fire across the chamber, setting the rugged cellulose of the walls smoldering in places and recoiling like a striking snake against one hapless changeling who decided to poke his nose into the chamber to find out what all the commotion was about. The fire ate him into nothingness, leaving only a few smoking limbs spasming in the doorway.

Monster clung desperately to the small frightened voice she had heard in the pod. To release her fury on the creatures who attacked her friends would certainly kill both the bugs and her friends. The glare of white power from her eyes slowly faded as she regained control, wrestling the changeling power under her will. The love of the changelings was powerful, but far too easy to convert to hatred, and impossible to change back.

Nobody told Monster.

One tiny fragment at a time, she scourged her cached power, twisting the hatred and fear back into the original love stolen from the hive. It still itched at every hair on her hide for release, but the raving song of destruction no longer sang in her soul. Instead, there was something new. Something she had not felt for so long, she had forgotten what it felt like, or even what it was called.

Almost absent-mindedly, she lifted the broken camera to her eyes while shoving a massive plug of hive material through the only doorway into the conversion chamber. This was too important to be allowed to be interrupted. Screws, bolts, and housings unwound and unbent, while fragments of glass hovered as the broken camera turned into a floating cloud of parts, every single part marked and noted as to its form and function. The broken glass was first, as she brought the shattered fragments back together and allowed them to flow. There was a near-invisible coating on the lens that had to be duplicated exactly, as well as the shape and size that took all of her concentration until it was just perfect. Reassembling the camera and bending the rest of the parts to their correct dimensions was anticlimactic, much like assembling a puzzle. She slipped the rebuilt camera back into Featherweight's saddlebag, which had been thrown on the floor with the rest of their possessions as the changelings had prepared her friends before putting them in the pods.

Her friends were all still there, each bobbing along in their own pod and releasing waves of power that she could not help but feel, even though she dared not touch them with the heady

roar of power that already filled her every pore. Fragile. They would not be so easily fixed as a camera. Brother's shield spell could protect them, but it could only be cast from the inside, and even Monster could not hold the spell up forever. Eventually it would fail, and then the bugs would attack them again. She could destroy the bad bugs, but mom and her friends would certainly get hurt. The small, frightened voice she heard inside the pod wanted her to run, but her teleportation spell was far too dangerous to use on others. Monster would be free, but her friends would still be trapped.

There had to be another way.

"tink twilight tink," she mumbled, resting her horn against the wall, which gave softly under her pressure. A roar of fire seemed to fill her chest, exploding out along all of her nerve endings as an avalanche of facts clicked into place. Monster had a name. Twilight. This place was made out of wood, or cellulose. There was a transformation spell to change that into a different form, which would be much more appropriate for the creatures who wanted to hurt mom and her friends. The pink shield spell brother used became stronger the more power it was fed. This place was just filled with power, waiting to be used. It all bloomed across her mind in one beautiful equation, and Monster, that is Twilight, began to act.

[center] * * * [/center]

High in the top of the hive, the drone looked back at Queen Chrysalis with zebra eyes and spoke:

[i]You are the changeling queen, I do presume
You locked us away, our love to consume
When you sealed us in this tiny room
Your time was set, I see your doom[/i]

Queen Chrysalis narrowed her eyes and glared at the drone. "This is not funny. You've proven you can hold that form correctly, but we do not need a zebra when we invade Canterlot."

The disguised drone did not seem to notice at first, looking around the room with a deep calm that brought a chill up Chrysalis' carapace. It was almost as if the zebra had actually — no, that was quite impossible. No magic of unicorn or changeling could control a transformation. But this was a zebra.

"Who are you?" she asked carefully while circling the 'zebra', trying to figure out what was going on.

The zebra turned, as if listening to some unheard noise, then said with a sly smile:

[i]My name is not needed, if I shall be so rude

Your life is now over. Oh queen, you are scr—^[i]

The entire hive trembled as an incandescent bolt of pure energy punched up from the depths of the hive, vaporizing the disguised drone, the floor for several yards around him, and expending the rest of its fury upon the open sky. Chrysalis stumbled backwards, her mane smoking as she turned and flew blindly off the balcony in a vain attempt to escape.

She was too late.

[center] * * * [/center]

^[i]One: Ventilation^[/i]

Drawing on the power of the hive, Twilight fired an incandescent blast of power straight up, blowing through the entire hive until the sun was revealed.

^[i]Two: Transformation^[/i]

“Cee Six Ach Ten Oh Five plus En Two plus Oh Two equals Cee Six Ach Eight Two En Oh Two Oh Five plus Ach Two,” muttered Twilight, horn jammed into the wall of the hive as the brilliant radiance of love-powered magic flowed through her. The transformation spell was fairly easy on a small scale, but now the thick walls of the entire hive began to change in color and composition to a very much more dangerous substance. Without a good source of nitric acid, she drew upon the love supply of the hive to ruthlessly strip oxygen and nitrogen straight out of the surrounding air and humidity, making the forest air roar through the entire hive in a frigid blast. Frost formed on all of the exposed surfaces of the hive as the magic drew energy for the endothermic reaction, quenching the smoldering fires even as it left the atmosphere billowing above the upper hive mostly hydrogen. For a few moments.

^[i]Three: Fuse^[/i]

Ignoring the ripping noises of the changelings tearing at the blocked conversion chamber doorway, Twilight ignited a small floating ball of fire in midair, which slowly began to drift downwards to the transformed floor.

^[i]Four: Shield^[/i]

Brother’s shield spell wrapped Twilight and the six remaining pods, leaving the changelings who broke into the room puzzled to find only a giant pink bubble, and a small burning ball falling slowly to the ground.

Until it touched wood, now transformed to nitrocellulose.

[center] * * * [/center]

“What in heaven’s name?” Every eye of every pony in the Canterlot castle who were attending Royal Court turned to the south-west, where the double-flash a few moments ago preceded a

distant cloud of smoke, climbing into the sky. Princess Celestia watched in slack-jawed amazement as the roiling pillar of smoke began to spread out at the top, looking very much like a mushroom.

"It has to be Twilight," she whispered under her breath, still counting seconds until the stentorian bass rumble of far-off lightning rattled the windows of the Royal Court.

"I'm going, Aunt Celestia. And you can't stop me." Princess Cadence glared at her from inches away, her position at her side in the Royal Court abandoned as she peeled off her court dress right in front of the scandalized court. There were so many things she wanted to say to her niece, knowing she would never see her again. Tears welled up inside her, pouring out of her burning eyes as she swept the young alicorn in for a loving hug.

"Be careful," sobbed Celestia. "After you are done in the forest, I want you to promise me you will keep right on going to Cavillia for the Summer Sun Celebration and not look back. No matter what, you must be in Cavillia tonight!"

"Aunt Celestia, what..." Cadence hesitated in her own hug, before returning her aunt's embrace wholeheartedly, holding the older alicorn as if she knew she would never see her again. Finally she broke their embrace, to look deep into Celestia's streaming eyes. "I've spoken with your student. I know."

"She could not possibly know," whispered Princess Celestia. "She was my last hope, but even though I believe she could control the power, she could not make friends even when the world depends on it. The Elements will never open to the touch of an alicorn again because of my foolishness; only a mortal could use them to destroy the empty shell of that monster. This shall be my final task."

"There must be another way," whispered Cadence. "Another pony. Shining Armor is strong, perhaps—"

"You have never touched the Elements. They would consume him like a match. I could not do that to you, even to save my..." Princess Celestia trailed off, caught in memories a thousand years old.

"Sister. I know, Aunt Celestia. I know." Cadence brought a hoof gently to her aunt's cheek to wipe away tears while the Royal Court in the background murmured among themselves loudly enough to drown out any attempt at eavesdropping on the two princesses' moment together.

"It is my fault Luna is dead." Celestia blinked back her tears and swallowed hard. "If I fail, all of Equestria will follow. You must be strong when I am gone."

"Please, Aunt Celestia. Allow me to stand with you."

“No.”

The violet gazes of two princesses clashed with an almost audible hiss, only to have the youngest blink first. Cadence turned her head to look at the floor while tears of her own joined those of her aunt. “You be careful, please. I don’t know what you are planning, but... I will always love you, Aunt Celestia. No matter what happens. Remember that.”

The flutter of pegasus wings outside the window made the two alicorns realize their moment was over. Cadence galloped over to the air chariot with her husband, her mottled armor sitting inside and ready to be put on while in flight. She hesitated at the edge of the chariot, before leaping onboard, sparing her aunt a quick tear-filled glance as the guards flung themselves into the sky.

Behind her, Princess Celestia motioned the Captain of the Guard to her side. “I want every pegasus you have in the air to follow Princess Cadence and assist her in whatever she commands. Every one of them, on duty or off, and I want them in the air [i]now[/i]. I will fly myself to the Summer Sun Festival in Ponyville tomorrow morning.”

“Your Highness,” he gasped. “I can’t possibly allow—” Whatever he had to say was cut off abruptly in his throat as Princess Celestia met his eyes, and he was suddenly reminded just why she was the Princess of the Sun. “Yes, Your Highness. Immediately.”

[center] * * * [/center]

“I think my sis has been taking it easy on us,” quipped Shining Armor, looking down into the giant crater in the middle of the Everfree Forest. For about a half-mile circle, there was nothing but bare earth scrubbed as clean and as flat as if a giant razor had descended from the heavens and swept across the ground. Beyond that were the beginnings of a jumble of smoldering trees, building in density as the distance from the center increased to form a fuzzy bowl with a thick rim around the crater. Huge trees had been flung deeply into the woods and knocked down dozens of their own kind. Shining Armor and his unusually silent wife had passed more than a few that had to be older than the age of their entire entourage combined, tossed aside and broken like charred matchsticks.

Then there were the bodies. Very few of the black chitin-covered insects were intact, mostly missing limbs or heads, if not smashed into nearly unrecognizable goo. Cadance had tersely identified them as members of the changeling race, not normally found this far into the kingdom. The sky fairly bustled with pegasi, both armored and not, as they busied themselves with the mostly futile effort to find survivors among the strange creatures.

A Royal Guard in his golden armor flapped up to their chariot, and saluted. “Princess Cadence. Captain Shining Armor, Sir. We’ve found something in the center of the crater.”

[center]-----[/center]

Twilight grinned with savage joy as the ground bucked and heaved beneath her hooves. They hurt mom. They hurt friends. Now they hurt. The pink bubble surrounding them trembled as her ears popped, then popped again, but the power she poured into the spell kept all the bad things away until the rumbling beneath her hooves died down to a deathly silence. Finally she relaxed, and heaved a deep breath. It was over.

It took only a slight motion with her horn to peel away the green pod from mom, her stripes looking pale in the reflected pink light of the dome as she hacked and coughed the green goo away. There was a haunted look about the zebra, and she seemed to be much more cryptic than even normal.

“My child who I love, I have doubts to confess. While I was trapped in there, I felt great duress. I must thank you for setting me free, but outside are things the little ones must not see.”

She looked upset at Twilight’s attempt to open one of her friend’s pods anyway, and batted aside her horn with a strong hoof, something she had never done before. Instead she pointed at the pink bubble surrounding them all and stomped one hoof in anger.

Twilight had been looking forward to showing all of her friends how she had saved them, but mom looked very determined, and Twilight knew better than to fight the older zebra. With a wave of her horn, Twilight banished the pink bubble.

And felt her stomach twist in agony.

All around her, the forest soil had been scoured down to bare rock, with only the area protected by the bubble remaining intact. A sharp slope led down to the scrubbed ground, the strong breeze allowing her to see off into the distance where the surrounding trees had been heaped up all around the crater in smoking and smoldering rings, covered in thousands of little black dots.

Bodies.

Or at least parts of bodies. Twilight staggered to the edge of the slope they would have to traverse to escape the crater and threw up violently. Every single one of those little black specks was a living being, or had been a living creature just like bloom and mom and twist and feather. Now they were dead.

“Not Twilight,” she muttered. “Monster. Monster kill. Animal.”

-End chapter 12-

-Chapter 13-

[center][b]The Monster in the Twilight[/b]

[color=purple]Judgement[/color]/[center]

[hr]

In the Everfree, nothing lasts forever. Within years, the crater left behind by the exploding hive would be nothing but a shallow lake with few visible traces of the destruction involved in its creation. Months from now, the stripped carapaces of the dead changelings would be converted into valuable nutrients for the wealth of hydrophytic vegetation that would clog the shallow edges of the water, providing cover for predator and prey alike. Weeks from now, the piles of wood would have dried enough to spontaneously catch fire in fits and spurts as fire ants performed their role in the ecosystem. Days from now the bodies would be picked over by predator and scavenger alike, everything from tiny insects to massive creatures who only prowled at night to conceal their hideous features from even their own kind.

Today the piles of changeling dead were the focus of something strange and different to the Everfree, of such interest that the normal denizens watched in hiding from behind the treeline. They did not seem to be scavengers or predators, for instead of devouring the widely scattered pieces of changeling bodies, they seemed to take great interest in the living ones. The strange multicolored creatures brought with them all types of wagons and carts, and spread throughout the devastation with amazing precision. Creatures with glowing horns pointed out living changelings, other of the creatures moved fallen trees and rocks to bring them out, and the creatures with wings loaded the battered and stunned changelings onto their flying conveyances and vanished off into the distance. It was all very strange to the forest.

If the Everfree was truly alive, it might have wondered why the creatures picking their way through the bodies in search of the living were casting nervous eyes at the descending sun, as if they feared the oncoming night.

[center] * * * [/center]

Standing in the center of the massive crater with his wife, Shining Armor could not help but feel cold sweat drip down the inside of his armor in the baking late-afternoon sun.

It would be dark in a few hours, before which time Cadence and himself would have to depart in order to be at Cavillia as promised, leaving the nauseating job of rescue to the myriad of pegasi who had flocked to the rescue effort, both military and many civilians. It itched at his sense of duty to abandon them all to fly with Cadence to the carefree town of her childhood while the rescue crews still searched the piles of the dead for the rare living. Many of the surviving changelings did not have a mark on them but simply curled up helplessly as if their life was being leached away, or just stared out into space with bleeding ears. Despite his early

flippancy, there was a dark shadow that tugged at Shining Armor's soul to think of his sister as somepony who could kill this many with a single spell. And worse, it was his fault.

The sharp chemical tang of smoke forced Shining Armor's mind back to the days just before Twilight took her entrance exam for Celestia's school. Days of constant studying and preparation had driven the little filly into one of her normal fits of neurotic nerves that even double-chocolate ice cream had not been able to budge. As any good big brother would do, he had decided a distraction was in order. Sustained use of the Flashpaper spell throughout the house gave a sharp itch to everypony's nose for weeks afterwards, in particular on the back porch where the discovery had been made that Miss Smarty Pants could indeed briefly fly like a pegasus. After parents and a certain filly-sitter had returned to find out just what Twilight and her big brother had been up to, cooler and older heads prevailed before the distraction had turned into too much destruction. Cookies had been liberally doled out along with a stern lecture, and sincere promises had been made that she or Miss Smarty Pants would never use the spell again.

And she had used it to kill.

He could not help but look at the muddy floor where Twilight must have been imprisoned. Two open pods and two sets of side-by-side hoofprints leading away meant his sister had somepony else. Somepony who did not wear horseshoes, and who had no hesitation about trotting off with her into the surrounding forest. It meant Twilight actually had somepony who cared for her.

He was both happy and sad at the realization.

Twilight was alive, and had a friend. Had he discovered this at any time other than in the bottom of a huge crater where she had killed thousands of living beings, his heart would have been singing for joy. The little sister that he had sought for twelve years, who Cadence had hoof-sewn dozens of Miss Smarty Pants dolls for in hopes of triggering a memory, was not lost forever. Some part of her mind was still there. She was not simply a ravening beast of destruction who could pull down the sun, but some little spark of the tiny filly he loved so much still burned inside her battered body.

Perhaps too much of a spark.

The folded piece of grubby cloth set to one side of the hoofprints must have been one of the first Miss Smarty Pants dolls Cadence had faithfully made for their expeditions into the forest. It had always seemed such a futile gesture after each trip into that hellish forest to leave the new doll behind, but he had not argued with his marefriend, and later his wife. Cadence seemed to leave a tiny little bit of her heart behind in the forest with the doll every time they returned, whether in despair over not finding Twilight, or in anguish at the way she lashed out when they did find her. Shining Armor still worried that someday he would come home to find his wife gone away into the Everfree all by herself, never to return. He was not sure if he could resist the same urge

without her loving presence, allowing the thick green of the trees and swamp to tracelessly swallow him up.

The flattened and patched doll now rested tightly against his wife's side, held as if by physical contact the Princess of Love could somehow pass her reassurance over the distance to the traumatized little unicorn she could not help but care deeply about. He had once thought of Miss Smarty Pants as the ugly step-sister of stuffed animals, a badly sewn pony made of scraps and loose stitches that nopony could possibly love. Twilight had seen something else, a doll who needed love [i]because[/i] of her shortcomings even more than the other little fillies with their perfect little stuffed creatures who never had a hair out of place or lacked a plastic smile. Other little fillies needed their dolls; Miss Smarty Pants needed her Twilight, to the extent that Shining Armor often had absent-mindedly forgotten that she was a doll when distributing cookies or treats. Someone that close to your heart was never given up without loss. He tried not to think of his own well-worn Sir Armor action figure, buried below spousal detection depths in boxes of his old things and camouflaged with an old hoofball trophy. What depths of despair was Twilight going through that she would cast away her lifelong friend in this way?

[center] * * * [/center]

In a small clearing in the Everfree Forest, a sufficient distance away from the crater so as not to have any obvious dead changelings scattered about, a small group of very different ponies did very different things. The largest of the group, striped in black and white, stood calmly to one side with her eyes closed and all four hooves firmly planted in the thick, rich forest soil. She said nothing at all, but her head was in constant movement, glancing back and forth as if she were watching a large number of things through her closed eyes.

Four of the smallest ponies were gathered together with the jumbled pile of their possessions, separating out the various foodstuffs from camera equipment while chattering away with each other about the adventure they had today while lamenting a general lack of additional cutie marks from the experience. The fifth little pony had just emerged from the last pod, all covered in green goop with the emergence being properly documented by the clicking noise of Featherweight's camera. Despite being urged for a picture posed with the collapsing pod, the little red-maned pony went promptly over to Monster and gave her a hug and a messy green kiss on the cheek.

"Thank you Monthter. Aaaa-thooo!" Twist backed off a bit, and looked her depressed friend over carefully before asking, "Guyth. How long were we trapped?"

"Just a couple hours by my watch," said Featherweight, proudly holding up his timepiece. "We've only got a few hours before nightfall, so I'm a little more worried about where we are." The little colt finished his sentence with a badly-suppressed giggle, which set off the other little ponies too, but it took Twist to ask the question they were all thinking.

“Then why doth Monthter look like thee’th been thwimming in purple cotton candy?”

[center] * * * [/center]

Monster had been trapped within her own thoughts ever since she had plodded listlessly through the body-strewn crater, carrying five little green pods and a collection of saddlebags in her wake. The green goop that coated her legs almost to the knees was not only the result of being in a pod, but also the blood and other bodily fluids of the changeling corpses and shattered pieces of corpses she had blindly walked through, instead of around like Zecora. The bodies had been so pervasive as they had reached the rim of the crater that her mind had finally shut down rather than watch the reflexive twitches inside the thick piles of corpses.

[i]Nothing could have survived that. There can't be anypony alive under that pile. Just keep walking. Don't think. Just walk. There had to have been another — No! Just walk. Would it be easier to kill now? Does each shattered corpse lower the threshold until murder becomes a simple reaction? Don't think. Just walk. What if I am so numb to murder that I could kill one of my friends?[/i]

Any experienced medical pony would have recognized the beginning symptoms of shock on the young mare, from her dilated, staring eyes to her short, panting breaths and clammy skin. Although a doctor might look twice at the light purple fuzz that covered her entire body like some sort of pony-peach right down to the end of her tail, which had developed somewhat of a purple pom-pom appearance. Lacking a mirror, Monster had not really realized what had happened to her until Twist's outburst, which soaked into her depressed mind rather slowly. But it did soak.

“Aahm purple,” blurted out Monster in shock, holding a trembling, green-splotched leg up for inspection, then twisting around to look over her purple-fuzzed back. The fuzz did not wipe off, but the green goop that smeared on her hide when she tried sent spasmodic little twitches of nausea up and down her stomach. There was no obvious explanation for the fuzzy phenomena, and she could not bear to think of the origin of the green, sticky blood, so she quickly resorted to a technique that had stood her well for many years. One smeary and slightly fuzzy purple hoof gently prodded the silent zebra. “Mom?”

The meditative zebra touched hooves with her adoptive daughter without opening her eyes. “Beloved Flower, restrain your power. Please be calm without alarm. There is nought on you that shall cause harm.”

“Do ya think it's from the green goop?” asked Apple Bloom, trying to get the last of the icky stuff off with leaves from a nearby tree. “What if we all turn fuzzy purple?”

“Ewww!” Sweetie Belle rubbed the leaves against her last few green splotches with renewed vigor, taking an additional bundle in her magic to enthusiastically wipe down the sections of her back she could not reach. “I don't want to be purple.”

“Purple’t h not that bad,” said Twist, rubbing a clump of leaves over Monster in an attempt to clean her up. “We’d look like a bunch of grapeth.”

“I still can’t find my scooter,” Scootaloo groaned, grabbing a clump of leaves and contributing to the cleanup effort of the sticky unicorn, who seemed somewhat reassured by the physical contact of her friends. “I have no idea where we are either. Miss Zecora, can you get us home before dark?”

“My dears, do not fret. This is not over yet. Flower did what she must to set us free, from inside that awful, horrible tree. Now you small ones we must return, before your fate your elders learn.”

A loud roaring hiss split the afternoon air, followed by a nearby weak scream of terror. Before the echoes had died out, Monster bolted through the forest in its direction, her horn lit up with a blinding violet aura.

“Oh, no!” cried Zecora before dashing down the path after her wayward daughter, followed by five little ponies.

[center] * * * [/center]

As she looked up from the shattered copse of trees in which she had just struggled back to consciousness, Queen Chrysalis considered the bitter fact she was not having the day she planned. Not at all. Nothing in her plans included having nearly all of her children destroyed in one cataclysmic explosion, or her own well-battered and heavily punctured body being flung deeply into the forest. From the dull grating whenever she shifted positions, she was fairly certain all four of her legs were broken, the back ones during the explosion, and the front ones on what could only jokingly be called a landing. The explosion had ripped both of her wings off or at least broken them so badly they no longer worked, and the number of burning wooden splinters that had punched ragged holes in her rear carapace made it impossible for her to turn to look at the carnage. Not that it really mattered anyway. Even though enough nerve endings had been severed to keep her from screaming constantly in pain, the sensation of additional wooden stakes transfixing her vital organs when she crashed to the ground into the shattered trees made her numbly aware that once she had exhausted whatever small supply of love the Hivemind could still provide, she was going to die.

Of course, the Everfree Forest seemed ready to deny her even that mercy.

“Oh, come on!” Queen Chrysalis looked up in disbelief from her dying spot, unable even to pull her punctured body off the shattered trees she was impaled upon. She could do nothing but stare in amazement at the huge beast who nearly blocked out the sun, looking down at her with hungry, beady eyes. The Scorpio was an ancient Celestial, created by unknown gods near the

beginning of the universe from the primal building blocks of the very sky. Nopony knew just why the twelve great stellar monsters were created. Perhaps they were pets of the original creators, or deeply meaningful symbols of the creation. Or maybe just leftover bits of the heavens given to their malicious children to create play toys. This one seemed to be taking out its fury on the surrounding trees, slashing its way forward with snips of razor-sharp claws, apparently quite angry at being woken up by the recent explosion. And it seemingly had just decided just exactly who was responsible for awakening it from a mere century or two of napping.

She was not aware of her screaming. To be fair, she was not aware of many things, as the changeling queen had her full and undivided attention focused on the giant starry scorpion who towered above her, and the huge claw that seemed to be taking so long to plunge down on her bleeding body. The claw that slowed to a stop, surrounded in a shimmering purple magic.

“Ha! Bite me, you brainless beast!” screamed Chrysalis in a unthinking rage. “My changelings will tear you limb from limb and feast on your — Eeek!!”

The poisoned stinger of the giant star-beast lashed downward at the tiny speck of food that resisted being eaten. Perhaps a few stings would make it less annoying. Within the Scorpio’s brain of star-stuff were only a few primitive emotions. Anger. Eat. Sting. Grab. Sleep. It needed little else. Sleeping was out of the question after that horrible shaking rattled it around inside the comfortable hole it had dug just a few centuries ago. Anger filled most of its mind now. Eating was mostly an empty effort. Very few of the creatures of the forest even tasted good. The little bit of food that made such annoying noises was the exception.

It smelled good.

Raw forest loam sprayed in all directions as the giant Scorpio stinger smashed into the ground, deflected to just inches away from the changeling queen by a sparkling violet aura. With a deafening hiss, the giant beast stabbed again, and again, each time missing by inches. Gathering itself up, the Scorpio lashed out one last time with all its might, the glistening tail plunging down unimpeded at Queen Chrysalis — to sink into the bole of a leafy forest giant held suspended over the helpless changeling.

Chrysalis barely had time to utter a startled ‘Eeep!’ at the sudden appearance of the tree trunk, and the pointed end of the Scorpio stinger that protruded out the bottom mere inches away from her face, before the tree went spinning up into the air. Unable to free its tail, the Scorpio spun away after it, clattering claws and angered hissing dying away into the distance as the two vanished over the horizon.

[center] * * * [/center]

Standing in the middle of the crater, a rather wooly-coated pegasus dressed in slate-grey armor suddenly looked up into the air, and reflexively punched his commanding officer in his armored

flank with a loud clang.

“Captain Armor, do you see that?”

Shining Armor and Cadence looked up from their discussion to see the giant star-scorpion and attached tree soaring above the forest horizon and still gaining altitude.

“Well, that’s new.”

[center] * * * [/center]

Still woozy from blood loss, Chrysalis turned her head to look at the changelings who rescued her, even as her pain-numbed mind finally managed to figure out just how large the star-beast was, and how many changelings it would have taken to lift it, let alone throw it. It would have been a very large number, far more than the few hundred survivors she could still feel in the weak tingle of the Hivemind.

A single, familiar-looking unicorn stood a few feet away, her eyes blazing white with power. Chrysalis missed the Scorpio already.

“How did you escape the hive—” she started before the appearance of a zebra and five little ponies at the edge of the newly created clearing brought realization to her fuzzy thoughts.

“You! You’re the one who [i]blew up my hive!/[i]”

The changeling broke off into an agonizing coughing fit while the fuzzy purple unicorn just glared at her, breathing heavily. Finally she muttered, “Bug hurt my friends.”

Chrysalis fairly snarled in response, “You killed thousands of my children!”

“You would have killed us,” snarled Monster right back at her.

“Only after extracting every single drop of love you could give, after years of pleasant dreams and joy.” Chrysalis coughed wetly again, looking at the zebra and the little ponies standing nervously at the back of the new clearing.

Turning back to the fuzzy purple unicorn, she lifted her chin up with a jerk. “Go ahead. Kill me in front of your little ones, and show them the blood of the one who wronged you. Bathe them in my blood, for all I care. I’m dying already.” She coughed again and spat weakly. “There is only one Queen of the Changelings. As I die, another shall take my place. We shall have our revenge for the deaths of my children, for my changelings shall never rest until you are dead and eaten! And your little friends too. So strike me or not, as long as one of my children live, our fangs shall be at your — what are you doing?”

Above her, Monster raised one hoof, stained with changeling goo and blood, and placed it almost delicately on the queen's chest. For a moment, the changeling queen thought the unicorn was simply going to force her body farther down onto the wooden stakes impaling her carapace to the forest floor, perhaps as a last act of cruelty. Then her horn lit up, with a darkly burning fire so purple as to be almost black.

The tingle of the Hivemind in Queen Chrysalis' chest abruptly turned into fire as the faint trickle of love from her changelings cut off almost instantly, replaced by the slimy feeling of dark tendrils sliding through her mind. The darkness split, and split again, each of them slipping down a thread of the Hivemind to the heart of a distant changeling, even as she felt one of the tendrils coil about her own dark and unrepentant heart.

"What!" gurgled the changeling queen, as the unicorn's intent became clear and her throat started to contract. "That's genocide!"

Monster spoke but one word, her voice dripping with contempt. "Justice."

The curious voice of Apple Bloom could be heard all the way across the clearing. "Zecora, what is she doing?"

The zebra seemed to be almost a statue as she stood quietly and motionless next to the young ponies. "When the changeling queen dies, her life to another flies. If none live when her body retires, the race of changelings forever expires. My daughter fully intends, to put them all to gruesome ends."

Twist gave an anguished cry and fairly flung herself across the clearing to wrap around Monster's neck in tears. "No, Monthter! Thee may be bad, but that dothent mean all of them are bad."

Sweetie Belle was right behind her friend, wrapping one hoof around a purple leg in a tight hug regardless of the mess. "Twist's right. I mean, if you judged all ponies by Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon, you'd think we all were just horrible."

Featherweight quit taking pictures and floated down to join the hug with the rest of their friends. "They're right, and you know it. Just because she did something bad, doesn't make her a bad pony."

"She's evil," snarled Monster, her horn glowing even brighter. "Evil should be destroyed. She hurt you! She's a bad—" The unicorn cut off abruptly as her eyes met the loving gaze of the quiet zebra. Adopted as she was, Zecora had always been there for her no matter what, during thunderstorm, freezing cold or when dark things in the night stalked her dreams. There was no bottom to the forgiveness in the depths of her heart, just the same as her shattered memories

brought up the image of an older unicorn mare with a purple and white mane who used to look at her that exact same way. As well as a blue unicorn stallion with golden eyes, and a pink winged unicorn and a white colt and a giant white unicorn who brought down the sun—

Chrysalis gurgled helplessly, unable to spit words of defiance back into the foolish little idiot's faces. Forgiveness? Revenge was all she cared about now. The blaze of rage quickly succumbed to an icy chill that crept across her body from the cold hoof on her chest as the spell gained in power and realization began to dawn. She knew she was going to die, but the thought of having her entire race exterminated like insects after so many years of existence grated on her flinty heart before despair overwhelmed her. Perhaps it was best, after all. The ravenous hunger of the changelings had only deteriorated over the years. Someday soon they would be nothing but loathsome parasites. Hunted in fear. To be exterminated as a danger. Monsters.

The purple-fuzzed unicorn standing over the Queen suddenly wrenched herself away with a scream of agony that shook the ground and tore deafeningly through the surrounding little ponies. The bellow of pain and rage jolted Chrysalis agonizingly against her bloody stakes while the unicorn reared up on her hind legs, horn pointed to the sky to release a bolt of indigo power with a mighty crackle straight up into the air. The dark threads of power that filled the hivemind ripped away from Queen Chrysalis as if a thousand jagged steel threads were flaying her alive even while the battered unicorn bolted away from the little ponies, darting off into the shadowy forest with the sound of sobbing.

"Monster! Wait!" Apple Bloom galloped off into the Everfree after her, quickly followed by most of the rest of her little friends.

Zecora finally moved, walking over to lift up Twist from where she had fallen when Monster had run away. The zebra looked compassionately down at Chrysalis, who gasped for air with a glare in return.

"Dying queen of the changelings, your life shall soon be no longer.
But the new queen you select, can make your kind stronger.
Forgiveness is what I choose to give as your instruction,
for revenge will lead your children to destruction.
Be very careful about choosing your successor,
but remember you are dying. So—"

The zebra turned her back and began to trot after her daughter. "No pressure."

"Aren't we thtaying with the bug-lady, Zecora?" asked Twist, with a look of conflicted stress between her friend, running away in the distance, and the mortally wounded changeling.

"No, you must come right now, my little one. In order to catch my Flower, we both must run."

The little pony dashed off after the zebra for a few steps before doubling back to Queen Chrysalis just long enough to stick a cinnamon stick in her mouth, then ran as fast as her little hooves would carry her after her friends.

The dying changeling queen sucked in welcome air despite the gurgling that had begun to fill her lungs. With the departure of the small one, the clearing was as silent as anything ever got in the Everfree. Only the buzzing of insects and the faraway flapping of approaching pegasus wings could be heard through the ringing that still echoed through her head. There were at best mere minutes to go before her essence would pass to the Hivemind and a new changeling queen would be born. It seemed like such a short time compared to her long life, and whatever changeling inherited her power would certainly curse her stupidity as the remainder of her children starved. Then her race would die, just as she was dying. Alone. Unloved. Struck down as a monster.

As the sounds of wings grew louder, Chrysalis gave an experimental suck on the sweet candy and managed to smile, despite the pain. "They really are made with love!"

-End chapter 13-

-Chapter 14-

[center]The Monster in the Twilight
[color=green]Coronation[/color][[/center]
[hr]

It would have been almost impossible for Princess Cadence or the guards pulling her chariot to figure out which small clearing in the dense Everfree Forest had been the source of the flying Celestial scorpion. There were countless natural little clearings in the area where large trees had fallen a few years ago, or natural disaster or disease had cleared a small patch of undergrowth.

That is, until a blinding beam of churning indigo light that punched up through the sky made the decision on a landing site obvious. There was no time to gather the rest of the team from their scattered recovery tasks, and despite Shining Armor's objections, Princess Cadence decided to risk a landing right at the site without his shield spell, even stripping off her armor as the chariot descended. The Royal Guards pulling the chariot delicately dropped into the indicated clearing a few minutes later, setting down so gracefully that Shining Armor did not even break stride as he interposed his armored bulk in front of her on landing.

"Stay back, Love. At least until we have a look around," he quietly pleaded as the two guardstallions and her husband spread out to look around the recently-created clearing. The fresh earth bore the signs of both large hoofprints from adult ponies, and strangely enough,

impressions from a considerable number of smaller pony hooves on top of them, passing up to and beyond the corpse of the largest changeling she had seen.

The huge changeling was nearly alicorn-sized, and based on the way the green-splattered chitin across its back and rear had been shattered with horrendous wounds from protruding chunks of charred wood, it must have been close to the explosion when their hive exploded. At least it had not suffered. From the way the flanks of the changeling did not align with the forequarters, its spine must have been shattered in the explosion. And even if that had not killed it, the landing in the shattered poplar grove would have. Splintered saplings had been driven through its entire body, protruding out of the broken carapace of its back like some obscene bloody skewers. The creature's death would have been quick, if not painless.

Then the changeling turned [i]her[/i] head to look at Shining Armor.

It was not a look of a mortally wounded creature, but a sensually suggestive examination that Princess Cadence had seen mares give her handsome husband when they thought they were not being observed, complete with a lascivious licking of the lips, although that may have been excused by the stub of candy that was sticking out of the side of her mouth. Or not.

There was something predator-like about her gesture that tripped ancient reflexes in the back of her herbivore brain, sending the Princess stumbling backwards a step. Trying to recover, Cadence quickly said, "She's hurt badly! I'll go get help."

"No!" snapped the creature, before coughing wetly and spitting something green to one side. "I'll be dead before you could even reach them."

A pained smile slowly appeared on the face of the changeling as she looked between the Princess and Shining Armor. "Oh, the irony. I had planned to have a conversation much like this with you, right before the two of you were stuffed into an extraction pod forever."

While the creature coughed again, Shining Armor stepped forward. "Where is my sister?"

"Patience, My Prince." The creature sucked the small piece of candy back into its mouth and made it vanish with a crunching noise before resuming her sharp-toothed smile.

"Allow me to introduce myself. Princess Mi Amore Cadenza and Prince Shining Armor, I am Chrysalis, Queen of the Changelings. Forgive me if I do not rise." The Queen coughed again, and Cadence could not help but look at the bubbles that formed on her punctuated sides with each cough.

"Is there anything we can do for you?" Princess Cadence heard her voice say, still stunned at the condition of the poor changeling.

“Only to listen to my last words. You would be amazed at how the nearness of death can concentrate your thoughts.” The changeling spasmed, coughing and hacking again, and when she spoke again, her voice was much quieter, and her gaze was exclusively upon Princess Cadence.

“I have two things I must tell you, and I will make it quick. First, I want to apologize.”

“Apologize?” asked Cadence, moving closer to hear the Queen’s raspy voice.

“My changelings have kidnapped and killed your ponies for hundreds of years, and stolen the love from every race in existence. I planned on doing the same with you and that handsome lug over there in order to take over all of Equestria.” She broke into more coughing, but quickly continued as if she knew only moments remained. “That’s not happening now. You have to understand. We were starving. We always have been starving. It’s not an excuse, it’s what we are.” With a side-long leer at Shining Armor, the Queen added, “Pass along my apology to your little sister, when you see her.”

Cadence straightened up with a frown. “Just what do you think you will get from this apology? The rest of the changelings will never know once you... pass on.”

“Yes they will,” rasped Chrysalis with determination and a fire in her eyes. “We are all connected through the Hivemind. When I die, my essence will flow to another, as has happened to every Queen since the birth of our kind. The new Changeling Queen I have chosen will know all of what we have spoken.”

A brief cough stopped her, but she continued before Cadence could say a word. “With every generation, our kind has grown weaker, more hungry. I thought if we could sate our hunger just once on the thousands of ponies in Equestria, we might be able to break our curse before it destroyed us.”

Chrysalis spat viciously even as a gurgling became more audible in her voice. “Desperate measures for desperate times, and such stupidity. We became monsters to escape our monstrous actions. Fools.”

The changeling sagged and would have doubled over in a long coughing fit if not for the bloody broken trees that held her frozen in place. Large bubbles began to form on the outside of her punctured carapace, and it was obvious the end was very near.

“One last thing before I go,” she gasped, and faded off into a quiet whisper.

Cadence moved closer, placing her head close to lips of the gasping changeling. “Can you say that again?”

The sudden motion of the Changeling Queen caught Cadence by surprise, as she lunged halfway off her impaling trees to cross horns with the alicorn princess. Whatever she tried to say was drowned out by a gush of blood that coursed out of her mouth and a brilliant glare of green magic exploded throughout the clearing in a soundless blast of pure emerald power.

[center]-----[/center]

The afternoon in the Canterlot castle could have been called chaotic, except Princess Celestia knew what true chaos was, having seen mountains tap-dancing and chocolate rain pouring out of rainbow clouds. The expedition to the explosion in the Everfree had turned into a rescue effort far beyond anything in living memory, although Celestia could not help but think of the endless piles of pony dead that had resulted a thousand years ago when that infernal beast had sunk her hooks into Luna. Then, the dead had outnumbered the living by an unearthly margin, as the Nightmare drew upon the very lives of the transformed ponies who followed her lies. Three new races of ponies had been born that night, of Luna's genius and Nightmare's power, and all but a tiny hoofful of little Nocturne pegasi had been consumed in her dark magic when the Nightmare had fought against Celestia. If only she had not hesitated to use the Elements of Harmony against Luna, how many more would have lived instead of dying in agony? Now she could only stand at the window to the Royal Throne Room and watch helplessly as carts were flown back and forth across the city and out to the crater, bringing back the wounded and dying of the strange race of ponies, so much like her sister's beloved Nocturne, and yet so different.

A clatter at the door and the announcement of her guards heralded the arrival of her nephew, Prince Blueblood, who was in a state of nerves she had gotten quite tired of over the years.

"Aunt Celestia, the hospital is nearly full!" announced the Prince in what was supposed to be a note of concern, but sounded much like his normal whine. "What am I supposed to do with all of these monsters we are rescuing from the forest?"

The tall blonde unicorn came to an abrupt halt as Celestia turned to look at him. She had made excuse after excuse for the last few weeks as the weight of the heavenly bodies had worn her down, and had hoped to depart this evening without having to argue with Blueblood as she had so many times over the years. This afternoon as she saved her strength, she could not even hold her usual glamour across her face, and her normally soft, ethereal mane lay listlessly across her back in a cascade of dull pink.

"Auntie?" The traumatic shock that rippled through his face was obvious. Every single day of his existence, his Aunt Celestia, the Unconquered Sun, had been a constant. Now, she looked thin and wasted as an elderly pony in a retirement home, waiting for the end.

"What is it, my beloved nephew?" she responded, heartsick at the agony that flashed across Blueblood's face. "Are you having problems with the responsibility I gave you this afternoon?"

As he stood with jaw agape, Celestia could see entire generations of Bluebloods in his cheekbones, reminiscent of grandparents and great-grandparents back to the day she had adopted a small white colt from a noble house which had been all but destroyed by warfare. And she could also see something else that had been missing in House Blueblood for many generations. A certain strength that rose in his eyes even as he realized his beloved aunt was failing. A deep resonance with his predecessor's constant announcement of their willingness to serve even as they stood in Celestia's shadow, unable to carry out that responsibility. A small spark, unseen as long as her brilliance drowned it out. And now as her sun was setting for the last time, he emerged like the stars.

"N-no, Princess Celestia," he started, using her full name and title for the first time she could remember. "I merely wish to get your permission before housing the least-injured of our guests in my estate." The sounds of flabbergasted ponies among his entourage began to rise, only to die to silence as she swept her gaze across the gaggle of pretentious fools and vacant noblefillies who scuttled along in his wake. He continued without breaking his stride, "And I have brought with me a number of generous contributors who would like to open their houses and estates to the injured also. Do we have your permission, My Princess?"

