

Cunning paced up and down Bright Light's office with a vice grip on the papers suspended in his magic's grasp. The battle plans were conservative at best - a strict defensive line across the border to the northern province and gryffon territories, checkpoints in each border town for refugees and travelers, and a greater troop presence in major cities. Her boldest part of the plan was to call all of the volunteers to active duty. He snorted. All her plan did was spend her reserves. Wasteful.

But it served the purpose of avoiding a declaration of war. The citizens would not support the war without some just cause. Most of the leaders that fought on behalf of the Princesses were unpopular after Celestia's return. Any that had any power beforehoof were forced to step down. Mothers and wives forced their sons or husbands in the guard to retire early, fearing another conflict would take their loved ones away, though luckily, the inspired recruits more than made up for their numbers if not their quality. It would take a devastating strike against the kingdom for her subjects to support another war. But waiting for ponies to be murdered in cold blood surely wasn't part of her plan.

Cunning stopped his pacing, letting the note drop onto the desk. If Celestia only prepared a defense for an attack, it left her a few viable situations to get the other side to attack first.

Option one: wait until the public forces her to weaken the extra guard, allowing an attack similar to a massacre. Not only would their blood be on her hooves, but the public would question why she didn't have the foresight to stop it.

Option number two: put herself in danger by approaching crowds to convince them that hostile action may be the best course of action. Even if she's not attacked on the trip, she gains support to rally extra troops for a conflict. She does leave Dusk and Luna wide open to attack with her absence.

Third and most viable would be to begin covert actions to prevent the war all together. Secret strikes and missions into enemy territory would eventually stir the other side to collapse or discover her attempts at provocation, thus starting conflict. With a limited number of trained soldiers, she would need to send her most valued troops behind enemy lines. Definitely dangerous, but she accomplishes her goal without risking harm to her sister and niece.

"What are you planning, Celestia?" He whispered to himself. "How did you rid yourself so easily of my control?"

Anger started to boil inside of him once more. Her reluctance to be involved in conflict surely wasn't just about protecting her citizens. He couldn't shake her hesitance to chase after the Prince of Chaos. There was always a mask of anger covering some mixed emotion swirling inside of her head.

He morphed his body back into Bright Light, before exiting his study for the hallway. The guards outside the door saluted him as he passed.

"At ease. I'm feeling a little better than earlier. I'm just heading to the library."

The two nodded and resumed their former positions.

The halls in the school were decorated with many items of historical value; tapestries, sculptures and artwork lined its halls. Most of the items were relatively new - originating within the last three hundred years, when the school was revitalized to its current form of magical prowess. But some dated back to its founding - the first school established by the three tribes, meant for all ponies to attend. The original three dormitories had the ancient flags first placed on Equestrian soil, hanging above the entrances.

As if they were able to govern themselves, Cuning thought as he passed them. A few minutes later, he was in the library proper.

It was small in comparison to the royal archives and functioned more as a museum than an actual library. Almost all of the books in the library were recent texts: required modern studies, as well as recent revisions of Equestrian history. But it was the cases throughout the room that were the most interesting things to see: Commander Hurricane's armor, the garb and crown of Queen Platinum, and Chancellor Puddinghead's... hat. Ancient tools, weapons - several eras of clothing, all genuinely donated by their owners centuries ago - why students bothered to come here for books, he couldn't understand. Everything they needed was right in front of them, if only they bothered to look-

Bright Light gasped quietly. It was so clear. Whenever Discord was mentioned in a meeting, there was something - a twitch, the bat of an eye, or some visible cue on Celestia's face. The more stress on the princess, the more noticeable it was.

What was it? Think... he pondered.

He could see the look of frantic confusion in her eyes. While on the outside she was still just as strong, she was mentally beating herself up for some hurt her former love had caused. A twinkle behind her eyes that made them look that much more terrified. It was a plea. She had no clue how to handle it. How to handle his brother.

It was that look. The look she had once given them both, before... before her father was involved. Afterward, only his brother got to gaze upon. Hope. Love.

Anger began to consume him. Yes... that was why he was doing this. He swallowed before growling to himself, "She still loves him."

He trotted over to the window and stared out at the gathering clouds over Canterlot Castle. smile cracked across his face. That throne was rightfully his; so was his beloved Celestia.

"Misguided foal," he whispered, licking his lips. "You choose my brother... for now."

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The storm came slowly across the sky, gradually spreading over the city of Canterlot. Rain poured down as if the weather ponies were squeezing the clouds for everything they had. The sound of rain on stone caused the whole castle to have an otherworldly hum.

As Nightwind led Cloud Skimmer down the hall, he noticed her cringe when the noises grew in intensity. She had never been in this part of the castle, where both Princesses had their respective rooms. They usually kept the windows open through Nightmare Night to keep cool, but it had the unintended effect of a whistling breeze. On stormy nights it was... unsettling at best.

