Elements of Opposition

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Summary

In order to avoid upsetting Fluttershy while still creating chaos, Discord traveled to an alternate universe to wreak entertaining havoc, and picked the wrong one.

In the core universe, Spike receives a letter from Discord begging for help, and soon the Mane 6 are preparing to travel to the alternate universe to rescue him from their own twisted counterparts. Meanwhile, Discord struggles to keep his mind and will intact, while the alternate Twilight Sparkle seeks to use him as a source of magical power to be harnessed to Order, and the alternate Fluttershy expresses her own twisted mixture of desire and resentment against him.

There are no explicit, current, healthy pairings. There is the usual Spike/Rarity crush, past Discord/Celestia from long ago, unconsummated/unacknowledged feelings between the real Fluttershy and Discord, and a sick, totally messed-up relationship between the alternate Fluttershy and her prisoner, which I wouldn't even call a pairing since it's rape, except that the thing that makes it especially destructive is the presence of genuine emotions in it.

Graphic torture. Somewhat explicit, non-violent but psychologically destructive rape.
Harmony, 1 AM

In the middle of the night, Spike woke with an overwhelming need to belch.

This wasn't that shocking. While Princess Celestia had very rarely sent a letter this late at night, Princess Luna was also capable of sending letters, even if she almost never did. What was unusual was the surge of horrible nausea and the terrible taste in his mouth, the taste of spoil and rot.

One paw on his mouth and the other on his belly, Spike got to his feet. "Ugh..." He retched, and then belched. His flame came out a sickly yellowish green, and what looked like a badly mistreated scroll materialized and clattered to the floor before he could grab it.

Scrolls were not supposed to clatter. There was plainly something extremely weird about that thing.

The nausea passed, but if anything the terrible taste was worse. Spike picked up the battered, squashed scroll, and recoiled. It was wet. Saturated with some dark substance. Spike gagged again as he caught a whiff of the smell. Blood. Also a number of other disgusting smells he didn't even want to parse out right now.

He dropped the scroll, gingerly, on a desk, and ran for the kitchen, where he put on a kettle of boiling water. He pulled down a small ceramic container in the shape of a fat, grinning bear, which had been labeled "SPIKE'S TEA – DRAGONS ONLY!!!!!", and took out a pinch of the concoction within. It was cinnamon, and a mixture of the hottest peppers you could get in Equestria, and a mix of mineral dust consisting of gold, ruby, obsidian and diamond, all powdered so fine they looked like glitter. Spike put his tea concoction in a mug, poured the boiling water into it, poured a second cup of boiling water into a mug with no tea in it and drank that straight up because a taste this nasty needed some plain boiling water to burn it off, and then waited until his tea was done steeping and gulped it down as well, swishing it in his mouth to wash out every last trace of the bad taste.

Twilight was exhausted. Between the massive amount of studying history and court protocol she had to do before she could take her place in court on a regular basis, the frequent teleportations to Canterlot to assist the Princesses in some ceremonial duty, her research into the mysterious box and the potential location of keys for it, and her desperate attempts to still manage being the Ponyville librarian and spend time with her friends so they wouldn't feel as if she was drifting away from them now that she was a princess... Spike had seen her this tired before, but generally either final exams or the imminent end of the world were looming. There really were no major crises right now – the Discord situation was stable, in that he'd been missing for two months and no sign of chaos on the horizon anywhere; politics appeared to be going smoothly at the moment; no signs of Changelings, no mysterious mystic forces, everything basically as calm as things ever got in Ponyville. There wasn't any good reason for her to be working herself to exhaustion right now except that she was Twilight and that was what she did.

So there was no way Spike was going to wake her up to deal with this.

Spike carried the document out of the bedroom and into the main library, where he put on a lamp. There was no way he could sleep right now; the hot peppers he'd needed to wash the taste out had woken him up, and besides, he was intensely curious. What the hay was that thing? It looked like a
scroll that had been beaten up badly and soaked in something gross, blood he thought, but it was much too heavy to be a scroll, and things rattled inside it. Gingerly, touching it only with the tips of his claws because wow was this thing ever gross, he pried it open. The ends of it had been smushed and twisted, so it was more like a makeshift package of sorts than a scroll.

When he got it open numerous pages fell out. At least he assumed they were pages. Several of them were crumpled balls that had been squashed as small as a sheet of paper could get. Some were folded, but no two were folded the same way; one had been folded lengthwise again and again until it was very skinny, and then had been squashed like a bendy straw. Another had been folded widthwise, then lengthwise, then widthwise, then widthwise again, then lengthwise. Another had been folded into triangles, badly, with corners sticking out all over. Two sheets had been rolled into each other like a scroll ought to be, and those had been on the outside rolled around everything else, directly under the outer layer of packaging. One appeared to be an attempt to make an origami pony head, if the pony in question was a weird mutant of some kind with three horns and an absurdly wide face.

Neither the outer scroll that had been used as packaging, nor the two inner sheets that had actually been rolled the way scrolls were supposed to be rolled, had any sort of address, salutation or signature to indicate who the document had been sent from or who it was being sent to. Sighing, Spike decided to do his best to solve the mystery, since he couldn't sleep anyway. Besides, part of him was thinking this might even be a little bit fun. Take on a task that might challenge even Twilight a little bit, while she was sleeping, and do the whole thing for her. Present her with the results of his research in the morning. Watch her beam proudly at him. Yeah, that sounded nice.

Carefully he started unfolding the pages. The first thing he noted was that the writing did not look Equestrian. And then he realized, yes, it did, it was just abysmally bad handwriting. The characters were a random mixture between the blocky characters of hoof-writing, used by pegasi and earth ponies, and the smooth flowing characters of horn-writing, used by unicorns once they'd mastered telekinetic control of a quill. The size of the characters varied wildly, the way a foal's writing might, and the writer obviously had no clue how to keep characters in a straight line without guidelines on the paper, because the writing bent up, or down, or hit the side of the page and then ran down it sideways, and there were sometimes what looked like entire clauses inserted into the openings left by lines of writing that bowed in opposite directions. Had a foal written this? But there were a lot of pages, and none of them had any margin; the writer had used up the paper entirely, writing things along the sides of the margins in tiny letters that probably a foal couldn't have made.

Okay. This was a really weird document, and now, Spike had a true mystery on his hands. Who was it from, who was it to, and why was it written in this bizarre way? The paper was strange; it appeared to be randomly mixed swirls of wood pulp and... vellum. Vellum was a durable but horrible writing medium made from animal skin; griffons used it almost exclusively, since their mountainous homeland was short on trees and they were meat eaters, but most ponies would find the thought of writing on a dead animal's skin to be horrifying. But this wasn't a skein of vellum, it was the substance of vellum randomly mixed with the substance of wood-pulp paper... with occasional rough spots that seemed like the wood pulp had gotten some bark in it, and occasionally fur embedded in the paper. The fur was earth-toned, some brown, some gray, some black, occasionally dark red. It was as if somepony had used magic to construct the paper out of a pile of dead bodies and tree limbs. They weren't always even pony bodies. Spike shuddered as he located a spot on the vellum where the faint shape of reddish dragon scales was plainly visible. Maybe that had come from a snake or a lizard... but he'd never seen a snake or a lizard come in shades of red like that.

It was a document being sent to the Alicorn of Magic, it smelled like blood, and the paper seemed
to have been made by some sort of necromancy. Now Spike was more determined than ever to find out exactly who sent this message and why, before Twilight got her hooves on it. If it was some kind of evil magic that would mesmerize Twilight or something, well, Spike ought to be immune to it.

He laid the pages out as flat as he could get them. There were seventeen of them, not counting the envelope, which was so thoroughly saturated with blood that if it had ever had writing on it, the writing was long since blotted out completely. The rest of the pages were double-sided, more or less, though two of them stopped randomly in the middle of the page and left the rest empty, and one had a giant green stain in the center that the writer had managed to mostly avoid writing in. The ink, whatever it was—it appeared to be varied shades of dark brown or maybe dark red—had soaked through the paper in multiple places, which made it even harder to read because the writing from one side interfered with the writing on the other. None of the pages had anything at the top or the bottom to indicate who they were being sent to or from. And there was no page numbering, so no easy way for Spike to get this in order.

Spike started puzzling out the top lines of the pages, hoping he could use them to fit the document into the correct order.

As he attempted to read, he noticed that the writing material appeared to be changing without pattern as well. Most of the letters seemed to be formed with a stylus dipped in dark reddish-brown ink, where often the lines were thin and fine, made by the point of a sharp object, but then often thickening as if the writer's stylus was slipping sideways and part of the line was being made by the side of the stylus, the lines growing wider and wider as the stylus laid more and more of itself on the paper. Some of the letters appeared to be made with a quill that seemed like a magically stiffened caterpillar, something wide and fuzzy. When the wide fuzzy quill was in use, the handwriting changed slightly and the letters pointed in the opposite direction, and the smearing pattern indicated the writing wasn't being done by a hoof or a horn but by a paw, something that would accidentally drag across the page and smear the ink, just like Spike himself did sometimes by accident. Occasionally the ink would change to something more akin to a dark brown crayon, especially when the fuzzy quill was in use.

When he finally deciphered the first line of the first page he looked at, it was unhelpful. "not that stupid, I saw it coming... I was not at all prepared for what Twilight did." The second equally so. "because ponies think they look funny. I ask you how could something like that ever come from my DNA?"

Then the third chilled Spike, reading as it did like something so much more appropriate for a possibly necromantic and horrifying document written on dead animals in completely chaotic handwriting. "Have you ever eaten something that is so awful, your gut is heaving even as you put it in your mouth and you're actually crying from how unbelievably awful it tastes but if you don't eat it you'll lose control of your muscles and they'll start just eating it without"

The fourth page Spike looked at made him wonder if maybe he was up to this, if maybe he shouldn't save the document for Twilight after all. "and I'm hungry and I hurt all the time and somepony who looks and sounds exactly like my best friend, my first and closest friend, the pony who taught me the value of love and friendship, is raping me on a regular basis."

He pushed that page away for a moment, horrified by the mental images. Up to now, the creepy paper and the terrible handwriting and the outer wrapping soaked in blood had made Spike think of some document created by an evil unicorn necromancer to possess Twilight's soul or something. With that paragraph his perceptions shifted. This was a document created by the prisoner of the evil unicorn necromancer. A prisoner who was probably female, given that somepony was raping
her... but she was writing with a paw, not a hoof, so she was probably a griffon or... maybe a dragon? A dragon filly, being held prisoner by an evil necromancer who made evil paper, because a full-grown dragon couldn't possibly be victimized by a pony that way but Spike knew all too well how helpless a young dragon was in comparison to a full-grown pony, particularly a talented unicorn mage.

This was horrible and twisted, and he wasn't sure he wanted to know anymore, but someone was in trouble. Someone was hurting and desperate, someone was a prisoner being tortured, and maybe she might even be a young dragon like him. Now Spike had to decipher the rest of the document. He picked up the next sheet.

"slipping on the soap in the bathtub and cracking your skull. Universes where I am dead usually got to be that way because someone murdered me.

In this universe it was Spike. Yes, little Spikey Wikey. He took a sledgehammer to me."

Wait, what?

Spike bore down on that particular page. He hadn't killed anypony, ever, certainly not with a sledgehammer. Who was claiming that he had killed somepony? Wait, if he was reading this correctly, the writer was claiming that Spike had killed her. Which begged the question of how she could possibly be writing this. And besides Spike hadn't. Could it be a different Spike?... nicknamed Spikey Wikey? What were the odds?

Instead of going on to a different page, he worked on deciphering that one in full.

"Which hurts more than you can possibly imagine when she changes midstream from one to the other, because you can't tell the difference. They don't sound different, they don't look different."

Not helpful.

"to try to rescue me, in part because this is all my fault and in part because you despise me and
will probably enjoy hearing about how I have been humiliated here..." Okay, so that fit in with the hypothesis that the writer was a prisoner being tortured and was writing for help. But "you despise me?" Who did? Was this writer someone Twilight knew? Spike knew? The princesses knew?

"sweetness and light, black and white mentality, and excruciatingly bad dialogue that mark these universes. So I can't go to a universe where I never existed and I can't go to a universe where I currently exist;" More talking about universes. The letter had to be for Twilight, to be discussing such abstruse and strange concepts as multiple universes. Although, earlier the writer had referred to Twilight in the third person, saying she (or he) was not prepared for what Twilight did. So... now Spike was totally confused.

"silent as often as I can. Hasn't worked so far; apparently no matter how many times they humiliate me I can't get it through my head not to make sarcastic comments that lead to my being forced to admit to things I never wanted to admit to, like that I'm afraid and I hurt so much I'd do almost anything to make it stop." Not new information. The writer was a prisoner, being tortured; the writer had a tendency to make sarcastic comments, but some of the passages Spike had read proved that much.

"deliver them herself. If she's dissatisfied with me, she'll just tell Fluttercruel.

Although honestly, given the choice between Applejack punishing me herself and Rarity tattling on me to Fluttercruel so she'll do it... I prefer Applejack."

What?

Who was Fluttercruel? Some sort of evil doppelganger of Fluttershy? Why would Applejack or Rarity be involved in punishing the writer of the document? Spike had had a mental image of an evil unicorn captor in his head, but now he was even more confused than before. Applejack and Rarity weren't holding a prisoner, and Fluttershy was not an evil doppelganger... oh, no, was this document from the future? No! That would mean Applejack and Rarity would start working for the evil unicorn who might be an evil doppelganger of Fluttershy or might have made an evil Fluttershy or might be a changeling pretending to be Fluttershy and Spike himself was going to kill someone! With a sledgehammer!

No, there had to be a better explanation! Spike picked up the next page.