She nodded with a regal smile, barely holding in check the laughter she felt bubbling up at the reactions among his friends, who suddenly found themselves in a situation they had never expected. "Yes, My Prince. I hereby give you full authority to deal with this crisis, including gracious thanks for your generous contribution, and those of your companions."

"Then with your leave, there are many things we need to attend to. My Princess?" The blonde stallion bowed deeply, and departed at her nod, towing his chattering crowd along behind him. As the Royal Throne Room doors boomed to a close, the smile on her face stayed, even though it faded as she returned to her brooding, overlooking the city and the green forest in the distance.

[i]How many other bright lights in my life have been overshadowed by my power, unable to grow to their potential? I have extended my protection over all of Equestria, but could my interference have hurt the very ponies I swore to protect? Trixie has been so brilliant in her work, such a blazing light of power and skill that it was difficult to keep up with her training at times, only to have her fall back into her slovenly ways for weeks at a time. I pushed Twilight Sparkle into her wretched situation with my concern for my sister, only to lose them both. Perhaps the world will be better off without the Princess of the Sun, and I can finally know peace after a thousand years of torture for my failure. [/i]

The Princess stood at her window until it was time to lower the sun, watching the wounded creatures being flown into Canterlot. She would not fail them. Night Eternal would not fall.

She never even noticed the flare of green light deep within the Everfree Forest that signified the end of one life, and the beginning of another.

[center] * * * [/center]

Cadence stumbled backwards from the Changeling Queen, blinded by the green flash of light and a sharp burning that filled her head with fire. The anguished cry of her husband and the two guards seemed miles away while a growing crowd of other voices began to be heard, as if they were connected to her heart by threads of love. At first she could barely hear them; tiny little piping voices of distant birds whose voices grew, and grew, even as the hundreds of threads she could feel attached to her heart began to draw her life away from her in agonizing pain.

“HUNGER!” she screamed into the steamy air, surrounded by the green crackle of changeling magic. The agonizing pain of her starving changeling children lanced through her body like a dull sword. Vaguely she could sense Shining Armor’s presence as he rushed to her side, only to be thrown away by the crackling aura which surrounded her as every spark of her energy was being syphoned away through the growing Hivemind into distant changelings.

“MORE!” Tears streamed down her face as the pain brought her to one knee, clutching a foreleg against her barrel as the foal kicked inside. An arctic chill froze her hooves as the cold began to creep up her legs, until Shining Armor again crashed against her, crossing horns and pouring his magic into hers in a warm flood. She wanted to scream at him to keep his distance, but he held fast to her horn and voluntarily cascaded his own life into the changeling spell that was draining her.

The powers of the alicorns were said to reach the heavens, but her Shining Armor was an unmovable force with roots in the core of the planet, anchoring her against the chilling blast that seeped through her soul. The hungry cries of the changelings muted as their love cascaded through the Hivemind, drowning their anguished pleas as they continued to demand more, and more. For one long moment of grey lifelessness she held at the very end of her strength, feeling something she could not describe. An edge. A vanishing threshold, just at the edge of her hooves, but hopelessly out of reach. Until a very small and gentle touch within gave her a push.

One distant voice suddenly changed, from a cry of hunger to a radiant burst of love that surged through the Hivemind. As if it were a trigger, another of the hungry voices that had been devouring their love burst into a song of joy, and then another, until her entire heart seemed to burn with a love that could not be contained within one body. The Hivemind lit up with power in a slow and steady throb as if the heartbeat of a great multitude that filled her soul to overflowing. For an ever so brief flash, she could feel the thoughts of every changeling in Equestria, from the frozen north to the burning wastelands, before the roar of voices settled back down to a low buzz of happiness. Of love.

It was Shining Armor’s gentle touch against her cheek that woke her to the smell of smoke and

the coughing of the guardstallions. The two of them rested in the bottom of a shallow crater, the dry and brittle broken carapace of Queen Chrysalis thrown to one side and the sounds of guards digging themselves out from under more fallen trees to the other.

“Cadence, are you all right? Oh, Cadence!” Her beloved husband burst into tears at her weak nod and wrapped himself around her neck. “I thought I was going to lose you. What happened?”

“I-I’m not certain.” The alicorn princess stood up on wobbly legs next to her husband, and regarded the dry remnants of the changeling queen. Chrysalis lay unmoving, a dried husk looking as if she had been dead for days transfixed on the smoldering branches. She could feel the Hivemind within her as each changeling grieved in their own way, and explored a sensation of peace they had never felt before.

“I’m fine,” Cadence said blearily, feeling the very world spin around her hooves. It took more than a few deep breaths to get used to the feeling of hundreds of emotional connections to the changelings scattered all across Equestria, and the surrounding woods. It was, in a word, weird.

“Shining, honey. Do you remember when you said you wanted to have lots of children?”

Cadence, the new Queen of the Changelings stood up tall and exalted in the sensation of her children, each awaiting her commands. Including a very small one, nestled beneath her ribs and dreaming of her new friends.

“I think we may have a few more than you planned.”

[center] * * * [/center]

The ceiling of the Ponyville Spa was colored in soft pinks and blues, much like clouds in a sunset, which explained Tallgrass’ initial disorientation upon waking up. The floor was cool on his back, and the familiar scents of herbal extracts and aromatherapy candles contrasted perfectly with the sweet smell of concern from the matching soft pink and powder blue mares who hovered over him.

“Oh, darling. Ve vas so vorried.” Aloe, or perhaps it was Lotus, he still got them confused even after a year of employment at the spa, held a warm hoof to his forehead. “You’ve been out for nearly an hour.”

“I’m fine,” he whispered, sitting up with a shake of his head to clear out the fuzz. Everything in the world seemed sharp and clear, as if he had lived his entire life in a fitful doze and had finally woken up for real. The sensation of love from Lotus and Aloe was stronger than he had ever experienced before, although the all-consuming desire to drink it in like fine nectar no longer

clawed in his chest. Instead a warm glow seemed to surround him, resonating with the two spa owners to bring an involuntary smile to his face. "Really. I'm fine."

"Are you sure, darling?" asked Lotus, or perhaps it was Aloe. "Dere has been an accident of some sort, and all of us auxiliary nurses haff been called into the hospital."

"Vee didn't vant to just run off if you were haffing any trouble, dear," said the other one with a gentle caress across his ear.

"Yipe!" Tallgrass hopped to his hooves and shook his head vigorously to clear the tickle. "I'm fine. Really. Look, I'm up and walking. Why don't you two run on up to the hospital, and I'll shut down the boiler here and be along as soon as I can to help?"

The muscular earth pony watched his employers leave before trotting in a rather distracted manner around the spa to turn off all of the equipment and lock the door. There was no clawing hunger in his gut to drive him like a whip, with the whines of thousands of his fellow changelings a constant drone in the back of his mind. Instead, a sense of belonging that filled every facet of his senses was more felt than heard. The keening regret at the passing of so many of his kind, the grief at the passing of Chrysalis, the pain of injuries from the wounded, and the joy of the new Queen all merged into one warm fuzzy that filled his entire being with something he had only experienced here in Ponyville. Family.

There was one bothersome worry that still whispered in his mind as he trotted up the path to the Ponyville hospital where pegasi-driven carts were landing with his injured brethren. Other changelings had never completely understood him in the hive, from his strange tendency to remain on the surface at night to stare at the sky, to a bizarre reluctance to walk on bare dirt. The same connection to the Hivemind existed for him as for all changelings, but he had always preferred to take missions where he would be by himself for extended periods of time. Other changelings who heard voices in their heads were quietly dealt with, vanishing into the depths of the hive, never to be seen or heard again. He was smarter than that. Or so he thought until today.

The same liberation of his soul from that cursed hunger had brought forward the long-suppressed voices he had tried to ignore since his hatching. With every step along the dirt paths, he could feel their faint words whispered through his hooves and up into his liver.

[color=silver]Darkness is coming. Run.[/color]

-End chapter 14-

-Chapter 15-

[center]The Monster in the Twilight

[color=green]Sundown[/color][hr]

The long shadows of twilight were drawing across the thatched roofs of Ponyville, seemingly twisting as if they were alive while slowly filling the alleyways and streets with darkness. The fleeting sunset highlighted the nonstop flow of pegasi bringing wounded changelings to the small hospital or just returning to their loved ones to shake off the nightmare of body parts and green blood. The rescue effort had been an epic undertaking of unprecedented scale, where the Summer Sun Celebration's pomp and pageantry had been quickly cast aside in trade for bandages and care in a muddy crater. In the end, wounded changelings had been digging through piles of bodies with their own hooves for the last survivors in the growing darkness, even as the area small-town volunteers refused to leave until the last semi-conscious body was loaded. Too many of the ponies had lost ancestors to the carnivorous denizens of the Everfree, and even though the changelings were a strange and exotic race, a certain bond had been established in the bloody rescue effort. More than one pony home would welcome a tired visitor tonight.

In the courtyard in front of the Ponyville town hall, a chariot pulled by two Royal Guard landed almost unnoticed in the tumult. Almost.

"You can't park that thing here, Ma'am — Princess Cadence!" The rainbow tailed pegasus who had been directing traffic before dropping down from a nearby cloud froze, uncertain whether to bow or salute.

"No time, Rainbow Dash," snapped Shining Armor, with an uneasy glance at the setting sun. "Find Trixie and bring her to us."

"Ahh. What if she's drunk?" Rainbow Dash looked curiously guilty, as if the question was not entirely theoretical.

"Then drag her," snarled Shining Armor, with an uncharacteristic glower.

"No need, Your Highnessess," came a slurred voice as a familiar blue-coated unicorn strolled out of town hall, just ever so slightly leaning to one side to counter an unexpected shift in her local gravitational field. Her peaked hat adorned with stars was cocked jauntily over one eye and her starry cloak waved behind her in a nonexistent breeze, showing off her sparkling wand-and-star-trail cutie mark that looked suspiciously sparkley, as if it had been recently touched up. There was a distinct moon-shape to the shiny sparkles today, which went well with the amount of moonshine tucked just a few feet away in her belly.

"You," declared Cadence angrily, "are drunk!"

"I beg your pardon, pretty pony Princess." Trixie carefully adjusted her hat to a more jaunty

angle which almost resulted in it falling off. "I am only presently partly plastered. By dawn, when we all perish, I shall be positively permanently pithed and potted. Besides, isn't you supposed t'be somewhere else tonight?" The blue unicorn turned her back on Princess Cadence and squinted at the setting sun skeptically. "I'm going to miss that."

"Shining." There was a hint of iron in the normally light and fluffy princess' voice that struck a note of warning in Trixie, but before she could even turn around, she felt a well-practiced spell slap against her side. Then began the pain.

Shining Armor had a practiced military edge to his voice that cut through the boosted hangover like a razor. "Just in case you're wondering, you little snipe. That's one of the Guard's sober-up spells. We use it on trainees who decide to go out and celebrate a little too close to their duty time."

"[size=10]ow![/size]"

"It's fairly simple. All of the hangover, in about ten minutes."

"[size=10]kill me.[/size]"

"Or two minutes, if the caster is a little rushed, like us."

"[size=10]you bastard.[/size]"

"Since I know you can hear me now, and are paying attention," said Cadence levelly. "I'm going to say this exactly once. Aunt Celestia is coming to town at dawn. I don't know what she's going to do, but you're going to support her in any way you can. Sober. My guards are going to back you up every step of the way."

"Good luck with that, Princess. My guards abandoned me the minute they had an excuse to go play hero in the woods." Trixie's voice was very quiet, but all four legs were splayed out for support and she did not waver in her bloodshot gaze.

"Made any friends?" When Trixie did not respond, Princess Cadence looked up at where Rainbow Dash was directing traffic. "Oh, Rainbow. How has my Aunt's little student been behaving this year? Honestly," she added as the cyan pegasus squirmed in discomfort.

"All right," grumbled Trixie quietly, as if not to disturb her head for fear it might fall off. "I scared the birds, criticised the decorations to the point where the fashion fanatic locked herself in her creative cave, got the old apple baker so upset she dropped her false teeth in one of the pies and we still don't know which one. I think the arrival of those wounded weird ponies was an actual improvement."

“The fire wasn’t as bad as last year,” added Rainbow Dash in a doomed attempt to be helpful. “It’s really been pretty quiet all afternoon right up until the boom.” A pink glow surrounded the cloud, and Rainbow was lifted up to an altitude more appropriate for traffic control and less suited for eavesdropping. Cadence dropped her voice and leaned in close to her Aunt’s student.

“Trixie, please listen to me. I know Aunt Celestia, and I trust her. She made me promise to go to Cavillia tonight, just as she had you come here. She must still hold out hope that somewhere deep, deep, deep inside of you there is a tiny spark. A very tiny spark, mostly drowned in bourbon.”

“Hey!” Trixie managed a weak smile. “I’m not that deep.”

Cadence gave the little blue unicorn a soft hug as Shining Armor looked away with a sour grimace. “I don’t know how she does it. Everypony Aunt Celestia touches seems to light up like the sun. I never thought you would ever survive being her student this long, with all the partying and showing off you did. But you always came back to her, every single time.”

“Anything she can do, I can do better.” The small smile that emerged onto Trixie’s face like the sun coming out from an overcast sky vanished into a shudder. With a very small voice, she asked, “What if we die?”

“Everypony dies.” Cadence rested a hoof on Trixie’s shoulder and smiled. “Even alicorns. What matters is how we live.”

“Yeah, right. If this works, alive or dead, I want that statue.” Trixie gently poked Princess Cadence on the shoulder.

Cadence smiled despite herself. “This will work. And I’ll get you that statue. Thirty feet high in alabaster and marble.”

“Forty,” responded Trixie reflexively before looking with bloodshot eyes at the setting sun. “Look. You and Shining Blockhead should get going. You did promise, and the last thing you want to do around this town is break a promise.”

“I’m not talking to you until you apologize to Gummy!” sounded a distant voice.

“This place is crazy,” muttered Trixie, continuing with a sigh at the serious look from Princess Cadence. “I promise I will be a good little obedient student, and do what Princess Celestia told me to do. Cross my heart with frosting and hope to something, stuff a cupcake somewhere uncomfortable or whatever.”

“Good. Start with apologizing to everypony you insulted this afternoon.” Ignoring Trixie’s

outraged expression, Princess Cadence produced a small piece of cellophane and floated it over. "And one last thing."

"Gee, thanks Princess," said Trixie, holding the wrapper in her magic as if it were a dead fish. "You could have at least left the candy inside."

"We found it next to a place where Twilight was," said Cadence with a sniff, her wing clutched tightly around some unseen object. "She has friends."

"Wonderful." Trixie rolled her eyes and sighed. "So you think Little Miss Skybreaker has a sugar source, and you want me to track them down while making five unsuspecting friends while waiting for a thousand year old possessed evil goddess to return while staying sober. Piece of cake."

Princess Cadence seemed to walk as if the entire country rested on her back as she returned to the chariot, barely dragging herself onboard alongside a similarly tired-looking Shining Armor with little of her usual royal grace. She did not even look back as their guards swooped them up into the air and headed away from the small town, leaving Trixie all alone again, as usual. Well, almost alone.

"Any ideas, guys?" she asked the three identical Royal Guard pegasi who stood back at a respectful distance. "We've got a little over eight hours for me to make friends or the world ends. Where's Spike?"

[center] * * * [/center]

The sun lay close to the horizon before Princess Celestia took wing, launching herself out of the Royal Throne Room window in a maneuver that had constantly earned her some seriously cross looks from her guards over the centuries. As the hour drew near, the crushing despair that had slowly crept up on her over the last few years had begun to fade. Gold and silver seemed to wreath the Solarium in glorious fire from the setting sun, a benefit to not having the evening clouds brought out to paint the sunset in pastel shades. Beauty beyond any planned painting brought by tragedy and death, a dichotomy of logic that let her just stand and think before putting her beloved sun down for the last time.

She watched the sky as the last of her pegasi returned, flying with tired, shaking wings as they brought the last few chariots and carts loaded with wounded back to the scattered manors and estates who had opened their doors to the strange ponies. It was disturbing to think of how the changelings had infiltrated her own beloved ponies, even so far as to have a presence within her own castle. Seven times tonight, various servants or bureaucrats had timidly begged permission to speak privately with her, only to reveal themselves as changelings and beg for forgiveness while prostrated face-down before her hooves.

The first time had been a cold shock, by the third she had begun to recognize the signs and by the last, she had simply embraced the startled changeling and ordered a blanket amnesty. There was a world of difference between knowing [i]of[i] a race, and feeling the soft crinkle of thin chitin as they leaned into an embrace, feeling as warm and loving as her beloved sun. There was little room left in her mind for the regret of not being able to learn about them before... oblivion.

[i]Will my sun welcome us into its embrace as I carry the Nightmare and hold us both forever, or will it simply burn us to ashes? If there is any tiny fragment of Luna inside, will she forgive me for my actions? At least the two of us can be finally together, forever. [/i]

The sky had been clear of her pegasi for several minutes now, and she could feel the impatient itching of her sun to rest after the long day. With a weight in her heart like lead, her magic laid the sun down below the horizon and turned to the moon. Even before she raised her will, the smooth curve of Luna's moon eased up above the horizon, gently assuming its proper place.

[color=silver]Good evening, my sister. I'm looking forward to our meeting.[/color]

"You are not my sister." Celestia looked calmly at the rising moon, the weight on her heart lessening by the minute as her destiny approached. "You are a monster who only deserves destruction. Come to me at dawn, and I will see you get what you deserve."

[center] * * * [/center]

The halls of the Ponyville Hospital were buzzing with activity, from the low buzz of sedated changelings in beds to the quiet buzzing of the occasional ambulate changeling assisting the doctors and nurses as best they could. Anatomy was not a field of study for changeling kind; the severely injured had always been done away with, so as not to be a drag on the hive. Picking her way through the cluttered hallways, Trixie could barely suppress a shudder at the streaks of green blood that clung to far too many disposed bandages and flaked in dry smears along the floors. After asking [size=10](*)[/size] directions several times, eventually she opened the door to a room to find her little dragon with a pair of nurses attending to a badly injured changeling patient laying on its belly on the bed. Or at least it looked like they were attending to a patient.

It took a few minutes of gape-jawed amazement to realize one of the yellow pegasi nurses had to be a changeling, even after it spit a blob of green goo across the fractured chitinous back of the changeling patient laying sprawled out across a hospital bed. She had to choke back a startled cry as Spike then leaned forward and gently blew a faint green fire across the gooey mess, which promptly hardened and charred into a black material while the bedridden changeling gave a sigh of relief.

"Is that better now?" The soft voice of the other changeling even sounded like Fluttershy in a

creepy way as it gently patted the blackened goo, which gave a thumping noise like rubber. The wounded changeling nodded, and the two changelings exchanged nuzzles, making Trixie's stomach churn even worse.

[i]Three bugs, one dragon. Time to subtract a dragon from the equation and get to work. [/i]

"Come on, Spike," she grumbled, trying not to look at the battered and bizarrely bandaged changeling or the two identical nurses. "We've got a job to do. Any idea where we can find the real Fluttershy so I can apologize for whatever I did to make her run away crying this afternoon?"

"Apologize?" The little dragon's eyes narrowed and he peered at Trixie intently. "Who are you and what have you done with my Trixie?"

"I'm serious, Spike! Cadence ordered me to go apologize to everypony I insulted this afternoon."

"That could take weeks," said the dragon with a smirk. "Or we could just tie you up in front of town hall, and sell pies. You can apologize while they throw, and I can build up my hoard. We might even be able to find that set of teeth."

"Spike! Look, ditch your little bug buddies and let's get moving. We haven't got much time."

The little dragon crossed his arms and sat down firmly on his chair. "You can start right here. Fluttershy, I don't believe you've ever been properly introduced to my bossy boss, Trixie. Trixie, this is Tallgrass and Fluttershy. Or maybe that's Tallgrass and that's Fluttershy?" The flare of green as one of the two yellow pegasi transformed into a changeling with a slightly-twisted wing made the real Fluttershy 'Eeep' in surprise and try to hide in her own mane.

"Uh. Hello, Fluttershy?" Trixie fidgeted before launching into a quick apology. "I'm sorry for making your birds fly away. Now come on, Spike. I've got a lot more of these to do."

"What about last year?" asked the dragon, tapping one claw.

"Oh. And scaring them last year too. And the year before last," she quickly added as the dragon opened his mouth. The thought of Princess Celestia standing at the Solarium, tears streaming from her eyes as she looked into the sky seemed to somehow overlay across the sad-looking pegasus, and Trixie added without thinking, "Can you forgive me?"

"Well. Yes." The words were almost inaudible, but the tiny smile that came with them made her feel almost warm inside her heart. Probably a side-effect of that darned sober-up spell.

[center] * * * [/center]

In the Everfree, the sounds of pounding hooves echoed through the trees along the path where a fuzzy purple unicorn fled her memories. Little pebbles scattered in all directions as she clattered down a slope and through a small stream before flinging herself under a thick bush at the sound of pegasus wings from above. Close behind galloped a zebra and five little ponies, all of whom panted to a halt outside the bush.

“Monster?” Apple Bloom poked her face into the bush, only to recoil as a blue spark snapped across her nose. “Ow! I just wanna give you a hug.”

“Maybe if we snuck up on the other side of the bush?” offered Scootaloo. An attempt to follow her own advice ended quickly in another electrical zap.

“Pony pile!” shouted Featherweight, folding his wings up from his hovering spot above the bush at the same time the rest of his friends pounced into the bush. Various grunting and struggling sounds came from behind the green leafy obstruction while the zebra fidgeted nervously outside, until the rustle of hugging small ponies died down into a soft mutual, “Aaaawwww. She’s so fuzzy now.”

The sound of the flying pegasi far above the forest canopy died off into the distance before Monster spoke. “Sorry.”

Apple Bloom’s voice whispered, “That’s okay. You’re just skeered.”

“Scared.” There was more rustling from inside the bush, and some sniffing. “Sorry.”

The sky continued to grow darker as time passed. It was nearly black before Monster slowly plodded out of the bush. “Sorry, mom.”

The zebra smiled while patting the fuzzy unicorn on her shoulder. “My daughter, I love you without reservation, but these little ones we must return without hesitation. Come out, young ones, and let us make haste. We have a long ways to go and little time to waste.”

The bush remained silent while Monster looked innocently up into the darkening sky, only eventually turning to look into the zebra’s eyes. “Sleeping.” At the continuing stare from her adoptive mother, she floated out the five sleeping little ponies from the bush and placed them gently on the grass. “Sorry.”

Above in the sky, the sun finally finished its trip below the horizon and darkness embraced the Everfree Forest.

[center] * * * [/center]

In a ruined castle in the middle of the Everfree Forest, a faint light began to shine out of long-broken windows. Despite the long absence of living beings, the cavernous room was almost clean of dust or cobwebs, merely empty and waiting as it had been since centuries ago, except for some stones.

It was time.

Darkness was rising.

Five ordinary stones glowed faintly, with less light than a firefly. Although titanic forces could be focused through their crystalline structure, the Elements themselves were nearly powerless. Only when connected to their counterparts could they be unleashed.

They began to call.

Hundreds of creatures across Equestria stopped what they were doing momentarily as the call went out, then returned to their activities as if nothing happened. Most of them were ponies. A few were not.

The Elements were not complete. One of their number had not called. It remained, silent as always, lurking in places unseen. Waiting. It had been betrayed before. It would not be fooled again.

(*) Asked, demanded, same thing.

-End chapter 15-

-Chapter 16-

**The Monster in the Twilight
Darkness**

"I said open up! I have something to tell you! Just open your blessed door and you can go back to sobbing when we're done!" snapped Trixie as she continued to pound on the rather thick front door of the Carousel Boutique. She had a schedule to keep, and Trixie had decided to take her apologies in the same order of which the offence had supposedly been committed. Since Rarity seemed offended by the very way Trixie breathed, she was going to be first, like it or not. Well, second. "Tell me again just why I shouldn't just break open this darned door."

"It wouldn't be very nice," offered Fluttershy quietly.

"I know you're not very experienced at this," said Spike with a smirk. "But I'm pretty sure breaking down somepony's front door is not a good way to start an apology."

Trixie sighed to keep from snarling. The sobbing and wailing inside what she had mentally marked as the 'Fortress of Foolish Fashion' continued unabated, much the same as the past few hours, only more annoying. All Trixie had done was to graciously offer her advice on the decorations for town hall, and the mentally-deficient unicorn in charge of the decorations had run off, sobbing something unintelligible. Well, there was more than one way to cut the crusts off a peanut-butter and onion sandwich.

"Why, Rarity," she called out loudly, so as to be heard over the hysterics. "I had no idea you craved my approval so much. You must consider my taste in fashion to be greater than Fancy Pants, or even [i]Golden Orb[/i]."

"[size=18]What![/size]" There was a stampede of hooves inside the boutique moving so rapidly that Trixie stepped back from the door just in case. It was a good thing too, as the door was flung violently open before the unicorn from inside stomped outside, teeth bared and without a single tear on her face.

"How [i]dare[/i] you let the name of Golden Orb pass your foul lips. You are a buffoon and a fool, insensitive, totally uncultured, with less fashion in your blood than a baboon! You would not know a fashionable piece of clothing if it hit you in the face!"

Trixie made to respond, only to catch a dress to the face at high speed, wrapped in the unmistakable blue aura of the fashion fanatic.

"Why I could not care less about your stupid opinions on fashion if you were to tie me up with that disgusting rag you have draped across your back! Pardon me, is that glitter on your flank, or did you back into a foal's school project?"

"It's natural!" blurted out Trixie, caught by surprise as she fought her way clear of the dress.

"You might want to touch that up a bit dear, your 'natural' is running. Where was I?"

"You were talking about Trixie's cloak," said Spike with a goofy grin, still looking dazed at Rarity's sudden appearance.

"Yes, thank you Spike. You're such a dear. Unlike that boorish twit you have the unfortunate luck to have as an employer. Anyway..." Rarity tossed her head to give her mane a bounce before tearing back into Trixie. "That cloak is less of a fashion crime than your horrible hat, darling. I don't know how you even stand to go into public with it, unless—"

“Well, if the Great and Powerful Trixie is such a bad judge of fashion, why did you go running away like a chicken when I criticized your decorations?”

“Well, I...”

“You must consider me to have some fashion sense if you take my criticism so hard.” It was difficult not to smirk, but Trixie managed. More or less.

“But you were so rude! Of course I don’t think you are...” Rarity paused, apparently looking for a noun that would not bite back. The trap Trixie had set was fairly simple. If she acknowledged her previous outburst had been because Trixie had criticized the decorations, that would tacitly imply that the ‘blue clown’ actually [i]had[/i] some fashion taste, which simply would not do at all. If not, it would imply that Rarity had been petty and immature, and most probably would spell a death sentence for all of the work she had gotten ever since Princess Celestia had actually contracted with her for concealing outfits.

Trixie stepped back into the conversation with a bow and a straight face that was only possible after many years of acting experience. “I would like to apologize for my words this year. I obviously do not have the same appreciation for beauty as Her Highness’ personal dress designer. Can you forgive me?” The words seemed to slip out almost naturally again, and Trixie started to suspect that sober-up spell had some additional components that needed examination as soon as she had a moment.

“And last year,” added Spike.

“Oh yes. And for my actions the last two years. Although I still think that fire was not my — well, not entirely my fault,” corrected Trixie as Spike rolled his eyes.

“Well...” started Rarity with a glance at Fluttershy and Spike, although still avoiding looking directly at Trixie. “It would be terribly rude of me not to accept. I suppose. But only on one condition.” A fierce light seemed to ignite in the fashionista’s eyes as she turned to Trixie with an exuberant grin. “I get to burn that horrible cloak.”

“What! I’ll have you know this cloak—” Trixie cut off with a sideways glance at Spike’s smug face. The little extortionist had bet fifty bits that she would not be able to make all of her apologies without losing her composure. Gritting her teeth, she turned to the almost identically smug Rarity.

“Only if I can get a suitable replacement, with the same functionality and enchantments first.”

Rarity squealed in joy, producing a measuring tape that the sneaky seamstress had been hiding all this time and immediately began to measure her reluctant patron. “Finally! I’ve had to look

at this tacky thing for [i]three[/i] years now, and I just don't know [i]how[/i] Princess Celestia put up with it. You will wear your new cloak at court, will you not?

"Yeah," muttered Trixie with a glance into the sky where the moon shone down on the sleepy little town. "Every day."

[center] * * * [/center]

"You know you don't have to follow me, right?" Trixie looked back at Spike, trudging along with his ever-present shoulder bag, and some unwelcome guests.

"I'm not following you," said Fluttershy meekly. "I'm following Spike. He's a nice dragon, and I always love talking to him. I only get to see him once a year."

"Well, I'm not taking my eyes off that simply awful cloak," purred Rarity, with the air of somepony who had a book of matches and could not wait to use them.

"You ordered me, Ma'am," responded the mussed Royal Guard with a clearly uncomfortable glance around. "But if you don't need me anymore—"

"Stay!" snapped Trixie. "Heel."

As they approached Ponyville Town Hall, Trixie could feel her resolve slipping away into the night air with every step. Critical audiences had always been her downfall, and three of the most critical were lurking inside, waiting for her to make the first misstep. Maybe there was a better way to think around this problem.

[i]The gaping maw of town hall loomed before our fearless adventurer, like some sort of dismal dungeon infested by monsters and treacherous traps. From inside, the voices of three fearsome creatures could be heard, all of which the hero had rather foolishly pledged herself to confront, although all in one place, they would be an unbeatable adversary. Obviously a clever stratagem was called for to avoid being eaten or punctured.[/i]

"Private Wind Roar, front and center." There was an embarrassingly long moment between the order and the Royal Guard suddenly jolting into action, darting forward with a clatter of hooves on paving stones and giving a sloppy salute. The guard looked terrible, with tufts of hair sticking out in all directions and one of his wings had feathers sticking up.

Trixie pointed into the town hall. "Sic 'em?"

[center] * * * [/center]

The wooden flooring inside town hall amplified their hoofsteps as Trixie and her 'party' walked

slowly across the cavernous room, going up to three perfectly normal ponies busily setting up punch bowls, cake covers, and plates for the upcoming real party. There was an uncomfortable feeling around the Student of the Sun, much as if she had her familiar invisibility spell cast and both the ponies behind and in front were just looking straight through her. She stopped at a sufficient distance to be able to dodge any thrown objects from her audience before quietly clearing her throat and beginning. “I would—”

“Oh! Hi, Shy!” The obnoxious blue pegasus yawned while waving a hoof. “You come over to help with the party?”

“Actually I came over with Trixie,” breathed Fluttershy. “Princess Cadence ordered her to apologize to us, which seems kind of harsh. I mean she didn’t really do anything really, really bad.”

Trixie grimaced and set her jaw. “Like I was saying, I—”

“Ooo! Rarity! Are you back to finish decorating?” Pinkie Pie hopped over to a big box of decorations and started to pull out streamers, spinning to wrap them around her torso before leaping about the room and leaving a sparkly trail.

“Yes, Pinkie Pie. I believe my problem has been properly dealt with, and I am prepared to make this year’s decorations simply [i]smashing[/i]. Not explosive,” finished Rarity with a fierce look that somehow managed not to land directly on Trixie, but did anyway.

Trixie paused, taking in the rather intense way the three ponies were [i]not[/i] looking at her, before turning to leave. “I can tell when I’m not wanted.”

“Never stopped you before,” said Spike, standing palm-outstretched between her and the door. “Fifty bits.”

“Grr...” Trixie whirled around, but before she could open her mouth, Applejack spoke up.

“So what are you doing here, handsome?” asked the farmer, looking appreciatively at the mussed guard who had migrated to the punchbowl and begun ‘sampling.’

“I volunteered.”

Behind them, the door to the town hall slammed shut as Trixie stamped out into the darkness, alone.

[center] * * * [/center]

Thunder rumbled through the dark Everfree Forest, of a most peculiar nature. A casual ear

would say it was a single pony, running at a gallop along one of the forest multitudinous paths. But it seemed louder, for some reason. As the rumbling grew in volume and the source came into view, it became apparent the noise came from two ponies, both a purple fuzzy unicorn and a somewhat taller zebra, running in such close synchronization that it was impossible to pick out the differences in their hoofbeats. The faintest of light seemed to live in their eyes, and neither of them tripped over a single fallen log or protruding stone as they ran headlong down the path, headed home. Behind them floated a wide slab of bark as if a forest giant had involuntarily parted with a section of its woody hide to provide a bed for five little sleeping ponies. Onward they ran, their progress watched by many hungry eyes.

[i]The thudding rhythm of thundering hooves woke the crocodile from her evening drowsy nap. It meant only one thing to the hungry lizard: food. With cautious strokes, she began to paddle upstream to the ford where the creature would pass, clawed lizard limbs pushing the water back as she undulated forward. After a few moments, she broke the surface of the water with only her eyes and nostrils exposed. Strangely, the riverbank was not moving, although she was paddling quite vigorously. Even additional effort left her stranded in place as she saw the two creatures splash untouched through the ford, out of reach. With a subdued grumble, the crocodile slid back underwater to await the morning sun, unaware of just how long that wait was going to be. [/i]

Zecora and Monster galloped side-by-side down the path, each hoof-strike, each breath, each anxious glance up into the starry sky identical in every regard on the outside, but their faces were studies in contrast. A deep calm seemed to envelop the running zebra, her entire being at peace as the time of prophecy arrived, while fear and anxiety was foremost on the unicorn's panicked expression. The stars had moved again, into a configuration with only one possible meaning.

She was coming.

[center] * * * [/center]

Equestria spread out below them like a glittering jewel, tiny sparks of light reflecting her glorious majesty as the ponies celebrated the upcoming raising of the sun. Nightmare Moon chuckled with anticipatory glee, watching the events unfold beneath her ebon stare even as the chains that bound her to the moon lay broken at her side.

“Behold, my precious little princess.” With a thought, Nightmare gently swept the obscuring clouds of her darkness away from the vision, revealing a tempting passageway to her unwelcome guest. With luck, the annoying weakling could be goaded into yet another vain attempt to warn Celestia, and possibly this time expose herself enough to be finally exterminated from this body.

“What would you like to see in these final hours? Your sister perhaps?” The image of a pale

and wan princess, scribbling away at a lamp-lit desk swam into view.

“Or perhaps your children. They have grown so fat over the years, so tasty. I shall relish devouring them all, particularly the little ones.” The moonlit night that illuminated Canterlot showed a cascade of charcoal-grey pegasi with bat-like wings and glowing golden eyes silently gathering into groups around the city. “My, what a lot of them. Their power shall be so refreshing after such a long starvation.”

With no response, Nightmare cast her vision farther to where a pale blue unicorn with a long, knotted mane lay sobbing in an alleyway. “How the great and powerful have fallen. Perhaps after I have consumed your sister, I shall extend my hoof in mercy to her student. There is much power locked away inside that she will never be able to touch, but with my gentle guidance, she can become powerful indeed.”

Nothing. Not even a word. Angrily, the Nightmare turned her vision onto the forest, and the unlikely procession inside. “Ah, my little monster. So filled with fear and anger, a delicious banquet. And she brought her little friends too.” The five little sleeping ponies on the floating bark had rolled with the natural motion of their curved sleeping platform until they formed a multi-colored fuzzy pillow in the center, all mixed limbs and tails like some strange love monster.

“How touching. They really need to be touched.” Nightmare reached down from the sky.

[center] * * * [/center]

Monster knew fear. Fear lurked in dark shadows, in flashes of lightning that heralded the terrible thunder, in tooth and claw and thorn of the forest, and in her own mind. Things that she had seen a hundred times would suddenly remind her of a face or a name from her terrifying past. Colors had always been the worst, and the forest fairly [i]oozed[/i] with a wealth of iridescent glows and shimmers, sometimes forcing her to hide in the dark, herbal-smelling basement of Home for days at a time. Home was safety. Creatures and plants of the forest she could fight or flee; her own mind refused to allow her such options anymore. Memories roared in an agonizing torrent throughout her thoughts, memories of faces and names and odors and flavors, mixed with the exaltation of power drawn from the sun and fiery agony, a pleasure and pain beyond measure. Magic coiled around her horn unconsciously as they ran, batting aside low-lying branches and vines. There was no conscious thought directing its use, but instinct can be a powerful force in a unicorn entirely too familiar with the dangerous forest, as a certain observer suddenly found out.

[center] * * * [/center]

“You little snipe!” Dark magic coiled around the immaterial form of Nightmare Moon, crackling and snapping as the moon darkened, and then returned to the form it held for centuries. “You will pay for that dearly,” she hissed.

[color=silver]Temper, temptress.[/color]

“You!” No trace of the little cowardly princess could be found, no matter how hard Nightmare looked, rummaging through memories and long-lost experiences. “Come out and die, little one!”

[color=silver]No.[/color]

“Then see one die in your place, coward!”

[center] * * * [/center]

[i]The old panther’s ears twitched at the sound of galloping hooves, awakening him from a dreamy slumber. Prey that ran in fear was blind to attack, and easy to kill. He hungered. Food was near. The cloying darkness around the ebon beast wrapped him in a cold embrace, driving him down the hill towards the path regardless of the suddenly-sharp stones and razor-like blades of grass that sliced at his paws. The two traveling ponies were too strong to attack directly, but the floating wood behind them held delicious young ones, all juicy and tasty. He would strike from concealment, picking one of the little ones up in his jaws and be away into the forest before they would even notice. A rugged bush that seemed to be all thorns provided the cover, allowing him to wait until after their passage. Only after they had completely passed did the panther slide out from behind the bush and pounce, a silent shadow in the inky darkness that his prey had no chance of detecting.

Stranglevine was a constant threat in the Everfree. Crawling ever so slow to position itself over well-traveled paths, it would drop down on its prey and drag them back up into the treetops to absorb desperately needed nutrients, delicious iron-rich blood, fatty tissues engorged with energy, and precious calcium, leaving only a few tattered pieces of skin. A rudimentary intelligence controlled the not-plant, not-animal with just barely enough intelligence to be frustrated when it attempted to release its embracing vines on the rich food source passing below, only to be held unable to move. A second warm source passed beneath, but only when it had gotten out of range did the embracing tentacles of vegetation manage to silently fall, catching a gamey predator in their sharp, thorny embrace. As it drew the panther’s strangled body up to be consumed, huge upper leaves extended to gather the warm rays of the sun, due to raise in just a few short hours. Digestion was a difficult business without sunlight.

The only sign there had ever been a predator on the path were a few blood-streaked pebbles, and the trace of a smile on the zebra shaman’s face as she ran. [/i]

[center] * * * [/center]

Silent laughter filled the Nightmare’s head as she drew the veil of shadow across her vision, cutting off the source of Luna’s amusement. Rage stormed through her essence in response, a

weak tea compared to her mighty power when she first confronted Celestia. She hungered for a taste, a quick descent into a town to sip the nectar of fear, the fire of rage as she killed, the despair of the weak and powerless. Far better to drink from the neverending cup of a goddess than to sip drips from the weaklings who mewed and cried at her sight.

Ever so carefully, the Nightmare drew back her curtain again and showed Princess Celestia, sitting wan and drawn at her desk in a small puddle of golden lamplight. Writing, with tears of weakness in her eyes.

“Behold, my little worm. Your Celestia sits and broods while beneath her breast lays a thousand years of hatred and anger at one who stole away her sister. She has hidden it well, but I can smell the delicious aroma, power beyond measure that I hunger to drink. When I appear to her at dawn, she plans on unleashing that anger upon me. The fool.” Nightmare chuckled, watching like a starved cat waiting on a mouse, but Luna refused to rise to the bait.

“These years of starvation have made us so weak, and to be presented such a bounty on our release will be delightful. It will give me great pleasure to use her hatred to destroy you both.”

The image of Celestia below turned over a letter and placed it in a box with many others, as not to have them scattered by the night breeze that gently nudged at her thin white dress.

“Why so silent, little broken bird? Look at your poor, innocent sister. She is so unsuspecting. All it would take is a word of warning from you, and my plans would be in tatters. Go ahead. Reach out and touch your sister. Warn her.”

There was the ever so faint quiver of motion while Nightmare prepared to pounce, only to have it recede away into her mind as if it had been only her imagination. With a thought, she drew her darkness across the image with a chuckle.

“It is too late for the both of you. The darkness is in her heart and no amount of regret or pity will cleanse it. I would be able to track her down no matter where she goes and feast upon her blackened soul. When dawn comes, we shall meet again. One last time.”

[center]-----[/center]

The long-abandoned, crumbling walls of the ancient ruins stood out in stark contrast, highlit by moonlight that danced through the stones, making illusions appear out of the corner of the eye. If you could just turn your head fast enough, perhaps you could see a building, filled with happy ponies just as it had been centuries ago. But no matter how fast you turned your head, there was nothing but crumbling rock and exploring ivy. The physical bodies of the ponies who inhabited The Castle of the Royal Pony Sisters had gone many centuries ago, never to return.

Twilight and Zecora slowed their pace, finally stopping outside the thorn hedge that separated

them from their forest home. Behind them, the little ponies continued in their enchanted sleep, wrapped around each other in an affectionate way that only small children filled with innocence can maintain. Mother and daughter stood silently on the open path, both looking up at the sky with only the sounds of the forest and five small snores to keep them company. Finally the older zebra gave a sigh and sat down in order to rest her hooves, although her eyes did not leave the sky.

