

Past Sins
By Pen Stroke
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Chapter 17
Tainted Blessing

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[<<Chapter 16](#) - [Chapter 18>>](#)

“SHE DID NOT JUST VANISH INTO THIN AIR!” Nexus snapped. He slammed his hoof down on his desk and glared at the pair of guards that had entered his office. Since Twilight had disappeared from the end of the hangmare’s noose, Nexus had orchestrated an all-out search for her, but it was proving fruitless.

“We’re sorry, sir, but we can’t find any trace of the prisoner,” reported one of the two guards in front of Nexus.

Nexus grunted in frustration. “Did you search the town?”

“Yes sir.”

“WELL SEARCH AGAIN! SHE DID NOT JUST VANISH!”

The two guards saluted, and quickly vacated the room. Nexus glared at them as they left, and then flopped down onto the cushion behind his desk. He rubbed his temples, but before he could gather himself, another guard came into the room.

“What do you want?” Nexus asked, not even looking at the guard.

“Queen Nightmare Moon wishes to speak with you. She’s waiting in the throne room.”

Nexus’s aggravation cooled to a simmer, and he eyed the guard. “Did she say why?”

“She wanted to speak with you about Twilight Sparkle’s escape.”

Instead of growing worried, Nexus allowed himself to smile a little. The queen was concerned that Twilight had escaped. It was a sign his efforts had born fruit. This was the Equestrian queen he had been expecting. She would undoubtedly be furious about Twilight’s escape, and demand she be captured. He was going to receive a brutal verbal lashing for letting her escape, but he he’d accept it graciously if it meant the queen was finally acting like the way she was supposed to.

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Spell Nexus found the entrance to the throne room shut when he arrived, and no guards standing watch. It was ominous, and it sent a pleasant shiver down his spine. The silence, the cold, the ever present sensation of danger; this was how the castle should have felt since day one. This was the castle of Nightmare Moon.

Not wishing to keep his queen waiting a moment longer, Nexus knocked on the throne room door. The chamber beyond echoed with the sound, and after the reverberations had faded, a familiar voice called out to him. "Come in, Spell Nexus."

The doors to the throne room swung open of their own accord, nudge by magic that left no visible trail. This caused another shiver to crawl down Nexus's spine, but this time he was unable to enjoy it. He felt like an ant stepping into the presence of a god, and was beginning to fear what fate awaited him.

Still, Nexus forced himself to enter the throne room, and he quickly crossed the hall and bowed at the base of the throne. Behind him, the doors swung shut, and he could sense a surge of magic. The room had been sealed. No pony would be able to enter or exit the room until the spell was lifted, and no pony would be able to hear what occurred inside. It was just him and his queen, and that fact fueled the growing fear in Nexus's chest.

Nightmare Moon was sitting in her throne, and her royal seat had been turned to face the towering stained glass windows. The windows depicted her flying through the sky, basking in the light of a full moon while ponies below cowered and fled in fear. They were, in his opinion, the perfect decoration for the queen's throne room.

Still, unable to stand the silence pervading the throne room, Spell Nexus forced down the tight knot in his throat. "You summoned me, Your Highness?"

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It had taken every ounce of will power, but Nightmare Moon kept herself from attacking Spell Nexus outright. On the flight back, her anger had reached a boil. She was ready to do her worst to him, punish him for what almost happened to Twilight. She had every intention of making him pay, but as she imagined and planned what she would do to Nexus, other nagging thoughts began to enter her mind.

The first thought was what Twilight would think. Nexus deserved to be punished severely, maybe even made to face his *own* noose, but what would Twilight think if she did that to Nexus? How disappointed would Twilight be to see her take another pony's life in rage... like the true Nightmare Moon.

From that first thought of mercy sprung others, and they choked Nightmare Moon's anger like a weed. It also brought on a single, chilling realization that cooled her rage just enough. When she arrived at the castle, she did not seek out and attack Nexus as she had planned. Instead, she had waited in her throne room for him to arrive, to provide answers she sought.

As she waited, Nightmare Moon sat in her throne and stared at the stained glass windows of her throne room. The image they depicted, of her soaring over Equestria and inspiring fear. It was exactly how she was depicted in old legends, and what most ponies thought of her.

It was an image Nightmare Moon had grown to despise. She hated those windows as well as all the windows, murals, and statues that decorated her castle. Everything that only served the sole purpose of being constant reminders of what and who she was supposed to be.

She heard the knock at the door, and beckoned Nexus in. She heard him walk across the hall, and listened to every hoof-fall. She then waited, waited for him to be the first to speak, if only to allow herself a few more moments to ensure that when she turned around and saw Spell Nexus, she would not attack.

"You summoned me, Your Highness?" Nexus asked with a bow.

"Yes, Spell Nexus, I did," Nightmare Moon said coldly. "I wanted to ask you a few questions."

"Of course, Your Majesty. Anything you want to know I will gladly answer for you," Nexus said with the utmost respect.

"Have you found Twilight Sparkle?"