"Don't mind the noises, it's just the wind," he said.

She nodded, walking beside him down the rest of the corridor. "If you don't mind me asking, am I being reassigned to look after Princess Luna?"

He continued to stare straight ahead. After a moment, he spoke, "I'm sorry, sis. I'm not allowed to say."

Her cheeks reddened from anger and embarrassment. The fact that they were family was far from secret in the castle. She didn't want to be called 'sis' or 'sister' while on duty. That didn't stop him from pushing her buttons when they were alone.

A smirk played across his face. "My hooves are tied. Princess's orders."

Cloud Skimmer rolled her eyes as Nightwind opened the door to Princess Luna's room. She hesitated for a moment, debating whether or not to continue. He nodded his head towards the open door.

"Well?" He whispered. His face had grown completely serious, as if he was steeling himself for what was to come. Eventually, she worked up the resolve to enter the room.

The room stole her breath away. Each of the walls was painstakingly painted to look like the night sky - almost like a planetarium. But the dotted stars along the room twinkled with magic, showing their relative positions in the night sky. The bed sat in the center of the room, along with her wardrobe and collection of books. Each piece of furniture was painstakingly designed to be low to the ground, functioning both as chairs and as an unobstructed view of her canvas.

Princess Luna wasn't alone in the room, either. Granite shuffled around the bed, straightening the sheets. Her eyes were only partially glazed over, watching him with half-hearted intent.

"Cold..." she whispered. Her magic pulled the covers tight around her body, muffling the slight click of the door as it shut.

But Cloud Skimmer heard it. The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. Her rational mind started running through all the possibilities.

Granite pulled the shade down over the window. The canvas cover seemed to melt into the wall, completing that area of the faux night sky.

The princess' glazed look suddenly became clear and focused. In Cloud Skimmer's mind, this happened only before a major outburst of crying and mourning. She was floored when her voice rang clear and strong.

"Were you followed?" Princess Luna asked. She sat up in her bed adjusting her pillows for a more comfortable position.

Cloud Skimmer looked frantically between the Princess and her brother. He bowed before her, "No, Princess."

Her eyes began to glow a light blue in the darkness. That same color in all the paintings on the castle walls, the history books, and depictions of their ancient foe.

"Nightmare... Moon..."

She looked to the others for some kind of guidance. Perhaps a preemptive strike while she gathered her power, anything to stop her from becoming that monster. Her heart sank when both pegasi looked at her with the same light blue glow in their eyes.

She sprinted for the door but instead slammed into the Princess's magic. Her whole body lifted from the ground. She tried to scream for help but no sound came out. Again and again she tried, but there was no use.

"Cloud Skimmer. I am not Nightmare Moon. We would not be having this conversation right now if I was." The princess lowered her onto one of the chairs and released the magic from everywhere but her mouth. "I cannot have you screaming at the top of your lungs either. It is too soon to play my cards even as I fear that time is closing in on us."

The magic slowly removed itself from her mouth. Cloud Skimmer barely breathed, taking in the wild contrast of her daily routine - now clearly a show - to her more stern personality.

"I'm sure you're wondering why I brought you here?"

Cloud Skimmer only managed to nod.

"One of Discord's agents is in the castle. But it's not just any agent - it has to be one of his advisors.

"Before you ask how I know this, be aware that I don't know which one is hidden among us, nor who he or she is parading around as. But I am not easily fooled. I felt the traces of Nightmare's magic begin to shift when the statues were released. For a long while I cursed the fact that this reaction slowed me from saving my Dawn. As it turns out she doesn't need saving at all. It was a distraction."

Nightwind nodded and turned to his sister. "Right before Thunder Cloud fought off a group of Discord's followers, he found that Dawn had followed them onto the train. He intentionally abandoned his duty to protect Princess Dawn and the others. Their whereabouts are still unknown, but Twilight is protecting her."

Cloud Skimmer had a lot of trouble taking this all in. Why didn't she tell Celestia if she knew Dawn was fine? There was no need to escalate the threat of war if the facts were clear.

"You have questions, I assume." Luna leaned back on her pillows.

"How am I supposed to believe any of this?! You've been unresponsive since this all began!" Her voice began to raise in volume.

"Like I said, it is merely a ruse."

"A ruse you feel is so necessary that you are willing to emotionally destroy your daughter? Or even worse, if what you say is correct, leave her wide open to this 'spy'?" Cloud Skimmer immediately regretted those words. A long silence passed between the two.

"Do you think its easy to make that sacrifice?" Luna asked quietly. "I forced my own sister to banish me to the moon for a thousand years because of my own lack of judgement. My lack of trust.