"My daughter, what do you see in the stars above? Is it Fate? Or Hope? Or even Love?"

"They're afraid." The little unicorn huddled closer to Zecora and shivered without moving her eyes from the star-scattered heavens. "More than me." Scootaloo's wagon and scooter floated over the thorn hedge from their tree-home, wrapped in a faint violet glow. They silently tucked themselves in next to the sleeping little ponies while Monster continued to stare into the sky. When she spoke again, she spoke slowly. Her voice was unnaturally rough and deep from fear, sounding out each word as if it were foreign to her.

"I see two sisters who need each other more than life. If I am not there when they meet at the birth of the sun, their deaths will be my fault."

Monster leaned into her mother one last time before standing up by herself and facing the path leading to Ponyville. "Goodbye."

Zecora stood up with only a small wince of pain and took her place next to her daughter. "Goodbye? Why? What kind of mother would I be, when my daughter faces her darkest fear, to flee? When you go your fears to face, at your side is my proper place."

Monster sniffed and started to walk down the path with her mother, the slab of bark with sleeping ponies trailing behind in their wake.

Above them, the unsleeping stars continued in their courses as the hour of dawn grew nearer.

[center]-----[/center]

Tallgrass stumbled when moving from the brightly-lit interior of the town hall to the stygian darkness of pre-dawn Ponyville. It was a little more than an hour until dawn was scheduled, and there was no sign of either Princess Celestia or her annoying student, which made a good excuse for the 'Royal Guard' to step out of the party. Along with one other.

"You don't think she's found some place to drink herself senseless, do you?" asked Spike. The dragon sniffed the air with flared nostrils, seeking the telltale scent of his employer, or perhaps bourbon.

"Does it make her easier to deal with?" asked Tallgrass with a sniff of his own. The hour he had

spent with Trixie this evening in his present Royal Guard disguise was very similar to the hour she had spent getting a massage at the spa the previous day. Both hours had seemed like weeks, from the almost-constant complaining while Trixie was face-down on the table, and the low-grade grumbling of more recent exposure that gave him a strong urge to wash his hooves.

There was an emotional miasma that seemed to fairly drip from the unhappy unicorn, which the emotionally-sensitive changeling felt able to track from the other side of the town. It made for a very interesting revelation in the pre-dawn darkness as Tallgrass extended his perceptions.

He could sense two of them.

[center] * * * [/center]

Five small ponies gathered around a scooter and a wagon at the edge of town, in serious discussion of a very serious problem. Overseeing the discussion was a larger pony, of white with black stripes, who looked both bemused and concerned over the discussion.

“We need to talk to Applejack!”

“No! The mayor first!”

“Rainbow Dash!”

“Girllth, can you keep it down? I’m about out of anxiety thweeth.” Twist fed her last licorice stick to the shivering unicorn hidden under a blanket in the wagon before rummaging in her saddlebags. “I could have thorwn I had more jawbreakerth.”

“The light is better over at Twist’s house,” suggested Featherweight while sucking on a jawbreaker, responding to the accusatory glare with an indignant, “Hey. I found it on the ground.”

The arguments stopped as a distant, child-like voice carried on the cool night air. “I tell you, I don’t get a whiff of her in this direction.”

“Zecora! We need to hide you!”

“Yeah, ponies around town get kind of jumpy when new ponies show up, and you’re sorta... really strange. Sorry.”

“They don’t like parathprith eather.”

“Or the time we brought eggs over to the library to identify them?”

“Yeah, I didn’t think they were going to hatch.”

“Or try to eat us.”

“Monster!” hissed Apple Bloom, trying to pull Zecora into a nearby alley and finding a fuzzy purple leg sticking out from the wagon had latched on first. “Let go.”

“Uh-uh.” A brilliant purple light crawled up the zebra, fading out just as a Royal Guard and a

small purple dragon turned the corner.

[center] * * * [/center]

Despite the many times as he had been in Ponyville at night over the last year, the darkness tonight gave Tallgrass a jittery disposition. It was not made one tiny bit better by the quiet whispers from underhoof as he walked around with Spike, or the little dragon's constant worried chatter about his missing employer. As they approached the location where the changeling had detected such a gloomy emotional upwelling, he began to feel something else. Something familiar. Something that figuratively smacked him in the face as they turned the corner to see five small ponies and one large pink alicorn all looking in his direction.

Spike reacted first, with a yelp of "Princess Cadence! Are we glad to see you. Have you seen Trixie?"

Tallgrass remained silent to properly fight with his emotions, his eyes flickering around the group while he tried to make sense of the situation.

First there was the wagon, and a fuzzy purple face that he had seen just for an instant as they rounded the corner. The short glimpse before it vanished under a blanket had given him both a sensation of incredible joy and a desire to run up and hug whatever was inside the wagon, and a sense of outright terror and an urgent need to flee the wagon as fast as possible.

Then there were the three little hellspawn and their unholy assistants, who he had last seen as he chased them out of the spa after they had tied down the pressure relief valve on the hot mud bath warmer. He had been wearing his earth pony disguise at the time, which had been resilient enough to endure both being totally covered in hot mud, and the resulting chiseling out that needed to be done when the mud had cooled into a solid. It was only the constant flow of cinnamon sticks fed to him by their adorable little accomplice while being freed that had saved their lives, although that would change if they broke their promise and ever published any of the photos.

Last, but not least, was Queen Cadence. But not Queen Cadence. The changeling only had a brief glimpse of the new queen for a few chaotic seconds through the Hivemind a few hours ago. There was only one pink alicorn princess in Equestria. Whoever this was looked just like the new queen, but the strangely familiar feeling he was getting from her was not the Hivemind. And this one was younger, with her mane tied up in a ponytail. Strangely enough, the alicorn wore an expression of absolute bafflement as she looked over her own body, even going so far as lifting a wing and examining it.

"My Quee — Princess. Um. What are you doing here?" asked Tallgrass, with a sudden realization that the voices he heard talking up through his hooves had all gone silent the moment he spoke.

The alicorn finished looking herself over and gave a brisk nod. "I am talking with these young ponies, as you can see. My appearance is also quite a surprise to me."

"Oh." His eyes were drawn to the darkness that formed from under the blanket as a small form in the wagon silently peeked out at him, her horn glimmering every so softly. "Well. Your Highness, we must be going. Need to catch a pony. Come on, Spike. Hurry up."

The disguised changeling departed at a quick trot, breaking into a canter as soon as he and the dragon were out of sight. What drove him away at such a clip was not the creature's horn, but her eyes, their dark circles under the blanket having only the slightest tinge of violet, but filled to overflowing with fear like a cornered animal.

A fear entirely too much like the one he could feel from Trixie.

[center]-----[/center]

Silence covered the streets of Canterlot, the normal all-night celebration of the Summer Sun Celebration having been snuffed out rather solidly by the sudden influx of badly-wounded changelings. Princess Celestia remained in her bedroom, writing down things she never had time to write before. There was never enough time, and soon there would be no more time to write, only time to die.

In order to catch one last breath of a familiar scent, her window remained open to the courtyard below and the private gardens she had cultivated for so long. The heartache of losing Luna so long ago had almost made her throw away her own life, if not for the gardens she created to be a memorial to her beloved sister, to keep Luna's memory alive when she herself had passed on. As they took shape, Celestia had poured her own soul into creating a place of beauty where Luna could be remembered, and eventually the labor of love had overcome her grief, for if Luna did return, she would feel in her own heart the agony Celestia could barely stand. For centuries she had raised the moon within those green walls, seeking refuge in a place of peace where she could touch the hateful beast in the moon and still dream of her sister trapped inside. Now the garden was abandoned to the care of the gardeners who kept the plants alive even as the reason for their growth had passed.

It was just a dream. Luna was dead. Only the beast remained.

While Celestia remained awake at her desk far past the midnight hour, the shadows outside her window slowly began to fill with the rustle of wings and the glow of golden eyes. From all across Equestria, they gathered within the city and waited. Young, old, male and female, all with one thought.

The Nightmare was returning.

And there was one task her creations had waited a thousand years to complete.

-End chapter 16 -

-Chapter 17-

[center]The Monster in the Twilight

Nocturne

Dawn approached. The time had come. There was no more delaying.

Princess Celestia got up from her desk, the habits of a lifetime causing her to cap the inkwell to prevent it from drying out despite the futility of the action. The white dress slid off her thin shoulders like a snake shedding its skin, gently folded in her magic and laid across the bed for a return that would not happen. Only for a moment did she pause with the thought of likewise shedding her crown and the rest of her regalia onto the floor. Naked she had come into the world, but naked she would not leave as long as there was breath in her body. The golden shoes only seemed to fit loosely, enchanted to remain firmly in place no matter her physical condition. The hooves those shoes encased had worn out uncounted pairs of the finest steel ever to pass an earth pony farrier's hammer. The golden crown was supposedly made from the gold Unicornia had salvaged during their ancient flight to Equestria, forged by Princess Platinum herself, or at least by unicorns in her employ, and reforged every few centuries since. Only her Peytral of Office was still the original, made by the warriors of the pegasi from a single piece of metal taken from each clan leader's helm to signify their obedience. The weight dragged at her thin shoulders, weighing down her head and hooves with far more than simple gold and steel. It would be a burden she would gladly carry on this one last and final trip. Cadence would be better off making her own symbols of office without the shame and disgrace these carried.

As she turned to leave, Celestia hesitated before blowing out the light at her desk. The simple lamp continued to fill the room with light, banishing the darkness for the brief period it burned, soon to have the darkness crash back in as it exhausted the meager amount of fuel it could hold. In defiance, she decided to let it burn as she departed.

[i]Let it die like a princess, one solitary light, burning to banish the darkness until it consumes

itself and allows the world to go dark. Or until another comes to bring the light again.[/i]

“Princess of the Sun,” said a relatively quiet, familiar voice behind her. “Your subjects hereby request an audience with you about issues of the greatest importance.”

A cold chill went up her flanks at the sound of those formal words which she had not heard delivered in that way for centuries. Turning towards the window, she looked down at a charcoal-grey Nocturne pegasus in the armor of the Night Guard within her room. His dragon-like wings were flattened to either side, his golden eyes closed while laying prostrate before her. Only the slow movements of his sides showed he was alive.

“Begone,” she managed to say. “I command it.”

“By ties of blood and bone we are your subjects. The magic of your sister created us, we live to serve her will. You are bone of her bone, flesh of her flesh, you speak with her voice, and we do as you command. A second time we call out to you, hear our plea.”

Behind the Night Guard, the darkness of the night swelled ever so slightly to reveal a host of Nocturne laying upon their faces in the same exact posture as the first. There was no need to count them; she knew exactly how many there were. Forty-three. Male and female. The exact number of surviving Nocturne foals who had been spared from Nightmare Moon’s spell almost exactly a thousand years ago.

Plus one.

On that dreadful night, there had been a single newly-created Nocturne colt who had resisted the siren call of his creator, gathering the youngest and most vulnerable to flee the charnel pit that her fight with Nightmare Moon had become, but at the cost of his own life. In respect for his sacrifice, over the centuries the Nocturne had only granted three of their members the honor of bearing his name.

The weight of heroic expectations had been too much for two of them, all who had perished in tragic attempts to follow their ancestor’s honored hoofsteps. This last one was her youngest Night Guard, and his unswerving commitment to her service reminded her constantly of his long-dead namesake.

“Pumpernickel, please,” she whispered, unable to take her eyes off them. Memories of that cursed night thought long buried danced in front of her eyes in ghoulish clarity. The Nocturne revered their ancestors, naming each of their kind after a follower of Luna who had been slain in that terrible night when Nightmare Moon came into her power. Over the long years, she had never been able to speak with them without being able to see their long-dead ancestor in her memory. Whom she had killed by her hesitation.

Celestia backed up a step. "Don't do this. I can't do this."

The bulky Night Pegasus took a deep breath, and she could see the dry tracks of tears on his muzzle, although they did not affect his resonating tenor voice in the slightest. "Our lives are yours to command. We live or die at your word. A third time we call out to you, hear our plea."

Absolute silence filled the room, holding the Princess and the Nocturne in a frozen tableau until the clouds parted, and a beam of moonlight made their shadows dance across the floor as if they were alive, the shadows of uncounted generations of the Night Pegasi seemingly mixed with their long-dead Nocturne Unicorn and Earth Pony relatives.

"Rise, faithful servants." Celestia lifted her head high with a strength she did not know she still possessed as the Nocturne silently rose to their hooves and stood with eyes downcast. "Speak."

Although he rose to his hooves with the rest, the Night Guard in front of her remained with head downcast, scarcely moving a muscle except for his mouth. "As your faithful servants, we offer our lives to you, in this darkest of nights, as you go forth to set our Princess of the Night free. We beg of you, accept our offer."

"No. The Nightmare will consume you, as she did to your ancestors. I cannot accept your offer. You must remain behind." Memory of that night seemed to dance in the shadows behind Celestia, deaths beyond number doomed to happen again.

"We know." The absolute certainty of his voice made Celestia tighten with nervous tension, only to relax as he continued. "As you depart to battle our ancient foe, every Nocturne in Equestria shall be locked away behind bars of steel, unable to respond to her summons. Our strength must not be used against you, who saved us all."

"So you would offer me assistance you knew I would not accept." Celestia's eyes glittered in the lamplight and the ghost of a smile played on her aged face. "I would commend your loyalty."

"There is yet one more service we would give unto you. Know that your sister still lives."

All of the warmth Celestia had felt drained away into despair. "Luna is dead. I know that now."

"As long as we live, we bear witness to her power," Pumpernickel recited as if repeating a well-memorized text. "Our very flesh and blood were made by Luna, we but reflect her glory as the moon doth reflect the sun. None would dare call you mother to our race, but it was by her actions we were born, it was for her sins we shall serve the Crown in the hope of redemption until the last star goes out and the sun gutters into darkness."

Still with head bowed, the Night Guard refused to meet her eyes. "Your sister made us, the

three races of the Nocturne, before the Nightmare consumed our brethren. You are only her sister; we are more than her children. On the Night of Creation, Nightmare Moon's power transformed our bodies, but Luna passed on a tiny spark of her soul to each of our ancestors. If she were dead, we would know it in our hearts. She lives."

Words failed Celestia for the longest time. When she finally could speak, it was only with a raspy voice within a hairsbreadth of breaking into tears.

"You meant to bring peace to my soul, with the knowledge that my sister still lives. Instead you bring me ashes, as now I must kill Luna in order to save all of my beloved ponies. You meant well, as I did then, but please. Pray for my success, and mourn for the both of us. That is all I will ask of you. Do not hate me for destroying your Goddess of the Night. Forgive me."

Pumpkinnickel finally looked up to meet her immortal gaze. "No, My Princess. We shall not forgive you, for there is nothing to forgive. We know within our hearts that you will be victorious, and bring our Princess of the Night back to us once more."

There was nothing she could say in return. The Nocturne slid away from her path as she stepped to the balcony. Across Canterlot, in every shadow of every tower and building, she could see the glow of trusting golden eyes. Waiting. Watching. Believing.

Princess Celestia spread her wings and slowly flew off into the darkness to kill her sister.

-End chapter 17 -

-Chapter 18 -

[center]The Monster in the Twilight
[color=Orange]Dawn[/color][[/center]
[hr]

The faintest pinking of dawn on the horizon only made the inky darkness that coiled about the small town seem darker. Inside the brightly lit town hall, the inhabitants of Ponyville drew together in noisy celebration of the unprecedented honor that was about to be visited upon them. No city had ever hosted the Summer Sun Celebration more than two years in a row, and in only an hour, Ponyville would be the first. Still, there was an undertone of doubt that clung to the walls of the building, echoed by their changeling guests who clung to their new friends with an unnatural intensity, as if they feared losing their friendship as quickly as they had gained it. Certainly the chilling nervousness that propelled the partygoers to extravagant heights of activity was only due to the darkness; when Princess Celestia arrived, it would quickly vanish as shadows before the sun. Until then, there was cake to eat and punch to be drunk, and much partying to be done, for tomorrow was to happen in just a few minutes.

[center] * * * [/center]

“Come on, Trixie. It’s almost time for dawn. Princess Celestia will be here any minute.” The disguised changeling scratched on the side of the dumpster outside the candy shop, finally giving a sigh. “Spike even agreed not to collect the fifty bits you owe on that bet.”

“No.” Trixie’s voice continued to be quite firm, despite coming from inside the trash dumpster while a faint sniffing like suppressed tears underlaid her words. She had been just as obstinate ever since Tallgrass had tracked her emotionally-torn grief into the dark alley, and for most of an hour now it had not mattered if it was the changeling or the lizard trying to talk her out of the bin and back to the party. Still, he had to try.

“Well, if you’re not coming out...” Tallgrass paused before lifting the lid of the dumpster, regretting that the sugar that both ponies and changelings loved so much was also greatly desired by odiferous microorganisms. From the sound of Trixie’s voice, he expected to have to look down into the bottom of the bin. The last thing he expected was to be almost nose-to-nose with a sticky, angry unicorn once the lid was out of the way.

“What do you want?” whispered Trixie in a voice pitched low as not to disturb the dragon, who had decided to sit the end of the alleyway to look for reinforcements, or perhaps some fresh air.

“For starters, a hose and some soap,” said Tallgrass, startled at her sudden sticky appearance, with candy wrappers and unmentionable candy debris in her mane. “Look, I can’t tell you why you need to go back to the party. Can you just trust me? Please?”

Trixie’s eyes narrowed, bringing her violet glare to a sharp focus about an inch inside Tallgrass’ head. “Why?”

Being around the mopey unicorn for this long had stretched the emotionally-sensitive changeling’s patience to the breaking point. Angrily, Tallgrass switched forms to his amber-maned earth pony disguise in a blaze of green fire that flickered around the alley before snarling, “Now you have something on me. Blackmail material, some leverage, a dirty little secret you can use against me. Isn’t that what you want? If you can’t believe anypony would trust you without something to gain, then fine! Here you go. Are you satisfied?”

“You’re a bug.” Trixie blinked, looking perplexed.

“Changeling,” corrected Tallgrass. “And for the next few hours, I’m yours. Your guards passed Princess Cadence’s orders to me before they collapsed for the night. You can have them back at the party, and you never have to see me again. Cross my hea—”

Trixie’s sticky hoof moved lightning-fast to cover Tallgrass’ mouth before he could finish. “Just change back.” This time Trixie watched the transformation intently before taking a deep

shuddering breath.

“I had bug hooves on my back. I had bug. Hooves. On. My. Back. Ick!”

After a momentary hesitation and a second measured glare, Trixie tossed her hat and cape outside the dumpster with a sticky splat before starting to climb out. “Trust, ha! That’s a laugh. Celestia doesn’t trust me. Everypony in Equestria trusts her, but me? I get trusted by a bug.”

Trixie levitated her cloak and hat up to begin running a cleaning spell over them while ignoring the ‘Royal Guard’ standing in the alley, just as if he was a piece of furniture or a dog. “Golden Orb followed every single direction I gave her for this outfit, every stitch, every pocket, every star. And when she was done, she said never to give her credit. At first, I thought she was just being modest.”

She levitated the now-clean clothes across the changeling’s disguised back as Trixie turned her cleaning spell on her own sticky blue hide. “All of the little ponies cheer at my shows and applaud, but afterwards when they come around the dressing room, they don’t see me. They only see a step on the stairs to get to the Princess. Leverage.”

The last of the candy wrappers and sticky sludge taken care of, she gently picked the cloak off the back of the changeling and slung it across her back, adding the slightly-faded hat only once everything was in place. “Trust me? You think just because you flash me some bug skin, I’m supposed to trust you? I’ve been seduced by some of the greatest, I’ll have you know—” Pinking slightly, Trixie turned away and scowled. “Not like that. At least I don’t have to worry about you respecting me in the morning. There probably isn’t going to be a morning.”

With a muttered, “C’est vraiment des conneries!” Trixie stalked out of the alley and back towards the town hall, pausing at the sight of a small purple dragon sleeping curled up next to a bush.

“You get to carry Sleeping Beauty.”

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In the vast caverns beneath Canterlot Castle, the families of the Nocturne huddled together for warmth as they waited out the long night. The glow of nervous golden eyes refracted through the darkened crystalline walls like fireflies, reflecting a tension raised to extremes by their natural fear of underground spaces. The hard surfaces of the crystals that surrounded the cavern reflected the rustle of leathery wings and faint whispers in echoes that seemed entirely too much like the faint whispers of long-dead ancestors, seduced away to their destruction so many centuries past.

True to their word, steel bars blocked their way to the surface with several sworn-to-secrecy unicorn and earth pony Royal Guards in the Night Guard divisions outside, taking the voluntary

confinement of their fellow guards with no minor trepidation. The last few years had seen changes in the Princess far beyond living memory or guard tradition, and a feeling of tension between the diurnal and nocturnal ponies stretched tightly across both inside and outside the bars.

Gathered together in family groups and clans, the Nocturne distracted themselves by quietly reading from their Books of Tradition, histories of each clan kept all the way back to the original Night of Creation. Many of the stories and records of their ancient ancestors had not seen the light in centuries, and the families drew together as they were read, only rarely yielding a tense chortle at some of the more outlandish events.

Certain groups of the Nocturne inside their voluntary prison were less voluntary than the families of the Night Guard. On rare occasion, one of the clannish pegasi would leave the family, either to start a family of their own outside the clan structure, or because of behavior shunned by the traditionalists. Then there were others, who never were spoken about inside the family. Criminals. The insane. And the exceedingly rare individual for whom the ancient spell which gave the Nocturne their forms had broken down in some fashion.

One of these unfortunate ponies lay on the cold stone floor, far away from each family group as if she loathed their very presence. Laminia had fled the protection of her clan at a young age to become apprenticed to the Royal Seamstress, a job for which she had quite some talent. Where this night the rest of the Nocturne had eventually, if somewhat reluctantly, joined with the clans in their self-imposed imprisonment, the young mare had to be dragged screaming away from her earth pony foster parents. The cause for her separation from the clans was not obvious in the dim lighting of the prison, despite the mare's half-webbed, half-feathered wing which dragged on the ground beside her. The birth defect was one which her home clan had been willing to overlook, but her outlandish behavior was not. One look in her shining golden eyes tonight showed the knowledge of Luna's return that all the Night Pegasi had accepted, but there was also something else there. A glint of madness fed by fear and loneliness, which could only be sated by sacrifice.

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The cool night air between Canterlot and Ponyville slid through Princess Celestia's wings in broad, smooth strokes. At this altitude, it was almost possible to think of her entire life as a dream, where the only reality was air against her face and stars above her. They were a flighty lot, even more prone to flights of panic than her own beloved ponies. Luna had loved them individually, and could tell when even a single one had wandered from his or her appointed place in the sky. Holding back fate for two years had made them grumpy and irritable like cranky nobleponies in a hot committee room without coffee. Now they seemed to whisper to each other behind her back, terrified of what was to come and unwilling to accept her guidance. They knew what she had done to her own sister. After all, they had watched the event in such unspeaking horror that it had taken her centuries to get them to calm down. Now the monster

who wore her sister's body like some obscene puppet was returning, and they fairly trembled in the sky with terror at what was to come.

If circumstances had been reversed so long ago, Luna most certainly would have found another way to contain her sister. She would not have locked Celestia away in the sun for millennia. She would have been able to destroy the Nightmare. She would have been able to save Celestia, unlike Celestia's bungled attempt to save Luna with the Elements.

Even if the worst happened, even Luna were truly alive as Celestia dragged them all into her beloved sun to be locked away forever, at least they would be together at long last.

The brightly-lit town hall drew near too quickly for her tangled thoughts, as Celestia dropped silently into the darkened back plaza. She had only selected Ponyville for her final encounter with Nightmare a few years ago on a whim, or perhaps instinct, seeing something special about this small town when she had flown in on a routine visit. The town had lifted her spirits in the times she needed it most. Here the apples tasted crisper, the birds sung louder, the sky was brighter, and there was a sense of belonging like nowhere else that filled her heart with joy and shed light into even the worst of her days. Plus the baker made the most amazing cakes.

When she had sent Trixie here on that first Summer Sun Celebration, there had been a hope in her heart that perhaps, despite her repeated failures, maybe she could finally make friends in this place where friendship was so plentiful. There was no need to even use magic to look for her student tonight. From the happy sounds filtering out of the party going on inside town hall, Trixie was far away. The muffled music and the singing of the happy ponies seemed to clash so horribly with her memories of that terrible night, but they held back the ghosts—

Until she felt the Nightmare leap free from the moon and begin her long descent into Equestria.

Despair and anguish crushed in on all sides of the alicorn princess as a voice as clear as crystal whispered into her ear.

[i]I'm coming for you, Celestia.[/i]

It would only be a few minutes until she arrived. All of the pain and agony inside her immortal breast seemed to swell to a breaking point, a thousand years of pain brought to a single moment. She had not sung a word since Luna had fallen, but now the pressure was too great, and she gently lifted her voice to the frightened stars in memory of her lost sister.

[color=silver][i]Ask not the sun why she sets[size=10](*)[/size]
[color=silver]Why she shrouds her light away[/i][[/color]

[center] * * * [/center]

The five small ponies and their pink 'alicorn' guardian paused in their stealthy progress around the back of town hall, frozen in fascination at the ethereal voice that lifted softly over the moonlit plaza. It took them only a few quick steps to look for who was singing so beautifully in the shadows, seeing a painfully thin Princess Celestia with her head thrown back, tears streaming unrestrained from closed eyes as she poured out her heart to the sky in mournful song.

"Is she a ghost?" whispered Scootaloo.

"She is no spirit of the dead, my little friend. She sings in sorrow of her end." Matching tears dripped from the end of the disguised zebra's nose as she lowered her head in respect, only to twitch slightly as a trembling purple hoof from inside the blanket-wrapped bundle in the wagon poked her gently in one leg, and pointed to the mournful monarch.

[color=silver][i]Or why she hides her glowing gaze
[color=silver]When night turns crimson gold to grey[/i]

[center] * * * [/center]

Trixie stumbled on the path as the faint song rose into the air, her stumble matched almost exactly by her 'Royal Guard' tagging along in her wake with a sleeping dragon on his back. It was impossible to study at the side of the immortal Princess Celestia for twelve years without learning just how little you could really know about the ancient alicorn. Every time Trixie had thought she understood how the princess' mind worked, it was like going around a corner and seeing an entirely new world.

[color=silver][i]For silent falls the guilty sun
[color=silver]As day to dark does turn[/i]

Still, she had at least thought there were a [i]few[/i] things Trixie understood about the princess, one of which was her voice. During all her years of training, Princess Celestia had never raised that voice in song even once, be it a birthday party, or at Hearth's Warming. Instead, she had just sat while everypony else sang with that frustratingly calm expression across her entire face like a perfect mask. Part of the art of the stage was being able to 'read' ponies, and while Trixie was fully fluent, against Celestia she was illiterate as a newborn.

"Take Spike into the party," ordered Trixie, only half-looking at Tallgrass or she would have seen his concerned expression as he stared up into the sky at the stars. "I need to go take care of something. I promise I'll be right back."

Without even a glance back at her guard, Trixie began to trot with hesitant steps towards the shadows behind the town hall, vanishing into the darkness without a trace.

[color=silver][i]One simple truth she dare not speak:
[color=silver]Her light can only blind and burn[/i]

[center] * * * [/center]

The low murmur of conversations between the Nocturne in their prison ceased almost simultaneously, as the small family groupings clustered even tighter together for warmth against the sudden chill that gripped the cavern. Slowly, one after another, they began to hum a long, low note while the individual family groups gathered. Charcoal-grey bodies pressed against each other with their dragon-like wings, drawing together even the most standoffish of the clans, until every Nocturne seemed lumped together in one large grey mass for mutual support. All except for one mare, who stubbornly remained huddled by herself away from the rest, shivering with the cold until she tilted her head back and began to softly croon.

[i]No mercy for the guilty
Bring down their lying sun[/i]

Suddenly bursting into a shriek of rage, the crippled Nocturne mare galloped to the locked gate, flinging herself against the bars with reckless abandon and a horrible crunching noise that shook loose small flecks of dust from the ceilings. Several of the Night Guard dashed after her, unable to catch the frenzied mare before she crashed into the bars yet again with an unearthly scream. Two Night Guards launched themselves into a flying tackle, only to be flung away as the mare twisted with hysterical strength, bringing both steel-shod rear hooves crashing into one armored chest while catching the other a crushing blow across the snout with her bloodied deformed wing.

Dropping on top of her and wrapping the frantic mare with all four limbs and his wings, Pumpernickel hung on for his life, wincing as Laminia flung herself backwards and smashed him into the blood-smeared bars. "She'll kill you!" he shouted, being smashed into the unyielding bars again even as a medical pony holding a syringe in his mouth dashed forward. "She'll drain you dry just like she did our ancestors!"

"I don't care!" The mare thrashed in white-eyed fury, pinning the clinging guard against the bars of their prison as the medical pony darted in. "I want to die for her!"

"Got her!" shouted the medical pony as the mare lashed out one iron-shod hoof, nearly catching him on the helmet.

"That's my ass, you ass!" bellowed Pumpernickel, heaving his uncooperative captive to one side and holding her with grim determination. "I'm not going to let you do this!"

Laminia gave a shriek as the medical pony jammed a needle in her rump. With a vengeful kick that was fractionally too late, she caught the medic a glancing blow on his helmet that sent him

skidding away across the stone floor. “Let me go to her! Let me go!”

“No!” The bulky guard began to cry as he held the struggling mare, not relenting one iota in his grip as the sedative began to affect them both. “I won’t lose you.”

The surrounding Nocturne remained at a distance as the two ponies slowly began to slip into drugged slumber, clutching each other almost as secret lovers while tears trickled down their cheeks. Laminia’s voice rose in a whisper as the darkness closed in around her:

[color=silver][i]Blood so silver, black by night
[color=silver]Upon their faces pale white[/i]

[center] * * * [/center]

Without even a whisper, a series of grass blades bent and straightened in the shadows behind the Ponyville town hall. Each blade popped back up as the unseen pony that trod it down departed, the tiny flicker of icy blue that straightened it the only sign Trixie had ever passed by. As the invisible hoofsteps rounded the building, Princess Celestia came into view first, her head raised to the sky with her dull pink mane lying lifelessly along her painfully slender neck. A gasp almost escaped the student at seeing her teacher so wasted and exhausted without the concealing garments she had worn for over the past year. Tears streamed down Celestia’s sunken cheeks and brought little splashes of color to her dull mane as she sang, lost in the music of the spheres.

A hesitant movement drew Trixie’s attention, and caused her to draw in a breath with a sharp, angry hiss. The tiny terrorists who had caused her life such pain were creeping up to Princess Celestia, both pushing and pulling on that deadly wagon they used to carom through the streets on their missions of destruction. Something sizeable was loaded inside and covered by a blanket, most probably explosive, poisonous, or odoriferous. Probably all three. Bringing up the rear was a larger pink pony, most probably their accomplice, Pinkie Pie...

Trixie blinked and sharpened her observation spell. That could not be Cadence; she had seen the Princess of Lovey Smooches fly off south with Prince Iron Flank for their vacation home of — oh, obviously another changeling. It had picked a [i]darned[/i] peculiar disguise, though. Princess Cadence had not worn her mane in a ponytail for over a decade, or been seen in Ponyville without her armor, both the metal and stallion variety. So how did the bug copy her image from ten years ago?

Had she been closer, Trixie would have hustled the little pests and their pet bug away from the distraught princess, but that would have been futile. The dread in her heart at nearness of the hour combined with her distance to stop the student in her tracks, simply to watch. Perhaps their presence would bring some peace to the old alicorn on the eve of her battle with Nightmare.

The unearthly song finally ended, strangely incomplete as the Princess lowered her head with eyes still closed. Not even a single insect could be heard in the darkened courtyard, only the gentle blowing of an unusually cool breeze and the faint dripping of her tears. Without looking at her young audience, Princess Celestia rasped, "Children. It is not safe for you. Go back inside. Now!"

Trixie moved forward, dropping the invisibility spell in preparation for moving the little ungrateful twerps out of the line of upcoming fire. Five little voices all speaking at once made for a terrible din, causing Celestia to turn even farther away from the pesky little ponies until a deep, vibrant voice cut through the chatter like a sword.

"Oh Wise One of the Sky, I implore. My daughter is wise in ways of lore. Your path from here is critical to her, so the worst of dooms does not take occur."

Both distant student and nearby teacher looked at the pink 'alicorn': one with interest and the other in open-jawed amazement. Stumbling slightly, Princess Celestia got to her hooves and bowed her head incrementally at 'Cadence', only to be met by a much deeper bow.

The Princess took a deep breath and while turning her head fractionally to look the five little ponies surrounding the wagon, managed to stammer, "Y-you are not Cadence. Who are you?"

"A stinking bug," muttered Trixie, picking up her pace.

"I am not a Wise One of the Sky's kin," stated the pink alicorn. "This is but an illusion across my skin." One pink hoof touched gently upon the blanket heaped on the wagon, pausing for a moment before pulling it partially back.

Trixie skidded to a halt, only a few paces away. There was no mistaking that face or those eyes, even with the purple fuzz that covered her body, or the snow-white pointed horn that protruded from her head. Twilight Sparkle. The last time she had seen the destructive little fiend was over a decade ago, while Trixie had been hiding in a doorway to watch Twilight's entrance exam. The not so Great and Powerful Trixie had failed so badly at hatching the dragon, humiliated beyond words after having boasted so much in the waiting room before the test to all the other little colts and fillies.

The only way to assuage her wounded childish pride was to see another humbled as thoroughly as she had been humbled, standing before the smoking wagon, the unhatched dragon's egg mocking her despite all the fireworks she had thrown at it. Twilight Sparkle had [i]ignored[/i] her in the waiting room, preferring the company of a book to her fellow students. She was to be the one to pay for Trixie's failure. Her words of scorn and derision had been all prepared when the burst of rainbow light had turned her dream of vengeance into a nightmare of falling stone blocks and screaming. She could still feel the warm scales of the baby dragon as she pulled

them both into the concealment of a niche between two giant stones, trying to ignore the screaming outside and the sharp smell of fire while huge stones fell all around them. Even now she felt the irrational urge to hug the little scaled menace for reassurance while trying to shout a warning at Princess Celestia.

Instead of fear, the Princess of the Sun seemed to waken as if she had been asleep. A wave of ripples swept through her dull pink mane, flowing from head to tail in a cascade of pastel magenta and violets that softly lit the darkness while a warm smile crept onto her face in small steps, as if the muscles had fallen out of practice. "Twilight Sparkle. Thank the stars. And you have friends."

The purple unicorn did not respond, simply remaining frozen in place on the wagon with two stubs of what looked like licorice sticking out of her mouth. The trembling that had made the wagon seem to be jittering before intensified, even as all five of her little friends and the alicorn all rested a hoof or two on her for reassurance.

"Please, my Flower. Control your fears. This one is wise beyond our years." The pink alicorn remained standing with head bowed, one hoof on her 'Flower's' back until, unable to swallow the licorice, Twilight let the unchewed parts fall from her dry lips.

"Run," she finally managed to croak.

Celestia swallowed, with a short glance at Trixie that held nothing but love and compassion. "I'm sorry, Twilight. I can not leave my little ponies to face this... creature of my own creation."

"Thou. Shouldst. Run." The purple unicorn gasped each word out individually as if they were agonizing, and Princess Celestia recoiled back, her face gone suddenly pale.

Almost as if she feared the answer, Princess Celestia lowered her head and whispered, "Where did you hear that, my child?"

"Dream. Yesterday."

"Oh, Luna." A ripple traveled through Princess Celestia's mane, leaving it flowing behind her in a cascade of vibrant pastels that Trixie had not seen in years. Ages fell from her immortal face as she spread her wings, even while a wave of cold air burst from the sky.

"Children. Go with Trixie. She knows where to take you. Hurry." There was a strident note of command in the Princess' voice that had the little ponies and their pink guardian moving in Trixie's direction before she realized what was happening. As they passed, Celestia looked at the frightened unicorn in the wagon. "Bring back my sister, Twilight Sparkle. I know you can."

Before Trixie could open her mouth to ask just what exactly she was supposed to be doing with

the little menaces, the wind picked up into a strong roar and darkness began to swirl in the sky.

Trixie decided to get a little more distance.

The swirling darkness in the sky began to coalesce into a smokey form, first with two turquoise glows from the creature's eyes, impossibly cold and distant, in oval shapes like a cat, or dragon. An ebon horn fully as long as Celestia's crowned its cruel face, wrapped in cerulean armor as the rest of the alicorn emerged into the moonlight. A wave of arctic air spilled down, rolling over the moist grass in little crystalline sparkles that matched the specks of starlight captured in the creature's roiling mane of shadows.

In one smooth motion, Princess Celestia rose to interpose her body in front of the creature Trixie immediately assumed to be Nightmare Moon. Even as thin and wasted as Celestia had become, there was still a power and majesty in her motions that froze Trixie and her little escorts before they got around the edge of the town hall.

"Hello, Celestia," purred Nightmare Moon with a leer. "Miss me?"

"Hello, sister." The voice of Princess Celestia was as soft as a lover, without a hint of tears.

"Sing for us, Celestia." The gaze of the ebon alicorn traveled to the small cluster of frightened ponies. "Sing for your pitiful little subjects. You have not completed our song. After all, they should know how this ends."

Seeing no response to her taunt, Nightmare Moon landed in the plaza and lifted her voice.

[color=silver][i]Cruel moon, bring the end
[color=silver]The dawn will never rise again[/i]

Celestia rose into the sky, a golden force of pure power and light as the sun rose behind her.

"You are already defeated. Goodbye, Luna. You shall be free soon."

The sun flared behind the Princess of the Sun, and Celestia was gone.

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(*) [url=<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SLMvyX5yqXI>] Daylight's End[/url], written by [url=<http://twitter.com/riotrunaan>] RiotRunaan [/url], music by [url=<https://twitter.com/chrislinke>] Praeco[/url]

[img]http://fc02.deviantart.net/fs70/i/2013/078/b/9/here_comes_the_sun_by_russiankolz-d5yli73.

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Credit [url=<http://russiankolz.deviantart.com/>] Russiankolz at Deviantart[/url]

-End chapter 18 -

-Chapter 19 -

[center]The Monster in the Twilight

[color=Orange]Surprise[/color][[/center]

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“No!” hissed Nightmare Moon, staring at the empty sky where Celestia had vanished. “Coward! I’ll track you to the ends of the world and—”

[color=silver][i]Where she has gone, you dare not follow.[/i][/color]

No...” Nightmare Moon stared at the blazing sun sitting defiantly on the horizon and snarled as she felt Celestia’s hated presence within. “Hide, you coward. Crawl into your infernal sun and burn. Let your refuge become your [i]tomb![/i]”

Blackened fire climbed into the sky in an ebon thread, wrapping around the rising sun as the Nightmare used brute force and raw power to accomplish what the Elements of Harmony had done to her so many years ago. Familiar chains wrapped the glowing globe with wards and enchantments of immense complexity, a solo feat that could only be accomplished by the most powerful, at a horrific price.

[color=silver][i]My sister shall emerge more powerful, purged of her anger and prepared for your destruction.[/i][/color]

“She shall remain trapped in her beloved sun until the stars burn into cinders!” Spittle sprayed from Nightmare’s lips as she continued to work enchantments never attempted by mortal or immortal pony. “A thousand years I spent behind the bars of my prison, I know every rune and charm and ward the Elements laid upon it. No stars shall come to her aid while she watches her ponies die in fire and ice.”

[color=silver][i>You can’t do this...[/i][/color]

“Yes I can.” Black fire crackled at the end of Nightmare’s horn as the alicorn leaned into her spell with abandon, magic cascading into the sky in the long mystic thread that wrapped around the sun. “It will take every spark of magic in this body, down to your very blackened soul, but she will [i]never[/i] return.”

[color=silver][i>So weak...[/i][/color]

“I don’t need your pathetic body anymore,” growled Nightmare as the last of the spell spun out

from her horn. Teeth clenched against the pain of drawing out the last of her magic, she snarled, "Once I have consumed the fury inside that brain-damaged fool, I will remake that body into something more appropriate. Goodbye [i]princess[/i]."

The sun dimmed as the spell completed, lines of darkness fading into its substance as it sank below the horizon. Once again, silence filled the dark plaza, unbroken but for the noise of the party in the town hall. Finally, a single breath sounded, a deep gasp for air that came from a pool of shadow that surrounded the ebon alicorn, slowly getting to her hooves as her sides began to heave. The moon hesitantly emerged from behind the thin layer of clouds, once again filling the plaza with silver light that highlit the snarl upon the face of Nightmare Moon.

"What have you done, you little fool?" gasped the Nightmare. "Why can I not leave this body?!"

Joyous laughter filled Nightmare Moon's mind, penetrating to even the deepest memories and darkest shadows. Rage as she could, the Nightmare could not find even the smallest trace of the simpering alicorn princess, but the laughter continued.

[color=silver][i]Who is the fool now? It was I who invited you into my heart, and it is I who must permit you to leave. You shall infest no other living creature while this body draws breath,[/i] parasite.[/color]

"You think to thwart me that easily?"