"No," Nexus answered with a shake of his head. "She's eluded our search for the time being, but she will be found."

Nightmare Moon shifted in her throne, and glanced over her shoulder. "Did you order her execution because she attacked me?"

"Yes, Your Highness; something like that can't go unpunished."

Nightmare Moon slowly stood from her throne, and stepped around the regal seat so she could look directly at Nexus. "You mentioned once before that Celestia asked you to study the shreds of my body... and it was while interacting with those shreds that your eyes were opened to the truth, to the good I could do for Equestria."

Nexus smiled, slowly allowing himself to rise and stand up straight in front of his queen. "Yes, my Liege; it was the greatest day of my life."

Nightmare Moon moved forward, and came to a stop in front of Nexus. Her tall stature dwarfed his, just like the mountain dwarfs a hill. "Would you have, before that day, ever considered going against Celestia?"

Nexus blinked a few times as an expression of confusion formed on his face. "I don't see how that matters. I-"

"Answer the question, Nexus," Nightmare Moon hissed, her words dripping with her resentment.

"I-I suppose I wouldn't have," Nexus admitted while struggling to control the tremor in his voice.

Nightmare Moon continued glaring at Nexus, casting her shadow down upon him. "Did you have any affection for Celestia before you were blessed?"

"I-I might have," Nexus said as he took an anxious step back, "in my foolishness."

Nightmare Moon did not allow Nexus to stay away. For each step he took in retreat, she advanced a step of her own. "What was your exact relationship with Celestia?"

Nexus struggled to force down the knot that formed in his throat. "I was the headmaster of her school and, at times, I served as an advisor."

"Anything else?"

"I-I was once... a long time ago, her-" Nexus had to pause, and struggled with his words. "I was her private student. She took me on as her personal pupil shortly after I had earned my cutie mark, when I had created my very first spell."

Nightmare Moon stood silent for a moment. Her eyes were narrow slits, and her icy glare threatened to bore a hole straight into Nexus's soul. "One final question. How close were you to Celestia when you were her student?"

"I... I was just a foolish child, Your Highness," Nexus tried to protest, though his voice was cracking from fear. "I didn't know any better or that she-"

"How close. Were you. To. Celestia?" Nightmare Moon repeated, bending her head down so her eyes were even with Nexus's.

"I... I once thought of her as... as... as a second mother."

Nexus shut his eyes tight and winced, as if admitting such a thing was not only painful, but an invitation for him to be punished physically. Nightmare Moon, however, turned her back on him, and looked back to the stained glass mirror. She said nothing, though a deep frown formed on

her lips as she squeezed her eyes shut.

“My queen, please, forgive me,” Nexus begged. He bowed as low as he could, and practically kissed the floor as he spoke. “I was ignorant and foolish before, but this is why I am so blessed! Your blessing allowed me to see what a utter and weak fool Celestia is. Your gift opened my eyes to the truth.”

“Or blinded you,” Nightmare Moon whispered so quietly Nexus was unable to properly understand what was said. Before Nexus could ask what she had muttered, Nightmare Moon turned to face him once more, this time wearing a kinder expression. “Spell Nexus, would you like to receive a greater blessing from me? Would you be willing to receive a gift more precious than any you have ever received from me before?”

“O-of course, my Queen,” Nexus answered, looking as if he was on the verge of tears. “It... it would be my eternal honor to receive any gift from you, no matter how small.”

Nightmare Moon’s mane flared, and she stood tall before Nexus. “Then prepare yourself.”

Nexus nodded, took a seat before his queen, and puffed out his chest in pride. He waited eagerly for the blessing he was about to receive, and he closed his eyes to try and hide the joyful tears streaming down his face. All the while, Nightmare Moon’s mane slowly encircled him, like the cool embrace of a morning fog.

Yet, before Nexus realized what was going on, Nightmare Moon had put him to sleep just as she had subdued the guards of Canterlot palace. She then laid him down on the floor gently, and spoke just above a whisper. “I shall now grant greatest gift I could possibly give you. I will return to you your freedom.”

With those whispered words, Nightmare Moon let her mane flow into Spell Nexus’s body and phase through his flesh. She began to search for what she knew was already there, a parasitic blessing of magic. It was... the only explanation that made sense to her, after hearing how much Spell Nexus once cared for Princess Celestia.

Yet, the blessing Nightmare Moon found was more advanced than she could have ever imagined.

Every fiber of Nexus’s being was choked with the so-called blessing. The foreign magic was everywhere, like a thick network of roots in fertile soil, and the magic was pulsing with a steady, reliable rhythm... like a heartbeat. Still, just like with Twilight, Nightmare Moon found the core of the infection in Nexus’s head. Though, she quickly discovered that the infection’s core had overtaken Nexus’s entire brain, where in Twilight it was more like a cancerous growth on the back of her skull.

While more advanced, the infection felt the same to Nightmare Moon, so she tried to do as she did before. She used her magical mane to try and pull at the roots, to remove the blessing from Nexus's body. Yet, when her mane made contact with the infection, it made contact back. It was like getting zapped by lightning, and for a moment her mind filled with strange thoughts.