"actually perceive it as being like another dimension or something, and there he is tortured eternally. Not until he dies, redeems himself, serves his sentence, or goes catatonic or feral, like in Tartarus. Eternal torture, of the most horrible kind they could think of, and believe me, the creatures that invented this concept are great at thinking of horrible things. I'm not, of course, literally in hell any more than I'm literally in Tartarus, but it's a metaphor so I was hoping my geas wouldn't force me to spell that out. Apparently not." No, that wasn't helpful.

"I'm afraid I have to admit it, this is entirely my own fault. Now I'm told that many individuals in a situation such as the one I find myself in might engage in a bit of unproductive self-blame, such as 'If only I'd been'" ...Not helpful either.

"When I discorded her I basically had to just overwrite the top of her personality via brute force, rather than bringing something out that was already within, so I'm pretty confident that this is the case and there is no part of my Fluttershy that would enjoy tying me down on my back with my wings pulled open so far it feels like they're going to tear loose, whipping me (on my chest and belly, given that I'm tied on my back) with a diamond-studded hemp rope, and then ordering me to perform sexual acts on her. Pretty confident."
Spike dropped the paper he was holding, stunned and horrified.

Discord. The writer was Discord. It made sense – the terrible handwriting, shifting penmanship, lines going all over the page and completely disorganized method of packaging the document, the bizarre paper... the sarcastic commentary, the reference to "you despise me"... it made sense, it made horrible, horrible sense, but then it stopped making sense completely, because... because an evil doppelganger of Fluttershy was torturing and... and raping Discord? How? How did that even work? Wait, Spike didn't want to know how that would work.

But seriously, how? Discord was probably the most powerful being in Equestria. How could Discord be held prisoner and tortured by ponies? No, wait, it had to be changelings, he'd mentioned Applejack and Rarity so it wasn't just an evil doppelganger of Fluttershy involved, it was a whole lot of them... including Spike himself? Was he an evil doppelganger too? And... it still didn't make sense. Which was usual, when dealing with Discord. But the changelings weren't powerful enough to hold Discord prisoner... were they?

He read through the top lines of the next several pages rapidly, trying to find something, anything, to tell him what was going on here.

"Rain fish in Canterlot Fluttershy would be furious with me, and when you have only one friend she has quite a lot of psychological leverage."

"Showers her friends with absurd numbers of gifts, but she's also avaricious, much more ambitious, and keeps the gems she finds, or sells them for large sums. Also she has no problem having the former God of Chaos as a slave."

"I miss cotton candy so much, I dream about it. You'd think I'd dream of taking bloody revenge or something, but no, I dream about floating on a cloud of cotton candy, nibbling at it."

"But after Fluttercruel hurts me and uses me for her own depraved purposes... then she tends my wounds. Then she's kind, and sweet, and behaves like Fluttershy, and I'm so alone and I miss my friend and sometimes I close my eyes and pretend."

"I can cast a spell on Spike so his fire redirects, one time, to his cognate in my universe. I think I can guilt him into letting me send this letter. He's going to think he's sending it to Celestia. It's going to be really really hard but I think I can possibly manage to not tell him I'm casting that spell."

And with that it clicked. Somehow. The strange yellowish green fire, not his normal color at all; the feeling of nausea he'd gotten when he'd belched the document up; Discord talking about universes and evil Fluttershy and Spike himself had killed Discord with a sledgehammer except apparently he didn't and "his cognate in my universe..." Spike understood now. It had just been a weird abstract theory that Twilight had mentioned a few times, and also it had appeared in one of the Daring Do comics which weren't even canon, where Daring Do went to a universe where she was evil and Ahuizotl was good. And then he and Twilight had actually gone to one of them themselves, where Twilight had turned into one of the strange tall monkeys without fur except for their manes that ran the place, and Spike had turned into a dog, and there had been tall monkey versions of most of the ponies Spike knew. Alternate universes.

According to Twilight, there were multiple kinds of alternate universe. There was the kind where nothing was anything like it was at home, where you ended up maybe on a totally different planet or maybe your same planet except that there were no ponies and cats could talk or something. There was the kind like the portal, where the universe had all the same ponies in it but something about that world was radically different. And there were the kind caused when ponies – or dragons,
or anyone – made different decisions, so history went differently but there might still be all the same ponies you knew.

Discord was in another universe. Where, apparently, all the ponies Spike knew and cared for were evil. He wasn't sure if that made it the second kind, like the portal universe, or the third kind, where somehow, somepony made a different decision and it turned his family and friends evil. Not that he would rule out basically decent ponies inflicting some pain on Discord, but there was no justification for rape, ever (seriously how did that work? Fluttershy wasn't a unicorn; even if Discord had no powers how could she make... him... okay, Spike needed to stop thinking about this right now because it was horrifying and gross and also completely gross and oh no he was never going to be able to unread any of that stuff...)

Spike considered folding up the pages and leaving them for Twilight now. Now that he knew what the message was, he could guess that it was for Twilight or maybe Princess Celestia, and Discord hadn't thought to write down who it was for on the envelope probably for the same reason he hadn't thought that his paper would fit better if he'd folded it all neatly. Maybe Spike didn't want to know any more about this. He didn't owe Discord anything; after what Discord had done to Twilight the first time he'd broken loose, Spike had hated him for some time, and although he was reformed now, he was still annoying as all getout.

But no. Here Spike had bits and pieces of a story. He'd spent his entire life as a librarian's assistant, surrounded nearly every waking moment by books and inundated with the theories of documentation and classification and storytelling technique. He couldn't just go to sleep with these fragments of a story in his head. He had to get them together into the correct order and read the whole thing, so he had the full picture. And maybe it still wouldn't make sense after that, because it was Discord, but at least Spike needed to know.

So he began the laborious process of trying to match pages to each other based on the text on the bottom of one page seeming to belong to the text on the top of another. It did not help in the slightest that it seemed Discord hadn't done something normal, like written on one side of a page and then started on the second side; no, he'd done things like written three pages and then written on the backside of each one of them, but not in the same order. So Spike had to actually stamp the documents with numbers in order to sort them correctly for reading.

And then, once they were sorted, Spike began copying out the letter onto a real scroll, in his own neat handwriting, so that Twilight and Princess Celestia wouldn't have to struggle through the horrible handwriting and total disorganization and the ink bleeding through the paper (literally, since according to Discord and the smell of it, the ink was blood) that Spike had had to in order to read it. It took him twenty pages, mostly because his handwriting was much neater and more even than Discord's, so what had taken Discord thirty-three pages (some of which had giant empty spaces in them) took Spike a lot less... although Spike's version took more sheets overall because he wasn't writing on the back of them.

When he was finally done it was morning, Celestia's sun was peeking over the horizon, and Spike felt like he might never sleep again. He was exhausted, but the horrors in that document haunted him. A world where, instead of (or maybe in addition to) discording the Bearers in the maze, that world's Discord had corrupted the Elements themselves, and it had changed the Bearers. Rarity, selfish. Applejack, a manipulator. Pinkie Pie... Spike didn't even know, because he was trying very very hard not to think about what Discord had been implying when he'd talked about Pinkie Pie. Rainbow Dash, obviously so disconnected from her friends that Discord never even saw her.

Fluttershy, a torturer. And... and rapist. (How did that work?)
And Twilight, who had done something to herself so that she could beat her world's Discord even with her now evil friends, and now she was evil, turning a blind eye or actively participating in the torture of someone who... okay, he was a big jerk, he really had discorded the Element Bearers and plunged Ponyville into chaos, but he had gone to their world to make it rain fish in Canterlot and for that they were beating him with diamond-studded whips? And making him eat bird poop? And... Spike didn't even want to think about what else the letter had talked about.

He could understand them really, really hating Discord. If he, himself, and apparently it sounded like he hadn't been changed, if he could have picked up a sledgehammer and destroyed the living statue of Discord, he who'd never ever wanted to kill anyone or anything... and they didn't know this was a different Discord... okay, he could understand them hating him. Whatever the other Discord could have done to make the other Spike kill him once he was stone and helpless, it had to have been horrible beyond imagining. But put him in *stone*, or... kill him quickly and cleanly if you were a killer and that was a thing you did, not... not torture. Not rape.

Fluttershy couldn't be allowed to read this. He wasn't sure any of them should except for Twilight. She'd know how to handle it. She'd know what to do.

It had occurred to Spike more than once that this could be some kind of a sick joke, a bizarre and twisted prank. Certainly Discord wasn't above playing such a prank. But Spike was positive it wasn't the case. Discord might pretend he was being held prisoner as a joke, but talking about being forced to vomit and being beaten and being *raped* (did he actually say the evil Fluttershy had had Angel Bunny rape him? Now *that* sounded like a sick joke, but not one Discord would tell on himself.) Discord was too proud. He wouldn't say *these* things as a joke. He probably wouldn't say them if they were true, except that apparently he was under the effects of a spell that forced him to spill his guts verbally or he'd end up doing it literally.

Plus. Discord had claimed he was using his own skin to make the paper... and there were places where fur, in the colors of Discord's fur (or the color of Discord's fur when it was soaked with blood, apparently), or dragon scales in a very, very faded version of the color of Discord's scales, were embedded in the paper. He'd said he was using his own blood and the dirt of the floor for ink... the dark reddish-brown ink and the crayon-like writing. He'd said he was writing with his fingers, his talon or the fingers on his lion paw, and that was consistent with the sharply pointed stylus that every so often got longer, like Discord's talon was lying against the paper instead of pointing straight down, and the fuzzy quill, which did, now that Spike knew, look exactly like Discord writing with a furry finger from his lion paw. The blood-soaked envelope didn't just smell like blood; there was a difference between Spike's own blood and the smell of pony blood, and the blood he smelled on the packaging was like the two were mixed up together.

Discord was smart, and an excellent liar, but Spike just couldn't believe that he could possibly be detail-oriented enough to construct such a *consistent* fake.

They couldn't leave him there. Spike didn't like Discord, but... they couldn't leave him there. They couldn't leave anypony to suffer like that. In the letter he kept saying he didn't really believe Twilight would come to his rescue... but Spike knew better. He knew his Twilight Sparkle, the real one, not the evil one from that world, would never leave *anypony* in a situation like that.

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**Harmony, 7 AM**

It was much, much too early in the morning when Twilight felt her shoulder being shaken by a small dragon paw. "Twilight! Twilight, get up, it's morning and I have something important to show you!"
Twilight dragged herself upright. "Is there tea?" she mumbled.

"Yup. Double-black plus ginseng, ginger, cinnamon, and a lot of honey."

"Where?"

"On the kitchen table. Last time I gave you your tea while you were in bed, you drank it and then fell back asleep and then you got mad at me for letting you oversleep."

She shoved her hoof through the unruly mane falling in her eyes, trying to push it back, because it was way too early for magic, not without her tea. "Can you go to Sugarcube Corner and get—"

"Croissants, got'em, fresh baked, raspberry and cherry flavors with icing, plus I fried you an egg, plus apple juice for when you burn your tongue on the tea."

"Okay, okay. Just give me five more minutes."

"Did I mention fresh-baked? Like, gonna get cold if I give you five minutes? Just like the egg I fried you?"

Twilight moaned. "Spike, I'm so tired..."

"I know," Spike said. "I know just how you feel, I was up all night. But this is important."

She blinked at him. "You went to bed before I did..."

"Yeah, but a document came in during the night and... well, I had to stay up all night deciphering and re-copying it so it was readable."

Twilight shook her head, both to get mane out of her eyes and because that didn't make any sense. "Spike, who sent a document to you in the middle of the night? And why did you have to decipher it? Was it some kind of secret code?"

"No, just... really, really, really bad handwriting. Pages and pages of it. And I can't show it to you until after you've eaten, but it's important."

"Spike, you said it was important!" She stumbled out of bed. "If it's important, how can it wait until I've eaten?"

"Uh, Twi... no, no you won't. 'Cause there is no way I am letting you read this thing until you eat."

"Spike, you said it was important!" She stumbled out of bed. "If it's important, how can it wait until I've eaten?"

Spike sighed. "You'll... uh, you'll know when you read it. It... it's bad, Twilight, it's really bad. You won't be able to eat if you read it before breakfast. I could barely make yours."


"Nopony's dead yet, but..." His voice cracked. "It's not any of those things, Twilight, but you just gotta read it for yourself, okay? It can wait until you eat breakfast, but please just get downstairs and eat? I don't want to be the only one who's read this..."

She sighed heavily. "Fine."
Anticipation and worry made the egg tasteless, the croissant dry, and led her to drink her tea too fast, burning her mouth. She wished Spike would have just given her the document; whenever she was anxious, food didn't even taste good.

"Okay, I've eaten. Where is it?"

"Here's my copy." Spike handed her a sheaf of scrolls. "I've got the original over on your desk, but trust me, this is a lot more readable."

She glanced it over. "Who is this from?" With it recopied by Spike, there were no handwriting cues to suggest the origin.

"Discord."

Twilight stopped dead on her way to her desk, the scrolls still floating in front of her head, and turned back to Spike, who was walking behind her. "Discord? It's from him? Does he say where he is or what he's doing? Did he turn evil again?"

Spike's voice cracked. "He did something dumb, but I don't think... I don't think we could've called it evil, really. Just kind of a really big, stupid, mean prank. And... and they're torturing him, Twilight."

She stared at him. "Who is?"

"We are. Evil us. Twilight, just read it, it's... it's so weird I don't wanna try to explain it, I'm afraid I'm gonna mess it up. You're smart enough to understand it. Just... it's not about him being a danger we have to stop. It's about him being in danger and he's asking for help."

"I don't understand how we could help Discord. Anything that could threaten him is much more powerful than we are..."