[color=silver][i>Did you not hear my sister? You have already lost. Search my memories, if you must. Our bodies have endured countless assaults over the years, from Tirek's fire to Discord's power. It may take years to recover from the most grievous of injuries, but we always have. So go ahead, fling my body into the hottest lava, bury it beneath the heaviest of stones. The agonizing pain you endure as this flesh slowly regrows will be entirely yours. And I will be there with you. Forever.[/i]

"No!" Running roughshod through the alicorn princess' memories did nothing but confirm her annoying unevicted pest's pronouncement, except—

"The Elements. What magic makes, magic can unmake. Isn't that right, [i]princess[/i>?"
Nothing but silence greeted the Nightmare as she chuckled in the darkness.

"Your sister lacked the power to cleanse me from your body, or even turn us to stone as the two of you did that capering chaotic idiot. But she could have easily used the power of the Elements to unmake us both. She will regret that decision."

Panting for breath, the Nightmare listened to the sounds of the crowd inside town hall slowly begin to fade as the brief sunrise confused the partygoers. Her lips curled back in a hungry grin as weak wingstrokes brought her to the balcony entrance of the town hall with hundreds of

ponies crammed inside. “First, I think a little snack is in order.”

[center] * * * [/center]

Trixie jolted back into awareness as the black alicorn began throwing spells onto the freshly-risen sun. It actually took a moment to fight down her first reaction: casting an invisibility spell and running like mad. Instead, she grabbed all the little pests and their wagon in her magic and dragged them all around the town hall and out of immediate eyesight of the presently distracted Nightmare Moon. To her relief, there was a Royal Guard just coming out of the town hall entrance — no, from the feathers sticking up from one wing, it was just that annoying changeling. She dropped the little brats at his hooves and ignoring their cries of disapproval, grabbed her hat and rummaged around inside.

“Here you go, Bug. Watch these little brats for just a second and don’t let them out of your sight! Gotit!” She yanked a book out of her hat and hit him hard enough across the chest with it to make his hasty response into more of a *whoof* than words.

“Read fast. You’ve only got a couple minutes before we’re taking these little brats to the Castle of the Royal Pony Sisters.”

“The Elements of Harmony, a Reference Guide?” asked Tallgrass in a tense voice just short of panic as he stared at the book. “What am I—”

“Read it, Bug!” she snapped, slapping her familiar hat back over her horn and grabbing the pink ‘alicorn’ in her magic. “I’ll be right back!”

With a quick heave of magic, Trixie and the disguised pink ‘pony’ passed through the outside doors into the town hall, the bug putting up quite a fight until it planted all four hooves in the town hall inner entranceway and snapped, “Slow down, you clown!” Her vibrant voice echoed around the small chamber between the thick inside and outside doors of town hall, the final ‘clown’ seeming to wedge right between Trixie’s ears and burn like familiar fire.

“No time to rhyme,” snapped Trixie right back, pausing before the inner doors to the town hall. “When we go in there, I need you to order everypony to evacuate the town.”

“Why use my voice? Have you no other choice?”

“No pony would believe me! They all hate my guts!” Trixie flung open the inner doors to the town hall and froze solid in shock.

“SURPRISE!”

Waves of happy ponies spread out across the two levels of town hall, crowding the safety rails

and hovering around a huge banner that read 'Welcome Trixie Lulamoon' and in smaller letters below 'and Princess Celestia.' Balloons and ribbons festooned the whole of the building in brilliant blues and silvers to match her colors, but were abruptly blotted out by a wave of pink that engulfed her into a hug of epic proportions.

"Were you surprised? Huh? Huh? Gummie says he forgave you for being so mean to him, so when Rarity suggested that we make this year's Summer Sun Celebration party for you—"

"Don't give me all the credit," said the bleached fashion pony as she rolled a ponyquin out in front of a rapidly-suffocating Trixie. "We all could tell the strain you've been under for the last few years. I apologize for the clumsy ruse, but we simply [i]had[/i] to get you out of town hall while we decorated and I made a few last minute alterations. Behold!"

To vigorous applause, Rarity whisked the covering off the ponyquin, revealing a splendid looking new cape and hat in the deepest shade of royal purple with sparkling stars. "Fluttershy did the finer needlework over the shoulders and Rainbow Dash was so kind as to provide the down."

"Down?" gasped Trixie, having managed to wedge a foreleg under Pinkie Pie's all-encompassing hug to get some critically needed air.

"Yup. 'Taint nuttin' warmer than a pegasus down^(*) lining on a cold winter night," said Applejack proudly, laying a hoof on the cloak and curling one edge back to reveal a filled pocket. "'cept one of mah family recipe bottles o' bourbon. You've done took to our stash well enough on your last trips that I thought it would be right neighborly if I was to tuck a bottle inside, just fer medicinal purposes."

"B-b-but. I don't understand." Overwhelmed and confused, Trixie gestured to the whole town of smiling ponies, some of them with more strained smiles than others, but still [i]smiling[/i] at her nonetheless.

Somehow Pinkie managed to talk while maintaining her rib-creaking hug. "We all have a little angry meanie hidden inside that comes out when ponies don't seem to like us. A party lets you bring her out and let her have some fun, so she doesn't try to make you angry anymore."

"Sometimes when you're really angry, you lash out," whispered Fluttershy from behind the ponyquin. "You don't mean to, and you always look so sad afterwards. We thought if we could make you happy—"

"And properly attired," continued Rarity.

"You could relax a little, without having to get bombed on our good lickker," said Applejack with what actually looked like a genuine smile, the first one Trixie had seen in the farmer's face ever. "I know how hard it is to keep up yer stuffy Canterlot image. Sometimes ponies fight so hard to

keep their real self hidden even when that's what everypony really wants to see."

"Yeah, I know how easy it is for a performer to come off as a jerk," said Rainbow Dash while hovering above, unwilling or unable to meet her gaze. "But even a jerk deserves a second chance."

"Attention, everypony!" called out Mayor Mare from her podium. "Before we start the party for the pony of the hour, I would like to call your attention to the magic of the sunrise, while we celebrate this, the longest day of the year!"

"Oh, no," whispered Trixie as a shadow passed the upper floor balcony where Celestia was supposed to appear any moment, if not for the inconvenience of being imprisoned in her own sun. The mayor rattled on, unheeded by the Student of the Sun while Trixie launched recklessly into a series of spells. Pink magic formed around Rainbow Dash's tail, yanking her down to ground level even as Trixie's new cloak and hat leapt off the ponyquin...

[center] * * * [/center]

Outside the town hall, Tallgrass fought with the book as five energetic little ponies tried to read it from over/under/around him. Strangely enough, the larger sixth pony did not join her friends, but remained in the wagon under the blanket, shivering hard enough to rattle the wheels.

"What are these 'Elements' anyway?"

"Do they turn ponies into superheroes?"

"Why do we have to read it in a book?"

"She said we're going to the Castle of the Something Something, I bet that's by where Monster lives."

"Thrixthe called you a bug. Doeth that mean you're a changeling?"

With a bleat of raw terror, Monster fairly shot out from under her blanket and darted away into the dark town, her cries of panic vanishing off into the distance as five little ponies looked up at Tallgrass with growing apprehension.

"You're not a Royal Guard?"

"It's an ambush! Just like Daring Doo and the Golden Chalice!"

"Hit it, Scoots!" bellowed Apple Bloom, kicking Tallgrass in the knee as Sweetie Belle grabbed the book. With a buzz of overstressed juvenile wings, the little pegasus propelled her scooter and attached wagon forward into the darkness, in rapid pursuit of their frightened friend while Twist laid down covering fire with jawbreakers and jellybeans.

"Ow! You little—" yelped Tallgrass, just as Featherweight dropped down into line of sight ahead of him.

“Smile.”

[size=20]-*FLASH*-[/size]

Featherweight patted his camera as he flew to catch his friends. Candid shots were always the best.

[center] * * * [/center]

Nightmare Moon remained crouched behind the balcony entrance as the infantile official prattled onward. Growing anticipation waged war with her hunger pains until at blessed long last the windbag finally reached the crescendo of her speech, the point at which the maximum amount of delicious fear and panic would be generated at the sudden appearance of her dread guise.

“...the good, the wise, the bringer of harmony to all of Equestria—”

The Nightmare stepped forward into the balcony entrance and gazed down at the hundreds of stunned faces, breathing in the delightful aroma of building fear.

“Princess Celest—” The idiotic official who was overseeing the event stared in slack-jawed stupidity at her magnificence, filling the balcony entrance with the glory of the night while the miserable little worms chattered among themselves below.

“Oh, my beloved subjects,” she said, exalting in the pulse of fear that strobed up from the multicolored multitude. “It's been so long since I've seen your precious, little sun-loving faces.” Nothing brought fear like uncertainty, and the panic-stricken ponies below radiated the delicious substance in great abundance.

“What did you do with our princess?” sounded some arrogant fool in the crowd, her voice muffled at the end as if she had suddenly been tackled.

“Why, am I not royal enough for you? Don't you know who I am?” The Nightmare fairly shivered with joy at the burst of pure fear that filtered up from below, feeling it flow through her starved body like a fine nectar.

A pink pony with no sign of fear bounced out into the crowd. “Ooh, ooh, more guessing games! Um, Hokey Smokes! How about... Queen Meanie! No! Black Snooty! Black Snooty!”

The delicious flow of fear began to taper off, and the Nightmare scowled fiercely. “Does my crown no longer count now that I have been imprisoned for a thousand years? Did you not recall the legend? Did you not see the signs?”

“I did.” The voice from the crowd of ponies was strong and clear, ringing out above the nervous

babbling like a trumpet's call. A familiar-looking blue unicorn strode out into a widening empty circle in the center of the floor, glaring up at her from under a faded purple hat. "And I know who you are. You're the Mare in the Moon – Nightmare Moon!"

The Nightmare smiled with smug satisfaction, at the sudden renewal of delicious fear from the panicked ponies. "Well, well. Some pony remembers me. So you also know why I am here."

"Of course!" The blue unicorn buffed a hoof and looked casual. "What you should be asking, Nightmare Moon, is why am [i]I[/i] here?"

"What?" The Nightmare bristled. Although the edge had been taken off her hunger, there was still so much more that could be harvested here tonight to replace what she had lost, and this blue fool was — wait, there was a familiar look to the annoying little unicorn. "Do you not properly fear me?"

"Not really. I saw what you did to Princess Celestia. Do you [i]really[/i] think that will hold her?"

Something struck Nightmare as ironically funny about the pompous blue idiot attempting to play on [i]her[/i] fears, and peals of laughter filled the building, bringing even more delicious fear wafting up from the terrified ponies.

"Remember this day, little ponies, for it was your last," she chortled, taking affront that the blue unicorn seemed bored instead of impressed. "From this moment forth, the night will last [i]forever![/i]"

A shrill voice rang out from the flustered official. "Seize her! Only she knows where the Princess is!"

Three dark pegasi sprang into the air and darted up at her. For a brief second, she exalted in the possibility that they were more of Luna's delicious creations, but as she unleashed a spray of lightning that knocked them all backwards into the crowd, a wave of revulsion swept across the Nightmare.

[i]Love? Icky, bland, sticky love? Disgusting![/i]

There was none of the invigorating hate and envy that had coursed through the veins of Luna's minions, only the horrid taste of love in an abundance that made her want to scrub her mouth out with ashes and gargle with soap. Power surged through her horn as she prepared to strike the insolent whelps into bloody fragments, but her momentary pause at the thought of splattering the entire building with that horrid substance was sufficient for the little blue menace to fire a spell of her own up into the air, a blinding explosion of fire and sparks that triggered such a burst of panic among the remaining ponies that the Nightmare had to stop to drink it in.

“The Great and Powerful Trixie commands you all cease!” A second burst of fireworks inside the building silenced the ponies, leaving only a few small, screeching birds flapping wildly around the inside of the building. A pale pink aura formed around each of the annoying feathered beasts, circling around the top of the building until it had gathered them all together and with a quick flip of one of the upper windows, pushed them outside.

“The [i]Great[/i] and Powerful Trixie,” scoffed Nightmare, looking down at the unicorn who had positioned herself in the very center of the room. “Do you think to vanquish me with your ability to herd birds then? You have no idea what forces you are toying with.”

“Are you so certain?” called out Trixie in a loud voice. “Do you really think Celestia would train me at her own hoof for twelve years and not tell me anything about you? [i]Twelve years![/i]”

“Bah! A pittance. You’re Celestia’s little pet. I’ve watched you caper and fawn in front of Celestia, learning nothing but party tricks.”

Breaking a victim was the part Nightmare loved the most, when it became time to exploit all the doubts and fears they held in the most secret recesses of their soul. She leaned forward across the balcony rail in anticipation of the delightful flow of dark angst and self-pity as she crushed this ‘Trixie.’

“No pony loves you or appreciates your abilities. You live in the shadow of the sun, never to shine even half as bright as your teacher. You will always be less than her. Second rate. A capering clown, who will never know true power.”

“All true.” The blue unicorn refused to meet her gaze, seemingly in constant motion as she paced and gestured around the floor. “Every single word. I spent years at her school, absorbing every trick and every spell they could teach me. Still, if I had stayed until I died of old age, I would not have even a fraction of her power. So I decided on something different. Do you know what I did during those times I left her school?”

“I couldn’t care less,” purred the Nightmare. “Something pitiful, I would suppose.”

“I went to the far corners of Equestria and studied at the hooves of the greatest minds in all of magic. They taught me lessons I never could have learned from Princess Celestia. I learned things you would never know, and could not fathom, but there is one thing I managed to learn that I will never forget.

“I had gone to Vanhoover in search of a retired practitioner who held a trick he had never shared with another mortal soul, a trick so awesome and intricate it had never been duplicated. A mystic secret that only I would know once he had taught it to me and passed on. I bargained with him for three days solid, not stopping for food or rest until he finally gave in. He had taken five years to master it, but I learned it perfectly in less than a week, and performed it for him so

flawlessly he had no choice but to proclaim I was the better. It was only as I was leaving, after learning all that he could teach that I learned a terrible secret, one that could never be unlearned.

“Celestia had been there a week before I arrived. She had dropped the hint that I had followed to find the old coot, talked him into teaching me, and [i]had been doing it for years.[/i] There is no action she takes which has not been planned, no words she speaks, no gesture she makes without meaning, even if it may not take effect for years, or even centuries.

“You may think Princess Celestia ran because she could not defeat you. In truth, she is using us both like puppets, dancing to her tune. Do you feel the strings across your flanks? Can you even know what she has planned for you?

“As one puppet to another, I do not fear you. You have no power over me.”

“What?” Nightmare reared up on her hooves as lightning flashed in the sky outside. “Celestia and I are gods! When we fought above the Everfree, we killed thousands of ponies and poisoned the lands for generations. Now your precious princess has fled to the sun to avoid my wrath, and a little worm thinks she can stand against me?”

“You are already defeated.”

The arrogant unicorn even managed to duplicate the exact tone Celestia had used before she vanished into the sun, and the Nightmare recoiled back in reflex, baring her fangs with a vicious hiss. There was none of the delicious fear or panic floating up from Trixie, none at [i]all[/i], and that meant either Celestia had taken on a complete psychopath as a student, or she knew something the Nightmare did not.

“I shall destroy you, and drink your soul.” Still there was no fear, and Nightmare felt the tiniest fleck of doubt begin to take root in her own soul.

“Before you do so, I have two things to suggest.” Trixie stood in a pool of absolute calm, looking up in the general direction of the Nightmare without actually meeting her eyes.

The Nightmare spluttered, itching to release her limited power on the annoying pest and blast her to bits, but held her spell. “What?”

“First, look around. While you’ve been pontificating and posturing, my [i]friends[/i] have been evacuating the building. There’s just the two of us now.”

The Nightmare looked around in shock at the empty building.

“And secondly.” Trixie curled her lip and turned her flank to the dark alicorn. “Nique ta mère!”

Absolute fury poured into Nightmare's spell, blasting down at Trixie in a destructive force that vaporized floorboards and blew the windows out of the building in a spray of molten glass that splattered across the town.

When the smoke cleared, there was nothing left of the arrogant unicorn but burning scraps of purple cloth and a few smoldering teeth scattered across the shattered floor.

[center] * * * [/center]

Nearby, a blue pegasus darted away into the darkness, trying to stay low and suppress her natural rainbow trail. She was headed for a rendezvous she was still unsure just exactly [i]how[/i] she had been talked into, or [i]why[/i] she was carrying just exactly [i]who[/i] she was carrying, but once they landed, she was [i]going[/i] to get answers, even if it involved physical violence. Make that [i]preferably[/i] if it involved physical violence.

As the rainbow trail dissipated into the night air, it seemed to leave a faint whisper on the breeze from her semi-conscious passenger.

"Le bourbon! Pour l'amour des étoiles, le bourbon!"

[hr]

(*) This pegasus down also keeps the wearer 20% cooler in the summer.

-end Chapter 19 -

-Chapter 20 -

[center]The Monster in the Twilight

[color=Red]Flight[/color][[/center]

[hr]

"All right, everypony. Do we got everything she asked for?" Applejack appraised their strange collection of equipment assembled on the front porch of Sweetie Drops Candie Shop with a sideways glance at Pinkie Pie, who had somehow produced a key and gathered the materials within instants of their hasty arrival.

"Half bucket of warm water, check! One gallon of corn syrup, check!" Pinkie upended the bottle, which began to cheerfully glug its sugary goodness into the bucket.

"One jar of molasses, got it." Applejack upended the jar and watched the slow progress

begin.

“Three-quarters cup cinnamon, jar of hot sauce, another jar of hot sauce—”

“Ah thought she only said one bottle of hot sauce?”

“Oopsie. Half a cup of root beer concentrate, a cup of carrot juice, cup of pickle juice, a cup of peppermint extract and a fifth of bourbon.” Pinkie Pie quit adding ingredients to the bubbling bucket and looked around. “Where are we going to find bourbon at this hour?”

Applejack removed her hat and hoofed over a bottle. “Don’t you say nuttin’.”

“It’s only about half-full.”

“She weren’t trying to lure [i]yer[/i] brother into bed. You’re lucky there’s any left at all.”

“In it goes.” Pinkie Pie upended the bottle and watched the amber liquid splash into the mess. “Now what?”

“Agitate well.”

“Power to the Ponies! Down with the Capitalist Oppressors of the Free Party Ponies!”

Applejack gave her best dry look at Pinkie Pie, who promptly began to stir the bucket. “Yassah, I’s got’s it now, boss.”

“And Rarity’s got the funnel. Now all we need is the victim. I mean subject.” Applejack jumped as an explosive noise echoed across the town, followed promptly by Pinkie Pie vibrating across the floor, her tail twitch-a-twitching.

“Dang,” muttered Applejack as she watched a burst of flames reach skyward from the direction of town hall, raining down burning sparks in the distance. “I’m sure glad Apple Bloom was sleeping over with Sweetie Belle tonight, Rarity.”

Rarity glanced out into the darkness. “Most certainly not. The boutique is locked up tonight. I thought she was with Twist.” They both looked at the dark and quiet candy shop, which bore no signs of Crusader activity **[size=10](*)[/size]** and worried to

themselves.

“Well, they’re not over at Sugarcube Corner,” said Pinkie Pie, tasting the contents of the bucket and making a face. “Mister and Missus Cake won’t let them overnight anymore, ever since they tried to teach Pound Cake how to use a scooter. Come to think of it, they haven’t set my Pinkie Sense off all night.”

Rarity fanned herself with the funnel and looked to the sky at the billowing smoke beginning to obscure the stars. “Oh, my. I’m sure they’re all safe and following the evacuation plan. I just hope Trixie is not injured.”

Fluttershy joined her friend in scanning the dark sky. “I’m worried about her too.”

“Not that. I’m just looking forward to finding out the end result of her little scheme.” The unicorn turned the funnel over, contemplating its use with an evaluating eye.

“Darling, did she specify which end to insert the funnel?”

“Um. Rarity, I’m pretty sure she meant her—”

Rarity waved Fluttershy away with one hoof. “Relax, dear. I was only attempting to lighten the mood. Besides, I think I hear somepony flying this wa—”

Acute hearing and a certain sense of self-preservation had led the residents of Ponyville to develop a sort of ‘Pegasus Sense’ from the relative frequency of ground-related impacts from certain members of both the weather team and the post office. Such sense did little good when the target in question was hedged in on both sides by friends, but did allow Rarity to roll with the impact when Rainbow Dash plowed into her at admittedly much less than her top speed.

“Rainbow! Darling! You’ve gained weight. Now could you please get off my back?” Rarity lay in a somewhat unladylike fashion, shoved by the impact to skid on her chest across the candy shop porch and narrowly missing the bucket of goop.

“Just a minute, Rarity,” came Rainbow Dash’s voice from inside the house. “I’ve got my head stuck in a pot or something.”

“Then who is sitting on my—” Rarity managed to twist around to look up, and saw — nothing. Although nothing was still heavy.

“Cinq minutes de plus, s'il vous plaît?” Whatever nothing was, it sounded very much like Trixie. Despite the dazed sound of the empty (and heavy) space on Rarity’s back, nothing got to her sharp and pointed hooves and stumbled over to the bucket, apparently eschewing the available funnel for the expedient of simply sticking her face right in and drinking in a most unseemly and uncouth manner, complete with loud slurping noises.

“Hey, Presto!” The voice no longer came from the vicinity of the bucket with the rapidly decreasing contents. Instead it came from the mouth of a suddenly very astonished and frightened yellow pegasus, by way of a ventriloquism spell many members of the town had gotten quite sick of over the past few years⁽²⁾. “Maskelyne would have been proud of the way I pulled off his trick.”

“That was awesome,” said Rainbow Dash, stumbling out onto the porch and shaking off the last pot which had apparently gotten stuck on her head during impact.

“Thank you, no applause please. Just throw bits.” Trixie’s voice continued to emerge from Fluttershy’s mouth despite both hooves being clasped over her yellow muzzle.

“Not you. I was talking about my fantastic landing.”

“The Great and Powerful Trixie’s performance was far better.”

“There you are! You did not get far!” A panting pink alicorn galloped up to the gathered group, her eyes wide with fear. “I listened for the impact’s sound, for that is where the rainbowed one is found.”

“Hey!”

“Oh, joy. The bug is here too. Did you bring the kids?” At the sound of Trixie’s voice, the pink alicorn stared in amazement at Fluttershy, who shook her head vigorously.

“I have said before, you annoying twit, this is a disguise, and my daughter cast it. I am Zecora, a zebra in kind, now tell me of my daughter and her friends, before I lose my mind!” Zecora looked back and forth between Fluttershy and the noisy bucket with a mixture of anger and confusion.

The slurping stopped, and Trixie’s voice came from the vicinity of the nearly empty

bucket. “You don’t have the Crusaders and Twilight Sparkle?”

There was a momentary pause that Trixe would normally have used for an abrupt exit, if not for the sudden dive by five very angry mares onto the empty space, all with their own issues.

“Where’s mah sister?”

“And mine!”

“If Scoots has one hair harmed on her mane...”

“You had better not have gotten Twist hurt, or I’m going to do something horrible to your birthday presents!”

“Um. Does this mean I should say something about Featherweight? Because he likes taking pictures of the animals. And I’d hate it if anything happened to him. He’s nice.”

Well, [i]four[/i] angry mares, and one frightened Fluttershy.

“Do not assault her on my regard,” commanded Zecora with such force that the pony-pile participants all looked up. “She left our young with her trusted guard. Her plan is in her head, quite tightly sealed, now is high time for it to be revealed.”

“Um.” Off in the distance, the flames from the burning town hall began to cast flickering shadows around the tense scene, making little specks of purple and blue show beneath their hooves. “Can the Great and Powerful Trixie convince us to move somewhere a little farther from the evil goddess who I just got done insulting until she tried to kill me and kind-of reflected part of her killing spell back into her face? I think I know where they went, and I’m sure my faithful Royal Guard is escorting them there now, just like I asked him.”

[center] * * * [/center]

Tallgrass cursed virulently as he galloped, full-speed in pursuit of the little pests as they passed out of the city and headed out into the woods. In his year of living in Ponyville, the changeling had actually never left the city limits, more than happy to remain in the warm and cozy town. Now as the dark trees began to pass on each side, the warmth of love began to slowly be replaced by cold and hungry feelings, from creatures who thought ponies were tasty, and changelings were dessert. Worse, even if he had decided to take to his somewhat misshapen wings in pursuit, the path turned frequently enough he would have [i]lost[/i] ground in his chase, and flying above the forest canopy would have just let the little ponies vanish into the immensity of the dark forest. Even worse

still, if or when he eventually did catch them, he had no idea which trail or forest path led back to town. At least from the flickering green light in their wagon and the positive way they took corners, the little brats seemed to know where they were going.

[center] * * * [/center]

“I think we take the left fork in the path up here. Left! That’s not left!” Sweetie Belle held the wrinkled page from the book up to her glowing horn-light and squinted. “Or maybe right?”

“Did we pathh that thipky thing yet?” Twist poked a hoof at the map and turned her head to one side. “Are you thure thath the right thide up?”

Scootaloo leaned into the handles of her scooter, going faster in the dark than she had ever gone before. Pegasi were extremely capable of isolating the location of lightning strikes from the noise of the thunder, and from the way their friend was howling away in the distance, making abrupt ‘cracks’ as she used her teleportation spell for short hops, she may as well been laying a trail of breadcrumbs for the little pegasus to follow. It was a dangerous trip, but Monster was a friend, and there was no danger too dangerous when helping a friend.

Besides, it was so cool!

[center] * * * [/center]

Fear.

Darkness.

There were very few thoughts inside Monster’s mind that did not encompass one or both of those ideas. The world seemed to pass in a frantic stream of trees and rocks, tears streaming from her eyes and the darkness of the night turning them into one long blur of terror. Every moment she gathered enough willpower to make an attempt at thinking straight, her magic coiled around her and propelled her forward with a sharp crack of sundered air.

Tiny little flecks of thought swirled around the cracks left by her overwhelming panic, popping up and vanishing in the whirling blizzard of her mind. The pink pony disguise she had cast over mom, which felt so right as if she were a loving nurturer and yet so wrong as if she were chasing

her, to capture and imprison her. The giant white pony, so different than her terrifying memories, her soft voice as she called out to Monster with trusting words, and her powerful majesty as she floated up into the sky and vanished into the sun. The giant black pony, all teeth and starry mane as she cackled in rage, somehow looking like brother from her dreams, but sounding so much like the voice that called to her.

[color=silver][i]Thou shouldst run[/i][/color]

Run she did, as the soil and sod passed beneath her thundering hooves, but a direction was only a vague guess. Every patch of darkness held a terror, every shadow clutched at her as she passed. No conscious thought guided her hooves, but in the back of her mind was an insatiable urge to return to where it first started. Her heart hammered away to the rhythm of a constant drumbeat, a thunder as if a thousand hooves were beating against the heart of the world. Reaching out to her. Calling to her. With one word.

Home.

[center] * * * [/center]

Nightmare floated up into the sky on a pillar of flames and smoke, her immaterial body roaring with an anger that made the fire below seem cold as ice. All that delicious frustration and anger had been yanked away like a popped balloon when she unleashed her ire upon this 'Trixie' who capered and jeered, throwing her own words back in her face. Then she had the unmitigated gall to reflect some of her own spell back against her host body even as she died! The indignity of the situation twisted her smoky form into a vicious spiral, drawing more cool air through the blazing inferno that should have held hundreds of ponies, each burning to death in exquisite agony for her to feed upon. Now the pitiful ponies fled the town in all directions, scattered throughout the darkness in concentrations too low to feed her burning hunger.

Still, in the distance, she could feel the unrestrained power of this 'Twilight Sparkle' as she fled in mortal terror. More power surged through that small body than hundreds of mere ordinary ponies, delicious power so ripe for the taking, with the delicious scent of... peppermint?

[color=silver][i]It is so nice to have a physical body again.[/i][/color]

A veritable wave of minty taste/smell flooded her senses, twisting her stomach in nauseated spasms as she involuntarily regained physical form to hover high above the town. The air felt cold on her tongue as she opened her mouth to spit, only to clamp her jaws shut as another spasm swept across her belly.

[color=silver][i]My sister just loves peppermints. She fed them to me all the time when I was just a foal until I got positively sick of them.[/i][/color]

“Elements,” grated Nightmare from between clenched teeth. “You are going to *burn*, little princess.”

With broad, powerful strokes of her wings, the Nightmare flew off into her beloved darkness. Celestia was a melodramatic soul, and there was only one place she would possibly have placed the Elements of Harmony: At the site where she sealed her sister in the moon, the Castle of the Royal Pony Sisters.

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(*) Crusader Activity normally meant fire, flood, panic, tree sap, or all of the above.

(1) Pinkie Sense has certain range limitations.

(2) ‘Now watch in amazement as the Great and Powerful Trixie will sing while drinking this bottle’ had caused more audiences to vanish faster than the trick she had just finished at the town hall.

-end Chapter 20 -

-Chapter 21 -

[center]The Monster in the Twilight

[color=Orange]Trust[/color]/[center]

[hr]

Six ponies paused at the edge of the dark wood from their headlong gallop out of town, only to have a seventh fade reluctantly into view in their midst, hedged inside as if within a corral made of mares. Rarity gave their newest member a sidelong glance, barely able to restrain a sniff of derision. There was a fine line between disheveled and *dishabille* for a proper unicorn mare, and The Great and Powerful Trixie had passed that line in a great leap much earlier this evening. The poor dear had no idea on just how to look seductively rumped, how to look in distress without *being* distressed. Perhaps once this whole end-of-the-world thing blew over and Princess Celestia put the arrogant poser **(*)** in her place, and of course providing Sweetie Belle was not injured or traumatized, it would be only appropriate to offer a mutual trip to the spa, if done quietly. She really was not that hard to get along with, as long as she didn’t talk.

“Now listen up,” snapped Trixie, perhaps a little louder than she expected from her unintentional twitch to look where her voice echoed out of the forest. “The big dark alicorn in armor is Nightmare Moon. She’s Princess Celestia’s—” Trixie evaluated just how her audience would react to the evil alicorn being the sister to their beloved princess and silently edited her origin story “—nemesis from a thousand years ago, who she defeated and imprisoned in the moon. The only thing that will stop her is the Elements of Harmony, and they’re stored in the Castle of the Royal Pony Sisters inside the Everfree Forest.”

“Hey, wait a minute!” called Rainbow Dash, pointing out into the forest. “If you knew this, why didn’t you just bring them with you yesterday?”

“I don’t—” Trixie ground to a halt, grinding her teeth. “Anyway, Princess Celestia seems to think that some purple [i]freak[/i] from out in the forest is going to be able to use these thousand year old artifacts without the slightest training or knowledge about their existence to put her si— I mean nemesis back into the moon.”

“Why didn’t she say something earlier?” asked Rarity with a wave of one hoof. “I would think something as important as this would have at least been covered in the newspapers.”

“Or she could have told us!” said Pinkie Pie with indignation. “I mean I didn’t even have time to bake a cake, or decorate it, or organize Black Snooty’s ‘Welcome to Ponyville’ party. Even if she is a mean, nasty creature, she still deserves cake.” Tears welled up in the party pony’s blue eyes and she sniffed. “A thousand years without cake. No wonder she’s such a grumpy grump.”

“Ah don’t believe you fer one minute,” snapped Applejack. “Princess Celestia would never hide sumptin’ this big from her subjects.”

“She probably had good reasons,” whispered Fluttershy, trying to hide behind her mane. “Maybe she was afraid of N-nightmare M-moon.”

“The Wise One of the Sky has reason for shame, for her sister is the one who bears that name.”

There was a certain rolling cadence to Zecora’s words as if they were supported by a thousand of her kind, far, far away. The disguised zebra’s voice seemed to push back the darkness in the immediate vicinity, drawing her five listeners closer for mutual support.

“It all started long ago, before my birth, when both sisters shared power over sky and eart—”

“Princess Celestia had a younger sister!” shouted Trixie with an aggravated stomp of one hoof. “She went crazy and Celestia used some ancient doo-dad called the Elements of Harmony to imprison her in the moon. Now she’s broken free and locked Celestia in the sun, and plans on keeping the moon up forever unless I—” Trixie broke off and swallowed, trying not to look at the dark forest and failing badly. “Unless I go get the Elements of Harmony from some creepy ancient castle, give it to the same crazy unicorn who almost killed all of Canterlot a decade ago, and hope she’s pointed in the right direction when they both explode.”

Trixie glared back at her six companions, only one of whom returned her glare in kind. “Don’t look at me that way, bug! I mean, zebra. I don’t have the kind of time to listen to your windy rhyme. I’m taking you with me, but only because Twilight Sparkle seems reluctant to blow you up. The rest of you can go help with the evacuation of the town or something.”

Applejack stepped forward one step, a bare moment away from violence. “What about the kids?”

“What about them?” Trixie made a dismissive gesture while turning her back, missing Rainbow Dash clamping down on the farmer’s tail with her teeth and hauling her hindquarters up in the air just before the lunge that would have planted a pair of horseshoes alongside that scowling blue face. “The Everfree Forest will just have to take its chances with the Cutie Mark Crusaders. From the way things have been going, they’ll probably drag an Ursa back into town. Poor bear.”

The inky night hid the shivers of fear that rippled underneath her new purple cloak, but not the startled jump as a gentle pink hoof rested on her shoulder.

“Trixie, I know you are very scared, for this event, you were not prepared. But there is one thing, that you must hold quite true, your Wise One of the Sky is counting on you. Her trust in you to set all things right, is your heavy burden on this long dark night.”

Trixie flung the hoof off her shoulder as all the anger she had suppressed for the last few years bubbled to the surface and blew. “Trust? I trained under her wing for twelve years! [i]Twelve years![/i] I was supposed to be the one to use the Elements of Harmony against Nightmare Moon! Me! Not that little purple loon who has been running around the forest like some animal!”

Fluttershy’s quiet “Hey!” was barely noticed as Trixie thundered onward, her voice echoing back in an eerie response from the dark forest.

“Everypony in Equestria trusts Princess Celestia! They trust her to raise the sun and moon, they trust her to run the country, they bring their little petty problems to her like children with a broken toy and she makes everything better. I spent five months corresponding and traveling to that loser escape artist Maskelyne’s retirement home, trying to beg the Puppet spell off his hooves before he up and died, and got NOTHING! She sends him one lousy note, and all of the sudden it becomes ‘Yes, Trixie. I’d be proud to teach Princess Celestia’s student my spell.’ ONE FREAKING NOTE!

“Celestia’s student. You would think I had that branded on my flank! I’m not her property! She doesn’t own me! The high and mighty of Canterlot do not care about Trixie, except as a stepping-stool to tread on to get closer to [i]her[/i]! If I’m invited anywhere, the invitation always says, ‘and guest.’ I know who they mean. I’m always under her shadow, never appreciated, just like that monster said!

“Everypony trusts her, but she never trusted me, ever! I had to sneak into the Solarium to find

out why she always looked like Tartarus after raising the moon! I had to steal the prophecy book out of her private library just to find out why she was being so secretive about her sister. I had to put up with those little sighs of disappointment, her ever-so-calm demeanor whenever I did something she disliked. I had to put up with the brother of that insane freak stalking through the castle at all hours of the day and night, with his perfect little floozy looking over my shoulder and spying on me!

“Worst of all, she never trusted me over twelve years, but she puts her trust in that little purple terrorized twit in an instant! ‘I know you can.’ WHAT ABOUT ME?!”

As the echoes of ME-Me-me-[size=10]me[/size] died down to the normal sounds of night, the pink ‘alicorn’ rested her hoof on the panting student’s shoulder again.

“Has your snit, finally quit?”

“Yeah. Let’s go get the kids.” Trixie yanked the bottle out of her cloak, took a look at it, and shoved it back into the concealed pocket with a grumbled, “Bientôt, Monsieur bourbon.”

“What?” Applejack yanked her tail away from Rainbow Dash and stormed up to Trixie, who continued without a pause.

“You don’t think I’d leave a bunch of foals out in the dangerous forest all by themselves just because I’m mad at Princess Celestia, do you?”

“Well...”

“If this works out, and if I live, and if she lives, I’ll yell at her. If not, I want that engraved on my statue. Did you get it written down, Spike? Spi— Oh, fudge! Where’s Spike?”

Fluttershy spoke up before Trixie could panic. “He was sleeping like a baby on Big Mac’s back when we all left the town hall. They should all be at their assigned evacuation point[size=10](1)[/size] by now.”

“Good. Thanks.” Trixie took a deep breath and looked away from the group, removing her hat with a flourish and taking on a tone of voice more appropriate for a stage than the edge of a creepy forest.

“And now the Great and Powerful Trixie will stride confidently into the dangerous Everfree Forest, her only companion a crazy pink zebra. Who knows what dangers they will face together as they proceed on their epic quest through uncharted wilderness in search of the fabled Elements of Harmony, their only guide a penciled map in the back of an ancient book, once held in Celestia’s private hoard of arcane wisdom. Behold, the ancient tome of knowledge, The Liberum Elementorum Harmonia! [size=10](2)[/size]” Plunging one hoof into her suspended

hat, Trixie blinked as the hoof continued through her brand-new hat and out the top instead of removing the magically stored book inside.

“Wrong hat.” The blue mare blushed a sharp pink at the nervous laughter from her audience before plunking the ventilated hat back on her head. With a mystic pass along the ground, an icy blue glow flickered from the hole in the hat and Trixie pointed down the path that lead into the forest.

“Fear not, for my incantation has revealed which way the miscreants have gone. Come, my faithful and hopefully tastier companion. Your crazy daughter proceeded this way in great haste, with the children and my loyal guard right behind.”

“You can track my Sweetie Belle?” exclaimed Rarity with an excited step forward, momentarily distracted from the ragged hole in Trixie’s brand new hat.

“Of course.” Trixie polished a hoof on her cloak. “The Great and Powerful Trixie has powers far beyond—”

“Hey look!” Pinkie Pie bounded down the path ahead of Trixie. “There’s a jellybean on the ground here. And one over here. I bet that hole in Twist’s saddle bag opened up again. And I thought plugging it with taffy would work.”

“Wait!” Trixie gestured. “I’ve got—”

“Slow down there, Pinkie!” Applejack and Rarity galloped past Trixie after the pink party pony. “Yer eating the trail.”

“Last one into the forest is a rotten egg,” snickered Rainbow Dash, flying low enough over Trixie to knock her hat down over her eyes.

“They’re probably so frightened,” whispered Fluttershy as she trotted past. “We need to hurry.”

Trixie stood watching the rest of the mares trot into the forest until Zecora turned to her with a smirk.

“To lead your friends to our children dear, you should probably not stay in the very rear.”

“Huh? Right! Come on, then.” With an urgency to her trot, Trixie bravely led her newfound friends into the dark forest, never fearful, never uncertain, without a single tremble to her pace.

Or at least that is how she intended to write it down, in the unlikely event they all survived.

[hr]

(*) 'Arrogant poser' in this case referring to Nightmare Moon, not Trixie.

(1) Due to their immediate proximity to the Everfree Forest, Mayor Mare had created a detailed evacuation plan for the town and ensured it was tested on a quarterly basis.

(2) The Elements of Harmony - A Reference Guide

-end Chapter 21 -

-Chapter 22 -

[center]The Monster in the Twilight

[color=Orange]Lies[/color][[/center]

[hr]

Thoughts shuffled through Trixie's mind like cards through a dealer's hooves as she galloped along with her newfound 'friends' through the dark woods. Decisions, facts, theories, plots and schemes rattled around, shifting into different structures every time she looked at them much like those hellish times in school when it was all she could do to keep from running away and soaking her head in bourbon until the sensation of overwhelming chaos went away. Admittedly she had not succeeded in her battle against [i]Monsieur Diable Bourbon[/i] every time, for what fun would that have been? Whenever Trixie returned after her brief 'vacations,' Celestia had always been waiting for her with that look of disappointment on her — No!

A sharp pain of spasming muscles lanced down the side of Trixie's face as she ground her teeth in frustration and rage. The solid thump of the bourbon bottle across her back was not helping either, as Monsieur Bourbon whispered out his enticing call. That infernal Applejack probably gave it to her knowing what problems Trixie had with the bottle, after the evenings she had spent out at the Apple Farm trying to get up the nerve to become 'friends' with the hick farmer's handsome brother. Celestia had sent her to this rustic, backwards, inbred, hell-hole three times now, and the closest she had gotten to making a 'friend' like her teacher had commanded was that one time the big red lug had carried her off to his own bed, tucked her under the sheets, kissed her on the cheek... and then went downstairs to sleep on the COUCH! Admittedly the memory was bourbon-blurred to near illegibility, but it still made her swish her tail in frustration on long, cold nights.

There was something horribly wrong with this whole night, from Celestia's behavior to her... sister's. Everypony wanted something; words meant less than nothing compared to actions. Uncle Quartermane had taught her that many years ago, and the lesson had been hammered into her thick skull by every pony since. Trixie had been so absolutely [i]positive[/i] Celestia had been prepared to sacrifice everything to fight her sister, but she would [i]never[/i] have placed innocent lives in danger. Therefore she had not planned to fight Nightmare Moon in Ponyville. Nopony, not even the Princess of the Sun could have cast such a powerful escape spell into the sun unless they had prepared for it. Therefore she had planned on vanishing into the sun. The only reason for doing that could be to drag Nightmare Moon along with her, but Celestia had not

even [i]tried[/i]. What changed her mind? The appearance of that magical purple powerhouse and her five... friends? Laughter, Kindness, Loyalty, Generosity, and Somethingelse. Grumpy? Sleepy? Annoying?