The suddenness of the attack made Nightmare Moon pull her mane back, and she quickly distanced herself from Nexus in fear he had been the one that attacked her. Yet, even as he began to sit up, Nexus's movements were sluggish and sloppy, as if he was sleepwalking.

Nightmare Moon watched as Spell Nexus sat up straight. He then rolled his head back, and allowed his mouth to open in a silent scream. For a moment it looked as if Nexus wasn't breathing, but then he coughed and something began to spill out of his mouth. It was a gashly black smoke that looked both sickly and poisonous. With each breath Nexus took, more of the smoke escaped his mouth, and the vapors began to circle and wrap around him while a larger cloud formed above his head.

The cloud continued to grow and began to drift towards Nightmare Moon. It was a slow drift, and given a few more seconds, the cloud would have likely reached her. Yet, before it could draw too close, Nexus choked, as if something had suddenly grabbed hold of his throat. At the same time, the spirals in his horn began to glow with a weak but steady white light. That light spread from his horn to the rest of his body, covering almost every inch of his coat. When it was done, it looked like Nexus's body had been painted with eldritch lines.

From those glowing white lines, which seemed to focus around Nexus's cutie mark, chains of magic began to appear. They lunged out, somehow grabbing hold of the black cloud. They wrapped around and dug in, binding the smoke before snapping taut and pulling the cloud back into the air above Nexus's head.

It was a display that left Nightmare Moon feeling tense. She anxiously fluttered her wings in an effort to relieve the uneasy feeling that was gripping her. There was something about the cloud that made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up, yet at the same time she felt drawn to the cloud.

Taking an anxious step, Nightmare Moon walked around Nexus, keeping her distance until she stood just to his left side. She focused on the white, eldritch lines that had appeared across his body. It was a spell of some sort, there was no doubting that, but it was not a spell she had seen before. The lines even seemed to merge with Nexus's spell-circle cutie mark.

Nightmare Moon began tracing the arcane lines with her eyes, trying to see if there was any rhyme or reason to the way they were laid out. She had come across a few books in the library about arcane lines, ones she had searched for when she had heard her resurrection spell had relied heavily on that ancient form of magic.

Yet focusing solely on the white lines would prove to be a mistake. As Nightmare Moon tried to find meaning in the spell that had appeared across Nexus's coat, the cloud was inching its way closer to her. It came at her from the side, keeping the mystic chains that held it pulled taut.

When Nightmare Moon finally noticed how close the cloud had come, it was already too late. Striking with the speed of a snake, the cloud lashed out, surging through a hole in the chains that bound it. Nightmare Moon wasn't able to jump away fast enough, and the cloud came in contact with the side of her body.

From that one moment of contact, Nightmare Moon felt something. It was like a sea of emotions was pouring into her. Hatred, loathing, a thirst for revenge and power; these and many other emotions began to fill her chest. It felt like she was being overwhelmed, washed away, and drowned, like she had fallen into a raging river.

In that moment, however, the white lines on Nexus's coat pulsed, and the chains that were wrapped around the cloud rattled. The spell holding the cloud began to pull, and slowly but surely it drug the vaporous mass away from Nightmare Moon, eventually breaking the connection that had formed between the two.

The instant the connection was broken, Nightmare Moon found she was able to move and breathe again, and within moments her mind was in a panic. She stumbled back to put as much distance between her and the cloud as possible, and she panted heavily as she tried to comprehend the overwhelming emotions that were already dying in her chest.

It was just as Nightmare Moon had feared. Rifling through her memories, she thought back to the conversations she had shared with Spell Nexus, remembering details he had offered. He had been chosen by Celestia to study the shreds that were left behind when she, or rather she and Luna, were defeated by the Elements of Harmony.

Nexus said it was while he was working with those shards that he received the very first blessing, that his eyes were opened to her wisdom and glory. But, if anything, his eyes had been blinded. He had been twisted and turned into a tool by a will that wasn't his own, much like how Nexus had used the poisonous magic to turn Twilight against her.

Spell Nexus was the mastermind behind the Children of Nightmare, but it was not his will that drove him forward. He was just another victim, the *first* victim, and the *true* evil behind the Children of Nightmare, behind all that had happened in Equestria...

... Was none other than Nightmare Moon herself.

The black cloud... Nightmare Moon could only guess that it was once a shred left behind by the Elements of Harmony. It was part of her, arguably the *worst* part: her unmatched loathing of the Royal Sisters, her arrogant sense of superiority, and her thirst for vengeance. The echoes of the

most powerful emotions, the emotions that had once made Nightmare Moon seek the eternal night, had attacked, entered, and corrupted Spell Nexus.

It was those emotions that drove Nexus to turn against Celestia, to form the Children of Nightmare, and to attempt the resurrection spell. Yet, if that was the case, why hadn't that poisoned magic tried to rejoin with the rest of the shreds when the spell was being cast? Why hadn't it left Nexus and merged with her?