I forced my sister to lock me up in the moon and lie about why I was sent there. I became a monster of legend so that she could still live in this world.”

Cloud Skimmer was dead silent. Watching the Princess bear her soul like that made her think twice about questioning her. She had practically brought Luna to tears.

“Do you still question my motives? Must I prove myself to you like I tried before? Or will you stab me in the back and throw me for dead?”

“I... I’m sorry... Princess.”

Luna took a few minutes to gather her composure. “That’s alright. I did practically throw this all on you.”

Cloud Skimmer gave a small smile.

“Now, questions?”

Cloud Skimmer nodded. “Why haven't you told Celestia, yet?”

“Because she is being controlled. Nothing I can say would change her mind, because she doesn't have a choice. She may hide her wounds well, but when I saw her eyes the night Dawn disappeared, I knew.”

“Can't you break the spell?” Cloud Skimmer asked.

Luna clammed up. There was obviously something left unsaid, which neither of the guards were willing to share. “The only release is death. Either she dies, or the pony who cast it on her does. I’m working towards the second option.”

Cloud Skimmer just stared at her. A spell that lasted as long as the caster lived? The thought terrified her. Pair that with a long since forgotten ancient enemy and it spelled disaster. She didn’t need to be a unicorn to envision the repercussions.

“That is why I called you here tonight. More than likely you three will be forced to leave the castle, in an attempt to weaken my sister. When that happens, I need eyes in the field so we can stop the war for as long as physically possible. Nightwind and Granite have already agreed to, but I would like you to do so as well.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re the only one that can watch over my daughter. I must act as I have been to minimize suspicion. She would be the first target if our enemy figures us out and I will not lose her like I almost lost Dawn.”

Cloud Skimmer lowered her head. The responsibility of watching over Dusk was tough on her at times - it seemed like an attack was always there, waiting. Letting Dusk out of her sight put her in a panic. She had frightened Dusk more than once already.

“I can understand that you have fulfilled this responsibility thus far. I’m only asking you to allow me to watch over the two of you. The spell allows you to call me to you in times of dire need.”

Cloud Skimmer nodded. Her protection of Dusk wouldn’t be enough if things fell to chaos. Besides, what harm could it do? “I’ll do it.”

“Thank you. It means so much to me that you are willing to do so.” She beckoned Cloud Skimmer over to the side of the bed. Cloud Skimmer obeyed without hesitation.

“Repeat after me:

“I Cloud Skimmer, do strengthen my loyalty to the crown and the protection of The Kingdom of Equestria. In the name of ponykind, under the guiding hooves of Chronos the First, and the ponies who descended to bring us harmony - Lik'tria, Malthus, Vreil, Kalignut, Ylldrid, and Nerites - shall I defend us till the end of all things.”

Cloud Skimmer hesitated before pronouncing some of the names, but found that when she read them, the words sounded as if she had known them all of her life. She felt a power resonate inside her, one she had never known before. When her voice finally became silent, the other ponies in the room nodded to her.

“Welcome to the Long Watch.”

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Screaming. So much screaming.

"I'm so sorry, please! PLEASE!"

The black cloud began to freeze over into small rigid crystal patterns. The laughter rang through the small chamber, echoing off of the stone walls. Her laughter, like she enjoyed this poor pony being frozen over and picked apart like a miner would do to precious stones: gently, piece by piece, slowly extracting the valuable parts.

"YOU DESERVE THIS, FOAL!" she boomed. But that couldn't be her. She was enjoying this - horrid torture.

Blood trickled across the stone floors, pooling in front of her. She looked down at her reflection.

Nightmare stared back with a wild, wicked smile on her face. "You do me proud, Celby."

Celestia screamed as she tumbled off the side of her bed, landing roughly on her shoulder. The doors to her room snapped open, as her personal guards charged into her chambers. Granite skidded to a halt beside the princess, while Nightwind shot through the window.

"Princess? Are you alright?"

She rose shakily to her hooves, leaning on Granite for support. All she could manage was a simple nod. Nightwind returned through the window, moving quickly to help support the princess.

"What happened?" Granite asked.

"It.. was..." she paused to slow her breathing. The guards stared at her in anticipation. She hadn't scared them like this in quite a long time. They were clearly unsettled and now completely on edge. "It was a... very real dream. One I don't wish to revisit tonight."

She looked out the window. The night sky was slowly peeling away its dark layers, revealing lines of orange and red on the horizon. It was almost time to raise the sun.

"Although it appears I don't have to," she giggled a little, lightening the mood in the room. The other guards relaxed, laughing nervously at their overreaction to the scene. They smiled at her, but the one she returned was far from genuine. One thought lingered in her mind:

Was it a dream? Was it real? What have I done? Mother, please... what have I done?

What have I done?