[center] * * * [/center]

The sharp bend in the path towered a full hundred feet of sheer drop over the placid Everfree river, winding its way along the green forest floor so far below. Centuries of intermittent flooding had undermined the cliff face, collapsing the edge of the earthen wall in an inexorable progression of erosion hundreds of times over the years. Still, the narrow dirt path on top of the bluff was fairly safe, unless there was some sort of disturbance to break loose the soil in yet another avalanche.

-*CRACK*-

The shattering noise of a teleport spell sent shockwaves through the surrounding vegetation, air, and incidentally, soil. Monster never even broke stride as several hundred pounds of earth fell beneath her hooves, galloping around the sharp curve the path took at the top of the cliff, only to vanish with another deafening explosion of sound once she had made the corner and could see far enough down the path. Several hundred more pounds of soil vanished along with the unicorn, leaving behind only an echo as the air smashed together into the sudden vacuum.

Deep inside the cliff face, a line of pebbles shifted slightly.

Silence held sway over the Everfree Forest in a very small and limited area, a silence slowly taken over by a very persistent whining noise, as if a large hummingbird were attempting to lift an anvil, or a very small pegasus were pulling a wagon containing three other little ponies at an extremely unsafe rate of speed. In a matter of moments, the pegasi propelled contraption came into view, accelerating to even an higher velocity as the driver spotted the pile of fresh earth as a very tempting-looking—

“RAMP!” shouted Scootaloo with glee, leaning into her wingbeats with abandon and uttering a completely superfluous, “Hang on!”

Featherweight barely had time to stuff his camera away and fly down to grab the back end of the wagon before the whole thing smashed into the rising wall of earth, rocketing all five of the little ponies up into the air.

“Turn!” squealed Twist, hanging on with all four hooves as the pathway far beneath them made an abrupt turn to the left, and they did not.

Scootaloo was a very strong little pegasus with unfortunately very little of the natural pegasus talent for reducing their own weight or the weight of things they were carrying. Featherweight,

on the other hoof, had a very limited wing strength, but was very talented on reducing the weight of things he carried. It was his special talent, after all.

With a sharp lurch, the scooter and wagon leaned to the left as it soared through the air, both pegasi flapping and pushing for all they were worth until all six wheels once again made contact with the dirt path with a mighty crash, sending tremors through the unstable earth of the riverbank. With a buzzing roar of little pegasus wings, the wagon and scooter passengers rapidly resumed their pursuit, five little ponies rocketing down the dark path to save their friend.

Leaving the forest quiet. Briefly.

“...(untranslatable) nymphs and their (untranslatable) contraptions running through the (untranslatable) forest in the (untranslatable) middle of the (untranslatable) night need to be (untranslatable) (untranslatable) (untranslatable).”

Tallgrass cursed viciously as he galloped along in pursuit of the little ponies, still wearing his Royal Guard disguise despite the froth of perspiration building up on his coat. The alternative was his natural form, which was not suited for long runs through the humid forest due to a lack of natural cooling. Yet another earthen dirt pile loomed up ahead in his path, and some inner instinct made him rise up into the air on feathery wings, slowing his pursuit to make the sharp corner above the crumbling cliff before landing to resume his headlong gallop.

Behind him, the earth shifted impatiently.

Before the normal noises of the Everfree returned again, the thunder of galloping hooves echoed around the cliff as seven ponies hurled themselves down the well-used path. One after another, they leapt over the heap of earth that marked the remainder of Monster's teleportation spell (and Scootaloo's ramp), except for the last pink 'alicorn', who skidded to a halt in front of it and opened her mouth to cry out a warning.

Deep inside the cliff, a final bit of earth released its friction-driven hold as the vibrations of their passage shook loose a tiny pebble.

With a deep rumble that drowned out whatever Zecora was shouting, the earth slid in the direction of the far below river, cascading four ponies in a tumble down the sharp slope. A unicorn and earth pony vanished over the edge, followed almost immediately by the two pegasi in headlong dives regardless of the horrible noise of shifting dirt and rock.

Still skidding down the slope were an earth pony and a screaming unicorn, who came to an abrupt stop at the very edge of the crumbling cliff, with The Great and Powerful Trixie dangling free above the fatal drop in an escape artist feat for which she was very much unprepared.

Above them both, and after a quick glance to make sure Applejack was safe, Zecora gave

intense study to the hoofprints of Trixie's 'guard' and how they stopped a few yards away from where the cliff broke free.

"Interesting move for one so meek, that you would fly when the ground is weak."

[center] * * * [/center]

"Honesty!" blurted out Trixie right into Applejack's face as the farmer fought to keep her hind hooves dug into the unstable ground. The sudden shout caused the two of them to slide fractionally towards the precipitous drop, and Applejack gritted her teeth in concentration as well as aggravation.

"What in tarnation—"

"I stole your grandmother's false teeth for the Puppet spell," gasped Trixie, her eyes closed in anticipation of the long drop off the cliff and the short stop at the bottom. "And I was trying to seduce your brother because Princess Celestia ordered me to make friends when I went to Ponyville and all I could think of was having him as a well not really a friend but more as a handsome lover and that worked out so [i]dammed[/i] well every year—"

"Shut up!" bellowed Applejack, feeling the loose gravel under her chest slide slightly.

"—and I wouldn't blame you a bit if you just dropped me right now right over the edge and let me go splat all over the ground because I let your sister go off into the Everfree Forest with her idiot friends where she's probably going to be eaten by a big scary bear—"

"Hey!" whispered Fluttershy, hovering behind Trixie's left shoulder with a scowl across her normally kind face at the insult to her furry friend.

"— or a manticore or a turtle or a lion because I've been such a beast to the little brats and all they want is their stupid butt marks but they keep doing crazy things to me—"

"And everypony else," said Rainbow Dash, hovering at her other shoulder as Trixie gasped for breath.

"Are you braggin' or apollogizin'?" shouted Applejack, having finally gotten her hind hooves solidly planted.

"It's pronounced apologizing, you inbred half-wit hayseed!!"

Applejack crouched frozen with her hooves gripping the Great and Powerful Trixie, who in turn remained dangling over the cliff face between Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy.

“Ah. AJ? You want us to fly her down to the bottom of the cliff?” Rainbow Dash glanced back and forth between her angry friend and the almost-but-not-quite-friend-if-only-she-would-be-less-annoying Trixie.

“Ah’m thinkin!”

-end Chapter 22 -

-Chapter 23 -

[center]The Monster in the Twilight

[color=Orange]Fear[/color][[/center]

[hr]

Pinkie Pie circled around their gathering spot at the riverbank, ending with a sniff and a wail. “No more jellybeans! We’ve lost their trail!”

“I bet that’s what you was following back when we first come into this here forest, weren’t it, Trixie?” Applejack gave her best angry glare at the blue unicorn, still being fussed over by Rarity who had produced needle and thread to make a quick patch on the torn hat.

“Yes,” said Trixie in a dull tone, devoid of hope. “I’ve got a short-range tracking spell stuck on their wagon, but that was just so they didn’t run me over anymore. We’re lost in this carnivorous forest, and we have no idea where the kids are.”

“What about your loyal guard, whom I met briefly in the yard?”

“Huh? Where did you come from?” Trixie looked up at the pink ‘alicorn’ before scowling off into the night. “He’s not a Royal Guard. He’s a changeling who’s been posing as an earth pony masseur in the spa. He’s probably been eaten by now.”

“Do you mean Tallgrass, dear?” Rarity paused in her sewing with a far-off look. “He has the most magnificent hooves. I always wondered just how he knew where to rub to get the knots out.” Blushing furiously, she returned to her sewing with a secret smile and a shy, “Not in that way, of course.”

Trixie picked herself up and pointed downstream. “Let’s at least go blundering around in the dark before we get eaten. Maybe we can bump into them by accident.”

“Why do you think in darkness you should blindly roam, when I have lived here many years, in my forest home?” The disguised zebra did not look angry when Trixie turned around to look, but more concerned. It was probably the pink disguise.

“Look, if you have a better idea of where Twilight Sparkle is, tell us.”

“My Flower flees to where she first was placed, before her presence there I traced. She was broken, dying, cold and frightened, to my destiny I was there enlightened.”

Trixie rolled her eyes and sighed. “Where is there?”

Zecora matched Trixie’s sigh with one of her own. “The castle deep within the Everfree, by where we live, in our hollow tree.”

“Wonderful. The Castle of the Royal Pony Sisters in the Everfree Forest, like I said before. Why didn’t you just say so?”

“I did say so, you saucy lass. Try not to be a donkey’s—”

“Whoa up there, gals.” Applejack interposed herself between the two ponies, who had begun to approach one another with a certain look in their eyes that promised violence.

“You know your way around these woods, ma’am? And you can guide us to this castle place where you say the kids are headed?” Zecora responded to each question with a sharp nod, not taking her eyes away from Trixie.

“Let’s just get a goin’, then. Them little fillies are getting farther away the longer you two sit here jawing at each other.”

Zecora gave another brisk nod before turning to begin their trip. “True.” With a sharp sideways glare at Trixie, she added, “Shrew.”

[center] * * * [/center]

The throne room of the castle ruins trembled to the thunderous magic of Nightmare Moon as five stone spheres flew into the walls with deafening cracks. Back and forth across the ancient room they crashed, smashing into wall, ceiling and floor with the same result.

“Open up, you infernal rocks! I am Nightmare Moon, and I command you!”

Raising a hoof, she smashed down at the five stone spheres, sending them ricocheting around the room, one of which rebounded off a knee.

“*!”

Light peals of joyous laughter echoed through her mind as the Nightmare fell to the cold stone floor, clutching a knee which felt as if it were made entirely out of shattered bone and raw nerves.

[color=silver][i]My Element doth express its distaste for my body's current inhabitant.[/i][/color]

"I don't need these five useless rocks," raged Nightmare, picking them up in her magic. "I need the sixth one! The one you [i]lost[/i]. The one that made the other two [i]USELESS![/i]"

Magic coiled around the five smooth stones as Nightmare used all her might to fling them through the castle window, shattering the last fragments of glass that time had not yet claimed.

[color=silver][i]My sister did find no impediment to their use. It was your actions that made Magic slip from our grasp, and your foolish pride that made you cast Laughter and Generosity away then, just as you have done now.[/i][/color]

"I only need Magic to free myself from your rotting flesh! Where is it? Where did your infernal sister hide it?!"

The infuriating chuckle echoed around inside Nightmare's head as she looked at her nearly unscathed knee, with only a small lump showing where the stone sphere had bounced off bone. The agony faded as she watched, Luna's laughter only getting louder as Nightmare realized the deception she had just fallen for.

[color=silver][i]Magic is only found with its friends.[/i][/color]

"Then I shall follow the Elements to their 'friend,' and seize it!" Nightmare Moon flung the broken fragments of the window away, only to be thrown backwards as the stone spheres came plummeting out of the inky night, rebounding off her immortal alicorn coat with horrible thudding noises. Laughter was the last Element to return, making a special rebound off the furious alicorn's helmet before settling down on the stone platform with its four other friends, just as they had been for the last thousand years. The Elements of Harmony had returned home to await their last member.

[center] * * * [/center]

Monster flattened her ears as she ran, drawing on her magic to maintain her breakneck pace through the forest. The all-encompassing fear which had wrapped her in a frigid embrace began to thaw as the familiar forest flowed around her, the soil thudding under her hooves and the humid, night-scented air filling her lungs. Even in the dark night, the whispers and feelings that permeated her being gave a sense of belonging, a dangerous monster in a dangerous wood, a creature in her own habitat. She could feel the urgent worry of her friends, falling behind when she teleported, but catching back up whenever Monster had to double back in the dark forest due to another landmark having been swallowed up by the darkness. Not lost. Never lost. Just not in the right place.

The changeling pursuing in her hoofsteps no longer filled her heart with terror, but a strange

feeling of kinship, as the love she sensed within him seemed to be a part of the energy she had stolen from his hive and used to kill his queen. Farther back, she could feel the hooves of mom and other ponies, led by the strange blue one who commanded the changeling. Trixie. She knew that name. A small face, screwed up into a scowl, demanding attention. A shrill voice. A blow that knocked her book to one side. A loud shout that made her cry. Monster remembered seeing a frightened pony on the inside of that fragile shell. But not a bad pony.

The bad pony lurked far ahead, screaming and cursing in the scary stones that lay next to home. She made the white pony go away into the sun. She wanted to hurt mom and her friends.

She was a threat.

[center] * * * [/center]

Tallgrass had long since stopped cursing as he galloped in pursuit of the little fillies. He needed his air too much for mere words. Fire seemed to fill his throat, cover his coat, and armor his hooves as he galloped. A mindless rhythm filled his head, of chanting and hammering hooves, as if the entire ground beneath him pulsed to the beat of far-off drummers while he ran—

[color=silver]raiti[/color]

—turning right to duck between two trees into a narrow forest path, over a fallen log and splashing through a narrow brook. A coiling vine narrowly missed him, brushing over his back as if repelled by his sweat while the changeling scrambled up the creek bank, hitting his full stride on the narrow path—

[color=silver]kushoto[/color]

—and turning left to leap across a low log which snapped at him, far too late to even get a bite from the delicious creature who galloped so fast. Deeper into the forest he ran, getting farther away from his little charges with every step.

[center] * * * [/center]

Monster's hooves slowed in their gallop as the suddenly cold forest air began to compress around her, holding her in a grip that sucked the air from her lungs and made her gasp for every breath. The suffocating fear had returned. The fear stood between Monster and the bad sister. Tall dead trees around Monster loomed inwards, towering over the frightened unicorn, reaching to embrace her with skeletal branches. Gaping mouths on the dead trees snapped at her perceptions while more fear rolled in like tar.

In the woods around her, dry branches rustled as Timber Wolves sensed her weakness and

were drawn near. Monster cantered to a walk, then a halt, frozen in the glare of the surrounding trees as they held her in their power.

[i]Power[/i]

Monster needed It. If she had It, she would not be afraid. She would be able face the bad sister and make her not hurt mom and her friends. brother did not need It anymore. It was [i]her[/i] It. There was too much fear here to face by herself. The changelings had used love for power; this place used fear. Monster could use fear too.

With a blaze of violet light, Monster began her spell.

[center] * * * [/center]

“Holy Celestia’s Terrible Teats,” gasped Trixie as the horizon blazed with purple light, a sudden wind whipping the trees around them into a frenzy and driving the seven ponies together for protection from the storm.

“W-what’s happening?” gasped Fluttershy, holding onto Pinkie Pie’s neck with a vice-like grip.

“It’s a spell,” shouted Rarity to be heard above the sudden roar of wind.

“Really?” Trixie bellowed in response. “I never would have guessed!”

The purple glow flared into eye-burning brilliance, illuminating the entire forest with a shriek and flash, stopping just as abruptly as it had started.

Spitting out a fragment from the falling leaves all around them, Zecora let out a low chuckle.

“Unless my old eyes have been deceived, an item my Flower has retrieved.”

“A retrieval spell?” Trixie looked uneasily at the horizon where the purple glow had nearly been like a second sun. “They take power in a logarithmic progression. Whatever she retrieved, it must have been critically important, like a spellbook or a weapon.”

[i]Or the Elements of Harmony[/i], she silently prayed.

[center] * * * [/center]

Monster stood in the center of the huge ring of burning trees and laughed. It was a strange sensation, unlike anything she had felt since she was very small. Her eyes watered, her ribs hurt, and she could barely breathe, but she could not stop. Resting on the ground in front of her was It. And a little something extra.

[center] * * * [/center]

[i]"Shiny!" The room shifted in her perception as Twilight trotted across the kitchen floor to put both hooves up on the table where Shining Armor was engaged in a very NOT bedtime story related activity. He held a needle in his magical grip, with a long black thread trailing after it. On the table was his junior cadet's uniform, with one sleeve laying flat and a loose fabric chevron being ever so carefully sewn into place. A look of fierce concentration occupied Shining Armor's entire face, with the tip of his tongue sticking out of one corner of his mouth and every single stitch that tacked his newly-won rank insignia resulted in a tiny little grunt of effort.

"What'cha doing, big brother?" The stubborn brother did not even acknowledge his adorable sister's presence, but continued to place one stitch after another into his stupid jacket on that stupid little piece of cloth. Bedtime was five whole minutes ago, and he had promised to read her a bedtime story tonight. She had picked out her favorite, [i]Clover the Clever's Third Treatise on Particle Transformation Through Quantum Tunneling (Foal's Version)[/i], and been waiting patiently in bed for three whole minutes. After giving him sufficient time^(*) to properly respond to her question, she dragged a chair over to the table and positioned herself in the proper place to be heard, about four inches from his left ear.[/i]

"[b]SHINY![/b]"

[center] * * * [/center]

Monster finally managed to slow her laughing long enough to pick up It. It was difficult to see from the joyful tears streaming from Monster's eyes, but It seemed to have several small rips and tears sewn up in neat stitches, just as precise and well-spaced as brother's uniform, in addition to a new pair of mismatched buttons sewn on for eyes. And just like his uniform so many years and a whole lifetime ago, the tablecloth he had been sewing on was just as precisely stitched onto the back of It, giving the impression It had a long, flowing white dress with a floral pattern.

[hr]

(*) By counting to 100 by primes.

-end Chapter 23 -

-Chapter 24 -

[center]The Monster in the Twilight

[color=Red]Courage[/color][[/center]

[hr]

It was happy. It even looked happy, with a smiling face and mismatched button eyes, although It

felt a little damp. Monster gave It a sniff once her laughter had subsided enough for breathing, but It smelled different now. It smelled of tears and lilacs, brother and sister and — no. It smelled of Shining Armor and Cadence, of soft pink feathers that wrapped around her when she felt sad, and the musky scent of a perspiring stallion that mom... A flicker of purple and white darted through her memories. Monster pounced, dragging the thought back up to the surface of her mind and examining the strange face. Twilight. Mom. The rumble of falling stones blotted out the memory, blown about by fire from the sky and smashing the image of the mare with the purple-striped mane into dust. So many dead ponies, dead by her actions, dead and smashed to pieces by the power she was unable to control. Not a single living thing survived — except the blue unicorn now chasing her. If brother... If Shining Armor had saved her, could he have saved others from the flames she brought down upon them?

Monster turned, ignoring the crackling flames that filled the clearing with smoke and the pitiful whine of burning Timber Wolves. When she would fight the dark pony, others would be hurt. Her friends. sis and rarity and — Trixie, whom she had almost killed before. One at a time, Monster dug her hooves deep into the soft soil of the clearing and concentrated. The Fear remaining in the area fought and hissed against the power she held within herself, but Fear could still be used to power a spell even if she could not tolerate its filthy sensation for long. The earth resonated with the touch of her friends and the hoofsteps of the larger ponies who followed them. Fear lashed out against the restraints she forced upon it, but she held it firm and shaped it, moulded it to her will, stretching it into a barrier between them and her. As thin as gossamer, it only could touch the mind, but none of them would be able to overcome it. They would all remain safe while Monster fought the bad pony.

Monster frowned, twisting her hooves into the soft soil with puzzlement, and finally resignation. The changeling no longer resonated with the earth. He had probably been eaten by one of the myriad creatures who hunted the Everfree Forest at night. She added the infinitesimal weight of its soul to the giant pile of bodies that she was already responsible for. The guilt of his death remained on Monster even though she had not killed him directly, as she most certainly would have needed to if he had eventually caught her. The words of the big changeling still resonated in her ears.

[color=silver]...We shall have our revenge for the deaths of my children, for my changelings shall never rest until you are dead and eaten![/color]

With a shudder, Monster returned to her travel, trotting much slower and with It held carefully to her cheek. Alone except for her doll, she continued down the path to her destiny.

[center] * * * [/center]

“This is (untranslatable) insane!” screamed Tallgrass as he burst up out of the deep water for a third time, flapping frantically for air as a set of toothed jaws snapped shut inches behind his rear hooves, taking another nip off his already-shortened tail. Throwing his entire energy into

flight, the changeling hurtled forward with one eye angled skyward until the stars suddenly obscured above him. With a snap roll, he plunged into the water again a split-second before a set of serrated tentacles swept through the air he had just occupied, the flying predator screeching in frustration at missing the delightfully tasty-smelling prey. He barely managed to swim a few body-lengths before exploding back up into the air again, only this time close enough to the shore to dart between two thick trees in a narrow path too small for the flying beast to follow.

“Watch the kids, bug! Read the book, bug! Trixie, I’m going to kill you if I get out of this alive!”

[center] * * * [/center]

“That was so cool!” Featherweight dashed about in the air, zipping back and forth like some oversugared hummingbird. “I need a flash like that! I could take night pictures of the whole town at once!”

“That’s great, Featherweight. Could you come over here and help pull Scootaloo out of the tree, please?”

The little ponies continued to tug on Scootaloo once all the larger branches had been cleared away, finally pulling the dizzy pegasus out of the old hollow tree she had managed to stick her head into when blinded by the purple flash. Despite her protestations of perfect health, her friends loaded her in the wagon and held her down while Featherweight took over scooter propulsion duty, at a much reduced rate of speed and with many mournful glances at missed photographic opportunities.

As they entered the smokey clearing, all of the little ponies gaped at the circle of burning trees around them, charred and blasted, all in a direction away from the very center of the path. In a circle farther out, a ring of burning branches nearly turned to charcoal still twitched and spasmed as the occasional Timber Wolf fragment crumbled to ashes and fell to the ground.

Featherweight slowed even more as the path narrowed, finally coming to a panting halt a few inches away from four deep hoofprints in the forest clearing’s rich soil.

“Cant. Go. Afraid.” Featherweight clung to the handlebars of the scooter as if they were a life vest in a treacherous sea, his wings just barely flapping.

“I-I know y-y-you’re skeered,” shouted Apple Bloom with chattering teeth. “But we h-have to keep going. M-m-monster needs us!” The rest of the little ponies huddled together in terror, holding onto one another until Apple Bloom crawled out of the back of the wagon and braced her head against the tailgate. “I-I’m not going to abandon her! I-I’m not going to be afraid!”

“Apple Bloom! No!” Sweetie Belle reached feebly for her friend but stumbled as the wagon

began to move again, pushed by four little earth pony hooves.

“Not. Going. To. Abandon. You.” Apple Bloom’s voice got lower and cracked with stress as she pushed. “[size=12]Not.[/size] [size=10]Like. [color=Silver]mom.[/color][[/size]” Fear roared to a world-rending volume in the ears of the little fillies, cresting into a crescendo of raw terror that abruptly began to fall as they passed through the wall of fear and the wagon picked up speed, from a trot, to a gallop, to a full roar down the pathway as Apple Bloom was dragged up into the wagon by her friends and Featherweight put his full effort into a pace that even Scootaloo would have considered dangerous.

“Wahooo! Faster!”

Or maybe not.

[center] * * * [/center]

The path that Zecora led them up angled in the direction of the flames and smoke seen climbing into the night sky ahead, which Trixie considered being at least [i]some[/i] indication the supposed zebra knew what she was talking about, although that still did not totally eliminate the possibility she was simply luring them deeper into a trap. Still, if they were ambushed by some nameless[size=10](*)[/size] monstrosity, at least while being digested she would have the cold comfort of knowing somepony else had led them to their doom.

Applejack put a hoof over Trixie and pulled her close as they trotted down the path towards the smoky fire in the distance. “Ah’m sorry about being so hard on your flank back there. It’s just... well, mah baby sister’s out there, and ah’m all tied up in knots with worry.”

“Yes. Trixie knows how you feel.” After a few false starts, her magical field pulled the bottle of bourbon out of her cloak and floated it over to Applejack. “Trixie has found Monsieur Bourbon to be a great comfort in stressful times.” The bottle bobbed somewhat while they trotted down the road with Trixie unable to meet the farmer’s eyes. “Perhaps too great a comfort.”

“Yeah, I know what’cha mean. It’s not a good idea to own a distillery when your parents die.” They trotted for a short while, both trying to ignore the fire ahead as it grew nearer. Finally with a sigh, Applejack pushed the bottle away. “You just put ‘ol Monster Bourbon back in yer cloak, and we’ll drag him out for a victory drink when we’re done, ya’hear?”

“Deal.” Trixie tucked the bottle back into her cloak and giggled nervously.

“What? Did ah say sumptin funny?”

“No. It is just something Trixie heard from Princess Cadence’s guards at one time. They called Twilight Sparkle, ‘Monster’ because of the trail of destruction she leaves behind her. It made me

think we are like a little dog chasing a wagon; what are we going to do if we catch her?”

“Oh, [i]now[/i] yer makin plans? Seems a bit late.”

“Harumph.” Trixie trotted along, waving a hoof at the smoke ahead. “The Great and Powerful Trixie prefers to work off-the-hoof, but planning is still important. I stole your grandmother’s false teeth to use in the puppet spell not knowing if I was actually going to use it tonight. If I had managed to lay my hooves on some glass eyes, my performance would have been perfect.”

“Say what?”

“The Puppet spell is a vastly complicated spell, far beyond your meager knowledge. But if you must know, I performed the trick for Princess Celestia three times. The first time, she was able to detect the Puppet from my voice. The second time, I used a set of dentures in the spell, but she could still see which image was real by looking into my eyes. On the third time, I cheated and put a tiny bit of my own essence into the spell along with the glass eyes.”

“Wasn’t that just a mite dangerous? Ah mean there’s only so much of ya to go around.”

Trixie snorted dismissively, missing Applejack rolling her eyes with a hidden smile. “It was worth it, tenfold. Celestia nearly ripped the stage apart in a panic when the candle burned through the rope and the spiked trap slammed shut on my alter ego. Presto!” Trixie’s eyes glittered in the nearing flames as if a fire of nearly forgotten joy burned in her mind.

“Ya really brought down the house this time. Or burned it down, ah suppose.”

Trixie’s joyous expression fell, returning to her cynical sneer. “Bill me.”

Applejack chuckled, nudging Trixie with a shoulder as they trotted into the outskirts of the scattered flames illuminating the clearing.

“You know, if’n Big Mac did take a shine to you, I reckon it wouldn’t be too bad to have you out at the farm all the time.”

“It wouldn’t?” Trixie blinked in confusion, her attention drawn away from the flames. “Wait, at the farm?”

“Heck, yeah. We’re always a little short hooved around apple bucking season, and a few little ones runnin’ around to keep Apple Bloom company would be darned welcome.”

“Little ones? Like — foals?” Several unused muscles in Trixie’s gut clenched, thinking of delivery pains associated with a foal the size of Big Mac.

“Only about five or six, ‘cause you don’t want to get too busy to buck apples.”

“But what about—”

“‘Tween raising the young uns, apple bucking, fixin’ the barns, weaving apple baskets, chopping firewood, planting, canning, weeding, cooking and cleaning, we put in a good seventeen hour day, but a few months of that and you’d be just like one of the family.”

“Seventeen...” Trixie slowed, thinking of endless lines of trees needing harvesting as Applejack continued trotting along.

“And there’s always more ‘n enough grub. I mean we got apple pies, apple fritters, apple dumplings, apple brown betty, apple cake, apple chips, apple juice, applesauce—”

Trixie interrupted rather weakly. “The Great and Powerful Trixie doesn’t really like apples all that much.”

“Oh, don’t you worry none about that. We also gots us a plum tree.”

“Oh, Applejack?” called Rarity, trying to keep as much out of the smoke as possible. “Would you be a dear and stop taunting the poor thing. There’s something wrong with Rainbow Dash.”

[center] * * * [/center]

The rainbow-maned pegasus lay curled up in a ball in the center of the clearing, well lit by the burning trees around her. Every so often, her blue coat would twitch, or a wing would shudder, the only signs of life she showed other than a rapid panting. The rest of the ponies held up a number of yards back, clustered together in a small herd for social protection from the paralyzing fear that seemed to pulse out from an invisible wall in front of them.

“Stand back,” said Trixie, not moving one inch away from the warm huddle of the rest of the ponies. “There’s some sort of spell in the air here. Let me just get a look at — Uggha!” The blue unicorn shuddered as her horn lit up, fighting her head back and forth as the glow flickered and pulsed as if reluctant to be controlled. Several moments passed until it steadied into a soft light. “Ow. Stupid Everfree. Oh. Yeah, it’s a spell.”

“Really?” said Rarity in an almost perfect imitation of Trixie’s voice. “I never would have guessed.”

With a growl of effort from Trixie, a pink aura surrounded Rainbow Dash, floating her away from the invisible spell and into the warm embrace of her friends.

“I c-couldn’t fly,” gasped the pegasus from inside the group hug. “My wings froze up. Are they

okay? Do you think there will be any damage?"

"Only to your thick head," muttered Trixie. "Ow!"

"Polite you should be to the very young flier, for she saved you from dying in the terrible fire. Think about that while you rub your head, or consider the next time you may wind up dead."

"I was never in danger from the fire. And besides, you could have just told me to apologize without hitting me," grumbled Trixie while rubbing the back of her head and glaring at the disguised zebra.

"Some of our lessons are easily learned, but some only sink in when you are burned. Now what do you see as an enchantment up there, that seems to have frightened our dashing young mare."

"I'm not afraid!"

Trixie scoffed. "Oh, yes you were. I've seen a variant of this spell used to protect chests or rooms from unauthorized intruders. There's a web of fear woven into it, pulled out in each direction as far as I could see." Trixie paused and glared at Zecora. "Before I was hit." Getting nothing but a shrug, Trixie continued. "There's always one exception to the spell, and this one's a tricky little stinker."

Rainbow Dash hopped to her hooves and shook her head vigorously. "Oh, no. This is just a wall, right? I'll just fly everypony over the top. How tall is it?"

"Tall enough if you misjudge it, you'll freeze up like you did just now a couple thousand feet up, and make a bloody crater in the ground when you hit." Ignoring the faint whimpering from Fluttershy, Trixie turned back to the wall and began searching for a weak spot. "There has to be something that bypasses it, some trick or code, but where is it?"

Ignoring Trixie, the pink 'alicorn' walked to the deep hoofprints in the ground, placing each of her own hooves in them before closing her eyes and humming.

"Got it," growled Trixie with a grin. "You're a powerful one, Twilight Sparkle, but you're about as subtle as a crutch. It's your greatest fear. All you have to do is admit your greatest fear, and you can pass right through."

"What the arrogant one sees, is completely true, for Flower's friends have been here and through.

While Trixie fears the tempting booze, my daughter is what I fear to lose."

Scattering fresh earth as she stepped forward, Zecora walked straight through the invisible wall

and down the path where she stood calmly, waiting for the rest of the group to catch up.

“Me! Me next!” Pinkie Pie bounced forward and stopped, facing the wall like she was about to charge, before announcing, “I’m afraid of losing my friends.”

Trixie huffed and watched the pink party pony hop casually through the wall while muttering, “Like that could ever happen to you. Come on, who’s next?”

“I-I’m afraid of not being able to fly anymore.”

“Ah’m afraid of losin’ mah sister. Ah promised ma and pa I’d take care of her.”

“I’m afraid of... dirt! Icky dirt! Ewww! But I would wallow in mud to save my darling Sweetie Belle!”

“I-I’m afraid! Of everything!”

Trixie scowled at the pink tail that blocked her view where Fluttershy’s front legs had collapsed on the trail in front of her. Her hind legs remained locked, holding her rear in the air with tremors shaking her pink tail like some huge fluffy rattlesnake. “Oh, for the love of ponykind! Just walk through it! You admitted your greatest fear.”

“T-t-that’s n-not m-my g-greatest f-f-f—”

“Fear!” shouted Trixie.

“Eep!” squeaked Fluttershy, in a terrified tone that nearly exceeded audible frequencies.

“Come on, Fluttershy! You can do it!”

“Yeah, Fluttershy! You rock!”

“Darling, you need to have faith in yourself. Think of it as a photo shoot.”

“Eeek!” Fluttershy’s paralyzed hind legs collapsed, allowing the yellow pegasus to curl up into a terrified ball of fur and feathers.

“Ah don’t think mentioning a photo shoot was the right thing to say there, sugarcube.”

“I. Have. Had. Enough!” Pink magic formed around the terrified pegasus and propelled her down the road, landing her firmly on her belly in front of her friends. Trixie cut off the levitation spell with an angry snap and stepped forward.

“I’m afraid of...” She trailed off, looking at the six ponies waiting on her. No pony had ever waited on her before. They actually wanted her to succeed, and were waiting on her instead of bolting off into the forest in continued pursuit of the little menaces.

“I’m afraid of...” There were so many things to be afraid of. Ants. Spiders. Laughter. She

always hated to be laughed at on stage. “Laughter!” Trixie trotted forward, only to come to a crashing halt as raw terror swept up her legs and across her chest, holding her muscles paralyzed.

Fear filled her mind with images, of standing on stage in the middle of a performance as the yawning audience trickled out the exits, the empty bed where a handsome stallion had slipped away on first light of the sun before his drunken companion could awaken, seeing Celestia perform a powerful magic on a whim that Trixie would not ever be able to master even if she spent her entire life trying. Failure. She would never be able to do what Celestia had wanted, she could never make friends, she was not great or powerful enough to use the Elements of Harmony to defeat Nightmare Moon. The evil being who corrupted Princess Luna was only toying with Trixie, feeling her thrash in terror like a crawdad in a boiling pot. Laughing at her. Mocking her. Relishing the fear that came from the crowd. Like a changeling consuming love, Nightmare Moon consumed—

She hardly felt the lariat as it settled around her neck, but she certainly felt it when all six ponies grabbed the other end of the rope and pulled, yanking Trixie through the wall of fear and dragging her down the path in a spluttering fury. Spitting out dirt and a twig, Trixie leapt to her hooves and glared at Applejack. “What did you think you were doing?!”

The smiles that occupied the ponies’ faces began to fade as Trixie fumed. Applejack flipped the rope off her neck and began to roll it back up, trying not to look Trixie in the eyes. “You was stuck there for quite some time, and we got worried.”

“How long?”

“It seemed like forever!” said Pinkie Pie in an aged, tremulous voice, earning a second glance from Trixie as somehow the party pony had grown a long white beard and was walking with a cane. Zecora walked around Pinkie carefully, as if she were contagious, before looking deeply into Trixie’s eyes.

“Have you seen some power, that might help my Flower?”

“I-I don’t know. There’s something wrong in what we’re doing, but I’m not sure what. Trixie thinks you all were right about the Elements of Harmony, but if Princess Celestia did not want to bring them to Ponyville and train Trixie... Or Twilight Sparkle with them earlier, she must have had a good reason. Why didn’t she just tell me?”

“Perhaps the use of this device is not meant to be taught twice. Once to you, and once to Flower, could there be dangers in this power?”

“It put an alicorn princess on the moon; of course it’s dangerous! But it’s missing a part; it only has five of the six elements according to the book. Unless one of you has some ancient relic

disguised as a knick-knack or necklace, Princess Celestia sent us out here on a wild goose chase to give Twilight Sparkle a broken weapon to fight an angry goddess.”

Applejack frowned. “Well, what in tarnation would that do?”

“Provide a distraction.”

[center]--*-*--[/center]

Celestia soared on wings of flame.

Magnetic vortices swirled all around her, lifting torrents of plasma into the sky as the sun erupted. Other immaterial forms danced with her upon the fiery wave, calling to her to shed what was left of her body and join their celebration. One at a time, they fell away with little piping cries of joy as she climbed. It was getting more difficult with every attempt to resist their siren call, but Celestia held to her purpose with a will of steel.

[i]Hold fast, my sister![/i]

She clung to the updraft, her wings catching every solar particle as it climbed. Up. Up. Up.

Until she struck the wards.

Blackened flames crashed across her ethereal body, magic meeting magic in a clash of power that she had yet to win, but could not stop trying. Her body twisted at the lashing agony, hurtling backwards away from the open sky where her beloved Equestria could be seen and back down into the swirling sea of fire where she floated in pain. The barely-seen forms of others drifted past, calling out to her in happiness as they danced and played before being swirled away by the constant solar wind.

She gathered her corporeal form about herself, and spread her fiery wings again, fighting against the little fingers that seemed to pluck about her mind, attempting to steal her self and turn her into one of the mindless beings who danced through the solar plasma. Luna would not have lasted a moment in this place, extinguished as a shadow before the flame. Celestia drew power from the sun, filling her being with might for yet another attempt at escape. If it took a thousand thousand years, she would leave this place, and save her sister from the shadows.

[i]I am Celestia, the Unconquered Sun. Hear me, Nightmare. I am coming for you.[/i]

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(*) Technically the monsters of the Everfree all had names given to them by the first ponies who discovered them, but since that meant many of them would be simply known as 'Arrrgh! Help!' it was probably better to simply consider them nameless.

-end Chapter 24 -

-Chapter 25 -

[center]The Monster in the Twilight

[color=Orange]Mamma[/color][[/center]

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Mothers are the most dangerous of monsters. A peaceful bear will turn into a roaring beast if they see a threat between them and their cubs. Even a peaceful pony can become a terror of sharp hooves and biting teeth when their foal is in danger. So when a monster's cubs are threatened, even the giants of the Everfree walk carefully.

The manticore snuffed uneasily as she glared out into the night. Dawn had arrived earlier, but only briefly, before being swallowed again by the stygian night. Now her little cubs squalled and fussed at being hedged inside the cave by their overprotective mother, hungry and bored, wanting to explore the dangerous world even though they too could sense the unnatural air that hung over the night.

A noise disturbed the darkness, and the manticore rushed to the entrance of her cave to listen. It sounded uneven in its steps as if the creature were sick or wounded. Food would keep her little cubs warm and happy, and not out in the dangerous woods becoming food for something larger than themselves. She prowled to the bush outside her cave to peek at the creature passing by—

—and promptly returned to her cave to chivvy the little manticores back inside. The purple creature looked sick, muttering to itself as it moved in a flickering gait through the clearing as if it were vanishing tracelessly every step and reappearing yards away, leaving little divots of moved earth no larger than a paw print in its wake. The purple female was dangerous enough normally, but if it were sick or diseased, there was no telling how much more dangerous it was. Far better to quietly whet her claws on a nearby boulder and find some easier prey.

Sooner than she had expected, a growing buzzing rattle echoed through the clearing air. Chasing her little cubs back into the cave and giving the disobedient brats a fierce growl to keep them there, she prowled back out to the bush outside her cave.

This time she remained in place, watching the bizarre parade of little colorful cubs pass by. They looked like the purple one's cubs. They sounded like the purple one's cubs. They even smelled like the purple one's cubs, with that strange changing scent they always had whenever the purple one had brought them to the clearing. She lurked until they had safely gone down the pockmarked path after the purple one, and crept out to the clearing to check. Several tiny

little eggs had been scattered along their trail, which she quickly scooped up and took back to the cave to share with her little cubs. Each of them seemed to explode with flavors she never had experienced before, although they did make the cubs dash around the cave with far more energy than before. It was not filling enough to feed the cubs, but whatever wandered through the clearing next certainly would.

A muttering noise overlaid the regular clop of fast-moving hooves this time as the mother manticore chased her overexcited cubs back into the cave, this time having to threaten them severely before she could make it back to her bush to observe what was trekking through the clearing.

It looked tasty. It [i]smelled[/i] far more than tasty, the faint whiff of sweat that drifted through the clearing air wafted across her nostrils with the delicate appeal of the most delicious wounded herbivore, young and fat with veins of marbling and a juicy liver.

It was too good to be true. It had to be a trap.

She hurried back to her cave, catching her little cubs as they scuttled around in all directions, dragging them all back inside and pinning them to the ground until the dangerous bait passed by. [i]Nothing[/i] was that good to eat. Whatever was using it as bait must have been far more dangerous than she. However, after the delicious-smelling creature had gone on its way and nothing lurked in its wake, she began to think that perhaps she had been mistaken. The wailing cries of her hungry little cubs triggered a sense of regret, but before she could set out to catch up with the delicious little snack, she heard the sounds of even more creatures coming through the clearing.

A herd of herbivores. The easiest thing to hunt. One powerful roar to stupefy them in place, and a vigorous pounce with a swipe through their midst to cripple one or more of them before they scattered. She dragged her cubs to the bush and cuffed them until they remained still. They would need to learn how to hunt if they were to survive, and the little cubs made tiny little growls and thrashed their stingers as they impatiently waited on their prey. Finally, the herd of herbivores galloped into view, and the mother manticore leapt forward with a mighty roar!

[center] * * * [/center]

The screams of the frightened ponies were overwhelmed by a powerful voice, shouting, “Behold, as the Great and Powerful Trixie vanquishes this terrible beast from the Everfree Forest! Marvel at her skill, her power over the forces of nature, her ability to bend the very rules of creation to smite—”

“Oooh, they’re so cute!”

“To smite... To... Fluttershy! Will you please stop playing with the monster’s little spawn? I’m

trying to vanquish it!”

“I’m sorry, but they’re just so adorable! Yes, you are! Yes, you are too! Those cute little eyes and darling little paws—”

“And tiny poisonous stingers,” grumbled Trixie to herself, because nopony else was listening, far too busy staring at the little butter-yellow pegasus with three little manticores tumbling over her, and the mother looking on with detached concern.

“Raarhuuh.”

“Oh, I’m sorry Missus Manticore. I know they need to get their sleep, or they’ll be cranky in the morning.”