That was when Nightmare Moon realized the purpose of the white lines that crisscrossed Nexus's body. It was a binding spell, meant to hold a majority of the poisonous magic.

Nexus was the headmaster of Celestia's school and a previous student of the princess. He wasn't an idiot, and he must have known that dealing with the shreds would be dangerous. Nightmare Moon could only guess that he prepared a binding spell either before he began working with the shreds or after he realized he had been attacked.

Nexus, the real Spell Nexus, had turned his body into a living prison, even if it meant that the corrupting magic was free to twist his mind. Yet the binding spell was not perfect. He was able to spread his so called "blessing" by breaking off small pieces of the corruption inside him.

It was a bitter truth, and Nightmare Moon still wished to punish the pony who had almost killed Twilight. She, however, could not deny Nexus's innocence. He was just another victim. He was just another pony she had hurt.

And she had to try and set things right.

Lightning began to crackle around Nightmare Moon's horn, and the energy quickly spread to her mane. She would attack this poisonous magic outright, and destroy it. She would rid the world of it. She would destroy the thing that had dared to threaten the ponies she cared about.

She would destroy the worst part of herself.

That thought, that one thought echoed in Nightmare Moon's mind like a haunting call, and it stirred something deep inside. She hesitated, and just stood there while the black cloud continued to reach out to her, even as the binding spell on Nexus's body kept pulling it back.

The cloud was a part of her, the *worst* part, but... it was still a part of her.

Without even thinking, Nightmare Moon took an anxious step forward, now understanding why she was drawn to the cloud. It was her vengeance, pride and loathing. It was the thing that would let her become the merciless ruler that everypony expected, let her become a whole mare again. It was the part of her that would actually *enjoy* being Equestria's tyrant queen.

The cloud was just inches away now, and Nightmare Moon came to a stop when she saw it try to close the minuscule distance that kept the two separated. She shut her eyes, and tried to fight the temptation building in her mind. If she joined with this, she would be able to forget about it all. Forget about her friends, about Twilight. She could simply forget about the time she had spent as a filly.

Nightmare Moon opened her eyes, and they glinted as a smile started to form on her lips.

Yes... she would be able to forget, and then she would be able to take her revenge. She would make the bearers of the Elements of Harmony pay for what they had done. She would smash the ancient power as she had before, and lead those who had wielded it against her to their just reward: a tight-fitting rope and a long fall from the gallows. She would watch them plummet until the noose tightened about their thin little necks. She would watch them all fall. She would watch Twilight fall, twist in the wind, and receive her just reward for abandoning Equestria's true queen.

She would do it all, and then she would-

Fresh glowing chains lashed out from Nexus's body, digging deep into the cloud. The binding spell was struggling to pull back the smoke as it spread out across Nightmare Moon's body. It began to blend with her coat and merge with her flesh, until one of the mystical chains grazed Nightmare Moon's chest.

The magic burnt like a hot stove, and the pain snapped Nightmare Moon back to reality. She realized what she was thinking, and jumped back to separate herself from the black cloud. Heavy pants escaped her mouth as she fought the urge to vomit.

She had just wanted to hurt the ponies of Equestria. She had wanted to bring back the eternal night, to deprive the ponies of their sun. She had wanted to destroy the Elements of Harmony, and she had wanted... wanted to see Twilight hang from the gallows.

A flutter of movement in the periphery of her vision drew Nightmare Moon's attention, and she saw the cloud inching towards her once again. This time, however, she retreated from its reach while her eyes and mane flared.

"NO!" she snapped at the cloud. "I don't want you! I don't care if you're some missing piece of me, I don't-"

Nightmare Moon's words died on her lips as she was hit with a cold realization, like somepony had thrown a brick in her face. Her breathing became slow, and tears formed in her eyes. She began to laugh and cry at the same time. Laughing at how stupid she had been, and crying because of what she had lost.

“The part I’ve been missing...” Nightmare Moon echoed, half-heartily stomping the ground, venting frustration from her own idiocy. “Without you, I’m not the same mare I used to be. Without you, I could have gone on being ignorant, continued being a silly, scared filly. I could have just stayed Nyx.”

That thought sparked something to life inside Nightmare Moon, like a match being tossed into a barrel of oil. It ignited a rage, a rage like none she had ever felt before. Her gaze quickly hardened, focusing on the black cloud with an unmatched hatred.

“And you... ***YOU TOOK THAT AWAY FROM ME!!!***” Nightmare Moon bellowed. “You couldn’t be satisfied. You couldn’t take defeat. You had to corrupt innocent ponies and finish the resurrection spell. You had to make me remember *everything* I’ve done, and convince me to do things I can *never* be forgiven of! And, because of that, now.... ***THEY ALL HATE ME!!! I CAN NEVER BE HAPPY AGAIN BECAUSE OF YOU!!!***”

The surge of anger in Nightmare Moon’s voice seemed to give strength to the cloud. The dark magic swirled into a frenzy and strained against the chains that bound it to Nexus. As Nightmare Moon calmed herself from the outburst, so did the cloud also calm down, though it still continued to reach out to her.