"You'll know when you read it."

So now she needed to read it more than anything else, but probably not while walking or she'd stumble over her own hooves, not that she hadn't done that many times before. The first thing she wanted to do, though, is get the original document. Because Spike might have copied it perfectly, but she always felt she could get more of a sense of a text when she read it in the original writer's pen.

Except that when she got a look at the original document, she saw exactly what Spike meant. It couldn't be from anyone but Discord; nopony else could have such total disregard for niceties like the size of the characters or how they lined up with each other. She was actually somewhat shocked that the words she could make out were punctuated correctly, though the capitalization was almost completely random.

Spike's version had fixed all that, and didn't smell terrible, so she decided that this time, she would read his version. And then she'd read Discord's version. After casting a spell to block her sense of smell.

The first thing Twilight noticed was, as she might have expected, Discord couldn't stick to a point and kept tossing things out as if he'd already explained them when he hadn't yet. Also that his opinion of her was very low for someone who was apparently asking for help. She frowned as she read "...well, if you knew, you probably wouldn't care. In fact I'm having a hard time believing I should bother mustering up what little energy I have to write this message, because I'm almost entirely certain you won't care and might even laugh and certainly won't lift a hoof to try to rescue
me, in part because this is all my fault and in part because you despise me and will probably enjoy hearing about how I have been humiliated here... but on the other hand I have very few options”. It was true that if his situation really was all his fault, he probably had it coming to him, but that didn't mean she wouldn't help – what –

"Literally I am in the basement of an alternate universe version of Fluttershy, chained to the floor, scraping together what very little magic I am able to use to transform the bark off tree roots and loose-hanging flaps of my own skin into parchment, which is why some of these pages will be part vellum, part wood paper."

Discord didn't have loose-hanging flaps of skin. He was lean and seemed to be made entirely of long thin muscle, like a snake. Nothing about him bulged or flapped (aside from wings, which were supposed to flap, obviously.) To have loose-hanging flaps of skin, he would either have had to have lost so much weight he was skeletal, or... or the skin had been cut loose from his body and was a literal hanging flap, not just a place where the skin was loose. And... he was pulling his own skin off to make it into paper? Chained in a basement? Fluttershy's basement?

Spike had said this was bad, but the first page of the letter had been so sardonic, even flippant in places, that when Discord had talked about not believing she'd help him she'd perceived it as whiny. As if what he was suffering was only all that bad in his own head. But this—

"tried gnawing my way out of the basement but there are spells on the dirt walls and I'm too weak to dig a deep hole to get around them. Also if evil goateed Fluttershy caught me I don't even want to imagine what she'd do to me. She doesn't really have a goatee, that's a reference to a joke you won't get, but she really is evil. I shall henceforth call her Fluttercruel because I am trying very very very hard to separate her in my mind from my dear friend"

"I almost think I'd rather be—"

No.

No, I'm not going to say that, I'm not going to believe that. I am not better off dead. Once I start thinking that way I've lost. Where there's life there's hope and all that. I got out of that damned statue, I can get out of this."

Get out of what? What was happening to him? Why couldn't he write this damn thing in order, or stick to a topic? He was chained up in the basement of an evil version of Fluttershy in an alternate universe, and his skin was hanging loose, and he was struggling not to believe he was better off dead, but how? How could ponies take Discord captive? He wasn't even vulnerable to Fluttershy's Stare.

"I want to go home. I hate it here. I'd hate it here even if I weren't chained up in a basement being routinely beaten with diamond-studded whips."

"I think maybe she is trying to make me associate terrible tastes and nausea with chaos, because she smiles cheerfully as she brings me the most disgusting things possible to feed me, tells me I should like it because it's not what any normal pony would want to eat and therefore it's chaotic and different, and then orders me to eat it and I have to. The obedience spell keeps me from disobeying a direct order. Have you ever eaten something that is so awful, your gut is heaving even as you put it in your mouth and you're actually crying from how unbelievably awful it tastes but if you don't eat it you'll lose control of your muscles and they'll start just eating it without your input, and at least if you can control your muscles you can keep your tongue out of the way of the food so you don't have to taste it so much?"
Twilight was not naïve. She was very well read, and among the things she had read, there had been accounts of war, of savage violence between ponies or between ponies and other species, of slavery and rape and torture and cruelty. But none of what she'd read had ever impacted anypony she knew. They were tales of ancient times, recorded history for the sake of making sure such things could never happen again. Nopony she knew had ever been beaten with a whip (diamond studded whips? That would be like... being hit with a whip and cut with thrown shuriken and battered with flung rocks, all at the same time. How could anypony do that to anyone, even Discord? Discord had never physically tortured anypony she knew of.) Obedience spells? Being forced to eat horrible things? Why?

Who could do that, even to Discord? Why would anypony do that? How...

Now she was riveted, horrified but compelled to keep reading. She read as Discord wrote about why he'd gone to an alternate universe, and why he'd chosen one where his counterpart was dead, and what a bad idea that had turned out to be. She read about the alternate Spike killing the alternate Discord, and part of her mind keened for her dragon baby, her little brother, an alternate who had to be someway, somehow like her Spike because ridiculous stuff like that comic about Daring Do going to the universe where she was evil and Ahuizotl was good couldn't possibly happen. Ponies' personalities, and other creatures, couldn't possibly just be completely different for no good reason. Events led to changes in personality. She'd raised her Spike to be like a pony, to turn to the answers of friendship and harmony first, never murder. What could have changed, what could have driven Spike to kill a helpless, neutralized foe?

And then she read about how. It didn't sound like Spike had been directly affected, but her friends' counterparts had been turned evil by the alternate Discord doing something to the elements themselves, tying them to their opposing principles so that they were permanently transformed into beings that contained their opposites as well as their original selves, and how badly must that be tearing them to bits? Was it that bad? Had the alternate Spike really been justified? She remembered Fluttershy yelling insults and laughing, Pinkie insecure and paranoid, Rarity obsessing over Tom the not-a-diamond... but even if they'd become those things for the rest of their lives, that couldn't be terrible enough to justify killing Discord, could it? Or torturing him? Not if the Elements had been an option, not if they'd gotten him into stone anyway... it sounded like they weren't that bad, Discord was saying that Fluttershy was still the animal caretaker and veterinarian, it sounded like it couldn't have affected them as badly as what he'd done to them in the maze—

"somepony who looks and sounds exactly like my best friend, my first and closest friend, the pony who taught me the value of love and friendship, is raping me on a regular basis."

Twilight almost dropped the scroll.

Was this a joke? She remembered an incident, after Discord had reformed but before she became an alicorn, when she woke from a horrible dream about Discord raping her to find that he'd seen the dream, having accidentally gone into her mind while he was sleeping as well, and he'd seemed genuinely insulted, as well as actually embarrassed. He'd told her then all kinds of outlandish things about how attractive he was and how some ponies with tastes he referred to as "refined and discerning" and Twilight referred to as "weird" would obsess over him, and she hadn't been sure she believed any of it. The idea of Fluttershy raping Discord was so outlandish, so incredibly unbelievable, that it almost had to be a joke... didn't it?

"I actually didn't mean to write that.

I hate this spell.

At least I managed not to write the thing I didn't want to write about above, but at the expense of
telling you something I thought I'd rather die than tell you, but blood doesn't erase worth a damn and it turns out that when you go into convulsions when you try to tear up your own paper because you want to not reveal something you've just stupidly put down on the paper due to a compulsion to tell the truth, you decide that the humiliation of admitting things like that is more bearable than the alternative."

There were rips in the paper, small ones. No. This wasn't a joke. If Discord was joking about a thing like this, he would be melodramatic about it, he would go into embarrassing details (at least as embarrassing as some of his claims had been the day he'd been telling Twilight that he was too awesomely attractive to stoop to raping ponies), he would take it to the point of absurdity... he wouldn't say that he'd never meant to say any of that, that he'd tried to unsay it but couldn't, that he'd thought he would rather die than admit to it. It was impossible, but she believed it anyway.

The letter described the others. It sounded as if Pinkie Pie had turned into an ax murderer or something. Applejack manipulative and weaselly, Rarity selfish and avaricious, Rainbow Dash a cipher because Discord never saw her. But it was Fluttershy her mind kept coming back to. Evil Fluttershy. A Fluttershy who could beat somepony with a whip, or rape them.

She wanted to cry. She wanted to find her Fluttershy and hug her for just being Fluttershy. She wanted to kill the alternate Discord, except he was apparently already dead. And she wanted to get her Discord out of there. As he described more and more of the tortures he was suffering and how they worked, she felt more and more protective, possessive and enraged that these others, these twisted parodies of herself and her friends, were doing this to him. Yes, he had gone there of his own free will, yes, he'd antagonized all of them, yes, apparently for some reason he was trying to conceal that he wasn't their original Discord, but... nothing justified this. Nothing.

And then he started talking about his theories about what they were trying to accomplish, how he believed they were trying to turn him into an unquestioningly obedient tool, which... could be right. The things he said they were doing to him were consistent with what a pony would do to another to accomplish that goal, based on things she'd read.

And then he wrote about the ways it was starting to work.

"But after Fluttercruel hurts me and uses me for her own depraved purposes... then she tends my wounds. Then she's kind, and sweet, and behaves like Fluttershy, and I'm so alone and I miss my friend and sometimes I close my eyes and pretend. And this is the absolute worst thing I can do because seriously, Stockholm Syndrome anyone? If I don't want to be broken I have to remember at all times, I hate her. She's not Fluttershy. She's hurting me and I don't deserve it.

But if I did deserve it I could make it stop by not doing the things that make me deserve it.

And I hurt so much and it's all you ponies' fault that I'm vulnerable to the emotional manipulation, that I want a friend so badly in my time of need that I pretend my captor is my friend, I let her pleasure me (not that I have a choice in what activities I have to let her perform, but I can resist in my mind, if I'm not so worn out that I just don't bother), I let her hug me and pet me and tell me I'm doing so much better, I'm being such a good colt... and I fall for it. I know it isn't real but I want it to be and honestly I'm used to making the things I want to be real become so and I admit I know that won't work here but I'm sorry, all right? I'm weak. I've never been tortured like this before. I've certainly never been tortured before while I had any psychological dependency whatsoever on another sentient being.

I need someone to care about the fact that I'm hurting. I'm fairly sure it's not going to be you. But if I give in and pretend that it's her, she'll break me. I'm trying not to break, I'm trying. But it's so hard."
Twilight had to stop for the moment. She couldn't see anymore, with the tears in her eyes blinding her. Fumbling around on her desk, she found a handkerchief and wiped her eyes with it.

She'd never sincerely believed Discord actually cared all that much about Fluttershy, or having a friend. He was, from all she could see, kind of a rotten excuse for a friend; he did things like pretend he'd forgotten Fluttershy's name for a joke. He'd been almost no help whatsoever dealing with the plunder vines, which had turned out to have been his own creation, even though they would have destroyed Fluttershy's home. Well, okay, his taunting Twilight about thinking she was better than her friends had led her to go back into the Everfree to help, and if she hadn't, her friends would never have figured out what to do to save the Tree, but on the other hand, she'd almost been eaten by the vines, and she had no way to know which outcome Discord had intended, or if he'd just been taunting her for amusement and hadn't had any deeper purpose for good or ill. He had skipped out entirely on the Welcome to Ponyville party Pinkie had tried to throw for him, causing her to have to change it to a celebration for Fluttershy's success after it had already started, and then he'd gone to apologize to Pinkie for discording her in the maze and the result of that had been Pinkie declaring that she was not, in fact, going to be friends with him. Pinkie, who insisted on being friends with every pony in Ponyville. Pinkie wouldn't talk about what Discord had done to earn this status, except to say that she was not friends with him, she just wasn't friends with him... but from Pinkie that almost sounded like a declaration of eternal enmity.

From Twilight's perspective, it had seemed as if the whole thing with Discord reforming and being friends with Fluttershy was one of his games. That apparently he'd decided he could cause more entertaining chaos and remain free and safe from retaliation if he claimed to be friends with Fluttershy, and could therefore have civil conversations with Fluttershy's friends that nonetheless were emotionally traumatic. She still burned with the kind of humiliation that made her want to sink into the floor when she remembered him taunting her about her dream. He didn't really show any signs of caring about anypony, even Fluttershy herself. Fluttershy claimed things were different when they were by themselves, that Discord wasn't willing to show emotional weaknesses around ponies he didn't trust but that he was much more genuinely nice to just her when the others weren't present.

Apparently the truth telling spell and the utter desperation he must be feeling had driven him to expose himself in ways he never would have when he was powerful and free. There was no longer any doubt in her mind at all that the letter was sincere, that everything Discord was writing about was at least true to his perception, because... Discord would simply never, ever admit to breaking down and pretending his torturer was his friend because he needed a friend too desperately to keep himself from doing it, unless it was both true and he was somehow compelled to say it. If this was a prank or a joke, he wouldn't have said any of that. Pretending to be a captive being tortured was... well, possibly something Discord might find funny, given how weird and broken and sometimes incredibly dark his sense of humor was. Pretending to be suffering from the beginning stages of Stockholm Syndrome wasn't funny at all. He just looked pitiable. Pathetic, in the literal, non-derogatory use of the term.

As much of an utter jerk as he'd been virtually every time she'd dealt with him, it looked to Twilight now like Discord's feelings might have been sincere all along, that Fluttershy was right and he really did care about her. And, possibly, that the reason Discord had been an utter jerk around Twilight herself had been that he apparently thought she despised him and would snicker behind her hoof at the thought of him being tortured. How could he think such a thing about her? Didn't he know she would never want to see anypony suffer this way, no matter what they'd done?