“Fluttershy,” said Trixie quietly while trying not to grind her teeth. “If we don’t get going, they won’t have a morning.”

“Sorry! I’m sorry. I’ll come back later, would that be all right?”

Trixie muttered to herself while the rest of the group trotted down the path, giving a frustrated, “Finally!” as Fluttershy caught up. It took The Great and Powerful Trixie a moment to realize just exactly what was different about the shy yellow pegasus, but once she realized what it was, she could not restrain herself.

“Fluttershy!”

The pony in question nearly leapt straight up with a shrill, “Eep? Yes?”

“Put. It. [i]Back[/i].”

With a heartfelt sigh, Fluttershy landed and parted her mane, nudging the baby manticore concealed inside back onto the ground and back to her mother with a soft cry of, “Don’t worry! I’ll come back later and we can play then.”

The disguised zebra moved up beside Trixie as Fluttershy ran off to rejoin her friends with frequent backwards glances at the manticore family.

“Do you see what is behind the heart of one so kind?”

Trixie growled, taking the bottle of bourbon out of her cloak and looking at it for a moment before sticking it back into her cloak. “I’m starting to think we’re the only sane ones here.”

The pink ‘alicorn’ smiled just the tiniest little smile and patted Trixie on the back. “We? Not me.

For twelve years I've lived in my forest tree, with only my daughter for company. We zebras are a herding kind, and such solitude is damaging to our mind."

"I wasn't talking to you."

-end Chapter 25 -

-Chapter 26 -

[center]The Monster in the Twilight

[color=Orange]Confidence[/color][[/center]

[hr]

The feeling of magic streamed in threads and knots, wisping around her horn and touching her hooves with feather-like nudges. The world flickered by, one step, two steps, three steps, as the trees and grass jumped beneath her hooves. She slipped through the cracks in the world, tiny little things no larger than a thought, but they were everywhere as if the world was made of glass, and long ago it had been struck a mighty blow that nearly shattered it. Now the starred-web of threads rippled in her sight, carrying her forward in tiny little jumps that was an experience completely new to her. The old teleportation spell she had used for many years tore at her flesh like a barbed hook, ripping rage and frustration out of her being and through the world in a lash of anger. She was used to the familiar pain; it had been a constant companion ever since her birth in the toppled stones and towers of the ancient ruin. Magic was Pain. Pain was Magic.

This was not her old Magic.

She was not certain of its name. The shadow had a name, but this was not the stuff of the Dark Pony. It was the ephemeral mist of illusion and light. She had felt its presence on the Trixie, although there was much Magic there too. Magic was easy; it bent to the will and destroyed what needed to be destroyed. This was new to her, and yet old beyond measure. Her mind played with it like a toy, bending and shaping it to her will. It would not be forced where it did not want to go, but vanished like the dew when pressured. It required a soft touch, a gentle request like the floating joy she felt putting feather's broken camera together. Magic was easy, the only limits were how much pain could be endured. This new starstuff felt of unlimited potential, able to do things Magic could never even touch, if only she could understand its powers.

Books. They held the knowledge of this new thing. She had once absorbed their knowledge like a thirsty sponge before...

Time. The Dark Pony would destroy everything long before Twilight... before Monster could master this subtle new thing. If only she had the time. Time might be inside the new magic, but she did not have the time to bring it out, a quandary that bent her mind to new possibilities.

The chill of water flowing across her hooves brought Monster out of her thoughts, standing ankle-deep at the edge of the roaring river. The creature who guarded the water lurked far away from the banks. He knew of Monster and feared her, although mom could speak with him for the shortcut passage across the water in exchange for certain herbs. He would not allow Monster the same favor, and cringed away whenever he saw her scarred body. It had made Monster angry once, long ago, and she had thought to strike him for the insult until mom had spoken with her in words very stern. Now she gathered the new magic around her, focusing on the other side of the river as she released it, but with too much force for her fledgeling control of this fickle substance.

-splash-

Churning water surrounded Monster as the spell fled her grip, dropping her far short of her objective. A confusing blur of orange and purple churned the water around her as the frightened serpent added to the confusion. Roiling water dragged her down, down into the deadly river as she grabbed for familiar Magic and yanked.

-*BANG*-

Monster coughed out water on the far bank of the river, barely aware of the screaming serpent thrashing its life out in the river due to the agony that ripped through her own head. The feathery touch of magic vanished as rage coursed through her mind, prying and twisting at the power she had stolen from the changeling hive. Magic screamed for release, to strike, to destroy in revenge for the terrible pain. There was no need to hold back until she faced the dark pony, for the Magic would always be there in all of its agonizing glory, a constant stream of never-ending power allowing endless destruction. The screams of the mortally-wounded serpent braced her concentration with the thought of the pain the pain Monster inflicted on others.

[color=silver][i]I have killed far too many with my hate. [/i][/color]

The quiet one trapped inside the dark pony knew what hurting others with her Magic brought. Monster had nearly killed bloom with her teleport spell when she fled in panic, and now her actions had killed yet another. Discipline was needed, and her focus narrowed to her own body. The screams and shouts from outside the world faded away as magic, the soft glow of the [i]new[/i] magic, gently enfolded her body and whisked her away.

[center] * * * [/center]

“There she is! On the other side of the river!” Sweetie Belle stood up in the wagon and pointed, which was a rather foolish thing to do as it released Scootaloo from her undesired restraint.

“I got it!” shouted the little pegasus, darting forward and displacing Featherweight as driver of the scooter. “We’ll jump the river!”

“Nooo!! We’ll never make it!” screamed Twist, tightening up her helmet and grabbing for a strap in full knowledge that her protest was only going to make Scootaloo more determined.

“Featherweight! Goose it!” shouted Scootaloo, leaning into her scooter just as hard as she could on the slope down to the river.

“Where? I don’t see any — Oh!” Tucking his camera away, the little colt buzzed down to grab onto the back end of the wagon, pushing as hard as his tired wings would push. The roaring buzz from Scootaloo’s wings sounded weaker than normal, but the wind still roared by at a terrifying rate as the scooter and wagon plunged down to the riverbank and leapt into the air from a makeshift ramp.

[center] * * * [/center]

Dragging what felt like a hundred pounds of stickers, prickles, snags, sticky pods, and adhesive leaves, Tallgrass staggered to the edge of the riverbank and stared in disbelief at the raging waves kicked up by what appeared to be a purple sea serpent in mortal agony. Just launching off an earthen ramp on this side of the river and wobbling weakly through the air was a familiar scooter and wagon which he was aghast to see was filled with the screaming fillies he was supposed to be protecting. With a flare of green magic, he shed his Royal Guard disguise and flung himself forward as fast as his bent wings would carry him. Frothing water rushed underneath his carapace while fire seemed to play along his weakening wings and air roared across his face, the world narrowing down to one spot, one single place on the bottom of the wagon where a proper boost would keep it airborne and keep the little larva from smashing into the river and drowning. Or being eaten.

So focused on his goal was the changeling that when a wave of splashed water rose up from below to smack into the bottom of the wagon, he flew right into the cresting wave, carried along with the wagon to the river bank where the Cutie Mark Crusader’s wagon bounced twice before continuing at a breakneck pace up the trail. Tallgrass, however,

simply lay in the mud of the riverbank and tried to figure out if his own neck was broken.

Regrettably, there were no major breaks or injuries that would excuse him to remain lying down in the muddy crater which was filled with orange hair for some reason. From sheer luck, his only injuries were a large quantity of mud jammed up his nose that he tried to blow out while staggering to his hooves and trotting up the hill. After all, they were just little ponies, and they needed protected from the dangers of the Everfree Forest.

Although he was starting to think he was protecting the forest from them.

[center] * * * [/center]

“I know I heard something, like an explosion or a bang.” Rainbow Dash darted ahead of the group and hovered around the treeline where the path descended to the river. “I don’t see any sign of them, but there’s a crater on the other side and the water’s all frothy.”

“An explosion and a crater most certainly sounds like my sister’s friends,” said Rarity with a lady-like sigh. “I certainly hope they are in good health, and this dreadful humidity does not adversely affect the natural curl in Sweetie Belle’s mane. Or any of the other children, of course.” The group stopped at the riverbank and stared at the purple sea serpent thrashing around in the middle of the river, one arm thrown dramatically across his face as he moaned and sobbed.

“Behold, the Great and Powerful Trixie,” announced Trixie in a monotone, only bothering to lift up one leg to wave, “as she will now defeat this horrible monster—”

“It’s true! I’m hideous!”

“—who blocks our way to the Castle of the Royal Pony Sisters—”

“Don’t look at me! Just put me out of my misery!”

“Trixie’s speeches do have that kind of effect on ponies,” remarked Pinkie Pie.

“Look, I’m busy!” snapped Trixie, shouting so loudly that Pinkie’s hair fluttered in the breeze. “I’m trying to figure out why Princess Celestia wanted me to take Twilight Sparkle to

the castle since there are only five usable parts to this ancient artifact. She's far too kind to use little children as expendable decoys." Trixie harrumphed, and tried to scratch an itchy spot between her shoulder blades as she glared across the river. "Not that it's a bad idea with those five..."

"Oh, excuse me then," sniffed the serpent, tossing back his shimmering locks in the moonlight and wiping away a tear. "I'll leave you alone to deal with your minor issues while I'm just dying here."

"Don't mind her, darling," purred Rarity, moving to the edge of the river where she could get a better look at the handsome serpent. "She's having a bad mane day."

"Tick!" screamed Trixie, twisting around trying to point her horn between her shoulder blades where she had just discovered the reason for her itch. "Ick! Tick! Get it off! Getitoff! It's sucking out all of my blood! Parasite! Leech! Smash it!"

"No!" whispered Fluttershy. "You'll hurt the poor thing, and do more damage to yourself."

Ignoring the yellow pegasi who fluttered up to help, Trixie began running around in a circle while pawing at her cloak. "Where's the insect repellent spell on this thing?"

With a sniff, the serpent cast a sympathetic look at Rarity, although he kept an arm across his face. "Is she always this much of a drama queen?"

"You would not [i]believe[/i] the things she's put us through. But enough of her, why are you hiding your face like that? You have such a beautiful mane, all glowing in the moonlight and so elegantly coiffed."

"Oh, it's true! It really is! If you really must know, I was just..."

[center] * * *[/center]

"Um, can you hold still, Trixie? She's really tunneled into your mane." Fluttershy probed gently in the knotted mess that was Trixie's formerly snow-white mane, which had turned a somewhat muddy green during their trip except for the section under her hat.

"AAAAaaahhhhhhh!! It hurts! It hurts!"

"I haven't even touched you yet."

"Sugarcube, could you hurry up? She's twistin' out of my rope faster than a squirrel in one of our birdfeeders."

"I don't want to hurt them."

"Them? [i]Them?[/i]" Applejack threw herself against the ropes as Trixie thrashed. It took the addition of Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash to hold their captive still until Fluttershy had extracted the last tick from Trixie's mane, by which time a much shorter-tailed Rarity had come trotting back over to the group.

"Fabulous news, girls. Steven has decided to share a sample of his conditioner, and Zecora says she can supply more when this is all over! Oh, and he'll let us cross the river on his back."

Trixie staggered to her hooves and spit out a piece of gravel. "What happened to your tail?"

"A small sacrifice for our cause." The fashionista sniffed, lifting her nose in the air which coincidentally allowed her to look at the multicolored mustache the serpent was stroking and adoring. "Plus, I think it looks [i]fabulous[/i] on him! Almost as good as it looked on me. Although I did agree to just one teensy little condition."

"What?"

Standing at the bank of the river gave Trixie no time to react as a set of well-manicured talons snatched her off the ground so quickly she did not even have time to scream. Agile claws plucked the hat and cloak from her back before plunging her head-first into the chilly water of the river. Emerging back into the air, Trixie gasped one breath before a glob of slimy mucus landed on top of her head, and the serpent's other clawed hand began rubbing it vigorously into her coat and mane. The substance tasted bitter and astringent at the same time, and she spit multiple times to get the nasty taste off her tongue before the serpent plunged her back into the water again, swishing her back and forth under the river's surface. It took several repetitions of the horrifying experience before he yanked her back out of the chilly water and deposited her on her hooves at the other bank where six sets of eyes examined her with various degrees of amusement. Almost as an afterthought, the serpent replaced Trixie's dry hat and cloak and nodded in satisfaction.

"There. Much better," declared Rarity. "Thank you, Steven."

"Oh, indeed," agreed Fluttershy with a stroke along Trixie's mane that was almost sensual. The snarls and tangles that had knotted her snow-white hair seemed to just slip away as the pegasus stroked, having found a hoofbrush somewhere which she used in broad, sweeping strokes to experiment with new manestyles.

"Can we... If we are all the way done... You know there's..." Trixie's mind fogged with

each brush stroke, feeling the bristles release tension she never knew she was holding back. “End of... the world... if we... don’t stop...” Finally pulling away from the seductive brush, Trixie took a deep breath and pointed down the path. “All right, new plan. We give Nightmare Moon a good shampoo and brushing, right after we find the kids.”

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Monster stood on the brink of the chasm that separated Home from the ruins, looking up past the starry sky. The fabric of the world was thin here, stressed and shattered so many years ago and still not totally recovered. Time wobbled if not watched carefully, while the sounds of ancient battles still echoed faintly in the middle of the darkest nights. Only fragments of bone and a few rusty scraps of armor remained from thousands of ponies who had lived here, fought here, and died here. None remained as ghosts to float through the fallen stones, but her imagination could see them all in armored ranks, unicorns and pegasi and earth ponies all dressed in bright gold or glowing purple. If she looked very hard into the sky at the brilliant stars, she could see them shiver at the memories of a brilliant white pony with wings like clouds calling out to an armored dark pony. They had seen her ebon flames lashing through the air, being blocked or countered by the white pony’s golden magic while she pleaded, never striking back, never raising a spell against her corrupted sister, taking the painful blows with tears, not for her own pain, but for the loss of her sister’s love. Then the bright pony flew away, leaving the dark pony to gloat among her golden-eyed followers who all stamped and cheered at her victory.

The bright pony returned, not with begging and pleading as before, but cold as ice with a rainbow light that outshone the brilliant moon. There were six gems in the golden collar around her neck that glowed and flashed, the ancient artifact they had once wielded as sisters. The dark pony screamed defiance, drawing power from all of her followers in threads of ebon fire that consumed them, flesh and bone gone to ashes in moments. Her dark power met the rainbow of light and shattered into nothingness, and when the light was gone, so was she. The bright pony dimmed in the memory of the stars as she collapsed in the shattered remains of their castle, the same stones that Monster faced. The same stones that concealed the dark pony now, without the light pony to use the ancient weapon.

Monster turned from the memory of the stars, trudging along on her hooves as she tried to think. At her unconscious desire, wisps of magic formed into ropes and wood to create a bridge beneath her feet as she walked across the chasm, deep in thought.

The bright pony had not fought the dark pony, but begged and pleaded instead, only using the artifact against her as a last resort. She was weak. Monster's heart churned with turmoil at the thought of facing the dark pony, but she had the courage to face her fear. The bright pony was no longer a protector; she was now a coward. She had the power to face her sister now like she did so many years ago, but chose to flee instead. Monster did not have the experience to use the weak power of this new magic against the dark pony like the light pony could have done. Monster would have to embrace the Magic to fight. She would have to completely become the monster she always feared, the beast who lurked in her heart and mindlessly destroyed, the roaring fiend that she held back whenever brother and sister attempted to capture her. Her friends would understand. They had each other. They did not need a Monster.

Once across the bridge, she slashed once at the magically-created ropes and watched the bridge fall away into the mists. Even if her friends had managed to pursue Monster this far, they would not be able to cross the chasm. She raised her head to look into the ruins, peering through the gloom to pick out the largest building which was surging with the unmistakable throb of power. That was where the dark pony would be. That was where one of them would die.

Monster walked forward, drawing upon her Magic.

[center] * * * [/center]

In the decaying throne room of the castle, Nightmare completed her preparations and curled up on the floor up to wait. The spells had been laid, the incomplete elements laid out in the middle of the room, and now all that was needed to complete the trap was time, which the immortal alicorn body she wore had in abundance. Echoes of the ancient battle seemed to resound around the room in every corner and cobweb as the Nightmare whispered into the night.

“Come into my parlor, little one...”

-end Chapter 26 -

-Chapter 27 -

[center]The Monster in the Twilight

[color=Red]Rage[/color][[/center]

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“There’s Monster’s house!” shouted Sweetie Belle as the wagon slowed to a halt at the top of the hill with a panting Scootaloo sucking down the last juice box in their supplies. “I bet she’s

inside getting a bunch of Zecora's potions to use against that scary pony Celestia was fighting."

"I don't think tho," said Twist, pointing down a grassy path to where a much newer-looking rope bridge dangled into the chasm separating them from the spooky moonlit ruins. Obvious signs of a pony's passage littered the path as grass for several yards to either side of the path had been flattened or ripped out of the ground. "It thure lookth like Monththerth been here. But thee did thomething to the bridge."

Apple Bloom gasped. "Somepony cut the bridge after she put it up for us. Look, you can see the cuts on the ropes over there. How are we going to get across?"

Featherweight fluttered to the edge of the bridge abutment and looked down into the mist that filled the chasm between them and the ruins. "I could try to fly down there and carry the end of the bridge end to the other side, but I'm so pooped I can barely flap."

"We can jump it!" declared Scootaloo, before four of her friends jumped her and dragged the little pegasus back into the wagon. "No! Wait! We can do it if we just get up enough speed! I'm hydrated now so it won't even be a problem! Not the rope!"

"There you are, you little menaces!" The raspy snarl of an adult voice interrupted the final knot-tying process of a restrained Scootaloo, and all five little ponies looked up the flattened grassy path and screamed.

"Changeling!"

"I'm not a changeling," responded Tallgrass with an irritated sigh. "I'm a Royal Guard — oh, horsefeathers. I forgot to put my disguise back on, didn't I?" He eyed the terrified little ponies who had packed themselves into the wagon and were trembling together in a mutual hug. "I know it's a little difficult to understand, but all of the wounded changelings in Ponyville came from when our hive had a big explosion. I've been in town for over a year, and you already know me from over at the spa. Here, let me show you." With a flare of green magic, Tallgrass turned back into his earth pony disguise.

"Tallgrass!" screamed the fillies, clutching themselves into a tighter mutual hug.

"We thought that valve was just loose and needed tightened!"

"Hotter mud is supposed to be good for you, right?"

"Anypony could have mistaken the bags of concrete for bags of mud!"

"You didn't theem too mad at uth onth you were chiseled out of the mud, mithter."

"Yeah! Apple Bloom stepped forward with a fierce, determined look. "That's right! You said you weren't gonna hold that against us. Besides, we cleaned up the mess and apologized to Miss Aloe and Miss Lotus. So why did you chase us all the way out here just to beat up a bunch of

harmless little fillies?”

“Hey!”

“And Featherweight,” added Apple Bloom.

“I’m not following you to hurt you, or beat you up, or any of that. Trixie—” his voice growled at the name “—told me to watch you. She was supposed to help me bring you all to the Castle of the Royal Pony Sisters...” He trailed off, looking to one side at the massive ruins across the chasm. “...which is probably those? Oh, my.”

The little fillies promptly filled the resulting silence with a mutual description of the pursuit of their friend and how she was ‘skeered’ and in pain and needed them and probably had run out of stress licorice sticks by now and would appreciate a juice box if Scootaloo hadn’t finished off the last one. It was a familiar form of chaotic, much akin to any normal conversation inside the hive and Tallgrass nodded along as they chattered until a brilliant flash of violet light interrupted their conversation.

For just the briefest moment, night became day in the ruins with a searing blast of light from the largest of the buildings inside the fallen stones. Whatever Tallgrass said in response was muted by a deep rumble of thunder, which most probably kept five little ponies from adding new changeling swear words to their already-expansive vocabulary. The ground shuddered with power in a deep thrumming noise, and the noise repeated, only this time heavily muted.

“Monster!” blurted out Apple Bloom, running to the edge of the bridge abutment and looking across the distance as if sheer concentration could bring the other side of the chasm closer. Dashing back to the changeling, she put on the most pathetic expression of big-eyed begging and whimpered. “Mister, you just [i]gotta[/i] help put the bridge back up! She [i]needs[/i] us!”

“Yeah,” said Sweetie Belle, contributing her own sad eyes to the conversation. “Monster stuck up for us, now we need to stick up for her.”

“We’re missing the fight,” groaned Featherweight, trying to look as plaintive as possible. “She’s just kick-flank [i]awesome[/i] in a fight, and if we don’t get there, it’ll be [i]over![/i]”

“I can give you a lollipop,” said Twist, digging around in her bags. “It’s only got a little lint on it from the bag. Oh, and thome gum, barely chewed.”

“Mummmph!” said Scootaloo from behind her gag, trying to wriggle around to add her big-eyed begging expression. “Mummpm, mm munmph mrnbow mash!”

With a sigh of resigned acceptance of the inevitable, Tallgrass popped the offered lollipop into his mouth and transformed into his Royal Guard disguise. As tired as his wings were, it took

only moments to dive into the chasm, retrieve the end of the rope bridge, and begin tying it on the other side. The first rope was easy, but once he had cinched the other rope tight, the bridge suddenly became much heavier.

“Cutie Mark Crusaders Rescue Squad!”

Hanging onto the suddenly-heavy rope by his teeth, Tallgrass dug in his hooves until the pegasus-propelled contraption blasted by, headed at top Scootaloo speed for the building from which the deafening blasts of power had begun to pour. Once they were clear of the bridge, he spit out the rope and dashed in pursuit of them again, trying not to feel as if he was flying into something he was never going to fly away from.

[center] * * * [/center]

Smoke curled in the hoofprints of the purple unicorn who walked slowly through the ruins, trailing acrid coils of burning stone and vegetation that brought a bitter scent to the motionless air with every step. Indigo shimmers of dark magics surrounded the building, a massive construction of heavy stones that had resisted the destruction that had swept over the castle centuries ago as well as the passage of time. In her mind, a furious Monster plotted just how many ways there were to tear that structure to pieces and beat the dark pony inside to death with the stones. But in the background, two quiet voices echoed through her head.

[i]Bring back my sister, Twilight Sparkle. I know you can.[/i]

There was no sister left for Twilight... for Monster to rescue. She had given herself to the beast who now controlled her body, leaving only the dark pony behind. The only option Monster had was mutual destruction by the same method. If she could destroy the dark pony, Monster would be too dangerous to live. Monster had been born here, of pain and horrible burning fire, thrown here by the light pony when she had first touched Magic. It was only appropriate that she die here whatever the result of the fight.

[color=Silver]no! thou must not fight her! she will consume you as she did me![/color]

The frightened voice was only an echo from inside the dark pony, a deception the beast used to preserve its life. There was no pony to rescue, no salvation of the innocent, only the punishment of the guilty. Monster had killed when she was born, and she had killed ever since. Somewhere beneath her hooves she could feel the distant tread of mom, grown nearer as Monster had hesitated. If she were to remain safe from the fight with the dark pony, there must be no more hesitation. Even Monster's slow tread now gave notice of the close proximity of the strange changeling. For a moment, she considered delaying just long enough to destroy the threat he represented to mom and her friends before confronting the dark pony, but...

[i]Twilight Sparkle. Thank the stars. And you have friends. [/i]

Her hoofsteps faltered. They were so close. It would feel so good to hold them, to feel their loving presence around her, to hear their happy voices. The darkness in Monster's heart lightened in their company, but she firmed her jaw and brought the Magic around herself as a shield. The dark pony awaited inside, the door open and inviting, an obvious trap. It would have felt so good to blast the door inwards in blazing chunks of molten rock, to destroy what ponies centuries ago had put such care into building. Without a door, she settled for striding forward, her horn flaring ebon with power as a shadowed figure rose up on the other side of the room.

"Welc—" An explosion of pure malevolence lashed out at the dark pony, sweeping her up into a burst of indigo smoke that smashed into the back wall of the room and [i]rebounded[/i], recoiling on Monster like a tidal wave. Only an instinctual lance of purple thrown out at the last instant made her merely skid backwards a few feet instead of being vaporized like her target. The coil of smoke twisted in mid-air, sweeping back together before Monster lashed out again, this time with a whip of solid darkness that split the cloud in half with a horrible crash, and then again as she lashed the whip of magic so hard it exploded on impact. Grabbing a nearby stone pillar in her magic, Monster wrenched it upwards, but instead of ripping a hole in the building roof and giving her a giant stone club, her magic merely skidded across the surface of the stone.

"You'll never break that spell," chuckled a grim voice as the cloud of smoke reformed and the doors to the room slammed shut. "I spent my time wisely while awaiting your arrival. The throne room always had many enchantments on it, but I added a little something extra tonight. You will find it completely reflective to all of your spells. Nothing gets out." The Nightmare chuckled as Monster continued to mindlessly tear at the pillar, grunting in concentration with her eyes black with magic. "You don't care, do you? Just a beast with power, so much delicious power." Focusing her magic to a thin line, Nightmare lashed at the enraged unicorn, watching as she reflexively deflected the attack and struck back, being blasted into her immaterial form again. With a shudder of pure joy, the Nightmare flowed across the room and reformed, exalting in the limitless hatred and anger her prey continued to pour into her magic as Monster struck again and again at her elusive foe.

[i]Yes. More! Oh, yes. Soon. [/i]

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"The Great and Powerful Trixie would like to ap—" A sudden coughing spasm swept over Trixie as she trotted next to Fluttershy. They trotted up the path for a while before she tried again. "I'm sorry."

"It's all right," said Fluttershy softly.

"No, I mean... You've been nothing but kind to me, and I yelled at you."

"You yell at everypony," said Fluttershy. "But you didn't yell at me very loudly, if that makes you feel better."

"It was the tick. I've always hated ticks. And mosquitoes." A ripple traveled down Trixie's back as a shudder traveled from her nose to her tail.

"They're just misunderstood. They only want a little bitty bit of blood so they can have babies." A second larger ripple traveled down Trixie's cloak as she looked away. Fluttershy winced and tried to help. "I mean when I first found out about changelings tonight, I was so afraid."

"I'm not afraid! I'm just... I don't like them." Trixie pulled her hat lower and glanced back and forth, just in case there was a tick lurking in wait.

"After working with them in the hospital, I found out changelings are a lot like ponies. They get scared, and hurt, and—" Fluttershy lowered her voice and looked out into the woods "—nervous just like us. They need love so they can have little ones just like ticks and mosquitoes."

"Ick!" Trixie waved a hoof like she was chasing away a mosquito. "No more bug talk! If you want to talk about something, talk about Nightmare Moon. At least she's not some icky bug trying to suck all of the..." She hesitated a moment, her eyes whirling with ideas, then broke into a gallop until she caught up with Pinkie Pie who was scouting ahead for dropped candy from the children. "Pinkie! Did you see exactly how Nightmare Moon reacted when the changelings attacked her at the town hall? I was busy and missed it."

"Yepperaroni. She made this awful face like when somepony finds spinach in their cake frosting, just like this!"

Trixie almost tripped as she winced away from the pink party pony's 'disgusted face,' before breaking into a gallop up the hill. "Come on! If I'm right, I know why Celestia didn't fight Nightmare Moon and why we need to stop Twilight Sparkle before she makes matters worse!"

The world seemed to flare with purple light as a ball of perfect violet illuminated the woods, blinding the group and bringing them to a halt.

After the sound of blinded pegasus hitting tree had quit, Rainbow Dash quite calmly spoke from somewhere above their heads. "How much worse?" The peal of rumbling thunder that followed gave an ominous air to the pegasus prying herself loose from the tree and landing, as the moonlit trees around them rustled and thrashed in the darkness.

"Explain yourself, and make haste please. We should not rest long beneath these trees."

“Talk while we’re moving, Zecora,” said Trixie, shaking her head and trotting up the path again while blinking furiously. “We need to get the kids to Twilight Sparkle [i]right now![/i] It’s in that book I stole... borrowed from Celestia’s library. There’s a line, [i]‘the bitterness in the young one’s heart had transformed her into a wicked mare of darkness.’[/i] When Fluttershy told me about ticks, I thought: What if Nightmare Moon was a kind of changeling tick, only instead of devouring positive emotions like love, she devours dark negative emotions like hate and resentment.” Another peal of thunder rolled through the still air as Trixie shuddered at the thought of how much power had just been released by Twilight Sparkle. “Celestia wouldn’t fight her because that would only make the ‘tick’ stronger. Nightmare Moon [i]wanted[/i] Celestia to strike her, just like she wanted me to attack her in the town hall. Every blow she takes, every attack, every hateful emotion that she absorbs makes her more powerful.”

“Wait up a sec,” said Applejack, scowling as she trotted closer. “So why’re you wantin’ our little ones to fight Nightmare Moon with some weapon that’s missin’ a part?”

“Not fight. Don’t you see? The changelings are stuffed full of love, a positive emotion. When Nightmare Moon fought them, their positive emotions acted like a poison to the ‘tick’ Celestia’s sister has embedded in her mind.”

“That’s why the icky face!” chirped Pinkie Pie as she bounced along. “So if we throw her a party with balloons and cake and—”

“Not us. The prophecy said [i]‘When the five are present, a spark will cause the sixth Element to be revealed.’[/i] Celestia saw those five darling little disaster areas as the five: Kindness, Generosity, Loyalty, Laughter, and something else. The Elements of Harmony use [i]positive[/i] emotions, which is the only thing that will be able to defeat Nightmare Moon! Ha! I figured it out!” Trixie managed to dance a little jig while trotting with a huge grin.

“Oh no!” Coming from Fluttershy, the quite audible exclamation was as noticeable as a scream of terror from a normal pony. “You said Nightmare Moon was like a tick, but when a tick is all nice and full—” The shy pegasus swallowed nervously “—she lays eggs.”

The group of ponies halted their trot at the top of the hill, looking at the brilliant flashes of purple and indigo light that flared out of the distant ominous building. Dark clouds began to gather together above the ruins, swirling together as the stars began to vanish behind them.

Rainbow Dash bolted ahead of the group, calling back, “Come on, AJ. I see a bridge up here. Let me get the ropes tied off, and you all can cross.”

“Well, hurry up! It don’t look like nothing good’s happenin’ over there. Trixie, Zecora, are you two comin’ along or what?”

The disguised zebra had stopped cold in the middle of the well-trod path, setting her hooves

one after another against the firmly packed dirt she had walked across for the last decade. Trixie watched suspiciously before calling back. "You girls go ahead, we'll catch up. The freaky zebra is doing something, and I want to keep an eye on her." Lowering her voice, Trixie whispered over the sound of the growing storm, "Come on, you cranky old striped nag. This had better be important. If we don't get your crazy daughter and those five nutty kids to the Elements of Harmony, this whole place is going to be crawling with little bitty Nightmare Moons."

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[img]http://fc00.deviantart.net/fs71/i/2012/029/4/8/i_am_the_power_by_gardelius-d4nzi3s.png[/img]

[b][url=<http://gardelius.deviantart.com/art/I-am-the-Power-282153592>]I am the Power[/url][b] -
by [url=<http://gardelius.deviantart.com/>] Gardelius [/url]on Deviant Art.

-end Chapter 27 -

-Chapter 28 -

[center]The Monster in the Twilight

[color=Red]Shame[/color][b][center]

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It took very little effort for Scootaloo to see which building held her powerful friend. Driving to the flashes of light and rumbles of thunder, the scooter and wagon bucked as if she were traveling over a rutted road, but the rough surface only made her drive faster as not to drop into the bottom of the potholes. A few loose pebbles made her misjudge a braking curve at the stairs to the rumbling building, turning it into a breaking curve as a fragment of broken pavement caught a skidding rear wheel of the scooter and snapped it off with a terrible crunch. If the riders in the wagon had not already been diving off, the resulting crash would have been much more impressive, but as Scootaloo limped up to the massive doors, she was much more concerned about her friend than a mere twisted ankle and throbbing wings.

"Open up!" shouted Apple Bloom, hammering a forehoof against the thick doors, barely able to make a thudding noise. Behind the doors, she could hear Monster fighting the dark pony with hissing roars of magic and the occasional thunderous rumble that shook the ground.

"Time out!" shouted Featherweight, adding his hammering hooves to the din. "You've got to let me get pictures of Monster kicking your flank!"

"The magic's too thick," said Twist with a last tentative poke at the doors, having given up trying to slip her last emergency cinnamon stick under the door.

"They've just got to let us in! Monster needs our help!" whined Sweetie Belle. A noise like

sizzling lightning and a brilliant silver flash preceded the immediate descent of Tallgrass, who had been attempting to find a way in through an upper window. He staggered to his hooves among the little ponies and shook his head, the sweet smell of barbecue surrounding him.

“W-window’s are t-trapped,” he stammered. “More m-magic than I’ve ever seen.”

“I’m not giving up!” shouted Apple Bloom, turning around and bucking at the door with her hind legs. “Open. Up. You. Stupid. Door.” A thunderous crash shook the ground, tumbling all the little ponies off their hooves, and as they attempted to stand back up, the ground shook again, even stronger this time.

“That’s it,” snapped Tallgrass, grabbing the little ponies and shoving them away from the door. “It’s too dangerous here. You’ll all get killed, and it will be my fault.” Ignoring their screaming, he pushed the whole bunch down the steps towards the wagon, but paused when he reached the bottom. For a moment he did not even breathe, with his hooves buried in the grassy dirt that centuries of wind had blown throughout the ruins, then he spoke with a voice that sounded very little like his own.

[i]Flower, restrain your power!

Your hate she needs, upon which to feed.

The Elements of Harmony must be used to end the pain of the Princess confused.[/i]

Like it had been a thrown switch, the crashing of magic from inside the building stopped, leaving the five little ponies and one confused changeling standing out in the growing storm.

[center] * * * [/center]

Nightmare rejoiced in the strength that flowed through her body as the mindless monster poured delicious rage into her magic. Time after time, she was blown into her immaterial body by blasts of magic so powerful that she could barely absorb them before reforming to absorb another attack. This was [i]far[/i] better than anything Celestia had done during her attacks. No pitiful whining or begging came from the blazing unicorn, nearly invisible behind a sheen of coruscating magic and smoke. Instead there was only power, great galloping streams of it that brought her to heights of exhilaration and pleasure never felt before. Even the memories of the whiny princess did not hold sweet ecstasy in this quantity from pleasures of the mortal flesh. Nightmare luxuriated in the fire of pleasure that surged through every part of her mind in crashing waves of sensations, loosening the mental grip she had maintained for so many years.

Creating an opening.

With a whisper of movement deep in her mind, she reformed on the top step of the throne room and dropped her defensive spells. The Nightmare had only a moment of shock as her total control of the alicorn body vanished in a heartbeat, hearing a voice that had not spoken in a

thousand years suddenly scream out of her own throat.

“Kill me! Strike quickly, for I can not hold her long!”

The Nightmare stopped in stunned amazement, feeling the thud of her far too mortal heart driving blood through her soon to be vaporized veins. The meek little princess she had imprisoned in her mind could only restrain her magical ability for a few moments, but a single moment is all it would take for the insane unicorn to turn her mortal form into a smoking cinder, just as the Nightmare had wanted. She would finally be free of this mortal body, free to consume the hatred and fear she could feel in the burning unicorn who would be her next body.

It had to be a trap.

The Nightmare could suddenly see the subtle trail she had been led down by the imprisoned princess, the little hints, the impassioned lies. She lunged against the weak bonds thrown over her will as she scrambled for control of her body's magic. The alicorn princess fought viciously to retain her fragile hold, but she was weak, and as they fought for control of her horn, a single word rang out inside the empty throne room.

“No.”

It was a nasty snarl of a word, spoken by a voice that could easily have belonged to a beast crouched over a blood-drenched corpse with bits of fur and bones scattered in all directions. Monster panted for breath, and only spoke again after the blaze of magic around her faded to a dim glow and the fire burning in her mane and tail had smoldered to mere smoking embers.

“No. Not kill.”

Finally wrenching control of her magic back, the Nightmare lit her defensive spells and snarled in defiance, “Little princess, you shall pay for that. I know better now than to think you would release me to embrace another host willingly. What subtle plan did you conceal, what scheme did you concoct with this ignorant beast?”

“It was no scheme,” came the soft voice from her own throat. “You cannot leave my body because you are not separate from me. I made you.”

“What!” snarled Nightmare, tracing the tiny threads of the princess' mind back to the dark recesses where she had hid. “You lie! I am Nightmare Moon, Ruler of the Night. Little princess, you are the one who invited me into your heart in your lust for power and glory while you sulked in hatred of your dear sister. I gave you that power and more. How dare you call me some unhinged facet of your mind, some trinket you made from glue and glitter!”

More threads to dark, unexplored corners of her mind became visible as the Nightmare traced

them, feeling the last bits of the alicorn princess finally within her grasp as the whimpering princess continued to talk.

"I envied the love my sister's ponies had for her, while their disdain for my beloved sky infuriated me. I knew I could not change their hearts while their bodies remained the same, but I lacked the power to transform them without assistance. Celestia would never agree to my foolish plan, so I used the Element of Magic to first transform myself into a more powerful form. I created you from all of my hatred and fury, all the dark emotions that ruled my heart on that dreadful night. I thought I could be stronger than my weaknesses."

The Nightmare paused to gloat, feeling the last threads of Luna in her mind. "I am not a weakness. I am the unlimited power of the cosmos! It was I who created the three pony races of the Night, it was I who held the moon against the assault of Celestia. It is I who caused her to flee in terror—"

"Liar." The unicorn glared at Nightmare Moon with bloodshot eyes that seemed unwilling to both focus on the same target. She was swaying back and forth, and patches of scarred skin were visible where her fuzzy coat had burned away, but she radiated a deep strength from where all four hooves were firmly planted against the stone floor of the palace throne room. The faint threads of Luna vanished as the little princess once again retreated, and the Nightmare fumed in rage at the loss.

"YOU!" A lash of indigo fury slashed out at the burnt purple unicorn as the Nightmare struck out, becoming more angry as Monster merely parried the blow and remained standing. Nightmare Moon stared in disbelief at her smoldering foe in realization of the power that was suddenly missing.

"Where is the anger you hold in your heart? Where is the fear?!"

"Celestia did not fear," growled Monster, panting for breath. "She fled so she would not fight you. Luna."

"There is no Luna!" screeched Nightmare Moon, blasting out with such force that the unicorn flew backwards and rebounded off the far wall even after blocking most of the spell. "I have destroyed the pathetic worm you call Luna. Fear your destruction at my hooves! Fear Nightmare Moon!" With each word, Nightmare lashed out again and again at the unicorn, battering her around the room like a toy. The last indigo stroke of magic flung Monster into a pillar with a wet snapping noise, and the unicorn staggered to her hooves only slowly, with one back leg limp.

"Luna," said Monster defiantly, as the last of her defensive spells fizzled out in a trail of sparks.

With a shriek of rage, Nightmare gathered her power in a blast that would scatter the arrogant

upstart around the room in a thin mist, only to continue to hold it in a crackling indigo sphere as a much better idea occurred to her.

“Yes. You shall know what it truly means to hold power. There is so much rage you try to hide within you, so much potential for destruction. All it needs is a little... guidance.”

“No,” whimpered Monster, backing up with an agonized hop as her leg tried to collapse under her.

“Yes.” Nightmare Moon smiled, a glittering line of sharp white teeth in the dim room as she walked forward.

[center] * * * [/center]

“Reference Guide?” snapped Tallgrass, flipping through the book in a panic. “Where in Tartarus are the [i]instructions[/i]? Just stupid poems and pretty pictures. It should have at least something that says, ‘This end towards enemy’ or ‘Press here to fire.’” The picture isn’t even labelled!”

“It’s awful quiet in there,” whispered Apple Bloom, as the rest of the Cutie Mark Crusaders gathered together.

“Too quiet,” said Sweetie Bell, with a nervous glance over her shoulder at the still-glowing doors.

“Aww. Monster kicked her flank and I didn’t get any pictures,” complained Featherweight. “I could have blown them up to full size and stuck captions like ‘Bam’ and ‘Pow!’ over them. Or a sign: You must be at least this tall to have your flank kicked by Monster!”

“I don’t think thee won,” mumbled Twist through the bandage she was trying to wrap around Scootaloo’s ankle. “I hope they’re not hurt.”

“Of course she won,” scoffed Scootaloo, her energetic posturing making it more difficult for Twist to wrap her ankle. “She’s [i]almost[/i] as cool as Rainbow Dash. I bet she’s just—”

Scootaloo’s face fell as a piercing scream echoed out of the building, a tearing wail of pure agony that rose and fell as the screamer gasped for breath, and then screamed again.

“Monster!” screeched Apple Bloom, flinging herself up the stairs and against the magically-locked doors again. “Tallgrass, help! Can’t you blast the door down or something! She’s hurting!”

“I only have two spells,” snapped Tallgrass, staring helplessly at the locked doors. A third gurgling scream made him hesitate, the useless book still open in front of him. With a series of

muttered frantic curses, he slammed the book shut and shoved it into Scootaloo's surprised grip. "Buck it, buck it, BUCK IT!" he muttered as yet another shriek filled the air.