“*But no more,*” Nightmare Moon seethed as a cold determination formed in her eyes as tears streamed down her face. It was in that moment the cloud of smoke changed its intent. It no longer reached for Nightmare Moon. Instead, it was trying to distance itself from her. It was trying to flee, despite the fact that it was still being contained by the binding spell.

Nightmare Moon spread her stance, and her eyes began to white with her magical power. At the same time, the gentle waving of her mane grew more violent and the magical field of stars rose upward like a roaring fire. Her mane stretched out and began to pool against the ceiling of the throne room. It was just like the night when she first came back to Equestria, when her mane filled the air inside the Ponyville town hall.

“I *won’t* be the mare you want me to be,” Nightmare Moon spoke, punctuating her sentence with a crack of lighting from her mane. It arched down and struck the black cloud, causing part of it to vaporize and burn away. The cloud surged and swirled in a panic, struggling with greater force against the binding spell like a caged animal.

“I *won’t* let you hurt the ponies I care about any more! I *won’t* let you hurt Rarity! Or Rainbow Dash! Or Applejack! Or Fluttershy! Or Pinkie Pie! Or Cheerilee!”

With each name, Nightmare Moon brought down a crack of arcane lightning from the dreadful storm her mane and tail had formed in the air of the throne room. With each strike, part of the black cloud was eradicated. The dark vapor scrambled and swirled, as if wincing, like it could feel the pain of being struck by the focused magical energy.

"I *won't* let you hurt Apple Bloom! Or Scootaloo! Or Sweetie Belle! Or Twist! I *won't* let you hurt my friends *ever AGAIN!*"

The next bolt Nightmare Moon called down was stronger than the ones before, her rage giving strength to her spell. It blew a significantly larger hole in the cloud, but unlike the bolts before, Nightmare Moon also felt the lightning bolt striking her as well. It was like she had been stabbed in the chest with a dagger, and the searing pain made her grit her teeth.

Despite the fact that it was trapped inside Spell Nexus, Nightmare Moon still shared a link to the cloud. It was a part of her, and her base instincts of self-preservation were screaming for her to stop. A fresh wave of nausea passed through her and her body felt like it was on the verge of giving out.

Her own body was rebelling, trying to keep her from further destroying the cloud, but Nightmare Moon would not stop. Keeping herself on her hooves through sheer willpower, she continued.

"I *won't* let you hurt anypony ever again!"

This time, when Nightmare Moon shocked the cloud, it audibly hissed in pain, its form writhing in the air like a bag of wounded snakes. It was hurting, but it was a pain she did not hear or see, but felt herself. Her eyes were shut tight and her ears rang with the sound of her own screaming.

It hurt a lot worse now. Nightmare Moon felt as if she had just hit her own chest with the lightning bolt. A burning, searing, stabbing sensation shot deep into her body. She was forced to drop to one knee, if only to keep herself from falling over completely. She panted, and the glow in her eyes fading as she tried to recover.

It was a moment the cloud, which was half as large as it had been, tried to seize. It squirmed and strained against the chains of the binding spell in a desperate attempt to escape, and it was beginning to succeed. The lines on Nexus's body were beginning to fade; the binding spell was losing power.

Freedom, however, would come too late for the cloud. Rising back off her front knee, Nightmare Moon steadied herself as the glow in her eyes returned brighter than ever. The thunderous storm formed by her mane began to crackle with energy, and became saturated to the point where it couldn't hold any more magic even if it tried. Nightmare Moon then focused that energy, and with a single, final stomp, she screamed her final words to the poisonous magic.

"I WON'T LET YOU HURT TWILIGHT... *EVER... **AGAIN!!!***"

The surge of lightning that was released at that moment was like none other seen in Equestria. The thunder blew out the throne room's stained glass windows and cascaded across the land. The sound felt like an earthquake in Ponyville and was clearly audible even in distant Appleloosa.

The bolt of arcane energy itself was as thick as a tree trunk and shone like a miniature sun. The throne room was completely bathed in light, and anypony who happened to be looking at the throne room's windows was forced to shield their eyes from the bright glare.

The thunderous sound of the spell drowned out Nightmare Moon's scream. Even though she couldn't hear herself, she knew that the scream coming out of her mouth was blood curdling. The pain... it was like nothing she had ever experienced before. It was worse than when she had been attacked by the Elements of Harmony, because now it felt like she was being burned and stabbed to death from the inside out.

To Nightmare Moon, it felt like the pain and the spell went on for an eternity. It was, however, only a few seconds before the spell was spent. The arcane lighting slimmed and faded before completely disappearing, leaving only a few lingering arcs of energy to cascade across the room.

With the spell ended, Nightmare Moon collapsed into a trembling, panting mass on the floor. Her body tried to recover from the pain as her vision swam. She didn't know how long she laid there, but as soon as she had the strength Nightmare Moon raised herself up off the floor, and looked across the throne room.