It seemed he didn't. Somehow he'd gotten the idea into his head that she hated him so much she would laugh at his pain. If that was how he'd been feeling the whole time since Princess Celestia had asked Fluttershy to reform him, no wonder he'd taunted her and mocked her and been as
annoying as he could manage without ending up back in stone. And that made her feel horrible. Discord was broken and desperate and begging her for help, not because he thought she would help him but because she was his only option, and somehow the things she’d said and done to him had led him to think she hated him and would laugh at his situation. He couldn't even have the confidence she would have if she was in such a situation and had sent a letter home asking to be rescued. He didn't seem to believe his letter was going to do him any good at all, and he was just writing it because otherwise he had no hope whatsoever.

She couldn't imagine how that would feel. To believe that nopony would want to help you, to believe that your only hope was to beg a dire enemy who would probably laugh at you and that therefore you had basically no hope at all. To know that the people you knew and cared about were alive, and safe, and that they'd gotten your cry for help, and to believe they would do nothing anyway.

Twilight remembered the incredibly awkward conversation Discord had forced her into after she'd had that dream. He'd been deeply offended that she'd dreamed him as a rapist, not because he seemed to have a moral problem with rape but because his self-esteem depended on an image of himself as someone that some ponies could actually find attractive, and he thought that a pony imagining him as a rapist was assuming that he was too bizarre and hideous to find a consensual partner. At the time she'd been much more concerned with his outrageously self-aggrandizing claims as to how attractive some ponies found him, and her own anxiety and humiliation over him taunting her about that dream, but she saw a connection now. Discord didn't, deep down, think ponies would ever want or like him or react to him in any way but fear and enmity. He'd actually bragged to her about the fact that none of his claimed sexual exploits had been anything other than meaningless physical interactions, one-night stands based on lust, and now that she thought about it, his entire criteria for who he'd said he'd been willing to sleep with had been based on how much they made him feel wanted. (He'd phrased it as how desperately they'd begged, but it was the same thing.) He'd been willing to give up his villainy, more or less, despite the fact that he plainly still didn't really care that causing mayhem wilfully was simply wrong, on the strength of one shallow friendship based on mostly nothing except a single pony being kind to him and claiming friendship with him. And now, based on what he wrote when he was being tortured and he was desperate, it seemed as if he was interpreting that friendship to be as deep and meaningful as her friendships were, and as if he was interpreting Twilight's irritation with his antics and wholly reasonable distrust of him as if she still saw him as an evil nemesis and felt nothing but hatred for him.

For the first time it occurred to her how awful his life must have been, how lonely and empty it must be to love and depend on something that virtually everypony hated and therefore to be rejected by everypony, completely alienated. To have never had a friend, in thousands of years, and to want one so badly deep down inside that you'd give up your entire lifestyle to keep your first one... and when you couldn't give it up after all, to put yourself in danger to get what you needed without losing your friend. He'd pointed out himself what a dumb idea it had been to go someplace where his alter ego was dead. But he'd done it anyway because he needed Chaos, and he needed Fluttershy, and now what he had was horrible parodies of both that were causing him nothing but pain and despair, driving him to expose his most humiliating emotional weaknesses to someone he thought was an enemy who would laugh at him.

When she was done with the document, she was shaking, and there were still tears in her eyes despite repeated dabs with the handkerchief.

"Spike?"
He handed her a second, drier handkerchief. "You see now why I wanted you to eat first?" he said.

She nodded. There was no way she'd have an appetite after reading this. "How did this come in? Did he really send all those sheets?"

"He had them wrapped in an envelope kind of thing. Which was completely soaked with blood. I don't even know how so much blood ends up on a piece of paper." Spike sighed. "After we rescue him, can we teach him how to fold paper neatly into itself? He had, like, twelve different ways he was folding the paper, so it was all totally disorganized."

"Chaotic, you mean?" Twilight managed a weak smile. "Spike, I don't think we're going to teach Discord how to fold paper neatly."

"Um, yeah, good point."

"Take a message for Princess Celestia?"

"Yeah, sure!"

Dear Princess Celestia,

Last night Spike received a multi-page document from Discord. He claims to be in a parallel universe, where evil versions of us have bound him to obedience and captivity with their versions of the Elements of Harmony. Spike re-copied the document because the original was very difficult to read.

What Discord is describing that they're doing to him is horrible, Princess. We have to rescue him. I am confident that the document is really from Discord and is sincere. I am sure you will want to read it for yourself before authorizing a rescue mission, and I don't know the best way to go about that anyway. It sounds like the evil versions of us still have their Elements, so I'm not sure if we would be the most effective rescuers, ourselves, or if you have a special team of ponies that does that kind of thing, or how you want to handle it.

Let me know when you're prepared to receive a multi-page document. I'll send you Spike's copy because it's easier to read.

Sincerely,

Your former student, Princess Twilight Sparkle

She watched as Spike scrawled a PS at the bottom. PS: This is Spike. Twilight is not joking. I was up all night deciphering and copying that document and it was so awful I don't want to go to sleep even though I'm really tired. Then he breathed on it, and it burned, vanishing.

Expecting that the Princess might respond quickly, Twilight started putting the pages of Spike's copy back together in order, because she'd left them somewhat scattered while she read it. The response came back before she'd organized more than three sheets.

Dear Twilight,

Please send me the original document. I can read Discord's writing.

Celestia

Spike looked at the note in bemusement. "Um... does she know what she's getting into? I mean,
probably his writing's always bad, but right now..."

Twilight shrugged. "She's the Princess. If she ends up wanting the second document instead, we can send it then. She probably wants to verify for herself that it really is from Discord."

Spike breathed on the stacked pile of sheets that had been Discord's original letter, and then grinned with relief. "Oh, good. That tasted so bad coming up, I was worried about what it might taste like when I burned it to send it back out."

Twilight finished reorganizing Spike's copy of the letter. "We can't let Fluttershy read this," she said.

Spike nodded. "Yeah. I don't think anypony should read this except Princess Celestia, really. I kinda wish I hadn't had to read it, but it was so weird looking, I was afraid it was like some kind of magical necromancy mind control document and if you read it it would take over your brain, so I wanted to make sure it was safe first. And then I saw the part about the other me, uh, killing Discord, except I didn't even know it was Discord yet, so then I had to read the whole thing."

"Well, I think you did a great job, Spike. I saw what a mess that document was. I can understand why he wrote on both sides of the paper if he had to use his own skin to make paper with, but it made it really hard to read even if it was printed neatly, and it wasn't."

"He changed hands," Spike said. "More than once. He was usually writing with his talon but then sometimes the letters got all fat and fuzzy and they started to point the other way, and the paper gets smeary when that happens."

"Maybe his talon just got tired," Twilight said, suspecting very strongly that that wasn't the reason, and that Spike had the same suspicion. If they allowed Discord the ability to heal himself, but only when they commanded him to, how many times might they have broken that limb? Discord's talon was both more fragile looking and more dexterous and useful to him than his paw. Anypony who was torturing him, who was aware that snapping his talon was his primary method of channeling his magic, would probably see that limb as a target, because breaking his primary forelimb would make him feel more helpless.

How did she know these things? Twilight took a shaky breath. She was a researcher, a student of magic and history. She'd read so much, but she hadn't realized she knew as much as she did about torture and what it was used for and how it worked until she read Discord's letter, and realized that she understood why their counterparts were probably using those strategies. Which suggested to her, awfully, that it was her counterpart who was orchestrating this.

What had her counterpart done to herself to turn evil? Discord hadn't known; he'd said the spell his alternate had cast on the Elements had only affected the other five, and that whatever it was that had happened to the Element of Magic, the alternate Twilight had done it to herself so she could harmonize with the other Elements again.

Or was it what she'd done to herself at all? She remembered how broken she'd felt when Discord had destroyed her friendships. What if that had lasted? Could she have turned into this, a mare who could justify torture and mind control, out of a desire for vengeance? She didn't want to think so; she wanted to think it was a spell gone wrong. But how would incorporating the opposite of Magic into her element make her into this? What was the opposite of Magic anyway?

"You did a good job," Twilight said again. "I wish you hadn't read any of that, though. Spike, you're so young; you shouldn't have had to be exposed to something like that..."
"I'm not gonna disagree," Spike said. "But... I'm not really a baby, like a baby baby, Twilight. I mean, maybe dragons my age are babies because we live so long, but I've been living with ponies. I don't think my body's grown much in a few years, but I feel like my mind has. It's kinda frustrating, actually."

"Yeah, you're not a baby, even if you technically are," Twilight said. "But you're still my dragon baby. I don't want you to have to see things like this."

"But I'm also your number one assistant."

"Right." She sighed. "Which, I guess, means that some of the terrible things I have to see, you'll end up seeing too. I wish I could protect you better, but I guess I can't."

Spike put a hand to his mouth. "I think Princess Celestia's replying."

He belched out a scroll. Twilight caught it and opened it.

Dear Twilight,

Please gather the Bearers of the Elements, and Spike, and come to Canterlot immediately.

I do understand that you no longer carry the physical representations of the Elements and cannot use them to spellcast, but you still bear them in your hearts, so forgive me for continuing to refer to you as such.

I am going to attempt to reach your brother and Cadance in hopes that they may be able to provide support, but they have their own realm to govern and protect, so I don't think it is likely.

Don't attempt to teleport. Although this matter is urgent, it is also very important that you preserve your stores of magic to the greatest extent possible. I believe you will need them.

Sincerely,

Celestia

She didn't sign "Princess Celestia" anymore. Probably because Twilight was a princess herself.

"Ok. Spike, take letters. Owlowliscious, please wake up, I need you to take a letter to Fluttershy. Spike, you run the letters to Rarity and Pinkie Pie; I'll run one out to Applejack and see if I can find Ditzy to take one out to Rainbow Dash, since the Princess wants me to conserve my magic."

"Right." Spike pulled out his quill and a pile of blank scrolls. "Short notes, right?"

"Yes. First note, to go to Fluttershy. "Fluttershy, Please come meet me and the others at the library. We think we have a lead on Discord, and it sounds like he's in trouble. -Twilight Sparkle"

"Sounds like he's in trouble?" Spike said skeptically as he wrote. "Isn't that kind of understating things?"

"I'm not going to tell her he's in an alternate dimension being tortured by an evil version of her," Twilight snapped. "Not... in a letter, anyway. We can explain everything once everypony's here."

Owlowliscious took the note in his beak and flew off. Hurriedly, Twilight gave Spike dictation on the rest of the notes. If Discord had been over there for two months, he could probably survive another day or two, but she felt a sense of almost panicked urgency. He wasn't her friend, not really, in fact he thought she hated him... but he was genuinely Fluttershy's friend. For her sake –
and for his, because nothing he had ever done that she knew of could possibly justify what he was enduring – she wanted, needed, to save him.

Harmony, 9 AM

In Canterlot, the Princess of the Sun calmly cancelled her morning court, firmly and peaceably dismissed her guards, locked herself in her study with the blood-soaked document, and then, when no pony could see her any longer... she broke down and wept.

Chapter End Notes

I apologize for the extensive repetition of passages from "Discord in Hell (Not Literally)"; in order to convey the characters' emotional reactions as they read, I felt I needed to quote the passages they were reading that were triggering those reactions. We aren't going to watch anyone else have to read the letter in detail like this.

I may be writing Spike a bit too smart and grown-up. I like a smart Spike, he's been raised by a genius who trained him in research, documentation and library science. Deal with it. Forensics on documentation to establish factors like age, source and verisimilitude would probably be an everyday part of life for researchers who deal with ancient tomes and scrolls of magic.

When Twilight thinks that Discord was no help with the plunder vines, this is because she doesn't know that they would have targeted her along with Celestia and Luna if he hadn't been shielding her with his magic (cf Vines) or that Zecora's potion doesn't work the way she thought it did and it was actually Discord who showed her the past (cf Detente).

There are references in here to events from Awkward Conversations, including the Pinkie Pie part that I haven't published yet.
Opposition, 7 AM

The dirt crawlspace dug out under the giant tree was never very well lit. There were two small gaps in the roots that formed the ceiling, which had been covered with metal lattices to allow light and air in, but they were on the west side of the tree, so no direct sunlight ever came through except in the afternoon, because Celestia had no imagination and would always make the sun track from east to west. No version of Celestia he'd ever met had enough of a sense of humor to make the sun rise in a different quadrant of the sky, and this version was more humorless than most. So the space was usually quite dark and dank; sunlight and moonlight shone through the two small gaps enough that the darkness wasn't usually total, but it was dim enough to have made it a challenge to write that letter.

It was gone now, off to its destination, hopefully. Discord had expected to feel a sense of accomplishment, of achievement, and he had last night, the moment Spike sent the thing, right before the nausea had overwhelmed him and he'd thrown up. But the feeling hadn't lasted. Discord lifted his head to stare up at the lightening sky through the tiny, sad excuses for windows in his cell, and felt a sense of emptiness and hopelessness. It was out of his paws now; there was nothing more he could do to try to save himself, and the truth was, he didn't believe it would be enough. The likelihood that his Twilight would care, or even believe him, was so low.

His whole body ached; Fluttercruel had allowed him to heal himself after Twilight's experiments yesterday, but without the ability to discorporate into some completely different form and then rebuild himself from scratch, there was a limit to what chaos magic could do. Chaos couldn't heal, it could only transform; Discord was an expert at finding loopholes in anything, including chaos, so his entire life he'd been healing himself with transformation magic, but low-level transformation could only do so much, and he wasn't allowed to perform a total transformation, so he ached all the time, even when he was as whole as he ever got to be anymore. Discord lowered his head back to the dirt floor, hearing the rattling of the metal chain as it clattered back onto the dirt. He'd tried pulling at it with all his strength, but it was deeply rooted – literally; it was deep under the dirt and fastened through one of the giant tree's huge underground taproots, so it wasn't coming up without a team of earth ponies with shovels, or magic, or preferably both, and the collar around his neck that it was fastened to prevented him from wielding that magic.