Green magic flared into life around the changeling, lighting up the doorway as a much larger shape took form, a regal white alicorn with golden shoes, crown, and peytral. Looking down at the little ponies, she smiled, trying not to flinch as another scream echoed. "I need all of you to stay far away from the door right now. When it opens, you need to run inside and grab for the Elements of Harmony. Can I trust you to follow my directions?"

"Yes, Princess," chimed the Cutie Mark Crusaders, although with confused looks.

"Good. Now move." 'Celestia' spit a green glob of substance onto the middle of the offending doors before spreading her great white wings and rocketing up into the stormy sky in a blur of white.

[center] * * * [/center]

"No!" gasped Zecora, pulling her disguised hooves out of the dirt she had so carefully twisted them into. "Go!" she shouted, bolting for the swinging rope bridge with Trixie running along side.

"First stop, now go!" snapped Trixie. "Make up your pink mind!"

"My Flower faces a terrible fate. If we do not run, we will be late!"

Zecora gasped out her words as if she were exhausted, pausing to catch her breath at the bridge abutment as Trixie galloped past, slowing to a fairly-fast walk across the rope bridge. "Hurry up, Stripes. Ohhhh, ponyfeathers!" A blue aura wrapped around the panting disguised zebra, and she floated across the chasm as Trixie began to run again.

"Thank you Trixie, for what I did see took much from me."

"Shutup! You get to carry me after I collapse." A blur of rainbow color followed Rainbow Dash as she swooped down to effortlessly fly alongside Trixie.

"Pinkie says the kids are off this way. We followed Scoot's wheel marks and — what the hay?" Rainbow Dash's eyes turned upwards to watch a huge white alicorn fairly flash up into the sky, entering the swirling storm clouds and beginning to fly in circles. "Cool."

Leaping up to grab Rainbow Dash's tail in her teeth, Trixie resumed her gallop through the spooky ruins only with two ponies in tow while headed in the direction of the faint screaming. "She's not... I don't think that's Princess Celestia," said Rainbow Dash while being towed along backwards.

“Really!” scoffed Trixie through a mouthful of tail.

“Yeah, the Princess wouldn’t be dumb enough to — wait a minute. Yes! She’s going to do it! I’ve never seen one attempted before, but if anypony can do it, the Princess can.”

“What trick does she attempt that Trixie views with such contempt?”

“It’s probably my idiotic changeling guard,” snarled Trixie as she emerged from behind a fallen stone to see a tiny cluster of multicolored ponies huddled up against a nearby building, the sounds of screaming somewhere echoing around the courtyard. “There’s the kids, and there’s no sign of—”

“There she goes!” Rainbow Dash flew up to get a better look, and Trixie let go before she got too high, dropping the disguised zebra at the same time. High above, the snow-white form of Princess Celestia was tucked up into a power dive, head forward with both forehooves forming a growing shock cone. “She built up a powerful negative charge up in the clouds, and when she touches ground, POW!”

“Pow?” asked Trixie, trying to judge the impact point of the falling alicorn, and coming up with an answer far too close to the little ponies.

“She’s not slowing down,” said Rainbow with a nervous glance back and forth between the door and the alicorn. “She’ll track all the lightning from the storm behind her if she doesn’t—”

“Down!” screamed Trixie, reaching up with her magic and dragging the multicolored pegasus behind a stone block just as the disguised changeling struck the doors in a blaze of green magic and a huge lightning bolt.

[center] * * * [/center]

“This is crazy! This is stupid!” muttered Tallgrass as he circled inside the storm, feeling the electric charge build up in his white coat to agonizing levels. Electricity cascaded across his body in a crackling sheet that blinded him to the outside world, but the blob of saliva attached to the door was part of [i]his[/i] magic, and once he had accumulated what seemed to be every spark in the cloud, he tucked his wings in and aimed for the one fuzzy green blotch he could still see with his horn. He had never held a form this large or this powerful before, and as much as the ramming wave of air that built up in front of him frightened the stones out of him, the feeling of the entire storm system firing a lightning bolt up his rear frightened him more and encouraged him to greater speed. It was impossible to measure ranges at this velocity, and he nearly did not get his shield spell up in time, striking the door in a blaze of green fire at almost the exact same instant the heavens smote down the ionized trail he had left.

He was unaware of the fate of the doors, blasting through the doorway in a panicked flailing of

limbs, rebounding off the slippery floor twice before skidding on his hooves in a long slide that rotated him once all the way around, winding up standing in front of a towering dark alicorn nearly the same height as his present form and nearly as surprised.

“Um. Hi?”

-end Chapter 28 -

-Chapter 29 -

[center]The Monster in the Twilight

[color=Purple]Magic[/color][[/center]

[hr]

“Cutie Mark Crusaders Rescue Team!”

Five energetic little ponies bounded through the shattered doors, flattening to the ground as a blackened form wreathed in green magic flew backwards above them, passing out the open doorway with a mingled yelp of pain and terror. Apple Bloom was the first to spring back up, darting across the floor to where a battered Monster lay in the midst of five large spherical stones.

“Monster! What did she do to you?”

Despite having one eye swollen closed and a trickle of blood dripping down her face, Monster smiled at the little filly. “**Loyalty**,” she croaked, sweeping away a building tear with one dirty purple hoof.

“How touching,” purred Nightmare Moon, moving close to the little ponies clustered around their wounded friend. Behind them, the shattered remnants of the door pulled themselves together in indigo magic and sealed the portal closed just as flawlessly as it had been before Tallgrass had smashed it open. “If you somehow meant to make these little foals bear the Elements of Harmony, you must have been hopelessly insane.”

“Quick! Scootaloo!” squealed Sweetie Belle as she pointed to a symbol on one of the large smooth stones next to Monster. “The book! Get the book!”

“Right!” shouted the little pegasus filly, grabbing [i]The Elements of Harmony - A Reference Guide[/i] and flinging it right into Nightmare Moon’s face.

“**Generosity**,” sighed Monster, trying not to facehoof at Scootaloo’s look of shocked realization.

Nightmare Moon snarled as she shook her horn, the book fluttering helplessly on it for a few moments until it burst into flaming sparks. “Why you little—”

“Smile!”

[size=18][b]-*FLASH*-[/b][[/size]

“Arrrgh!” Nightmare Moon stumbled away, firing a bolt of magic at random that reflected off the floor, wall, and ceiling, before striking her in the flank.

“**Laughter**,” snickered Monster as the rest of the little ponies laughed.

“We aren’t afraid of you, Nightmare Moon,” declared Sweetie Belle, standing in front of Monster with her head held high. “Well, not a lot. Maybe just a little.”

“Where is your fear?” snarled Nightmare Moon, stalking closer. “Why do you not fear me?”

“We ride in Scootaloo’s wagon! It takes a lot to scare us.”

“**Honesty**,” said Monster, struggling to get up on her hooves.

Twist looked at her bloody hind leg and gasped. “Thop it you two! Thees hurt! Let me get my bandageh.”

“**Kindness**,” said Monster with an affectionate nuzzle for the little filly, who had started crying.

Nightmare Moon stumbled back, her eyes wide with fear as her voice rose into a terrified screech. “No! This cannot be! You don’t have the last Element! You’re just a mindless beast from the forest!”

The dark alicorn looked frantically around the room as a low hum began to grow around the stones, suddenly turning to the scarred unicorn and lowering her horn. “Die!”

A blast of ebon power burst from Nightmare Moon’s horn and swept over the six

friends, bursting into scintillating fragments as a sphere of deepest purple surrounded them. Five little popping noises sounded as the stone spheres ruptured, and brilliant motes of dust began to circle the little ponies. Monster stood proudly in the middle, her eyes white with power and her horn glowing as bright as the sun. Nightmare Moon stumbled backwards, trying to shade her eyes as the scarred unicorn spoke.

“My name,” she said, lifting her head and horn proudly while rainbow light filled the room, “is Twilight Sparkle. And you will not harm my friends!”

[center] * * * [/center]

An explosion of indigo and green fire propelled the screaming changeling out of the shattered doorway, his flailing limbs wreathed in green fire as he bounced along the rubble that filled the courtyard until he came to rest inside a smoldering brush pile. Trixie hastened her gallop as the fragments of the door began to knit themselves together, ducking as Rainbow Dash zipped out in front above her. By the time the pegasus had reached the doorway, the doors had twisted back into shape just as solidly as before if the noise Rainbow Dash made when she bounced off them was any indication.

As Trixie galloped past the changeling’s impact point, she spared the time for a quick glance, feeling oddly relieved that the creature was struggling in the thorny branches instead of being reduced to a messy green stain. It would have taken valuable breath she could not spare to gasp out a quick, “Thank you!” but she grabbed him in her magic and towed him along behind anyway. Other colorful ponies were galloping along with her, but she slowed at the steps as Rainbow Dash beat futilely against the rebuilt doors.

“Stupid. Doors!” gasped Trixie, heaving for breath at the bottom of the stairs as the rest of the group gathered. “Stand back!” She lowered her horn and fired a blast at the massive doors, a weak popping noise no louder than a firecracker.

“That won’t get us nowhere!” shouted Applejack, turning around to buck viciously at the closed doors, joined by Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash.

“I have skill, not power!” snapped Trixie.

“Then save my Flower!” snapped back Zecora, looking a much paler pink as she gasped for air by her side.

“Stop it, you two!” shouted Applejack, hammering her hind hooves into the door again and again with no results. “If that thing feeds on hatred and bickering, the two of you’ll—”

Light seemed to fill the world, in hues and shades that no mortal light should ever be forced to take. Filtering out of the tall windows and through the cracks in the door, it illuminated the ponies in vibrant detail. Every shade of their coats flared into brilliant color, the cloudy sky above lit with chromatic glory momentarily as the clouds were blasted away, the ruins blazing with power and light.

And the pink alicorn illusion around Zecora began to dwindle and fade.

“No, don’t go!” screamed the zebra in pure panic as she ran to the door, only to collapse in tears as the rest of the pink vanished from her body. The suddenly plain-looking zebra remained slumped by the doors, tears pouring onto the dusty ground.

“What it is it?” asked Trixie in a panic, dashing up next to her and shoving at the stubborn door.

“My daughter draws her last bits of power, in this, her final hour.”

[center] * * * [/center]

The world was Light and Power and Pain.

Twilight Sparkle was frozen in agony, unable to breathe, unable to scream. Power pounded in on her fragile body from all around, even as the Light descended from the ceiling. Agony tore through every nerve as scar tissue hissed and boiled, burned out neurons rejoined, cells long dead sprang back to life.

[i]Too fast![/i]

Obedient to her will, the world slowed. Her hammering heartbeat turned into a sledgehammer of pain, screams of panic from her friends dopplering into low rumbles, the five streams of power converging into her being burning beyond anything she had experienced before. Power filled her heart, her soul, every single cell in her body and still more poured in. The Light twisted in her powerful grasp, settling down, getting closer and closer with each moment.

[i]Slower![/i]

Time staggered, stuttering and skipping in excruciating bursts until she focused her mind. The smashing impact of her heart slowed even more until each beat was a slow surge, a gentle wave of Pain. Light still drew near, but the Power rushed into it like lightning into a tall tree. She was a conduit, a moist circuit of delicate flesh and blood between the stroke of lightning and the earth. The Power flowed in and through and out into the Light without touching her flesh. It was pleasure greater than any she had ever experienced, even when she had been driven by her frail flesh to seek companionship. Even the Power she experienced when she touched the sun paled against this.

With this much Power, she could [i]make[/i] suns.

Nightmare Moon appeared only as a blur to her perceptions, a dark knot of Magic tied around frail threads, so few as to be nearly nonexistent. It would only take a thought, a mere twitch of the mind to tear that evil into pieces so small even it would be unable to reform, but at a loss of the trapped soul.

[i]Bring back my sister, Twilight Sparkle. I know you can.[/i]

Pain wracked her body again, drawing up the hatred and fear she had buried and causing the world to flicker and fade. There was something wrong, something she could not see. Her innermost instincts screamed against the idea as the approaching Light showed what was expected. The Power could be used to cleanse the soul of that Nightmare, but it would take every bit of Power she could draw. The five sources of Power sensed their need and grew, bringing the Light to a blinding brilliance that she fought. It was wrong. It was [b]wrong![/b]

And the Light touched her head, and she understood.

There was no Power in the Elements of Harmony. They drew their Power from their users.

Five little ponies, her friends, twisted in pain as their Elements drew Power from deep within their souls. They were too small to power the Elements, too young, too weak. Luna could be cleansed of her taint and saved, but only at the cost of five precious lives.

[i]No![/i]

She fought with the Light, struggling against it as the Power grew. It fought back, wanting to only be used, not caring what the costs would become. Power had no friends, it existed only to be used, and it drew more Power from her friends every timeless instant she struggled. Soon it would be too late. Her friends would die.

[color=silver]Kill me, Twilight Sparkle. Save thy friends.[/color]

[i]No.[/i]

The spell-fed knot of Power in the alicorn twisted in her vision, feeding on the hatred and fears inside its host body. It was created from hatred and anger incarnate, living on the dark emotions and wanting only destruction. The Light clung tightly to her head now, pressing down as if to say it would not yield until this fragment of Disharmony was gone, even if it meant the death of her friends. She could feel the first faltering of energy from her friends, a green twitch in the network of Power that engulfed her in agonizing potential. There was no time left.

Twilight Sparkle faced the Light, drawing on her every fragment of will. The roar of power from the other Elements stopped, then ran backwards as she poured power back into their faltering bodies. With a tiny flicker of movement, her body appeared a few yards closer to the Nightmare even as she shoved the unconscious bodies of her friends backwards to be out of danger. The Light guttered as it ceased to draw Power from the little ponies, leaving far too little Power to destroy the Nightmare and her host body.

Twilight did not care. She had different intentions.

Power flared again in the Light, driven by Twilight as she poured her own Magic into the ancient device. Rage and fear powered the sphere of energy that surrounded the two combatants, silver and invulnerable, as the panicked Nightmare rapidly found out. She flung herself against the surface of their prison as Twilight glowed like the sun, forming a second smaller sphere in the center. Slowly the center sphere grew in size and brilliance, pulling at the forms of the two trapped ponies.

“No!” screamed Nightmare Moon. “What are you doing?”

[color=silver]She is creating a place where hatred and fear can not exist.[/color]

“You will die with us!” snarled the dark alicorn, unleashing a blast of power against Twilight that curved even as she fired and vanished into the growing center sphere

without a sound.

[color=silver]She knows.[/color]

With a wordless snarl, the dark alicorn lunged at Twilight before being caught in the same unseen tug, and struggled against its power as the portions of her body closest to the center faded. The center sphere continued to expand in an inexorable fashion, soon to be as large as the outer sphere, even as Twilight began to fade also.

All of her Anger had long since been poured into the Light that crowned her head, as had every scrap of Fear and Shame, and Worry. Now it seemed as if the last bits of her soul streamed into the Light, her memories of home and the terrible falling sun in the sky vanished first, and her friends, and finally the memories of a black and white striped mare pulling her burned body out from under a bush.

“Goodbye, mom.”

As the last bits of her mind flowed through the Element of Magic, Twilight could only see the Light.

And it was good.

[center] * * * [/center]

When the adult ponies broke into the room, there was no sign of Nightmare Moon or Monster, just five unconscious children around a golden diadem that sat alone on the floor.

And a huge ball of incandescent light suspended motionless in the middle of the room.

Shrinking.

.author's note

There is fanart for this chapter, from

[url=[http://fcoo.deviantart.net/fs71/i/2013/072/6/7/commision edited 1 by dessert711-d5xy9eo.png](http://fcoo.deviantart.net/fs71/i/2013/072/6/7/commision+edited+1+by+dessert711-d5xy9eo.png)] FCoo [/url] at Deviantart

-end Chapter 29 -

-Chapter 30 -

[center]The Monster in the Twilight

[color=Purple]Void[/color][[/center]

[hr]

The cascade of ponies into the ancient throne room divided almost instantly into five adults who headed directly to five unconscious young ponies, picking them up and holding them in single-minded concern. They were almost unaware of the smoke that wafted throughout the battered room, or the huge softly-glowing golden ball of light in the center. Following them, Trixie walked side-by-side with Zecora in stunned disbelief, approaching the glowing sphere and gently laying a hoof on it.

“It’s almost cold, like running water,” said Trixie, looking up while running a hoof across the perfect surface reflecting her own face like a funhouse mirror.

“You speak of the tomb of my daughter,” said Zecora, resting her hoof almost reverently besides Trixie’s before leaning forward with a solid thump, striking her head. “A place with no fear, no anger and no hate. So this was the ending of my daughter’s sad fate.” The faint dripping of tears on the floor were almost lost in the quiet voices of the children waking up behind them, and Trixie moved her hoof to rest next on top of the distraught zebra’s with a reassuring pat.

“I’m sorry, but there’s nothing I can do. I’ve seen this dimensional distortion spell before at one of the young spellcaster’s demonstrations they held for applicants into Celestia’s School for Gifted Unicorns. It took seven teachers to set up the spell and Princess Celestia to provide power, but in the end they created a tiny little universe about the size of a bit coin that lasted about a minute. Celestia said that with enough power, we could create an entire world made just the way we wanted.”

“Your Elements have taken both Nightmare and daughter, to a world which has neither wind, earth, or water. An ending of life for powers unspoken. Equestria is saved, but...”

Zecora slumped against the golden sphere, her tears flowing unchecked as Tallgrass moved up behind her and rested a chitinous hoof on her shoulder.

“Your heart is broken,” he completed. Zecora nodded, her tears continuing to flow along the unmarred surface of the shrinking golden sphere.

Trixie tapped the sphere, making only the small click of a hoof meeting an immobile object. “Princess Celestia said her little demonstration universe was made out of cake. There was no way to be sure because the portal they were pushing power through was about the size of a pinprick. To make it this large and without any portal to the outside world...”

She bent over and picked up the golden tiara cautiously, turning it over in her hooves. “Sparkle must have used the Element of Magic to create it around the both of them so Nightmare Moon could not escape. But how did this get outside? It can’t have just fallen out; the universe inside could be thousands of miles across, and the spell interface is impregnable.”

“I’m not pulling the stunt I did on the door again,” growled Tallgrass, holding a hoof to his head. “I think it knocked my horn loose.”

“Be quiet, you silly goose,” hissed Zecora, her tears suddenly gone. The zebra moved her cheek along the golden sphere with intense concentration as if she were listening to something inside.

Trixie stared at the zebra in disbelief. “You can not [i]possibly[/i] hear anything in there. That’s not a real object, it’s a theoretical interface where the laws of this universe and that universe are separated from each other by a metaphysical boundary layer of disjunct magical waveforms making a standing interference pattern that drains the universe inside of power until the symmetrical magic balance is drained below a certain threshold, and the field collapses. Um. Well, that’s what one of the instructors said. It’s completely impervious to any damage, because to this universe, it really isn’t there.”

Trixie reached out with the Element of Magic and tapped rather firmly on the glowing sphere. “See, not even—”

[center] ~~~~*~*~*~[/center]

Twilight Sparkle floated in the Light.

For once in her life, there was no pain, no fear, no anger. Instead, all around her was the brilliant light of joy, fading out in the distance in all directions. She had no eyes with which to see, but she still saw herself as a cloud of faintly violet particles, a fog of glowing dust, swirling and blowing on invisible currents. The flow of energy around her substituted for breathing, an invigorating touch rippling across her body like a spring breeze.

A soft golden light surrounded her, emanating from a similar fog of yellow particles. Bit by bit, they separated from her own glowing form, coalescing into a small sphere of light that spun around in the air and danced for joy. She could ‘hear’ it sing and giggle as it floated around, expressing its pleasure in a childish song of freedom and flight.

To one side was a larger cloud of darkness, twitching and spasming in the light as dark particles flew away, fading into the distance with a sizzle. Beneath the boiling pile, a slightly lighter color of particle began to take shape. Somewhat similar to her own shape, it simply lay inertly on the ground as if it were dead, even though Twilight could see the low throb of indigo light coursing through its indistinct form. Finally, the last bits of darkness boiled off, vanishing into the Light as

if the darkness had never existed, and Twilight drew herself together as the magnitude of her error became apparent.

“Luna?”

Indigo light surged weakly, and the cloud of glowing dust drew together as if in pain. “We are injured, Twilight Sparkle, but we live. Thank you.”

“I’m sorry,” moaned Twilight, moving closer to the unmoving ball of indigo sparkles while the golden light danced and played above. “I failed.”

The indigo particles stirred, forming a pseudopod that gently brushed the surface of Twilight’s transformed body. “You freed me from my own folly, Twilight Sparkle. Do not despair at our circumstance.”

“It’s hopeless. We’re trapped.”

“Where there is life, there is always hope, young one.” The dark sparkles rose up, forming into the fuzzy outline of a proud alicorn. “Arise, Twilight Sparkle. Arise and greet thy companion.”

It took several tries for Twilight to gather her body together, forming a strangely lumpy unicorn body from the translucent sparkles of light available, but eventually she stood beside the transformed Luna, looking at the golden light flying above them.

“My sister’s sun is filled with such as those, immature creatures of immense power. Celestia was blinded to its kind, having spent far too much time looking at its brethren to recognize it, but I who lived in the darkness hath reflected its kind of brilliance for far too long not to see the child for what he is.” Luna extended a hazy foreleg, which the ball of light promptly hovered over with what could only be described as a dance of overwhelming joy.

“H-hello, little one.” Twilight tried to extend a leg to touch the creature, only to have her body waver and distort with the effort. “I-I’m sorry for trapping you in here with us.”

Luna looked around the limitless glowing area with a sense of calm contentment, breaking into a sigh as she caressed the ball of golden light. “Child, your skill at your craft is without equal. I see no weakness or flaw in your construction. Still, I thank you for granting me these few minutes of freedom before we pass forever. You did what you needed to do, and there can be no greater praise.”

Twilight made no sign that she heard, only curling up into a tight ball of faded purple particles and damping her glow, leaving Luna to look into the distance and consider the slow vanishing of the horizon. Finally, she laid down beside the tightly-compacted ball of violet particles and extended a ‘wing’ over her. “Twilight Sparkle, if I have only one regret, it is that you are forced

to pay for my misdeeds. Please forgive me.”

The ball of violet particles shuddered, and a quiet voice asked, “What about your sister?”

Luna winced as she looked away from Twilight. “What I did to her cannot be forgiven.”

“No.” The ball of violet particles shifted, and the body of a warped and scarred unicorn slowly coalesced out of the fog. “I hurt her too, and tried to kill her ponies. She not only forgave me, but she sent me to save you. If she were here now, what would you say to her?”

“I would say,” said Luna, her body becoming misty and indistinct, “I’m sorry, Tia. Goodbye.”

“Tia!” chimed the floating ball of light, lifting from Luna’s foreleg to zip rapidly around them. “Tia! Tia!” Putting on a burst of speed, the ball of golden light streaked off into the distance, becoming lost to the surrounding light of the pocket universe in moments and leaving Luna and Twilight Sparkle to stare in bewilderment. There was a brilliant flare nearly lost in the surrounding light, and a tiny patch of darkness became visible in the distance, far, far away.

[center] ~~~~*~*~*~~~[/center]

Trixie lay flat on the dusty floor of the ancient throne room, looking at the razor-sharp hole in the golden sphere that light poured out of like a blazing torch. A matching hole had been punched through the eastern wall of the room behind her, still glowing white-hot with the passage of whatever came flashing out of the sphere. With a yelp of agony, she tore the hat off her head, dropping it to the floor and stomping the flames that surrounded a crisp circular hole in the fabric until the fire went out, and she panted in reflexive panic.

Looking up, Trixie saw everypony in the room staring at her, and she scowled in return. “Don’t tell me Sparkle didn’t aim — Ow! Ow! Ow!” She glared at Tallgrass, who quit smacking her over the head and glared back just as hard.

“Next time your mane is on fire, I’m going to let it burn.”

“Oh.” She barely spared a touch of one hoof to her ravaged mane before moving to inspect the rift in the glowing sphere, which had shrunk down to the point she could see over it now. “It’s fading fast now that it has a hole in it.” With a glance at the zebra still holding her face to the side of the sphere, Trixie added, “Do you hear Sparkle in there anywhere?”

“I fear she is lost and wanders in vain. When the hole closes, there she will remain.”

“Come on, Sparkle,” muttered Trixie, turning the golden tiara around in her hooves nervously while watching the sphere shrink. “You punched a hole, now get out of there.” She moved closer to Zecora as the golden sphere continued to shrink, blinking away a few tears of her own

as they stood and waited.

Time passed in infinite slowness, until Zecora spoke abruptly with a puzzled tone. “Now I can feel her approaching, for I am her mother. She walks not alone, she is helped by... another?”

“Nightmare Moon?”

“No, I do not think so. But their pace is too slow, I fear for their fate. By the time they arrive, it will be far too late.”

“Like Tartarus it will,” growled Trixie. “Your daughter made this thing.” She jammed the tiara on her head in front of her horn and glared at the shrinking golden sphere. “Anything she can do, I can do better. Stand back.”

There was a shuffling of hooves in the room as the adult and young ponies backed up to the other side of the room. Zecora stood up next to Trixie, and after a moment of indecision, Tallgrass stepped up to her other side.

Trixie licked her lips and straightened the Element of Magic while regarding the shrinking sphere, now barely tall enough to reach her chest.

“Showtime.”

-End Chapter 30 -

-Chapter 31 -

[center]The Monster in the Twilight
[color=Orange]Sunrise[/color][[/center]
[hr]

In what had once been a universe of pure light, darkness now tinged parts of the sky, fuzzy blotches of nothingness that devoured the light in an inexorable progression. Soon there would be nothing but darkness, and the indistinct forms of Twilight and Luna dodged around the growing places where their world was returning to the magic from which it had been built. Without a stationary frame of reference, it was impossible to tell how fast the glowing forms of Twilight and Luna were moving, but it would have been plain to see for any observer that one was lagging behind the other.

“It is too far.” Twilight’s voice was weak, and barely carried to the star-filled alicorn form who stayed at her side. The glowing ball of purple sparks faltered in her pursuit, falling behind momentarily until the ethereal form of Luna slowed to match her speed.

“Do not lose hope, Twilight Sparkle.”

The violet light that flickered in the weak ball of particles dimmed, and the progress of the two trapped ponies slowed yet again as they skirted another growing blotch of darkness that was consuming their vanishing world. A ragged wisp of purple ripped away into the coiling darkness as they passed, and she staggered in their flight with a soundless scream only for Luna to wrap around her in support as they flew onward.

“I am too weak.” Even in direct contact, Luna could barely hear her voice, and a ripple passed through her immaterial body as Twilight continued, “Leave me.”

“Never!”

“I can’t even see the way out any more. I’ll only slow you down.” More patches of darkness opened up as they flew together, a deadly maze that only grew more complex as they traveled. Still, Luna flew onward, dodging around the lethal hazards in pursuit of a target only she seemed able to sense.

“I shall not abandon thee, Twilight Sparkle, just as thy friends shall not abandon thee.”

“Or Celestia,” murmured Twilight, secure in Luna’s embrace. “She is loyal. She never gave up on you.” The flight of the celestial alicorn seemed to stutter for a brief moment as her starry wings caught on some unseen obstruction before she continued winging her way through the vanishing light. She flew in silence for a time, swooping between the growing patches of darkness as the world became gradually dimmer and her path grew random. The light was dwindling as her last night was about to fall, and Luna whispered as she flew with Twilight held close.

“Sister, I wish I could but see your light one more time.”

[center][img]<https://lh6.googleusercontent.com/-xd9b6Kw0R84/UeYX29RIEUI/AAAAAAAAAMA/2CtFKtySJrQ/w496-h104-no/horizon-w-bird-edited.jpg>[img]/[center]
[url=<http://godsgimp.deviantart.com/art/Red-Dawn-Wallpaper-161679046>]source[/url]

Celestia lay in an ocean of fire, her corporal form faded to mere outlines in the constant flow of the solar wind. The barrier that Nightmare Moon had placed around the sun was too strong, wrapped and bulwarked with every trick and flourish that Luna had ever known. Her heart had broken at the moment Luna had died, vanishing from her perception in the blink of an eye. Consumed by rage, she had thrown herself against the wards of her prison again and again until there was nothing left within her weakened body but sorrow. She would fade, her light becoming one with the carefree lights who flowed and danced on the ever present winds of the

sun. Where once there had been two sisters, there was now only one, and she could not live alone.

The purifying flames of the sun felt welcome in her chest, slowly turning her mortal form to nothingness, removing the pain and sorrow that had been trapped for so long. Pipping voices sounded around her, their unearthly language sounding almost comprehensible now that she neared the end. They almost sounded like—

“Tia!”

Celestia bolted upright. It was impossible. That was Luna’s voice.

“Tia! Tia!”

Swirls of the glowing wisps spun and danced in her direction, surrounding her in a dizzying blur of pure joy as one individual spark floated down in front of her face.

“Tia!”

There was the faintest tinge of violet to the glowing aura that surrounded the wisp as it spun and pranced in front of her with all the ecstasy of a foal finding its mother. Celestia felt her body grow firm again, pulling its mortal essence back to her familiar shape as the rest of the wisps danced around them, mirroring the movements of their dissimilar twin.

“H-have you seen Luna?” asked Celestia.

The wisp stopped dancing, holding itself almost rigidly solid against the solar wind, and a voice emerged from it that she had given up hope of ever hearing again.

“I’m sorry, Tia. Goodbye.”

A jolt passed through Celestia as she stumbled, then flung herself up into the sky in a blaze of fire. Power shimmered in her wake, drawn from the substance of the sun in reckless disregard for anything but speed. Rising higher and faster than she had ever traveled, she could feel her body gather the power, concentrating with one thought, one goal.

Until she struck the wards.

Felt them bend with a crackle of dark fire against her mortal shell.

The popping of spells fracturing.

And she was flung back.

Dark fire danced across Celestia's skin as she spun down into the blazing sun, her body weakly twitching even as she cast a despairing look at her beloved Equestria still out of reach.

"I'm sorry, Luna."

"Tia!" Wisps streamed around her falling body, extinguishing the ebon flames that left dark traces on her shining coat. Power coursed into her again as the wisps bore her up, surrounding her with their bodies until she once again struck the wards.

And shattered them like glass.

"Tia! Fly!" shouted the wisps, scattering in her wake as Celestia took wing, streaking through the sky on her way to Equestria and the tiny trace of her sister she could sense. A trace that was fading far faster than she could fly.

She was going to be too late.

[center][img]https://lh6.googleusercontent.com/-kNlxvs3UNW8/UeYX2zHcmzI/AAAAAAAAAME/1ReFjvpzmas/w599-h129-no/horizon-smaller.jpg[/img]/center]

The spluttering roar and crackle of vast power being unleashed echoed around the ancient throne room, spraying sparks and threads of fire from the Element of Magic that burned pits and charred lines on the blackened coats of the three ponies standing by the shrinking sphere. Tallgrass winced at each spark that landed on his chitinous back while Zecora simply stood perfectly immobile as if the smoldering spots were inconsequential, but Trixie was getting the worst end of the backlash. Only the smoldering cape across her back had managed to protect her from actually catching on fire, but nearly all of her wispy mane had been burned to smoking stubs, and the unmistakable stench of burning hair made her voice rasp as she growled curses and maledictions against the quivering golden circlet on her brow. The shrinking of the golden sphere continued, although possibly slower now, but it had nearly reduced its diameter to a few hooves across and the light that coursed out of the hole in it only flickered and strobed, never stopping even for a moment.

Twist nuzzled up to Fluttershy's neck and whispered into her ear, "Do you think Trixie can thave Monthter?"

Keeping a stone pillar between herself and the spluttering magical sparks, Fluttershy shook her head and nuzzled Twist in return. Each adult pony had brought one of the little ones behind cover when Trixie had started her seemingly-futile attempt to control the shrinking golden sphere with magic and profanity, but in the chaotic confusion, they each had wound up with a

little golden-necklaced pony different than they expected. Rarity wound Scootaloo's injured ankle in an improvised bandage, while Applejack stroked the mane of a crying Sweetie Belle, talking to her in a low voice about the pain of loss. Apple Bloom fought with Rainbow Dash, who was keeping her from running back out to where the swearing unicorn struggled with her difficult task by holding the little earth pony suspended over the ground and unable to gain traction. It was a heart-rending huddle of miserable ponies who held themselves together for mutual support, although Rarity did try to keep Scootaloo's ears covered whenever Trixie hit a particularly virulent series of swear words.

The roar of erratic magic dwindled as Trixie finally shouted, "I can't do it!"

"No!" screamed Scootaloo, jumping away from Rarity's tearful bandaging and dodging her way over to the smoldering unicorn. "You just gotta do it! You just need to try harder!"

The clatter of many little hooves promptly followed the little pegasus, perhaps a herding instinct from her friends being behind her in the wagon for so many stressful times. They all clustered around Trixie, leaning against her and crying almost incomprehensibly about their lost friend. The adults hurried up, first attempting to pull the little ponies to a safe distance, but pausing at their looks of anguish.

"I'm sorry, but I can't," moaned Trixie, reaching up to remove the Element of Magic. "I failed." Her hoof encountered another as she touched the tiara, holding her firmly as Zecora turned on Trixie with a soft voice that felt eerie in the echoing room.

"Who are you?"

"You daft old bat," snapped Trixie, trying to move her hoof to remove the tiara but remaining trapped. "I'm a failure! Just let me go!"

"What about Monster?" sobbed Apple Bloom.

"I don't care about..."

Trixie trailed off, looking at the concentrated gaze of every pony in the room, both large and small. The glitter of gold and jewels of the Elements of Harmony around the necks of the little ones ripped at her heart with agonizing jealousy. Twilight Sparkle had been a destructive monster, but she had been able to attract not just one, but five little friends to use the ancient weapon. The tiara that Trixie now bore on her own head knew she was not worthy of their trust, and would not even try to join with the rest of the golden parts. It fought her at every turn, and even though Sparkle had been able to use it alone, that success was going to be the death of the insane purple mare in just a few minutes.

"I don't... I'm not strong enough."

"But you're the Great and Powerful Trixie," sobbed Twist.

"Yeah, you can do anything!" said Scootaloo. "Except fly."

"And out-drink Big Mac," added Pinkie Pie.

"You are an extraordinary talent," said Rarity tearfully, with a gentle pat to the remains of Trixie's smoldering cloak to put out a persistent ember. "With depths we never realized before."

"Yeah!" said Rainbow Dash with a punch of one hoof. "You made Nightmare Moon blow up the whole Town Hall!"

"You think this is just a game?" snapped Trixie, pointing at the shrinking sphere. Zecora took the opportunity to tap her gently on the head, speaking even softer.

"This is no game. What is your name?"

"I am... Trixie?" she said, looking with confusion between Zecora and the shrinking sphere, only half the size it had been just a few minutes ago.

"Louder! And prouder!" said Zecora in a voice so soft as to be nearly inaudible.

"Don't give up," said Apple Bloom with a fierce nudge that was more like a head-but to the side of the hesitant unicorn.

"She ain't no quitter," said Applejack from the other side of Trixie with a similar nudge. "You whip this one and Big Mac will have to get in line to get out with ya."

"Yeah!" said Sweetie Belle, rearing up to put two hooves gently on her star-and-wand cutie mark and laying her head against the dirty sweat-smeared mare. "My sister says you're our rolling model. Do it for us!"

[i]Do it for you.[/i]

Trixie turned from her audience to once again face the rapidly-shrinking sphere. With a brief grunt, she leaned into her power again, focusing it through the rebellious Element of Magic with a soft hissing noise that splattered sparks around the golden sphere.

"You show 'em!" cheered Scootaloo.

"Yeah!" added Featherweight, touching his shutter to get a picture before resting a hoof on Trixie's side. "Kick its flank!"

“More, I implore.” The persistent voice of the zebra touched some deeply-buried reserve of anger in Trixie, and she poured the emotion into her spell.

“I am the Great and Powerful Trixie!” she rasped, wincing as her magic popped and snapped white sparks around the tourmaline gem in the Element, scattering more burning spots down her neck. The surrounding ponies all rested a hoof on her for support as Trixie poured more power into her spell, ignoring the flash and roar of feedback that shook the ancient walls.

“Who are you!”

Trixie braced her hooves, leaning into her magic with a snarl of frustration made manifest as the Element of Magic fought from side to side. The roar of magic doubled, and doubled again as her hooves skidded briefly backwards, knocked off-balance by the shaking ground but held firm by her friends. Sparks sprayed in a constant stream, deflected from the huddling ponies around her by a dim chromatic glow flickering from the golden necklaces around each of the young ponies. The light was too bright to look at now, a brilliant flare that seemed to penetrate the skin of each pony in the room and burn into their hearts.

“I am the Great and Powerful Trixie! Student to Princess Celestia, the Unconquered Sun!”

“Is this your fate?” shouted Zecora over the thunderous roar of magic. “To be too late?”

“No!” The incandescent stream of polychromatic fire pouring into the hole in the golden sphere clashed with the light bursting out, spitting and popping explosively in a cataclysmic tornado-like roar that shook the building and rained down small stones from the ceiling.

“What will ponies say you did today?”

Light had so flooded the room it was impossible to tell the exact location of anypony, a brilliance that seemed solid and just as immobilizing as molten glass. The zebra’s voice resonated through the room, bringing the spark of an unfamiliar feeling to Trixie’s chest as she realized just what was missing.

Relaxation swept across her in a wave as the roar of magic turned into a silent prismatic light, wrapping around the golden sphere and holding it perfectly still. In the quiet, only the sounds of breathing could be heard, and the peaceful voice of Trixie whispering.

“Not me. They will say [i]we[/i] saved your daughter.”

Time ceased to hold meaning in the ancient room. It could have been hours or only a few minutes until a thin stream of dust began to pour out of the sphere, sliding through the magic without resistance. It pooled on the stone floor, glittering in reflected light until the last particle

had escaped the imprisoning spell and the shape of a pony finished forming. Only then did the magic stop and the sphere dwindle out of existence.

The acrid smoke had vanished in the light breeze that blew through the shattered windows of the throne room, allowing the distant sounds of birdsong to echo through the ruins. Sunlight streamed through the castle windows, highlighting the ponies as they stood up from where they had fallen on the floor as if waking from a dream and sending brilliantly-lit motes of dust drifting through the air in a gentle dance of random winds.

In front of them all was a dark alicorn form, curled on the stone floor with wide turquoise eyes and panting rapidly as if she were frantic to feel air once again while terrified it might be taken away at any moment. The sunlight glittered in her star-swept mane, which swirled and coiled across the floor in an invisible wind, but all eyes in the room were focused on one of her wings.

Which was being held protectively over an unmoving small figure.

-end Chapter 31 -

-Chapter 32 -

[center]The Monster in the Twilight

[color=Orange]Resignation[/color][[/center]

[hr]

“Flower, is that you? Do my eyes see what is true?”

Zecora stumbled forward, falling to her knees in front of the dark alicorn laying on the floor. A single tear hesitated at her eye, finally falling to the dusty floor of the ancient throne room with an almost audible splash. The alicorn raised her protective wing slightly from over the small body, and a sudden gasp swept through the room.

“She’s gorgeous!”

“Look at her wings!”

“She has all of our colors.”

“Why, she’s an alicorn!”

“Rarity! She looks just like that time we did your laundry!”

A small alicorn filly lay motionless on the cold stone floor, her mane and coat a streaked explosion of colors that streamed from her nose all the way to her tail as if all the sun-drenched clouds of a vibrant sunset had been condensed together and formed into a tiny little pony. Bits of her mane glittered in the radiant sunbeam that slanted through the window, in a slow chromatic flow down her neck that shimmered and glowed even as the little filly raised one violet wing to shade her face and muttered, “Just five more minutes, Mom?”

“Monster!” Five little ponies flung themselves across the floor, piling into their friend in a joyous ball of happiness that drowned out all coherent speech in the room, to the point that even Princess Celestia appearing in a ball of light inside the throne room window a few moments later seemed anticlimactic. Rather than interrupt the ecstatic reunion, if possible, the adult ponies all quietly tip-hooved to the other side of the room where they would be able to hear each other. Celestia and Luna leaned against each other with fierce intensity, avoiding the same pony-pile that had overtaken Twilight Sparkle and her friends only by the discipline of their advanced ages, although it had been a close judgement call.

“Sister,” said Celestia, her eyes still closed as she returned to the hug she was sharing with Luna. “Can you ever forgive me for what I did?”

“No, big sister.” Luna clutched Celestia even tighter, tears finally beginning to pour down her cheeks. “The blame is entirely mine own. We shall not forgive you, for there is nothing to forgive. You did what had to be done to save our ponies from what I had become. I knew in my heart that you would find a way to save me from my folly, and reunite us the way we were supposed to be. Together.”

“It [i]is[/i] my fault, little sister. I should have seen the pain you were in. I should have done something. I drove you away! It was my actions that made you into that... thing!”

“No, Celly. No. I can forgive you a thousand times over before I can forgive myself. I struck you! I tried to kill you!”

They continued their tear-soaked embrace while the adult ponies stood sniffing to one side. Finally Luna managed to choke out, “I’m so sorry!”

The babbling of little voices abruptly cut off, and a stampede of tiny hooves cascaded up to the two princesses as the little ponies dashed over to provide comfort, but it seemed to have a negative impact as the dark alicorn only cried harder in their innocent presence. Her tears washed down the front of her chest, drenching the little ponies as they clustered near and even dampening the coats of the adults who could not help but attempt to add their consolation to the distraught new princess. A thousand years of cold reserves broke in both of the old alicorns as their tears unlocked deep reserves of sadness which had not been reduced by the passage of time.