Spell Nexus had been blown clear by the thunderous explosion and was now laying against a far wall, unconscious. The glowing white lines on his body looked broken and jagged, and were now starting to fade away. The binding spell had been broken, but it had served its purpose.

The dark cloud was gone, but Nightmare Moon could see something remained of the poisonous magic. It was a pathetic little blob of black gunk that oozed and gurgled. It was no larger than a field mouse, and it rolled like a sickly, sticky ball of tar. It was inching its way towards the throne room door, still trying to flee.

Sneering and grunting, Nightmare Moon forced herself back up onto her hooves. Her legs were shaking, but she kept her balance enough to begin walking forward. It took only a few steps to catch up with the little ball of black ooze, and she stomped her hoof down on it once she was close enough.

Then, without a single word of mercy or regret, Nightmare Moon's eyes flashed white once more. A final jolt of energy surged down her leg, and the ooze burned and hissed beneath her

hoof. She winced at the slight pain in her chest, but Nightmare Moon did not relent until the ooze was nothing but an ashy smudge on the floor.

And with that, Nightmare Moon took in a single deep breath, held it, and then let it slip out slowly. She stood there for several long moments, taking in everything she had just done... and she was happy. Equestria, her friends, Twilight... they were all safe. She had destroyed the thing that had tried to hurt those she cared about.

But what else had she just done?

She had destroyed a piece of herself, the part that would have made everything she had done, everything she had accomplished, have meaning and purpose. Now, she truly and forever was stuck between two lives. She could never be Nyx again, and she had just burnt away the part of her that could have found happiness living the life of the true tyrant queen Nightmare Moon.

Still... the fleeting moment of happiness in her chest lingered. She had... done something right, and even if Equestria as a whole hated her for the rest of eternity for what she had done, she had at least done this much right.

And it wasn't going to be the last thing she did right either.

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*CREEEEEEAAAAAAK... CREAK... CREEEEEEAAAAAAK... CREAK*

At a larger home on the outskirts of Ponyville, a single filly sat on a swing in the front yard. The hinges of the swing set creaked and squeaked as the filly barely swung at all. She only moved a few inches back and forth as she sat on the swing on all fours with her eyes on the ground.

Her dad always used to push her on the swing. He got busy sometimes, had to work late, but he *a/ways* made time to push her on the swing. The swing had been her favorite birthday present, even more than her tiara. It was the only thing her dad was always willing to do with her. He was always willing to give her a short push, even if he was heading out to work or going someplace.

That was before Nightmare Moon came back.

The past few weeks had been the worst of the filly's life. Almost every pony in town was mad at her. Some outright blamed her for everything that had happened, but the worst part was what had happened with her father.

When Nightmare Moon came back, her father left home to go work and live in the castle. Her mother had said he was working for the queen; that they should be happy. Her mother had said that her father was now a powerful stallion in the government, and that's why he had left. He

was important to Nightmare Moon, and that they should be happy.

Yet Diamond Tiara wasn't happy at all. She continued to stare at the ground, not even caring that her tiara had fallen off and was now sitting in the dirt underneath her swing. She didn't care about that stupid thing, didn't care if daddy was powerful or important. The only thing she wanted was to have him back. He'd make all the mean ponies stop teasing her. Ponies never made fun of her when he was around. That... and she missed him.

Diamond Tiara sniffled, using a front leg to wipe her nose. She didn't cry; not because she wasn't sad but because she was also angry. She wanted to make Nightmare Moon give her daddy back, but she was scared. It was stupid to think she was scared of Nyx... but... but Nightmare Moon was scary.

Why did Nightmare Moon needed him anyway? She had so many other ponies working for her; why did she need to take her daddy?

Diamond Tiara grumbled, pouted, and did her best to keep herself from crying as she continued to think about her father. She had been moping around inside the house, but her mother had tried to encourage her to swing on her swing. She had gone outside and sat down on the swing set just so her mother would leave her alone.

Still, she didn't swing, mostly because what she wanted the most was to be pushed on the swing. She wanted to get a push from her daddy, but he didn't come home anymore and she didn't see him in town either. He was just gone, stolen away.

And if her father wasn't there to give her a swing, Diamond Tiara didn't want to swing at all. She just wanted to sit there and wait until her father finally came home to give her a push.

It was at this moment, amidst the creaking and whining of the swing's hinges, Diamond Tiara heard another creak. The house was surrounded by a fence, and the new sound she heard was the creaking of the front gate's hinges as it was opened. Diamond Tiara first thought it was Silver Spoon, and she lifted her head to tell her friend she wasn't in the mood to play or do anything. Yet, when she looked up, her gaze met with a pair of azure eyes.

She stared at those eyes for a long time, and those eyes stared back. The pony who owned those eyes took a tentative step forward, and then broke into a gallop. Diamond Tiara just as quickly jumped off the swing and ran to meet the other pony, leaping into his embrace. She hugged the stallion tightly around the neck, and he held her in his front hooves just as tightly.