*I'm never going to get out of here,* he thought, and closed his eyes tightly, clenching his paws into fists as if he could crush the thought. He couldn't think that way. If he let himself give up hope completely, he'd snap.

The door upstairs creaked open. Discord cringed, flattening himself against the floor before he could stop himself. Stupid, really, what good was that going to do him?

"Wake up, sleepyhead!" Fluttercruel's voice caroled. "Rise and shine, it's time for breakfast!"

Despite his hunger, Discord felt dread. *Please let it be edible. Please, please, please, let it be actual food this time, please.* Yesterday's breakfast had been three eggs. Which would have been wonderful, except that they were raw. And in their shells. Which hadn't been cleaned, so they were covered with bird feces. And it had turned out they were over a month old and rotten. And when he'd tried to balk at eating them once he'd realized they were rotten, Fluttercruel had ordered him
to, so he'd had no choice. Filthy shells and all. Then she'd punished him for trying to refuse.

First she'd broken his talon by making him stretch it out on the dirt floor and then hitting it repeatedly with a small hammer, until the bones shattered. Most of Discord's bones weren't bones at all but soft cartilage, and extremely flexible, but this wasn't the case with the bones in his paws or wings because they needed some strength and firmness in order to work, and that made them breakable. He'd been scheduled to spend his morning helping Rarity, and he needed both paws in presentable condition for that, so Fluttercruel had had to order him to heal himself, eventually. But she'd spent many long minutes letting him cry and whimper with pain while she lectured him on why he shouldn't try to refuse his orders before finally letting him heal.

Then, when it was late afternoon and Rarity was closing up for the day, Fluttercruel had taken him with her on her trip to a dairy farm. She'd purchased milk, then brought him out to the cowpen and asked him if he wanted some. When he'd said yes – he'd known that nothing good was likely to come of it, but the honesty spell on him gave him no choice but to admit it – she had poured a cup, then ordered him to eat a pat of cow manure and told him that if he did it quickly enough she'd give him the milk. He knew how this game was played, he knew she wasn't playing in good faith and that this was just an excuse to torment him, he obeyed because the spell on him forced him to and not because he actually believed she'd give him anything when he was done, but even still, a little part of him had shriveled up and died inside him when he'd finished and Fluttercruel had declared he hadn't been fast enough, and then poured the cup of milk out onto the ground in front of him.

He hadn't been given anything else to eat, all day, and after the effort of not telling Spike that the letter he was begging Spike to send would go to his cognate in Discord's home universe rather than to the Celestia of this one, which had made him acutely nauseous and forced him to throw up all the disgusting things he'd been forced to eat that day... for all intents and purposes it was as if he hadn't eaten since the day before yesterday. He was so agonizingly hungry... but he whimpered quietly in fear of what awfulness Fluttercruel might have decided to make him eat today.

"Here you go!" She carried a bowl of plain hay in her forehooves as she fluttered over to him, using her wings for locomotion. "Some nice hay for you."

Discord was part pony. He could eat hay. It was the most boring possible food in existence, so he didn't like it, but it wasn't rotten and it wasn't fecal matter, it was actual edible food, so he dove at it. His sensitive nose caught a whiff of what Fluttercruel had done to the hay the moment before he bit into it. Discord didn't let his face change expression, but inside he was smiling fiercely. This trick, at least, he could handle.

He devoured the hay in two gulps and a slurp of the tongue to catch whatever he missed, cleaning the bowl out completely. The large quantity of hot sauce that Fluttercruel had laced it with, puddles of the stuff lying under the top layers of the hay where he'd easily smelled it but hadn't been able to see it, were a pleasant burn, clearing his sinuses and helping him become fully alert despite his exhaustion. In fact the hot spice made the hay far more palatable to him than ordinary boring hay without any kind of spice would have been. Even without his powers, Discord could handle any quantity of hot sauce. But Fluttercruel didn't know that, obviously, or she wouldn't have tried this trick. So as soon as he'd finished eating, he mimed being overwhelmed by the hot spice, panting, gasping, letting his tongue hang out of his mouth, and begging Fluttercruel in a choked voice for water, which she denied him, laughing. "Oh no, silly, no water for you right now. You need to earn your keep, after all."

Discord had known she would do that, of course. He really did want water; he'd been feeling dehydrated when he woke up, even before the hot sauce-laced hay. But he wasn't in nearly as dire
straits as he was pretending. If Fluttercruel thought that something he found a mild annoyance at worst and actually pleasant at best was a harsh torture he could barely endure, she would likely inflict it on him again, in lieu of the tortures he really couldn't endure. Of course he couldn't say he found the spice unendurable, because it wasn't true, but he'd found that the spell didn't prevent him from using his body language to lie. It didn't even make him nauseous when he did. As long as he made no attempt to speak a lie or to speak a technically true statement that was so misleading it was essentially a lie, the honesty spell didn't harm him.

It wasn't enough, of course. She never gave him enough to make him stop feeling hungry. When she'd chained him up for the night and he was in too much pain to fall asleep right away, he generally spent the time fantasizing about food. Candied apples, mountains of ice cream, warm mustard-filled donuts chock full of cracker bits, cheese and lollipop tops, pie soup, oyster-flavored bananas, mozzarella mushroom muffins, hot sizzling barbequed rutabagas that tasted like Gryphonian grilled steaks with cream cheese barbeque sauce, hearty crunchy tableware... it was probably foolish of him to do it and it probably made his hunger worse but he couldn't stop. When he hadn't been working on his letter and he hadn't been sleeping and he hadn't been thinking despairing thoughts about what would likely happen to him the next day and how little hope he had to ever get out of here, he had been lost in elaborate daydreams about food, inventing entirely new recipes in his head, savoring imaginary tastes and lingering over the imagery of flying rowboats laden with delicious dishes, and equally delicious food on top of the dishes, all for him.

Sometimes when he was bleeding and his skin was torn and she didn't let him heal himself right away, he'd lick the blood or tear off the skin and eat it, and once or twice he'd even bitten large chunks of flesh out of his own tail and eaten them, because his tail had been beaten so badly it was practically ground meat anyway and the pain of biting into his own flesh where the pain was already so bad he could barely stand it was still less than the agony of his hunger. Also, because he knew that either he'd be ordered to heal himself at some point, or he'd bleed to death, so one way or another no matter how badly he further mutilated his tail he wasn't going to have to live with it indefinitely.

"All done with your breakfast?" Fluttercruel asked cheerily, and pointlessly, because at this point the bowl was completely empty.

"Yes," Discord mumbled, tiredly, wishing there was more hay in the bowl.

"Discord, that's not very respectful. How do you address me?"

He sagged against the ground in utter humiliation. "Yes, mistress, I'm done," he said, forcing himself to speak loudly enough that she wouldn't force him to repeat himself. "What do you want me to do today?"

"Well, Applejack could use the help. So let's head over there."

He followed her out of the basement, putting one limb in front of the other in a dull routine pattern, trying very hard not to think about the future. Going to Applejack's almost invariably meant being beaten at least once. Well, it could be worse. It could be Twilight. Unbidden, his mind went back to the experiments she'd performed on him last night, and the agony he'd endured. No. No, Twilight was a slave to Order. Every three days and then every four days. Clockwork. He had four more days before he needed to suffer under Twilight's hooves again.

At least Applejack got started early in the morning. On some of the days when he was supposed to help in Rarity's shop or when Fluttercruel kept him here to help her, the day's work either started late enough, or he remained in proximity to Fluttercruel long enough, to give her the opportunity to demand that he satisfy her in the morning, and given that she usually required pain, humiliation
and submission from him before she'd be satisfied, those mornings were bad. Applejack was almost certainly going to hurt him, but not in the particularly horrible ways Fluttercruel usually inflicted on him.

"Let's give your wings a little stretch," Fluttercruel said. There were two rings in each of his wings, surrounding the upper bones and piercing through the thin flesh underneath. She unclipped them from the harness buckled around his body. "You can go ahead and give them a little flap, but no flying unless Applejack tells you to." They burned with the ache of having been bound in one place too long. It almost hurt more that she'd unbound them and ordered him to use them, but it was still a relief to be able to stretch them out.

He wondered how she was going to make him pay for this particular small mercy. Maybe just the fact that they were free, that he could theoretically fly away despite the leash because he could outfly Fluttercruel, and the obedience spell wouldn't allow him to. Sometimes Fluttercruel seemed to revel in giving him the appearance of freedom, when both of them knew perfectly well that he wasn't actually free at all. He'd pulled that particular stunt on ponies often enough to know that it was sometimes very amusing to pretend that your victim was free to do as they liked.

Fluttercruel was in many ways worse than he ever was — he'd never raped anypony and he'd never employed unrestrained torture, preferring to put most of his focus into the psychological variety because mere pain was just boring — but she used many of his more sophisticated techniques as well. It hurt, seeing himself and the things he'd done in her behavior, experiencing for himself what his victims must have felt and knowing that this particular singular torment, at least, was one he deserved, even if he was still managing to hold tight to his belief that he didn't deserve most of what he suffered here.

"Now, don't forget," Fluttercruel said cheerily as she fastened a leash to his collar. "Don't let anything damage your collar today!"

She said it every day. He suspected that if she left it open ended, a command to never damage the collar, the force of the command would eventually wear off and he'd be able to free himself. But because she repeated the command every day, he never had a chance. In the early days when they'd first enslaved him, Fluttercruel had told him not to damage his collar, so he had looked for elaborate workarounds that would permit other ponies or inanimate objects to damage or destroy the collar. After he'd deliberately tripped and fallen neck first into a bonfire on the logic that either it would burn his collar off and free him to use his magic, thus allowing him to heal the burns, or he'd burn to death and be free of this torture, Fluttercruel had figured out his game and had rephrased the command so that there were no more loopholes.

"I won't forget," he said dully, because it was true, the spell wouldn't let him.

Fluttercruel stepped into the hoof-end of the leash, shook her leg so the hoof ring would slide up and catch tightly, and walked forward. Discord followed her out of the house into bright sunlight, trying desperately to convince himself that today wouldn't be so bad, that it could be worse, that he'd be able to endure it. He knew he was lying to himself, of course, but he needed to.

Harmony, 10 AM

"This is the situation," Twilight said.

It had been difficult to refrain from giving explanations prematurely, particularly since Fluttershy had been the first to arrive, almost before Twilight had gotten back to the library herself, and she had been pleading with Twilight for information. But this was the kind of thing you didn't want to
"Last night Spike got a letter from Discord. It was in really bad condition, so he copied it out and sent the original to Princess Celestia. In the letter, Discord says that he went to an alternate universe – like that portal I went through to get the Element of Magic back from Sunset Shimmer, except this one seems to be more like ours, where all the ponies that are here are there as well."

"Hey, is this like that alternate universe Daring Do went to in issue 29 of the comics, where she had to team up with Ahuizotl because he was a good guy there to defeat herself because she was evil?" Rainbow Dash asked.

Twilight almost face-hooved – as if what happened in a comic book could have anything to do with a serious situation like this! – and then realized that, actually, Rainbow couldn't have picked a better example if she'd tried. "Almost exactly. It sounds like it's not quite entirely like that – like maybe at one point the good ponies were still good, and maybe most of them still are – but we are evil there. The six of us."

"Evil?" Rarity cried. "Oh my dear! Does the alternate version of me force ponies to wear plaid?"

"Is it like when Discord messed with us and I'm all like 'argh I hate you all you're laughing at me' and Applejack's like 'snicker snicker no I'm not' and Fluttershy's all 'I am laughing at you cause you're stupid' and Rarity's in love with Tom?" Pinkie Pie asked.

"Pinkie! I thought we agreed never to speak of that again!" Rarity said.

"Kind of," Twilight said, ignoring Rarity. "But a lot worse."

"Worse?" Applejack said skeptically. "What's worse'n what Discord made us into?"

Twilight took a deep breath. "I'm – I'm going to get to it. Let me finish. He said, he went to that universe because he wanted to make chaos and he was afraid Fluttershy would be mad at him if he did it here, so he went to a universe where all of us, and maybe all the ponies, are all still there, but where the other him was dead. It turns out, the other him is dead because the other Spike killed him."

"Spike is evil too?" Rarity exclaimed melodramatically, and fell over backward in a faint. Spike shoved a chair behind her to catch her, in the absence of her fainting couch.

"Wow," Rainbow said. "Spike, you killed Discord? That's... I don't know whether that's scary or awesome. Maybe both!"

"It's not awesome," Spike said. "The other me did it while he was a statue, with some special magic sledgehammer. I don't know why he did it, because Discord's letter didn't say, but I can guess."

"As can I," Twilight said. "The alternate Discord corrupted the Elements of Harmony themselves. Not just us, but the actual Elements. And it sounds like he didn't reverse them so much as he fused them with their opposites. So all of us are weird combinations of our true selves and our opposite selves, at the same time, and that's what turned us evil."

"Like what're we doing that's evil?" Applejack asked skeptically. "'Cause if the alternate Discord's dead... ain't like being a liar would've ever made me wanna take over Equestria or something."

"Like torture," Twilight said.

Pinkie Pie's eyes went huge. "Torture? Like... us? We're torturing ponies?"
Twilight nodded. "Discord's been taken prisoner by these alternate versions of us, and they're... they're torturing him. And I don't mean the kind of thing all of us except Fluttershy have probably wished to do to Discord at some point, not like smacking him or bucking him into a wall or something. I mean... torture. I... I don't even want to describe it. He sent the letter because he wants us to rescue him."