Almost incoherent, Luna sobbed, “What if I am weak again, sister? I can no longer be trusted by your side!”

“Never, little sister.” Celestia leaned over Luna, her tears flowing down the pastel mane which nearly engulfed the smaller alicorn. “I have not fought so hard, risked so much to lose you again. I shall always be there for you.”

"You were there when I became the Nightmare, and it did not help," sobbed Luna, her emotions at the ragged edge of control. "I was so afraid, of you, of my ponies, of being forgotten and alone. The darkness will always be there for me. Waiting."

Neither alicorn sister noticed the sharp gasp from around their knees, and the clatter of little awkward hooves as Twilight scurried outside, returning a few minutes later with something clutched between her teeth.

"Princess? Princess Luna?" Twilight's voice was muffled as she nudged the dark alicorn, finally resorting to a sharp poke with her rounded filly horn to get Luna's attention. "Here."

"What is it, child?" asked Luna, shocked out of her tears momentarily by the tattered scrap of cloth carried by the tiny multicolored alicorn. She held the scrap up to the sunlight that streamed through the window of the ancient throne room and regarded it with bafflement.

"That is Miss Smartypants," said Twilight Sparkle with a sharp nod of her head, as if her words explained every question in the universe.

"Smartypants?" asked Luna quizzically, blinking away tears to glance at her sister, although her blank look in return did not add any additional information to her puzzlement.

"Yes, or as she is properly called, Miss Smartypants, Ruler of the Back Yard, Guardian of the Night, and Defender of the Bedroom." Dropping her voice to a loud whisper, she added, "She's my doll."

"Really. Well." At a loss for words, Luna turned the scrap of cloth over several times before determining which end was up, giving the tattered scrap of cloth a long look into the two mismatched buttons that were most probably its eyes. She paused, holding the doll loosely in her magic field before bringing it in closer and giving it a sniff. The damp, star-strewn mane that cascaded down Luna's back gave a slight twitch, and ever so slowly began to ripple as if a faint breeze blew through the ancient castle. "Hast thou ever given thy defender to another pony, Twilight Sparkle?"

"Just once. He was a big, strong stallion who was afraid, but Miss Smartypants helped him out in just one day! Go ahead. Hug her."

Even as her emotions churned into a chaotic turmoil in her head, Luna could not look into those trusting purple eyes and deny her request. She brought the dirty scrap of cloth to her chest and gave it a little hug, just once. Only a little one. Very small. And she knew.

"Thank you, Twilight Sparkle." Luna gave the grubby scrap of cloth a second hug, a small smile emerging onto her face like the sun coming out from behind a cloud.

The little alicorn beamed in return, seemingly reflecting and amplifying the smile until it filled the entire throne room. “You can keep her as long as you want, as long as you take good care of her and keep her washed and patched up. Your mom should probably do the patches, because I kept burning little holes in her when I tried.”

“I’ll help you with the patches, Luna,” said Celestia, moving up to put one wing over her sister.

“Celly!” Luna looked up at her sister and tucked Miss Smartypants under one wing protectively. “You can’t even darn a pair of socks.”

“Thank you again, Twilight Sparkle,” said Celestia with a smile, keeping her wing spread over her little sister. “We will be taking you home shortly, so if you and your little friends would like to get some pictures—”

“Pictures!” squealed Twilight, bounding off towards the other end of the throne room with the rest of her friends in tow. “I want to sit in the throne first!”

“No, me! Me!”

Chuckling slightly despite herself, Luna leaned against her sister as she watched the little ponies play. “The place of her creation took away all of her pain, but my heart was torn by forces without and within. Save for the fact I would have lost you, my sister, I would that I had been reborn a foal, without the memories of my terrible deeds, or the responsibilities of my position. Thank you, dear sister.” She wiped her face with one hoof, turning to blink at the rest of the adult ponies, who all returned her look with various degrees of concern. With a painful gulp, and an extra squeeze to the doll under her wing, she stiffly nodded her head and addressed them as formally as possible.

“We must thank thee also for thy assistance in our release. Thou all...” She trailed off with a sniff, and blinked away yet another tear, unable to speak any more.

Stepping forward, Zecora went to one knee and bowed her head. “Oh, Imetabiriwa na Anga of the moon, we are honored to greet you in this room. To accept my daughter’s gift was very right, for in her grip, many nightmares it has put to flight.”

After Luna nodded her head to the zebra, Applejack stepped forward, her hat in hoof as she nervously bowed. “Your Highness. Highnesses. We all just wanted to welcome you back to Equestria, an’ you ain’t gotta be so scared of nuttin’ no more. This here’s a lot different place than it were when you... You know.”

“Used the Element of Magic to create Nightmare Moon.” Luna’s voice was steady, but the stars in her mane slowed in their waving to a mere crawl, and the wing with Miss Smartypants tucked

underneath was held quite tightly against her side.

“Yeah, that’s it. I don’t think ya gotta reckon that’s gonna happen again, since Trixie there has that magic gizmo now, and I don’t think she could magic her way out of a wet paper bag.” Applejack waved at the blue unicorn, who still looked almost exactly the same way she did when the portal was being closed. The rest of the ponies had emerged from the event refreshed, even Rarity’s short tail being restored to its glorious curly state, but Trixie was unchanged, from her singed hide to her nearly burnt away mane. Trixie gave no indication of hearing her name, but remained staring vacantly at the cluster of small ponies playing around the stone chairs at the other end of the room.

“Plus I don’t think that there gadget really likes her all that much anyways.”

“I... see.” Luna looked over the small group of adult ponies, then turned to give the little ponies at the far end of the room a second look. “You do not fear us?” she asked with a sniff, turning back to Applejack who was holding her hat uncomfortably in front of her chest.

“No, Ma’am. Trixie done explained how you’re Princess Celestia’s sister and all. I reckon since she’s kinfolk, she oughta know you better than any of us. If she trusts you, we should trust you too.”

“They have faith in you, sister,” added Celestia, nodding her head at the group and in particular, one pony who stood out more than the rest. “You underestimate the love they have for us. Is that not correct, changeling?”

“Tallgrass, Ma’am,” said the changeling with a nervous nod. “And yes, Ma’am. If there was any more love here, I’m afraid I would burst, Ma’am. They’re a very forgiving kind, your ponies. When my hive blew up, they came to help regardless of our previous deception. Their love for each other and for strangers is beyond my kind’s conception.”

Suppressing a distracted grimace, Tallgrass nodded at Trixie and added, “I think their compassion is contagious, because I’m even willing to forgive her behaviour most outa—” Clamping a hoof over his face, the changeling gave a short bow to Princess Luna before backing away, although Zecora continued to watch him with unnatural curiosity.

“Well,” said Celestia, looking over at her student who still seemed engrossed in the playing of the six little ponies at the other end of the room. “My student, it seems I owe you an apology. Trixie?”

Zecora stepped forward and placed a hoof on Trixie’s singed and pock-marked cloak with a faint crunch of crispy fabric. “The Wise One of the Sky who is your teacher, awaits your response.” Waving a hoof in front of the stunned unicorn produced no reaction, and the zebra turned to Celestia with a sigh. “I cannot reach her.”

"I've got this one," said Pinkie Pie with a happy bounce, sliding up beside Trixie with a quill and a sheet of paper. "Can I get an autograph, oh Great and Powerful Trixie?"

"Wings..." Trixie blinked into wakefulness, and pointed at Twilight Sparkle, who was balanced on top of four other little ponies on one of the thrones, waving cheerfully at the camera being carried by her friend. "She's got wings."

"She [i]has[/i] wings, darling," corrected Rarity. "It's perfectly normal for an alicorn. And such a beautiful color scheme. I'm so looking forward to making her a play dress."

"And throwing her a party!" added Pinkie Pie.

"Teaching her how to fly," said Rainbow Dash.

"Introducing her to all of my animals," said Fluttershy.

"And having her little friends out to the farm to play," said Applejack, although she did hesitate once the words were out of her mouth.

"There is much that I can teach her, now that I can finally reach her," added Zecora.

"Um," started Tallgrass, only to recoil as Trixie jabbed a hoof in the direction of the playing children and hissed at Celestia. "She has wings. [i]Wings![/i]"

"Undoubtedly the Element of Magic—" began Celestia before Trixie cut her off with a rude gesture, jamming the golden tiara on her own head and glaring at her teacher and the Princess of Equestria with an intense glower.

"Where's mine?"

The faint tickle of feathers across her flank made Trixie freeze. She lowered both of her front hooves to the ground for stability before ever so slowly turning her head. First to swim into her vision was a single light-blue feather, then a wide blue wing, fanning up and down across her flanks...

Then Rainbow Dash's smirking face as she fanned her wings over Trixie, being suspended over the student's back by Pinkie Pie's strong earth pony hooves.

"Rainbow Dash!" cried out Trixie, her face reddening with anger as she drew in a deep breath to begin shouting. For the longest time in the ancient throne room there was no noise except for the small ponies at the other end of the room, trying to build a pyramid of their bodies on one of the thrones.

And then there was a small snort.

And an infectious giggle.

Followed by a gale of laughter as Trixie collapsed on the dusty ground, rolling onto her back and kicking her legs in the air. They all laughed, even Luna, although with substantial restraint, and even though the little ponies did look over at what the crazy adults were doing, they decided that getting pictures taken in silly poses was a far more fun-filled activity.

“Ooo, I’m going to get you back someday, Rainbow,” chuckled Trixie. “Thanks. I really needed that.”

“Hey, don’t mention it. Um. Thanks?” Rainbow Dash flew down to Trixie and put a hoof to her forehead. “Did that weird headband warp your brain or something?”

“Your Trixie is indeed acting quite strange, but I do not think she is deranged.” Zecora shrugged. “Any more than she was before.”

“The crazy zebra is right for a change.” Trixie rolled to her hooves and lit her horn to pick up the tourmaline-topped tiara, holding it hesitantly in her magical grip as her face grew serious.

“Princess Luna, when I first stole that book from your sister’s library... Actually, now that I think of it, that book was awfully easy to steal.”

Celestia merely smiled, never stopping her warm embrace of her long-lost sister for even a moment.

“Anyway, the minute I figured out what the Elements were, I had it all planned out. I would use the power of the Elements to become an alicorn myself. Using my new powers, I would defeat the legendary Mare in the Moon and go on to rule all of Equestria at Celestia’s side. All the while we slogged through that stupid forest, I knew what would happen when I put it on. My destiny would be fulfilled. Wings and a crown.”

Trixie turned the golden tiara upside-down, holding it as she would have held a poisonous snake. “That all went straight to Tartarus. When this thing touched my head, I saw things. Echoes, reflections, whatever you call it, all the way back to when the Titans created the Elements.” Lost in thought at the sights she had seen, Trixie held the tiara loosely, making the smallest movement to put it on her head before she caught herself with a frown.

“Princess Luna, I could see every time it had ever been used before, when you and your sister used it, and when Twilight used it, and... I’ve never been so afraid of something in my life. You used it to create a monster, Celestia used it to imprison you in the moon, and Twilight Sparkle

used it to create a world. All my life, I've wanted power, fame, the love of millions, the knowledge of the universe." Trixie turned the tiara around in her magic, the sunlight glinting off the ancient relic in little golden and pink glitters that seemed so harmless in the light of day. Finally, she sat it down on the cold stone floor in the sunlight and regarded it with a shake of her head.

"Wings. I wanted wings, no matter the price. I saw what your sister could do and I was just eaten up by jealousy, just like you. I wanted to be her, I wanted to have her power, I wanted to be loved like her. I wanted, I thought, I yearned, it was all about me, never anypony else. I was so blinded by what I [i]wanted[/i], that I never thought about what I [i]needed[/i]. Friends."

Her voice got very small as she continued. "It almost killed all those little ponies. The Elements don't have any power on their own; they pull it out of their users. I never would have seen that as a problem before now. If I had used the damned thing on Nightmare Moon, I would have killed five little innocent friends from my arrogance. Even if I had succeeded, how much longer until I would use it like you did, Princess? How long could I last until I brought life to my own Nightmare?"

"You used the Elements of Harmony, not for your own greed," said Zecora, moving up and resting a hoof on her shoulder. "But with your friends to save lives in need. I think as a student, you may actually be capable of learning. Although," she removed her hoof from the burnt cloak, wiping off some charcoal residue, "you should first try something that involves less burning."

"I intend on doing what I should have done in the first place. I've been just horrible to all of you, even the bug — I mean Tallgrass. And you, Zecora. I mean to make it up to all of you, and [i]earn[/i] your friendship."

A blue aura surrounded the Element of Magic as Trixie floated it back over to Celestia, placing it down at her hooves with a faint click.

"I quit."

-end Chapter 32 -

-Chapter 33 -

[center]The Monster in the Twilight

[color=Orange]Fini[/color][[/center]

[hr]

"Trixie—" started Celestia, only to be cut off as her former student continued to talk.

"No, I mean it. I quit, I resign, I no longer wish to be your student. When you take

Twilight Sparkle and the Elements of Harmony back to Canterlot, I plan on staying in Ponyville to make restitution for what I've done to them. Maybe I can get a job as a maid or something. I'm pretty good at demolitions. Or I could write my memoirs. [i]My Life as a Canterlot Fraud[/i]."

"Trixie—" began Celestia in a firm voice, only to be cut off again.

"I've learned a lot from you, Your Highness, don't get me wrong. In addition to your sister, you've got a new student now, with wings. I think she's the one you wanted to train in the first place, while I was just a spare."

"Trixie!" commanded Celestia, "Will you—"

"I'll visit Canterlot in a few days when I find a place to stay in Ponyville, clean out my room at the castle for your new student, pay off my overdue library fines, apologize to Shining Dumbbell and his wife, but that's it. No more Royal Performances, no more filling your tower up with smoke in the middle of the night, no more hiding my peanut-butter and onion on toast sandwiches behind the throne for midnight snacking. Although I will miss lighting Prince Blueblood's tail on fire when he isn't looking."

"Cool!" said Rainbow Dash.

"Trixie?" Princess Celestia had an almost pleading tone to her voice that was immediately overridden by her former student.

"And Spike! I'm going to miss him something terrible, but your new student should be able to handle him. Make sure to have him scrub behind his ear-ridges twice a week or they get all gunky, and don't ever let her feed him opals before bedtime, no matter how much he begs. I'll write him every week and tell him how well I'm doing making friends."

"Um. Trixie?" Fluttershy tugged gently on the remains of Trixie's burnt cloak until she turned to look. "Hush."

"Thank you, Fluttershy." Celestia lowered her head until she was just a few inches away from Trixie's embarrassed gaze. "Don't think you can slip away from your responsibilities this easily, young mare. Even though I will be taking the Elements of Harmony back to Canterlot for safekeeping, it is the [i]bearers[/i] of the Elements who are the key to their use. In the event they are needed again, I shall need somepony to

gather Twilight Sparkle and her friends together...” Princess Celestia trailed off and looked at the other end of the room where the young alicorn in question was attempting unsuccessfully to hover, with encouragement shouted at her from all directions. “Where does she live, anyway?”

Zecora opened her mouth to respond, but Trixie pounced before she could talk. “Right outside the castle and across the big ditch, Your Highness. It’s a long way from town and it would take her an hour to describe it to you.”

With a brief scowl at Trixie, Zecora bowed and said, “I would not mind moving my tree, if the town is willing to accept me.”

“Good, then it is settled. Although I think Twilight Sparkle may need some help if the Elements of Harmony are needed again,” Celestia added with a worried look. “The power they draw would be quite dangerous to the young and immature. “

“How about the old and immature?” asked Pinkie Pie. “When we all crowded around Miss Grouchypants to help her make a hole in the big gold ball, the funny crown thing seemed to work just fine. It even tickled! I want to do it again!”

“Well, ah ain’t lettin’ mah little sis do anything dangerous without me being there for her,” said Applejack with a determined set to her jaw that indicated argument would be futile.

“Nor shall I,” said Rarity with a toss of her head to throw back her mane defiantly, in a pose that mirrored Applejack almost perfectly.

“You aren’t sending Scoots somewhere dangerous without Rainbow Dash!”

“Somepony needs to go along with them to make sure they’re not hurt.”

There was a very long silent pause lasting nearly a minute and containing a great number of intense looks before Trixie let out her breath in an explosive, “Fine! I’ll go with Sparkle and help. But only if needed. And it had better be something really important, end of the world, doom and gloom stuff.”

“I fear your requirements may be met, my obstinate student.” Celestia looked embarrassed and gave Luna an extra squeeze. “While overseeing the stars in Luna’s absence, I may have moved a few—”

Luna cleared her throat and gave Celestia a sharp glance.

“Well, more than a few prophetic stars into places they really don’t belong.”

Luna nuzzled Celestia affectionately, although with a sharp nip. “I shall have centuries worth of work to clean up your mess, my sister. But it is worth it. And speaking of centuries, what of the pony who saved my life?”

“Well, I suppose I could accept some reward—” started Trixie, before catching a sideways glance from Celestia. “Oh. Sparkle.”

Zecora stepped to Trixie’s side and bowed. “I’m afraid it will take many years, until I am quite old, for Flower to become the Wise One of the Sky, long-ago foretold.”

“You’re taking Sparkle to Zebrica?” asked Trixie, her eyes glittering with anticipation. “You know, they’re a set now. You’ll have to take all of them. And that ‘many years’ thing is just optional, right? Travel is broadening for young minds.”

“Trixie,” growled Applejack.

“What? You could go with them, and I’ll watch Big Mac for you.”

“Trixie!”

Zecora chuckled at the two, giving a nod and a smile to Celestia. “Our nations may seem quite far away from each other, but I did not realize how close they were, until I became a mother. So close they seem, in my observation, that I recognize this stallion’s station.”

“Huh?” Tallgrass looked away from the playing small ponies with a shock of realization as Zecora faced him and looked deeply into his blue faceted eyes.

“How does it feel, to be free of your Queen? To hear with new ears, and see things unseen?”

Tallgrass shifted in place, listening intently to no avail for the sound of pegasus wings coming to rescue them. “How do you know of my mind’s release, where after many years, I finally found peace?” He quickly covered his mouth with one hoof and mumbled, “Sorry, my stupid mouth is doing it again.”

A smile crossed Zecora’s face and stayed as she responded, “Do you know where your story does begin?”

“At the beginning, where all things start.” The changeling paused to stand up straighter as if he were listening to a voice, far, far away, in the rhythm of beating hooves.

The zebra stepped over to the changeling and placed one hoof on his chest, closing her eyes. “This stallion has a wise one’s heart.”

“My mind is what I think is broken,” echoed Tallgrass without a pause.

“A worse falsehood has not been spoken.”

The changeling shook his head, looking at the zebra as if he had never seen her before. “The things I sense cannot be true.”

“Do you think these things are seeking out you?”

Trixie turned from her quiet conversation with Luna to snap, “Will you two go get a room?! We’re trying to have a bonding moment here!”

Tallgrass smirked, looking at Zecora with raised ears. “I think she wishes us to disappear.”

Zecora smirked right back, with a licking of her lips. “Or me for you to just consume.”

“So fair a mare is not for a plate.”

“So hale a male could be a... date?”

Trixie fumed and waved a hoof threateningly. “Outside! Go! Orange! Silver! Wait a minute.” She paused, one ear cocked up at the ceiling. “Do you hear that?”

Tallgrass perked up both ears and listened. “I hear nothing, not even a word.”

Zecora took an identical pose. “Well, just one thing, but it’s a bird.”

“It’s very quiet,” said Fluttershy.

“Too quiet,” said Pinkie Pie, pulling out her party cannon.

“Where are the kids?”

[center] * * * [/center]

As the pile of little ponies collapsed in the warm beam of sunshine that illuminated one of the

thrones, Scootaloo suddenly sat up and asked, “Do you know what this means?”

“You sat on a sharp rock?” asked Sweetie Belle.

“No, I mean this!” Scootaloo waved a hoof at the entire room. “We’re actually [i]inside[/i] the spooky old abandoned castle.”

“Yeah,” said Featherweight. “Think about what could be lying around, just waiting to be discovered.”

“Like suits of armor.”

“And haunted kitchenth.”

“And swords!”

“And books!”

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

The six of them regarded the older ponies on the other end of the room, who seemed to be quite absorbed in whatever older pony stuff they were doing and ignoring them for the moment.

“We’d have to be really quiet,” said Scootaloo.

“Come on, let’s go.” Absolute silence reigned in the throne room as tiny little hooves slipped out of the nearby door into a dusty corridor, the reign of silence quickly overthrown with shrieks of childish joy as the little friends galloped into the ancient castle in search of adventure, with the thunder of adult hooves in futile pursuit.

In the throne room, the two ancient alicorns remained wrapped in each other’s embrace, rejoicing in their moments together long delayed. So much time had been stolen from them that they simply remained holding each other without saying a word for endless minutes until they could hear the sounds of chariots approaching, and knew their time together would soon have to be shared.

“I love you, little sister.” Celestia nuzzled her sister, taking a brief nip at one wing where Miss Smartypants was hiding, only to have Luna tuck it even closer to her body with a giggle.

“I love you too, big sister.” Luna stroked her face on her sister’s warm neck, waiting until the Royal Guards were nearly into the ancient throne room before whispering into her sister’s ear.

“Am I still grounded?”

The guards would later tell the story of how Princess Celestia and her sister were both laughing uncontrollably when they were found, rolling around on the floor in a juvenile tickle fight.

[center] * * * [/center]

At one time, the Everfree had been a garden.

A wonder of the ancient world, it wrapped the Castle of the Royal Pony Sisters in a belt of verdant green and flowers so thick and wonderful it was said a young couple could enter the forest along a path as newlyweds and never emerge at the other end until they were old and grey. The creatures who called the forest their home were the refugees of the world, fleeing burnt forests and dried inland seas for the harmony that filled every nook and cranny of their new home. Even the smallest of foals could be lost within the mysterious greenery for days and emerge not only unscathed, but healthy and well-fed, as if they had been cared for by the trees themselves. No pony needed care for the garden, for the plants grew, the rain fell, and the animals looked after each other in love and friendship.

Then one day, Harmony shattered.

Rage and Hatred entered the garden as the sisters fought, sending shocks through all the plants and creatures who called the Everfree their home. Claws and roots fought one another in mindless agony, the ancient forest of peace becoming a bloody battleground. No pony knows how many died that night, in blood and sap that drenched the ground like rain, but the echoes of the battle echoed through the soil and water ever since, growing stronger in the darkness. For endless generations afterwards, harmony was absent in the garden, transforming it into a hellish nightmare of hunger and malice. Where young lovers once strode carefree and untroubled, now creatures from beyond the veil of dreams stalked the bloody darkness where even the most fearsome predators feared to tread.

The forest was unaware of the passage of time, but it could remember the touch of harmony that once ruled. The ancient abandoned castle in the middle of the forest still echoed from the clash that took place in the skies above it, even as the buildings fell into disrepair and began to decay into chaos. Some tinge of harmony still existed within the ruins, and even the most fierce of the forest inhabitants avoided the ancient fallen stones and ivy-twined walls, as if they could feel shame at what they had become.

Once quite recently, the forest had felt something quite small, a tiny pin-prick of pain to the immense green expanse that should have been ignored. After all, the forest could no more feel the sensation of a tiny ball of magical fire burning out than it could live and breathe. Still, there had been a response, a reflex of some sort, even if it had not been driven by intellect or emotion. The fire had been quickly extinguished, but the spark that ignited it continued to burn,

flickering from one place to another with the speed of a living creature. It could have reminded the forest of what it had once been, had there been anything to remind. For many seasons of warm and cold, the spark burned within the forest until it seemed to become one with the thick green coat of violence and blood. At times it burned with a fire that threatened to extinguish itself in a conflagration that could have swept the entirety of the forest up in its blaze, if not for another spark that held itself near to the spark of fire.

Had the forest been intelligent, it might have wondered about the sparks, how they clung to each other like the harmonious inhabitants of the decaying ruins so many seasons ago. In the way of sparks, it gathered more to itself, holding them to the outskirts of the forest where their dim glow would not be extinguished by the violence that filled the woods. They would dance through the outskirts in the same way other sparks once played carefree throughout the forest, and even the creatures who saw them held back their claws, perhaps with their own ancestral memories of those times long gone. Other sparks blew into the forest in a torrent, ripping and tearing in the way of their kind. The forest had seen worse, and dealt with them in its own time, but this time the bright spark and its companions attacked the dangerous sparks and extinguished most of them, although the fire of the bright spark dimmed.

From one side of the forest to another, more sparks flew, tiny sparks visiting the destruction and saving other sparks in a most peculiar fashion that felt almost familiar to the forest, as if it had happened before, in happier times.

And then the Darkness returned.

What were sparks to the Darkness that covered the world? Without light, the forest would die, the sparks would go out, and there would be nothing but ice. But the forest could do nothing but watch as the ancient catastrophe played out again. This time the sparks would lose, and Darkness would consume all.

Except...

Within the ancient ruins, in the center of the forest's grasp, an ancient magic stirred. Beasts looked to the rising sun with strange sensations in their hearts, minds growing clearer than they had ever been. With the sun came a warmth that had almost been forgotten. A touch of a long-lost friend. The sparks had drawn together in a flame of such brightness that it lit the world, bringing light and healing to the broken forest.

And Harmony returned.

When the sparks departed the ancient ruins, they took two new sparks the forest had nearly forgotten, one as brilliant as the newly-risen sun, and one as crystal-bright as the moon. They burned with unquenchable fire, a combined blaze that could have burned away the forest in the blink of an eye as they rose into the sky.

Leaving the forest alone again.

The insanity that had gripped the forest was gone, but the healing would take many, many seasons, and some parts of it would never recover. Still, it looked forward to the day when once again, the sparks could play within the garden in peace and joy.

That is, if the forest was able to think. Which it was not.

.author notes

I listened to [url=<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H4tyvJJzSDk>]Lullaby for a Princess by ponyphonic[/url] many times during the writing of this story. I hope you enjoyed it. If you liked the description of the Everfree, go read [url=<http://www.fimfiction.net/story/102166/lost-cities>]Lost Cities [/url] by Cold in Gardez or [url=<http://www.fimfiction.net/story/207272/seeds-of-future-past>]Seeds of Future Past[/url] by me. If you didn't like my description of the Everfree, go read Lost Cities anyway. It's much better :)

-end Chapter 33 -

-Chapter 34 - Epilogue

[center]The Monster in the Twilight

Epilogue[/center]

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Once upon a time there was a tiny little town named Ponyville in a valley not far from Canterlot. In this town, the sun shone brighter, the stars spread across the sky sharper, and sunrise and sunset were things of absolute beauty. The bearers of the Elements of Harmony lived in this small town, but were very reclusive, and did not like to visit with reporters.

The names of the Elements of Harmony were Honesty, Kindness, Laughter, Generosity, Loyalty, and Magic, and they were borne by six of the town's inhabitants: Applejack, Fluttershy, Pinkie Pie, Rarity, Rainbow Dash, and Twilight Sparkle. Whenever reporters visited, they never were able to find any of the bearers except Pinkie Pie, and after an hour or two of conversation, they were always glad to flee back to their newsrooms to finish their stories from the official accounts.

None of the reporters ever paid any attention to a group of six small students who galloped happily around the town. Their leader was a colorfully-streaked young pony who lived just outside of town in a large tree with her foster parents, both zebras. If they had paid attention to the young ponies, they might have heard the young pastel pony called by the name of 'Twilight.'

They might have noticed she spent a great amount of time in the town's library, with Princess Celestia's young protégé, Trixie, and her dragon, Spike.

They might also have noticed quite a few visits by Twilight Sparkle's parents, accompanied by their son, Shining Armor, and his wife, Princess Cadence, along with their beautiful newborn daughter.

Had they stuck around for a few days, they may have noticed Princess Celestia frequently dropping by during the day, or Princess Luna at night. But the reporters never did, and the citizens of the town were more than happy to keep that information to themselves.

As the years rolled on, the ponies of Equestria never found out just why whenever the Elements of Harmony were needed, the Princess' student always substituted for Twilight Sparkle, and each of the bearers brought along a younger pony. Some thought it was a sort of apprenticeship program, or perhaps just a severe lack of foalsitters in their home town.

But nopony ever asked the young ponies, which was just fine with them as they laughed and played throughout the carefree days and nights of their youth, always ready for another adventure.

[center] [b] [size=24] The End [/size][b]/[center]

[hr]

Really. It's over. You can go home now.

No, there's nothing else down here.

Well, other than the cast party.

No, you can't come in.

Oh, I suppose. Since you asked so nicely and stuck around until the end.

As production for Monster in the Twilight is winding up and the actors are all ready to go home, we managed to get them all rounded up for one last photo. Smile!

[img]<https://lh4.googleusercontent.com/-J5hShUS9ZWY/UfXIFGJLVBI/AAAAAAAAAMo/KX-z26wxj6E/w1358-h443-no/Monster-Cast-Photo-test.jpg>[/img]

I hope you enjoyed the show. For those of you asking if I plan a sequel, the answer is Yes! This was a six-month project, and the sequel,

[url=<http://www.fimfiction.net/story/143216/letters-from-a-little-princess-monster>]Letters From a Little Princess Monster[/url] is flowing out in little pieces as I find time. If you want to write something in the Monsterverse, please feel free (just don't forget to credit). And give Trixie wings. (Ok, I put that in. Can I have the keys to my car back now, Trixie?)

-end Chapter 34-

Credit for the cast photo goes to Inkscape, found at [url=<http://inkscape.org/>] Inkscape.org[/url]. If I can draw using this, [i]anybody[/i] can.

Resources used are mostly vector files found in DeviantArt's [url=<http://mlp-vectorclub.deviantart.com/>] MLP Vector club [/url] including the [url=<http://evilbob0.deviantart.com/art/MLP-Ancient-Castle-Throneroom-Chamber-320610107>] Throne Room [/url]

Starting with the CMC+2, we have

[url=<http://www.deviantart.com/art/MLP-Resource-Featherweight-01-346256257>] Featherweight[/url],

[url=<http://www.deviantart.com/art/Cutie-Mark-Crusaders-Oooohh-341719697>] The Cutie Mark Crusaders Classic[/url] (the original, far better than the New Cutie Mark Crusaders), and the Element of Cute Kindness,

[url=<http://www.deviantart.com/art/Twist-Vector-REVISED-v3-238465528>] Twist![/url]

Moving along to the Original Mane 6-1, we have

[url=<http://anxet.deviantart.com/art/Fluttershy-Vector-Yoo-Hoo-357886722>] Fluttershy[/url],

[url=<http://quanno3.deviantart.com/art/Rarity-356040631>] Rarity[/url],

[url=http://fc08.deviantart.net/fs70/f/2012/250/6/5/rainbow_dash_by_newlunaticrepublic-d5dul8t.svg] Rainbow Dash[/url],

[url=http://fc04.deviantart.net/fs70/f/2011/260/9/7/applejack_vector_by_hombre0-d4a3lwt.png] Applejack[/url] and hiding somewhere in the background is [url=http://fc08.deviantart.net/fs70/f/2012/286/5/1/pinkieisaspy_by_brisineo-d5hp5o0.svg] Pinkie Pie the Spy[/url]

Voted Best Supporting Actor by a bunch of people who don't really want to be eaten is [url=http://fc05.deviantart.net/fs70/f/2013/201/0/7/vector_mlpres_nightmaremoon01_by_zutheskunk-d6eexvd.svg] Nightmare Moon[/url], and the ever beautiful Queen ... um, I mean [url=http://90sigma.deviantart.com/art/Princess-Cadance-and-Shining-Armour-Resources-295790323] Princess Cadence and Shining Armor[/url] to the right, and [url=http://sulyo.deviantart.com/art/Demonic-Pony-316344542] Optio Pumpernickel[/url] to the left.

The happy zebra couple does stand over by your left hand, as [url=http://www.deviantart.com/art/Happy-Changeling-379143345] Tallgrass[/url] and Zecora (zecora_by_uxyd-d5djlmh.svg I can't find the source to this one)

Taking a bow are our stars of the show, [s]Princess[/s] [url=http://tryhardbrony.deviantart.com/art/The-Great-and-Shocked-Trixie-341258916] Trixie[/url], and her future self (she hopes), [url=http://dcencia.deviantart.com/art/The-Trixie-Supremacy-Drawfest-2013-2-dcencia-375087631] The Grand and Magnificent Ruler Trixie the Great![/url]

And last, but certainly not least, the Princess of Friendship and Fun, [url=http://caliazian.deviantart.com/art/Alicorn-Twilight-w-Coronation-Tiara-356451443]Princess Twilight Sparkle, aka, Monster![/url]

Let's have a big hoof of applause for our cast and crew! They'll be signing autographs in the lobby after the show as you leave the building. Good night, have a pleasant evening under Luna's beautiful stars, and don't forget to tell your friends.

Apple Bloom - Loyalty
Sweetie Belle - Honesty
Scootaloo - Generosity
Twist - Kindness
Featherweight - Laughter
♪♪♪

Zecora words: Pack,back lack quack

insanity profanity grace, face

http://fc00.deviantart.net/fs71/i/2013/072/6/7/commission_edited_1_by_dessert711-d5xy9eo.png

found
round
inside
reside

Blog entry

Monster in the Twilight: Judgement will be published Friday.

News: Just finished the 'Judgement' chapter in "Monster in the Twilight", and I'll put a teaser at the end of this post. Waiting til Friday to hit publish, so I can catch any errors (or at least the Monster sized ones)

Jmac has a new chapter out on

[url=<http://www.fimfiction.net/story/79894/quizzical-greystone-and-the-basements-of-doom>]

Quizzical Greystone and the Basements of Doom [/url], which I really like. Something is keeping Favorites from getting notified when he updates chapters, so I'm passing along the information.

Editing on [url=<http://www.fimfiction.net/story/67042/the-traveling-tutor-and-the-librarian>] The Traveling Tutor and the Librarian[/url] is almost done, unless my last editor makes any changes. Thank you [url=<http://www.fimfiction.net/user/Nyerguds>] Nyerguds [/url] for your excellent assistance. I'm going to try to post it on [url=<http://mlpchan.net/fic/>] MLPchan [/url] like the EqD editors always advise to see if that can help, before I actually submit it. I've gotten enough positive feedback about it that I can't tell if I'm deluded, or it actually is good :)

And now for the trailer:

[hr]

Blog

Monster in the Twilight - Coronation will be published Wednesday (being edited)

Thanks to the ceaseless work by a talented team of professional editors... well, some guys who

had the misfortune to actually ask if they could help edit, the latest chapter in Monster in the Twilight - Coronation should be out Wednesday. (It's done, it just needs sprayed for typos and my horrible grammar errors)

I'm also soliciting Tropes that you think should go on the TVTropes page that is being built. Please put them in the comments, and I'll see if I can get them put in.

[hr]

Georg's One-Line Stories - The part of the program where Georg puts links to stories he likes that he does not think are getting enough love.

[url=<http://www.fimfiction.net/story/52731/tias-tacos>] Tias Tacos [/url] How Equestria was founded and Celestia and Luna became Princesses. With Tacos!

[url=<http://www.fimfiction.net/story/77094/countdown-to-crisis>] Countdown to Crisis [/url] A Lunaverse story starring our favorite alternate universe purple dimension traveling unicorn, who really should leave a trail of breadcrumbs or take a map.

[url=<http://www.fimfiction.net/story/19308/the-rummy-business-of-old-blooey>] The Rummy business of Old Blooey [/url] Wooster and Jeeves Ponified. I say, dashing good time reading and all that, wot?

[url=<http://www.fimfiction.net/story/72777/a-canterlot-carol>] A Canterlot Carol [/url] by GoH. A heartwarming tale of a government worker with a kind soul. Very loving.

Misc:

It appears [url=<http://www.fimfiction.net/blog/135886>] Twilight has a book [/url] One more thing to add to my Amazon Wish List.

And [url=<http://www.fimfiction.net/blog/135684>] Hivemind needs some love and birthday wishes [/url] Don't forget the hugs.

And now for the teaser for Coronation

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Blog

Monster in the Twilight - Darkness (16) to be published Tuesday if the site stays up

Final editing of Chap. 16 is almost complete, thanks to a number of great editors who have not been eaten by carnivorous verbs (yet). Oh the dangers of writing in the Everfree Forest.

Chap. 17 is done, just needing some touch up paint. I actually wrote 17 before 16, because I had to. 16 is slower pitched and longer, 17 is higher-pitched and shorter, they average out. 17 should be posted by the end of the week. Pumpernickel gets his moment in the spotlight.

“Monster” now has 999 thumbs-up! Yea! At 1000, I’ll have to start work on a Tropes page.

Speaking of which,

[url=<http://www.fimfiction.net/story/67042/the-traveling-tutor-and-the-librarian>] The Traveling Tutor and the Librarian now [i]does[/i] have a

[url=<http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Fanfic/TravelingTutorAndTheLibrarian>] TV Tropes page [url] Thank you to Lhmac for helping with editing there, along with the usual suspects :)

In more good news, the FimFiction sort string I use still works with the site update. It lists the stories in your ‘Read it later’ list

[url=http://www.fimfiction.net/index.php?view=category&order=updated&read_it_later=1] by the date of their last update.[url] I can’t remember who’s blog on the site I stole it from, but it was in the middle of a very interesting discussion on HTML.

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Georg’s One-Line Stories - The part of the program where Georg puts links to stories he likes that he does not think are getting enough love.

First want to plug [url=<http://www.fimfiction.net/user/Bardsworth+Brony>] Bardsworth Brony[url] and his fics [url=<http://www.fimfiction.net/story/34533/a-blank-canvas>] A Blank Canvas[url] (Complete) and [url=<http://www.fimfiction.net/story/88275/a-family-matter>] A Family Matter[url] (in the process) I’ve really enjoyed his concept and the work he put into them, so stop by and take a look.

Also a three-story arc by [url=<http://www.fimfiction.net/user/xXSilverLiningXx>] xXSilverLiningXx [url] starting with [url=<http://www.fimfiction.net/story/48962/lost-kindness>] Lost Kindness [url] which I’ve been asked to help with, and if anybody who does Thoughtful and Deep well would like to help out, I’m certain he would appreciate it.

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Now the teaser from [b]Darkness[/b]

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Monster in the Twilight - Ch. 17 posted

[url=<http://www.fimfiction.net/chapter/283707>] Chap. 17 of Monster in the Twilight[url] is now posted. You may notice the return of Pumpernickel from [url=<http://www.fimfiction.net/story/48849/genealogy-or-the-mating-habits-of-nocturnes-pegasi>] Genealogy (or the mating habits of Nocturne Pegasi)[url], another pony who has stepped up as Celestia’s light began to dim. Unfortunately the same cannot be said for Laminia, who will have a bit part in the next chapter.

Monster now has a [url=<http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Fanfic/MonsterInTheTwilight>] TV Tropes page[url] with a few spoilers in it. Hopefully it will grow a bit as I progress.

Next chapter : Dawn

Weep you no more, sad fountains;
What need you flow so fast?
Look how the snowy mountains
Heaven's sun doth gently waste.
But my sun's heavenly eyes
View not your weeping,
That now lies sleeping
Softly, now softly lies
Sleeping.

Sleep is a reconciling,
A rest that peace begets:
Doth not the sun rise smiling
When fair at even he sets?
Rest you then, rest, sad eyes,
Melt not in weeping,
While she lies sleeping
Softly, now softly lies
Sleeping. (John Dowland)

Monster in the Twilight - Ch. 18 in final edits, releasing tonight

Just wanted to let you know Chap 18 of

[url=<http://www.fimfiction.net/story/78582/the-monster-in-the-twilight>] The Monster in the Twilight[/url] should be released tonight, after I finish final edits. If you would like to help out, the Google Document link is

[url=<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1VSHh8itjZ7e6nCeGzloAnbFXqVYiOp8fwMU3seOnhMI/edit?usp=sharing>] Here [/url]

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Georg's One-Line Stories - The part of the program where Georg puts links to stories he likes that he does not think are getting enough love.

[url=<http://www.fimfiction.net/story/45525/whipstitch>] Whipstitch [/url] by

[url=<http://www.fimfiction.net/user/Pennington%20Inkwell>] Pennington Inkwell [/url] and

gotten enough done that I feel confident that a new chapter of Monster in the Twilight will be released by the middle of next week. In reward for your patience so far, I shall draw back the curtain just a bit to allow some light into the discussions that have been happening in the comment section.

News: First, [url=<http://www.fimfiction.net/story/67042/the-traveling-tutor-and-the-librarian>]The Traveling Tutor and the Librarian[/url] is still in the /fic/ review process, have not heard anything in a while, and I hope the reviewer didn't choke on my 98k word Romantic Comedy. If he died laughing, is that considered a positive review?

Next, my fic [url=<http://www.fimfiction.net/story/95144/waiting-on-death>] Waiting on Death[/url], is a comedic bit I cooked up after waiting patiently so long for [url=<http://www.fimfiction.net/story/400/binky-pie>] Binky Pie[/url] to be updated. I swear it must have gone into stealth mode on release from as few hits as it got. Did I really make that bad a hash out of it?

Now, a brief peek behind the curtain at events taking place in the current chapter of Monster in the Twilight.

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