"Diamond Tiara, Sweetie, it's time for dinn-" Diamond Tiara's mother began. She poked her head out the front door, but then froze. She looked at the stallion her daughter was hugging, and her own eyes began tearing up.

“Regal... Regal Cut, is that you?”

Regal Cut looked up, smiling through the tears streaming down his face. In an instant, Diamond Tiara’s mother was outside, joining the warm embrace the family was sharing.

“Daddy, does this mean you’re not working for the queen any more?” Diamond Tiara asked.

“Yes... yes it does,” Regal Cut said with a nod, not even bother to wipe away the tears on his face. “She released me.”

“Released? But honey, I thought-”

“Not now, dear,” Regal Cut said, quickly sneaking a kiss from his wife. “I... I promise I’ll explain later. So... I heard dinner is ready?”

“Yes... yes it is.”

“Good. Diamond Tiara and I will be right in, but first... I want to push my daughter on her swing.”

The mare nodded, and Diamond Tiara laughed as she quickly galloped over to the swing, Regal Cut following behind her. Soon, Diamond Tiara was giggling and laughing, calling out to be pushed higher while her father smiled, tears of joy pouring from his eyes.

All across Equestria, similar homecomings occurred. Stallions and mares who had once served Nightmare Moon were returning to the families and friends they had all but abandoned. As each was greeted with warm embraces and tear-filled eyes, those who had once served Equestria’s queen spoke of how they had not been fired from their jobs, but released... given back the freedom they never knew they had lost.

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Zecora nosed open the door to her hut, returning to her home after gathering herbs and roots she would need for her latest brew. She smiled as she stepped inside, and sniffed at the aroma that hung in the air. It smelt just as it needed to. She took in the sent a few moments longer before turning to look at her bubbling cauldron. Sitting beside it, Twilight Sparkle was using her magic to carefully stir the contents.

“In herbalism, Twilight, you have shown great potential. In just a few days, your growth has been exponential,” Zecora praised.

Twilight smiled, and looked up from her work. “Thanks, but I’m just a quick study. That, and you have some really amazing books on herbs and their properties.”

"In stewing herbs and roots, zebras are unmatched, and to our books the same compliment can be attached. Still, I offer thanks for your aid with my work. You could have easily just hung around my home, like a lazy jerk."

Twilight laughed a little, and went back to stirring the cauldron. "Well, I've never been that good at just sitting around, especially when I've got a lot on my mind. It helps if I can find something to distract myself with."

"Heavy thoughts rest upon your soul," Zecora said knowingly as she began to unpack her ingredient laden saddlebags. "Undoubtedly about an alicorn queen who was once a foal."

"Filly," Twilight corrected. "But... yes, I am thinking about Nyx. How can I not? The last time I saw her, she was going to confront Nexus about what he did to me. I know she's an alicorn... but it's been three days. What if something happened?"

"To your concern I can relate, you worry about Nightmare Moon and her fate. But you must understand you are a wanted mare, and-"

KNOCK... KNOCK...

"you must hide yourself with care," Zecora finished, quickly changing her sentence while still managing to pull off a rhyme. Twilight nodded, and slipped into Zecora's bedroom while the zebra moved to the front door. After giving Twilight a few more moments to hide and hearing the pony on the far side knock once more, Zecora cracked open the door and looked to see who was outside.

"Hey there, Zecora."

A relieved smile formed on Zecora's lips. She opened the door as a particular orange farm pony walked inside with a baby dragon riding on her back. "Applejack and Spike, it is good to see you. I hope you have not come seeking a healing brew."

"Naw, we ain't here for anything like that. Though, I gotta say, the critters here in the Everfree Forest sure seem more riled up than usual. I swear I saw something that looked like a wolf on my way here."

"A lupus minor is what you saw, I have no doubt. I too have noticed them lingering about. For several days now the forest has not been at ease. There are far too many monsters linger amongst these trees."

Applejack glanced outside, as if she would see one of those monsters looking in on them through one of the hut's windows. "If there are so many monsters, maybe you should come stay in Ponyville for a spell, just to be safe."

"Your concern is touching, but you need not worry. If it becomes too much, I will leave this place in a hurry. Still, if I may ask, what brings you here, out into Everfree's wild frontier?" Zecora asked before going to the cauldron and resuming the stirring Twilight had been forced to abandon.

"Don't bother barking up that tree, Zecora," Spike said as he jumped off Applejack's back. "I've been trying to get her to tell me the whole way here."

"Well, I told ya it was a surprise, and now that we're actually here, I'll tell ya," Applejack lectured before looking back at Zecora. "We're here to see Twilight."

Spike's eyes widened, and he quickly looked around. Twilight, having heard her name, stepped out from her hiding place in Zecora's bedroom. The second Spike saw Twilight, he tackled her and hugged her neck while laughing and crying at the same time.

"Twilight! Oh Twilight, I've missed you so much, and when I heard you were going to be executed, I... I..."

"I've missed you too, Spike," Twilight said. She lifted a hoof and returned Spike's hug. "And I'm sorry I couldn't tell you I was okay, but I couldn't risk the royal guards finding me."