Fluttershy had said nothing since Twilight began to talk. Now, the silence following Twilight's last words were broken by a sob from the gentle pegasus. Fluttershy sat down on the floor heavily, without any of her usual grace, and covered her face with her hooves, crying quietly. "I knew he was in trouble," she whispered, barely loudly enough for Twilight to hear her. "I knew it..."

Rainbow Dash knelt down beside her fellow pegasus, putting an arm around her. "Hey, Flutters. It's gonna be okay." She looked up and scowled. "Uh, exactly how are ponies like us torturing Discord? Last I checked, he was like super powerful and without the Elements, we've never been able to do anything to him."

"It sounds like the other me found a different way to use the Elements," Twilight said. "She cast an obedience spell on him."

"An obedience spell?" Rarity cried, and promptly fainted again. Twilight rolled her eyes.

"Does an obedience spell do what it sounds like?" Applejack asked.

"It makes a pony into a slave," Twilight said. "It's an abomination. The spell's forbidden, it's the kind of thing you'd expect somepony like King Sombra to use, not... not me. Under an obedience spell..." She swallowed. "The pony under the spell can still think and feel for themselves, but they can't disobey an order. The one controlling the spell could make them put their hoof in a fire, or, or jump in a lake and drown themselves, and they'd have to do it. An ordinary obedience spell would never work on Discord, he's much too powerful... but the other me channeled the spell through the Elements, like that summoning spell the Princess taught me that we used to call Discord when his vines were all over the place."

"But, my dear," Rarity said, back from her brief faint already and fanning herself until Spike took the fan from her and began eagerly performing the job himself, "why would anypony ever need to torture somepony under an obedience spell? I'm hardly the student of magic you are, but I remember reading about those in my magic lessons. If somepony's compelled to do anything you tell them to, why would you torture them?"

"Maybe because you're evil," Rainbow Dash said. "I mean... if we're evil... I'm a hero and I can't tell you how many times I've wanted to buck Discord in the face. If I was evil and I could order him to stand still for it... I mean the only reason I wouldn't want to do that is that it's wrong and evil, and if I was evil I wouldn't care, I guess."

"What kind of parties would an evil me have?" Pinkie asked nopony in particular. "Like, would I decorate everything in black? Or not send out enough invitations, so some ponies wouldn't get them and they'd get upset? Or use punch that was going bad so everypony got food poisoning?"

Twilight did not want to explain to Pinkie what Discord had implied about her alter ego. "Discord says he thinks they're trying to brainwash him," she said. "The obedience spell can force him to obey, but we know how good Discord is at finding loopholes. He says he thinks they're conditioning him to obey unquestioningly, to be so afraid of disobedience that he won't look for loopholes anymore, and then they'll be able to make him use his magic to do anything they want. He also says they think he's the one from their universe, which might explain how the other me would stoop to casting an obedience spell, except I don't care what they think he did, there's
absolutely no good excuse for... for the things he says they're doing."

"And you believe him, sugarcube?" Applejack asked.

Twilight nodded. "I do."

"Yeah," Spike said. "I checked over the document itself really carefully and it all tied out. Like he said he was making the paper he was writing it on out of tree bark and his own skin, with transformation magic, and there were places where I found the paper was rough like bark or it had Discord's scales in it..." He stopped abruptly at the look of utter horror from Fluttershy. "Uh. So, yeah. Twilight and I think he's telling the truth."

"You mind if I take a look at this letter for myself?"

Rainbow Dash snorted. "Like you could tell if Discord was lying," she said. "I know you can usually tell if somepony's lying, but you've never been able to tell with Discord before."

Applejack rolled her eyes. "The reason I can't generally tell if Discord's being honest is that he never is. He's always setting off my 'this is a load of horseapples' meter, but I can't generally tell about exactly what, cause he mixes up lies and truth and he tells the truth like it's a lie or he uses a truth to tell a lie and it's such a big mess of confusion, I can't tell which way's up. A thing like this, though, it feels like either it's all gotta be a lie, because it's some kind of joke or evil plan, or it's all gotta be the truth, and I figure maybe I can tell which."

Twilight smiled nervously, shuffling slightly in place. "Um... Well... The thing is..."

"We sent the letter to Princess Celestia already," Spike said.

"But you said you made a copy, Spike," Applejack said. "I don't need to read the original. Honesty ain't in ink and paper, it's in words."

Twilight sighed. "Discord sent the letter to me," she explained. "So he knew I was going to read it. And he knew Spike would because he sent it through Spike. And I'm sure he knew that I would send it to Princess Celestia. But I don't know if he would be all right with me sharing it with anypony else."

"Seems to me, if I was being tortured and I wanted somepony to come rescue me, I wouldn't care who-all read my call for help, so long as it ended up they came to help me."

"But you're not the kind to keep things to yourself for the sake of your pride. Some of the things Discord says in this letter... he says he's under a spell that forces him to tell the truth, and if it's not the complete truth, he'll throw up, and because of that he says some things that he didn't even want to tell me, but the spell made him do it."

"Um... if it helps to make sure that everypony believes him... I think Discord would be okay with Applejack reading it," Fluttershy said softly. "I know he doesn't think any of us trust him except for me—"

"Yeah, well, why would we?" Rainbow Dash asked. "He lied to our faces about those vines!"

"I'm, um, I'm not saying you're wrong to mistrust him... I'm just saying, he knows about it. If, if he's really in trouble, I think he would be okay with Applejack reading about it, if it means that we believe him..."

"All right," Twilight said. If Applejack saw something she and Spike had missed, some way this
could all be some kind of elaborate awful prank, she needed to know. And if Discord was as
sincere as Twilight felt he was, Applejack would pick up on it, and the others would trust
Applejack's assessment of Discord's honesty more than they'd trust such an assessment from
anypony else except maybe the princess. "But, Applejack... it's awful. It's really awful."

"Maybe so, but I gotta see for myself anyway," Applejack said. She sat down at Twilight's desk so
she could use her hooves to move the pages, and Spike handed her the document.

"What are we going to do, Twilight?" Fluttershy asked, as Applejack was reading. "We are going
to help him, aren't we?"

"We're going to Canterlot to talk with Princess Celestia, once Applejack finishes," Twilight said.
"She said the six of us, plus Spike, need to meet with her there. She also said she was going to try
to get hold of Shiny and Cadance."

"Oh my!" Rarity raised her eyebrows. "So Princess Celestia is taking this quite seriously."

"Yes, I think so," Twilight said.

Pinkie had said almost nothing, at least not in comparison to her usual exuberance. Now she said,
apropos of nothing, "I never gave him a party." Her eyes were wide, and... welling with tears?

"You most certainly did," Rarity said.

"Yeah, it's not your fault he skipped out on you and you had to change it to a 'Hooray for Fluttershy
Reforming Discord' party!" Rainbow said.

Pinkie shook her head. "I was always going to have a real one, but not until he earned it. Because
he was trying to break the rule."

Rarity gasped. "He broke a Pinkie Promise?"

"No, not that rule. Nopony breaks a Pinkie Promise," Pinkie said. "He said you guys weren't really
his friends. Just Fluttershy."

"Well, duh," Rainbow said. "Kind of obvious, don't you think?"

"Is that why you said you weren't his friend?" Twilight asked.

"I said I wasn't going to be his friend but I wasn't not going to be his friend," Pinkie explained,
which explained nothing. "Because he wanted to be friends with me. He came to me to apologize
but he apologized about the wrong thing! And he wants to be my friend, but he doesn't want to be
friends with my friends, and he's said he's sorry for what he did to me in the maze but it's not
because of me, it's because he likes Laughter, and he's not sorry about any of the rest of you except
Fluttershy and I said well then you can't be my friend! The rule is, if you're going to be my friend
you have to be friends with my friends, and if you're going to be sorry for making me a big
meaniepants it doesn't mean anything if you aren't sorry for doing it to my friends too! And he said
but you wouldn't ever be his friends because you hated him and I said but did you even try and he said
there wasn't any point in trying and that Twilight thinks he's the worst kind of stallion there is,
which honestly he isn't even a stallion really because he's not a pony, he's a draconequuthingy and I
don't even know what you call them when they're male, but anyway he wouldn't tell me what he
meant by that but I said well if you're not even going to try to be friends with my friends then I can't
be your friend until you're friends with my friends and that's why I'm not gonna throw you a party.
But I was always going to someday! I was sure he would come around eventually, because you're
all such nice ponies, and I was going to... as soon as he could really be sorry for messing with all of
us and not just me and Fluttershy and as soon as he could really be a friend, not just say he is to your faces and then say to me that none of you are really his friend because you hate him... I knew he could do it someday, I knew Fluttershy was working on him so I had to be the bad cop even though I don't like that because he has to know that sometimes being a friend means being friends with your friends' friends, and I had the party all planned in my head for whenever that was going to be..." She flung her arms around Twilight with a sob. "BUT WHAT IF HE NEVER COMES BACK? What if we can't rescue him, or what if the evil us, they, they... what if he never comes back?"

Awkwardly Twilight extricated herself from the sobbing Pinkie Pie, handing her over to Fluttershy, who was equally distraught. There were times that Pinkie seemed bizarrely inappropriate, like she lived in an entirely different world, and when she'd first started talking about not giving Discord a party Twilight had thought that this was one of those times. But the party was just a symbol. Pinkie wasn't crying over the fact that she might never be able to hold a party for Discord, she was crying over the fact that for some reason, she had seen a greater potential in him than anypony but Fluttershy had, and he might not live to realize that potential.

And possibly for the fact that she'd held back her friendship, something she normally gave to anypony at all, from someone who'd actually sought it, because she'd been trying to teach him to be a better friend, and now she might never have a chance. It actually somewhat surprised Twilight that Pinkie had tried being the "bad cop" with Discord; she was normally so relentlessly cheerful, so impossible to offend or depress. Naturally, she had probably only been able to bring herself to do it because she'd believed that she could teach him that way, that he could improve if she held out on him... and if he didn't survive this or they couldn't rescue him, she'd have to live with rejecting friendship from somepony who'd offered it without ever achieving the goal she'd been trying to accomplish by doing that.

"Now, Pinkie, I'm sure Princess Celestia will have a strategy," Rarity said. "I'm... sure she wouldn't abandon anypony in such dire straits, not even Discord."

"One way or another, we're going to help him, Pinkie," Twilight said. "He's a jerk, but he's our jerk, and he – and he doesn't deserve what they're doing to him. Nopony would."

Applejack stood up, pushing the chair back from the desk. Spike had been hovering by her, pointing out various features of Discord's original document that weren't present in his copy. "I've read all I need to," she said shakily.

"And?" Rainbow asked.

"And I think this ain't no prank or twisted up plan of some kind. I feel like, probably he ain't being entirely honest about what all he did over there – he talks about it like it was nothing, and ten to one I bet ya it was the kinda thing where if he did it here we'd've been trying to talk Fluttershy into helping us put him back in stone. But that is no justification for what they're doing... and in my opinion, if there's anything he ain't being honest about when he talks about what they're doing to him, I think he's holding back on how bad it is." She took a deep breath. "I also think Twilight's right, nopony else should read this thing. It's bad to read about terrible things like this happening to somepony you know, even if you don't much like him, but it's much, much worse to read about yourself doing those things. I'm gonna have nightmares about this for a long time now."

Twilight felt a mixture of relief and sorrow. It was good to know that the Bearer of Honesty agreed with her own assessment of Discord's truthfulness in the letter. But if he'd been lying, then she could have been angry with him for playing a cruel prank or whatever it would have been. If he was telling the truth... then all those horrible things really were happening to him, and they were
being done by versions of herself and her friends.

"So you believe him?" Rainbow still looked skeptical.

"I surely do," Applejack said.

"Okay then! If you trust that he's telling the truth, that's good enough for me."

"And me," Rarity said. "Not that I ever doubted my little Spikey-Wikey, but it is good to get an independent opinion." Spike grinned in exactly the same way a dog being scratched would wag its tail. Twilight half expected him to start wagging his. At least this portal, we'll all get to stay our own species, she thought.

"Well then!" Pinkie shouted. "What are we waiting for? Let's get to the train and go see Princess Celestia!"

"Yes," Twilight said. "Let's go."

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Harmony, 12 PM

Celestia's seneschal offered the Bearers refreshment while they waited for Celestia to dismiss the Solar Court for lunch. The sandwiches looked positively delicious, and the cookies delectable, but Twilight had no appetite. She drank the apple juice that had been put out for them, noting with a bit of vicarious pride that it was obviously Applejack's family's own product, and watched her friends, with the exception of Fluttershy, scarf down the food.

"Fluttershy," she said softly. "Are you okay? Maybe you should eat something."

Fluttershy shook her head. "I couldn't eat right now. What about you? Shouldn't you eat?"

"No appetite," Twilight said.

Fluttershy looked as if she was going to cry again. "It's... it's really... bad?" she whispered. "Is he – if we rescue him – when we rescue him, do you... what kind of medical treatment do you think he'll need? Because I'll pack my whole kit if I need to..."

That was good. That was Fluttershy focusing on what she could do to help, not crumpling up in grief because of what was happening to her friend. "I don't know what we might need," Twilight said. "Painkillers, antiseptics and bandages, I guess. Maybe... some material for splinting. He says they leave him a little bit of his magic to heal himself with, but he said he heals himself with transformation magic, so that's not going to work well if he has only a little bit of it."

"What does that mean? Healing versus transformation magic?"

"Well, healing magic focuses on fixing a body back to its natural state, of course. It's a type of harmonic magic, like most of the magic unicorns do. Discord doesn't use harmonic magic, and by its fundamental nature chaos can't fix things, so he probably doesn’t have access to healing magic at all. Theoretically, you can use transformation magic to heal by transforming a body from an injured state to an uninjured state. Like, if I turn you into a gecko, and then I turn you back into a pony, when I turn you back into a pony I don't restore you to how you were before you were a gecko, I restore you to your ur-state, your fundamental Fluttershyness, so if you had a broken wing before I made you a gecko... geckos don't have wings. When I turn you back into a pegasus, you don't get the broken wing you had before, you get the unbroken wing that nature says you should have, because that's where I'm getting the pattern to make you back into yourself. You see?"
"Not entirely but a little bit..."

"So Discord can heal any injury by just transforming himself back into his uninjured state. But transformation magic takes a lot more power than healing does... which might not be a problem for Discord, because generally speaking getting chaotic magic to do what you want it to do takes a lot more power than using harmonic magic, but that might not be an issue for him because of his affinity with Chaos... but on the other hand he's not used to having limited quantities of power..." Abruptly Twilight realized that Fluttershy's eyes were glazing over. "Oh! Sorry. The point is, using transformation magic to heal isn't efficient and uses a lot of power, so he might not be able to heal himself very well."

The bugle of the herald cut off any reply Fluttershy might have made. "Princess Celestia!" the herald shouted, as if everypony in the room didn't know exactly who was walking through the large doors.

By habit, Twilight bowed. Celestia laughed gently. "There's no need for that, my little ponies." She looked at her herald. "Bugle Blue, I don't require so much pomp and circumstance with these ponies. These ponies, and this young dragon, are heroes of Equestria, my loyal and faithful servants, and among their number is our newest princess, Princess Twilight Sparkle. They do not require such ceremony."

The herald turned red and stammered. "I – I'm sorry, your Highness..."

"It was a simple mistake, and no harm was done," Celestia said. "Simply remember in future."

"I – I will."

She looked at Twilight and her friends. "If everyone has had a chance to have some lunch, let us go to a more private chamber to talk."

"These sandwiches are great, Princess!" Rainbow said. She grabbed an extra one to munch on as they headed for the chamber.

Twilight noticed Pinkie sticking an entire tray of sandwiches in her mane, where it disappeared. "Pinkie, what are you doing?"

"You and Flutter didn't eat anything, silly billies! So I'm saving you guys some lunch for later!" She dumped half a tray of cookies into her mane, and then poured the rest of them into her mouth. "Ymm!"

The private chamber was still very large, but unlike the wide open court hallways and audience chambers, it had a door. Celestia closed it with her magic as they all entered. "How come the private room, your Highness?" Applejack asked. "Is there something hush-hush about all this?"

"To a degree, yes," Celestia said. "There are many here in the court who would... not approve of a mission to rescue Discord, and I prefer not to give the gossip mills of Canterlot new fodder to squawk over." She smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. Twilight noted that Celestia looked... tired. It bothered her. Princess Celestia never looked tired during the day.

"So we are going on some kind of rescue mission?" Spike asked. "All of us?"

"You, most certainly. Spike. No matter who goes on this mission, there will be no way to communicate home by conventional means. If you need help or encounter difficulties, only a dragon's messenger fire can send a letter between the realms."
"Wow! So I'm important to the mission?"

"Absolutely." Celestia smiled warmly at him.

"Who all you thinking of sending, your Highness?" Applejack asked.

"I do not believe Princess Cadance and Shining Armor will be able to leave their duties in the Crystal Empire for this," Celestia said. "And if it's true that he's being held in the basement of Fluttershy's counterpart, and that the portal is near the Everfree... a small group who can move quickly, who are familiar with Ponyville and who the residents will not be alarmed to see, but who have sufficient power and experience to handle themselves should there be trouble, would be ideal. We cannot afford to send anyone whose counterpart might be dead, for that would certainly raise great alarm and consternation if they were spotted, but the only ponies we know to be alive are Spike, the six Element Bearers, and myself. I... cannot go." She sighed. "The other Celestia would surely sense my presence. There cannot be two Sun Bearers who are unaware of each other. So I believe that ideally, the party should consist of you seven only."

"Prin—uh, Celestia," Twilight said, unable to quite get used to the fact that her rank made it proper to address Celestia by her first name, "wouldn't the fact that we don't know that Shiny and Cadance are alive over there mean we shouldn't bring them anyway?"

"They could have brought enough power and skill to the group that it would be worth the risk," Celestia said. "I have many powerful and well-trained soldiers among my Royal Guard, and my sister's Lunar Guard has many as well. But none have experience in fighting by your sides. Shining Armor and Cadance do. Nonetheless... they're not available, and I have every confidence in the six of you ponies in any case."

"And me," Spike said.

"Spike, your role on this mission is too vital to be jeopardized by potential combat," Celestia said. "You shall accompany the Bearers, but I want you to avoid any type of confrontation with the ponies on the other side unless it is absolutely necessary. If you should be injured, the others would be left with no means of summoning aid from our side if they needed to."

Twilight grinned to herself. *Nicely played, Princess.* She'd just told Spike to keep out of trouble and stay safe, and had managed to phrase it in a way that made it sound like it was his duty and a heroic act to do so, not something he should do because he was a tiny little dragon who couldn't realistically fight a full grown pony. Telling Spike to stay safe because he was a kid never worked anymore, but telling him it was the best possible way for him to protect the rest of the group just might.

"Yes, your Highness!" Spike said, standing up straight and proud. "I'm your dragon!"

"You know I'm ready for an adventure any time, any day," Rainbow Dash said. "But, Princess, I have to ask... is this really what we oughta be doing? I mean, I don't think Discord deserves to be tortured either, but... we haven't got our Elements, and the evil versions of us do. And they're evil. So except for me, most of them are gonna be better fighters than my friends are, I mean you can't get awesomer than me by being evil and if she's got her opposite trait in her then she's probably a coward who'll run away, but the others... a mean and angry Pinkie or Fluttershy's probably gonna be better able to hurt other ponies than our nice and kind Pinkie and Fluttershy. And the other Twilight came up with a spell to *take down Discord.* No offense, Twi, but you never came up with anything like that."

"It's true, I didn't," Twilight said. "It sounds like the alternate Discord was running riot on that
world for a lot longer before they could put him in stone than ours did, so she probably had a lot more time where she felt she had to come up with things." But she was definitely going to look into this Sweet Dreams spell for herself, when she had time. According to Discord, the other Twilight had initially disabled him with a spell that fed on chaos and produced happy illusions that kept the subject calm, and even if Discord himself never did anything that warranted having to stop him, he had never been the only source of dangerous chaotic behavior in Equestria. The obedience spell was completely evil and Twilight would never have used such a spell on Discord even if she knew how, but the Sweet Dreams spell didn't sound harmful at all.

"Rainbow, are you saying we should leave him there?" Fluttershy asked, anguish in her voice.

"Well, um... maybe? If he's there, we don't need to worry about what he's up to here... and it's not like he'd do the same for us. I'm not worried about myself, like I said, I'm pretty sure I can kick my counterpart's flank into next Tuesday. But I'm worried about the rest of you guys. They're more ruthless than you and they've got their Elements and we don't. And... he kinda did get himself into this..."

"How could you..." Fluttershy whispered, looking utterly stricken.

"That's exactly what he thought we'd say," Twilight said.

"Fluttershy, Rainbow Dash is only doing as is her nature. Don't be angry with her," Celestia said. "It is the nature of loyalty to put the well being of friends first, before any other consideration. And given that loyalty is so powerful once it is given, she does not easily trust or befriend anypony who's harmed her friends at any point. It is perfectly understandable for her to put your safety and well being ahead of Discord's, just as it is yours to forgive easily and to consider the suffering of a friend to be your highest possible priority."

"I'm not saying we should leave him there," Rainbow said, uncomfortably, looking away from Fluttershy's eyes. "But maybe we should think about what the best thing to do for all of Equestria is? I mean, I'd like to go kick evil me's flank, but is that what we ought to be doing?"

"You're absolutely correct, Rainbow Dash," Celestia said calmly. "We should think about what the best thing to do for all Equestria is. That is always my first consideration, when making any decision. And I assure you, rescuing Discord is the best thing to do for all Equestria." She put a hoof on Rainbow Dash's shoulder. "I'm glad you brought up this question, because I'm sure it must have been in the minds of some of your friends as well, and I welcome the opportunity to explain why we must rescue him."

"Okay...?" Rainbow was now looking extremely uncomfortable, as if she couldn't tell if Princess Celestia was angry at her or not.

Celestia lowered her hoof, and stepped away. "Setting aside the moral considerations of what the good thing to do is, the righteous thing to do. From a purely practical perspective... in Discord's letter, which I take it you have not read, Rainbow?"

"Uh, no, Applejack and Twilight and Spike all agreed that nopony besides the three of them and you oughta read it."

"Of course, and that was wise. But if you had read the letter, you would have realized exactly what I am sure they have, and what I have. Discord says that he believes they are trying to brainwash him into being an obedient, unquestioning servant... with the full power of Chaos at his command. He says that he doesn't know what they intend for him, but speculates that perhaps they will want him to conquer other worlds for them. Other dimensions. If that is the case, and we cannot assume
that it is not... ours is the first he knows of. And if we leave him there, whatever loyalty he feels toward us now will be turned when they break him. He will hate us for abandoning him there. He might even seek permission from his masters to attack us."

"Um. Yeah. I guess... we don't want that!" Rainbow laughed nervously in obvious embarrassment and continued discomfort.

"But if that were the only consideration... if I were as ruthless and cruel as it seems my counterpart may be, and I was only concerned with ensuring that Discord could not be turned against us... I might send a team of assassins to kill him. Without his power, he's as mortal as any pony. In his current circumstance he might even thank me for that. There is a reason why I wouldn't choose that path, aside from the fact that it's a betrayal of everything I believe in and everything Equestria stands for. The truth is, Equestria owes Discord a debt it has never been able to repay."

"Owes Discord a debt?" Twilight said, somewhat shocked.

"My goodness, he's only been reformed a few months, and I certainly hadn't heard of anything particularly remarkable he's done for Equestria," Rarity said. "Whatever could you mean, Princess?"

Celestia sighed deeply. "Discord... was not always Equestria's enemy."

"Oh! Oh!" Pinkie raised a hoof. "Is this like all those stories where he used to be your brother and he was an alicorn and then some kind of mean nasty Chaos thing took over his brain and turned him into a bad guy?"

"That's ridiculous, Pinkie, Discord can't be..." Twilight trailed off at the expression on Celestia's face.

"Discord was never an alicorn. He was always a draconequus... a species that is now extinct, except for him," Celestia said. "And from the time I met him, he wielded Chaos magic. However... I am curious as to the source of these 'stories,' Pinkie, because some of those suppositions are almost accurate."

"Oh, they're not here," Pinkie said. "They're out there." She waved her hoof at nothing. "Just like the one we're in!"

"Princess, that's just Pinkie being Pinkie," Applejack said. "But I admit I'm mighty interested in what parts of that crazy story she just told might be the truth."

"My family took Discord in, as a foster brother of sorts to myself and Luna," Celestia said. "He was... different then. Not physically, he looked much as he does today, though younger. And in some ways he was much the same. He still loved Chaos. He enjoyed playing pranks, teasing Luna and myself – especially Luna – and starting arguments. And he was thoughtless, and occasionally cruel, but back then he also had great compassion at times. He never did have very much empathy for any ponies he didn't know well. But for the few he invited into his heart, he was as loyal and true as any of you are to each other."

"He told Fluttershy he never had a friend before," Applejack said, scowling slightly.

"He never did. He had foster family and a teacher. I told him on occasion to make friends with other ponies besides Luna and myself, and he..." She broke off for a moment. "Excuse me, my throat is a bit dry. I think I'll have some of that excellent apple juice from your farm, Applejack." She opened the door, stepped out a moment, and returned, sipping a cup of apple juice.
Twilight might have just imagined hearing her voice break, right before she excused herself to get a drink.

"What did he do, Princess?" Fluttershy said softly. "I mean... if you're okay with talking about it..."

"Of course I am," Celestia said warmly. "I was going to say... he told me that Luna and I were all that he needed, that he had no desire to make friends of other ponies when he had us." She sighed. "Probably I should have demanded it, or made arrangements for him to meet others whether he liked it or not, but... perhaps it would have made no difference in the end."

"What happened, Princess?" Rarity asked. "He's obviously quite different now..."

"What happened was war." Celestia took another sip of her apple juice. "In those days the dragons were different as well. Today they are disorganized, individualistic to the point of being almost ungoverned, but in those days, they were a great empire, and they were at war with Equestria. And we were losing. When I ascended to the throne, Luna was not at her majority yet, so she didn't yet rule by my side. I was barely more than a filly, and I had the responsibility of protecting my nation against an enemy more powerful, who were far too proud to surrender to mere ponies, who were very difficult to kill with magic or in fact anything, and who didn't seek to merely conquer us but eat us."

"Yikes," Spike said. "Dragons... dragons don't eat ponies nowadays though, right?"

"Not as a rule," Celestia said. "But as I said, things were different in those days." She closed her eyes. "I sent my most powerful weapon to the Dragon Empire to defeat them. Discord wasn't as close to all-powerful as he is now, then, but he was the most powerful mage in Equestria and most likely the world. I knew that using his power in the context of warfare, using chaos to kill and to destroy the minds of his foes, could damage his sanity. He knew it as well. I sent him anyway, and he went willingly, for I had to consider all of Equestria, not just one I... one I cared for. And he had little loyalty to the abstract ideal of Equestria, but he was loyal to me, and to Luna." She breathed deeply. "If I had known then what I know now... I might still have done it, and he would almost certainly have disobeyed me and done it anyway if I had ordered him not to go. For all the damage Discord's chaos did to Equestria, he never killed ponies except by thoughtless accident, not that I was aware of in any case. The dragons would have eaten us all."