"Well, Sugarcube, I reckon you don't have to worry about that any more," Applejack responded, "and, by the way, it's good to see you're okay."

"Thanks, Applejack, it's good to see you too," Twilight replied, "but why don't I have to worry any more? How did you two even find me, and what's going on in Ponyville?"

"A whole lotta crazy," Applejack answered. "A few days ago, Nightmare Moon called all the ponies she had workin' for her to the castle. Every single one, and she kept them all locked up at the castle until sometime this mornin'. Then, she called the mayor up there. We were all worried, but an hour after that the castle gates opened and all them ponies started comin' out.

"But here's the strange thing," Applejack continued. "All the ponies that went in had turquoise eyes, but when I saw them comin' out, not *one* of them had that eye color any more.

"They didn't?"

Applejack shook her head at Twilight's question. "No, and that ain't the end of it either. After all them ponies left the castle, the mayor came back out. She rounded up all the ponies in Ponyville, and read us a message from Nightmare Moon. It was all about how her crazy cult was disbanded, and how she was sendin' all the ponies who worked for her back to their families."

"She... she sent them *all* home?" Twilight asked in disbelief.

"Yeah, it was so crazy," Spike said as he finished hugging Twilight. "I think I even saw Spell Nexus walking by the library, along with some other ponies from Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns. I would have never thought he had anything to do with this."

"Oh, trust me, he had *something* to do with it alright," Twilight grumbled. Her memory of being attacked by Nexus caused a small twinge of pain in her neck.

"Well, maybe not, Sugarcube. From the way it sounded, none of them ponies workin' for Nightmare Moon were doin' it on purpose. Supposedly, they were brainwashed, but when she found that out, Nightmare Moon fixed the brainwashin'. She freed all them ponies, and then let them choose whether or not they wanted to stay and work for her or go home. And, from what I hear, they all chose to leave."

"This is very peculiar and strange; what has caused Nightmare Moon to change?" Zecora asked.

Applejack shrugged her shoulders. "Don't rightly know, sugarcube. But that *still* ain't the strangest part."

"What could be stranger than what has been said?" Zecora asked. "Has Nightmare Moon grown a second head?"

"No, I reckon even *that* wouldn't be as strange as what she has done. Nightmare Moon went and stepped down as the Queen of Equestria."

"She... she stepped down?" Twilight whispered in disbelief.

"No, I find this all too much to swallow. I believe your words, Applejack, are quite hollow."

It took a moment for Applejack to parse what Zecora had said before she furrowed her eyebrows. "You callin' me a liar?"

Zecora nodded her head firmly. "Nightmare Moon relinquishing her crown and control, it goes against all her plans and her greatest goal."

"Well, if you don't believe me, then why don't you take a gander at this?" Applejack replied. She reached into her saddlebags, and after a moment of digging, pulled out a scroll. Twilight took the scroll in her magic, unrolled it, and saw it was something of a royal proclamation, though it was written more like a common letter. It did, however, have a royal seal.

Zecora leaned in behind Twilight's head, reading the message alongside her.

To the citizens of Equestria,

Today I, Nightmare Moon, have disbanded the Children of Nightmare, the cult of ponies who were responsible for my resurrection. They, along with any other ponies that joined the castle staff in the past few weeks, have been released from their service and are allowed to return to their homes, families, friends, and lives.

Please hold no ill will against these ponies. Their actions were not their own. All that they did was done under the influence of my magic. My magic tainted and corrupted these ponies. They, like all of Equestria, were victims and nothing more.

If you must blame anypony, blame only me.

Finally, I, Nightmare Moon, hereby step down as Queen of Equestria. All power and control of the government is hereby returned to the regents and officials appointed by Celestia and Luna, those who are entrusted to rule in the absence of the Royal Sisters.

Should anypony need to speak with me, they can find me in my castle. Otherwise, I would ask that you all simply pretend that I don't even exist.

Nightmare Moon

"I guess what you say is true; forgive me for ever doubting you."

Applejack smiled and gently punched Zecora in the shoulder. "Aw, don't you worry about it. I probably wouldn't believe it myself if I hadn't seen all them ponies leavin' the castle un-brainwashed."

"It kind of makes sense, actually," Spike remarked. "Can you think of *anypony* you know that would have worked for Nightmare Moon willingly? I mean, back me up on this Twi... Twilight, are you crying?"

Twilight looked up from the message, and quickly used a front hoof to rub away the tears that were starting to slide down her cheeks. "Sorry... I'm just... so happy."

"I'll admit, sugarcube, this here is some good news," Applejack said, "but not exactly *that* good."

"But don't you see what this means?" Twilight asked with a wide grin on her face.

"I reckon I don't. What *does* it mean?"

"She's not trying to be Nightmare Moon any more," Twilight said, rubbing her eyes again to try

and keep back the tears. "I think... I think my Nyx... is coming back."

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[<<Chapter 16 - Chapter 18>>](#)

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Questions, Comments, Concerns?

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