"Are you saying Discord went insane because he was forced to use his powers to kill the dragons?" Twilight asked.

"Not... entirely. There was no one moment that broke him. It was a slow slide. His sanity was questionable for some time, but I was always able to return him to himself, to break his obsessive focus on Chaos and make him recognize there was value in life aside from making everything change constantly. But eventually... the dragons tried to kill him, in a way that completed his transformation into the avatar of Chaos, not a mere Chaos mage. He became very nearly unstoppable... and lost his reason, at the same time. And for some time, we were separated because of what the dragons had done. He believed Luna and me to be dead, and with what was left of his sanity gone, he blamed us for abandoning him. And blamed us the worse when he learned we weren't dead, even though it was no choice of ours that separated us from him. I couldn't... I couldn't bring him back to reason. Chaos was all he loved any longer, all he lived for, all that mattered to him."

She took another sip of her apple juice. "So you see... Discord saved Equestria, at the cost of his sanity, and we repaid him by fighting him for centuries and then sealing him in stone for a millennium. We had no choice, but in a sense, neither did he. He lost his ability to freely make choices, to restrain himself, because of the war I sent him to win. Ponies live and thrive today
because Discord willingly risked his psyche to save us. And I never meant to lock him away for a thousand years... only until I could find some other way to restrain him, to bring him back to himself. But then I... then I lost Luna, and... with the Elements broken, I had no way to seal Discord again if I freed him. I didn't dare."

"How tragic," Rarity said softly. "I never knew... It must have been so hard for you, Princess."

"I always intended to release him, once you six were bearing the Elements. But not right away. You needed experience, you needed to deepen your friendships, for I knew that destroying friendship had become one of his favorite tactics. He broke loose before I thought you were ready, and you did well, defeating and resealing him... but it had always been my intention to ask you to try to befriend and reform him, eventually. Because I knew it was possible. Because once he had been my... my..."

"Yer brother?" Applejack asked.

Celestia shook her head, her eyes welling with tears. Twilight hadn't seen the Princess so overwhelmed with emotion since the Elements had defeated Nightmare Moon and restored Princess Luna. "Luna saw him as a brother," she said. "But I was the one who asked my father to take him in, when we first we met. We were too old to be newly a brother and sister." She closed her eyes. "It was very long ago."

"Oh, my," Rarity said. "Princess... did you... love him?"

Celestia nodded, once. "As I said. A long time ago. It... doesn't matter any longer. There have been too many years of enmity... I am not sure we can ever even be friends, now. But... yes. He was my first love, and I his."

Twilight blinked. Discord had told her, while he'd been ranting about the nightmare she'd had with him in it and why he was much too attractive to stoop to raping ponies, that the "most beautiful and powerful mare in the world" had... well, the way he'd phrased it, it had sounded positively sordid. He'd said she'd thrown herself at him and begged him to take her virginity. Twilight had shouted "TMI!" at him and strongly considered hitting him, again, and she hadn't taken the boast at all seriously. But Discord had a way of telling the truth in a way that made it sound like lies. And mixing lies and half-truths into it; he'd also told her he'd never had any relationships or much more than one-night stands, had actually bragged about it as if it was something to be proud of, and if what Princess Celestia was saying now was true, he'd been lying about that. But actually telling the truth about being the first love of a beautiful, powerful mare... while not bothering to mention that she'd been his first, and if the rest of what he'd said had any accuracy at all, only love, as well.

"Wow," Rainbow Dash said. "Just... wow. I, uh, I'd have never expected that, Princess."

Celestia smiled wanly. "No one ever does," she said. "It isn't... a fact either of us advertise. For obvious reasons. And as I said, it's no longer relevant... except as part of the explanation why I felt he could be reformed, and as part of the explanation why I feel Equestria owes him that chance. He has done so many terrible things... things I can never truly forgive. But even at the height of his madness, he protected Equestria from threats that weren't him. And I know that he can control himself for love's sake, that he has. I am not sure anypony can offer him love, not anymore, but I believed he could control himself for friendship's sake as well. And thus far he has. Mostly. As much as he ever did, anyway." She sighed. "For the sake of the debt all ponies owe him, for losing himself to save us from dragonkind, we must rescue him. For the sake of not allowing him to become a weapon against us again, we must rescue him. And... for the sake of what I once felt for him... I, myself, cannot bear to leave him to such torment. Will you help him for Equestria's sake, Rainbow? And for mine?"
Rainbow nodded seriously. "You can count on me, Princess."

"And me," Rarity said. "I hadn't any idea you and Discord had such a tragically romantic past, your Highness. Of course I'll do anything in my power to help."

"Figured I wasn't gonna be able to leave somepony in a place like that soon as I figured out he was telling the truth," Applejack said. "So I'm all in."

"So what're we waiting for? Let's go!" Pinkie shouted.

"Pinkie, we don't even know where we're going," Twilight said.

"Oh." Pinkie's face fell.

"Have you attempted to find the portal yet, Twilight?" Celestia asked.

"Not yet, but something as disruptive as a portal to an alternate dimension should show up pretty easily if I scry for it." She mused for a moment. "I'm thinking, we should return to Ponyville. The portal's near there anyway, so it's almost on the way. We can pick up any supplies we might need..." 

"Yeah, that's right!" Pinkie said. "If we're in a different Ponyville then all the emergency supplies I put all over the place in case of emergency would be in different places because a different me would have put them there and maybe they would be evil supplies! I wouldn't want to grab a balloon that I set aside for a balloon emergency and find out it was a bomb she put aside for a bomb emergency! So I'm going to have to pack up all my emergency supplies and bring them with us!"

"And I'll want my medical supplies," Fluttershy said softly. "And maybe I should speak with Zecora about bringing along a few healing potions."

"Oh, and I will most definitely want to bring along costuming supplies," Rarity said. "After all, if we happen to run into our other selves, they won't believe we belong there; we may have to disguise ourselves!"

"I figure I'll just bring a lot of rope," Applejack said. "Can't think what else I might have that we'd need for a trip like this."

"Mountain climbing pitons," Rainbow Dash said. "And one of those hook thingies that you swing up onto the top of things so you can climb. That's what Daring Do would bring!"

"Darling, why does Daring Do need mountain climbing pitons when she is a pegasus?" Rarity asked.

"Duh! Because when she was fighting the werejaguars, their high priestess cast a spell on the mountain to make the air burn if you got more than pony height off the ground, so she ended up having to climb Mount Popocatepetl to throw the Ruby of Doom into the volcano with mountain climbing pitons instead of flying!"

"So you're gonna bring some?" Applejack asked skeptically.

"Naah, there aren't any mountains in Ponyville," Rainbow said confidently. "I figure I don't need to bring anything but my awesome self."

"I'll need paper and quills," Spike said. "Lots and lots, maybe."
"And we need to pack food!" Pinkie said. "Oh, I know, I'll bring a couple of cans of Cotton Candy in a Can! That way when we find Discord we can open up the can and give him the cotton candy! And if he has his powers back he could eat the can too!"

"When we get back, I'll make a list," Twilight said. "We'll pack everything, and we'll make sure that everything we need to do gets covered while we're gone. Like someone to take care of Fluttershy's animals."

"Yeah, and I'll need to get someone to cover my weather shifts," Rainbow said.

"I'm going to take a few minutes to see if I can scry the portal from here," Twilight said. "It'd be better if I could tell Princess Celestia exactly where it is before we leave. Spike, while I'm concentrating on this, can you take notes on what everypony says they need to pack?"

While Twilight was setting up her scrying spell, and the others were talking animatedly with Spike about the preparations they needed to make, Fluttershy turned to Princess Celestia. "Princess, can I talk to you? Um... privately?"

"Of course, Fluttershy. Walk with me." Celestia walked with Fluttershy out of the chamber. "What did you wish to talk about?"

"Um..." This was so hard. "What you said... before... about you and Discord?"

"Yes?"

"Does that... does that mean... is it okay to feel that way about someone who isn't a pony?"

"Did someone tell you it was not?"

"I'm not sure... exactly. It's just... everypony always seems to act like... it's, um, unnatural. Wrong, or, or something. Ponies joke about Spike's crush on Rarity, but if she had the same feelings for him, some ponies would act like she's weird? Or sick?"

Celestia nodded. "Prejudice against xenophilia. It comes and goes. There are times that it is stronger in society, and times it is less strong. Discord and I had to hide our true feelings in public, at first; I didn't wish to cause a scandal, and while Discord did, he cared for me enough to respect my feelings. Eventually I stopped caring. The common ponies might have been scandalized if they knew, but we were at war... and when my love came home to me ranting about the world being a soap bubble and talking about turning the patterns of everything inside out and telling me that reality was melting, I wasn't going to turn him aside for propriety's sake, no matter who could see us."

Turning the patterns of everything inside out. The last time Fluttershy had seen Discord, he'd talked about how strongly he was compelled to do that, how it obsessed him and it hurt him to be unable to do it. The Princess had said that in the old days, he'd been able to hold himself back for the sake of love, and that now she believed he could hold back for the sake of friendship, and Fluttershy knew that that was true. She'd seen him doing it. She knew how hard it had been for him.

She felt so guilty. She was the one who'd told him that ponies would be afraid of even harmless, beautiful chaos, that he needed to make friends before he could do even that much. And so he'd run off to create chaos somewhere that she wouldn't see him do it, because he couldn't bring himself to do without it. And now he was in a terrible place, trapped, because she had told him to hold himself back still, and he couldn't do it.
Fluttershy wanted to save him, wanted to fly in there and Stare down anypony who'd hurt him, wanted to bring him safely home and take care of him and make him well again. But in addition to that, she wanted him to know she'd never meant to make him feel hopeless, she'd never meant to make him feel like he had to run to another universe to get what he needed. If bringing his light rain to Ponyville could have saved him from needing to do this, she should have encouraged him to do it, she should have talked Twilight and Pinkie and Rarity into accepting it and let them convince evverypony else, because Twilight would have been fascinated by it and Pinkie would have thought it was fun and Rarity would have seen the beauty in rain that was light. They wouldn't have been afraid of something beautiful and harmless even if it was strange, not if she'd assured them ahead of time. But she hadn't. She'd been afraid of what they would think. She hadn't been confident enough to stand up for her own opinion to her friends, and because of that, one of her friends was suffering horribly.

She wanted him to know how sorry she was for doing that.

She wanted him to know... if he could use love as an anchor to help him deal with his obsessions... if he could want that as much as he wanted Chaos... maybe if he could possibly be interested... maybe...

Before she could lose her nerve, she asked, "So, it wouldn't, you don't think it would be wrong or weird if, um, if I was in love with..." She trailed off, unable to finish the sentence.

Celestia's eyes widened. "Oh. Oh, my poor little pony. Oh, my poor dear. I'm so sorry."

She laid a wing over Fluttershy's. "It's not wrong. Love is never wrong. But oh, my poor Fluttershy, if this had been any other time..."

"Any other time?" Fluttershy whispered.

"You love Discord," Celestia said softly. "That's what you're trying to tell me, right? And you're afraid that this makes you 'wrong or weird'. It's not wrong. Love is never wrong. But, Fluttershy..." She took a deep breath. "You didn't read the letter, right?"

Fluttershy nodded, wide eyes fixed on the princess, who seemed distraught on her behalf.

"What did Twilight tell you was happening to Discord?"

"The evil versions of us were, um... torturing him..." She could barely say the words. She could barely bring herself to wrap her mind around the concept. Discord was so strong and confident and carefree most of the time, so funny and alive. She'd seen him suffer emotionally. She knew he could feel physical pain; he'd told her it was painful to be turned to stone. But the thought of him being tortured... it seemed impossible, it seemed like a violation of everything he was, but then, if the impossible could happen to anypony it would be Discord.

"Did she give you any detail?"

"Just that... it was really bad."

Celestia nodded once. "I understand why she would have wanted to keep the details from you. But I think you need to know some things. I think perhaps your friends underestimate your strength. For the sake of helping Discord, can you bear to be told details that will horrify you?"

Fluttershy swallowed, but nodded. "I... um, I can take it. If it's to help him."

"First... I am so sorry to tell you, Fluttershy, but your counterpart is his chief torturer."
Fluttershy sucked in her breath. Let it out slowly. "Of course... because if the other him made her into her opposite, she'd be Cruelty... so that makes sense."

"He gave her a different name, so he wouldn't confuse her with you. He's trying, very hard, to separate the two of you in his mind. He didn't do that for any of the others. But... you must understand... part of the way they are torturing him is that by having her do it, they are using his feelings for you to harm him."

"But I thought... do they know about me? I thought they thought he was the Discord from their universe..."

"Discord thinks they do. It may be accidental. Perhaps they gave her the task simply because, as you say, she is Cruelty. But whether it's their intent or not... they are using his feelings for you to cause him harm, and... I don't know if he's strong enough to bear that. I fear he may simply let the part of himself that cares for others shut down."

"No." Fluttershy shook her head. "I can't let that happen. I can't."

"I hope you can help him fight it. He was... still resisting, when he wrote the letter. We have no way to know how long it was between the time that he finished it and the time that Spike received it, but we know that, at least when he finished the letter, he was still able to care." Celestia lowered her head. "But even if he is still able to care, even if he still wants your friendship... more than that is probably... unlikely."

"I... understand," Fluttershy whispered. "If... he loved you... there's no way I'm as pretty as you, and—"

"No." Celestia's voice was firm. "No, Fluttershy, that is not any kind of reason whatsoever. I have no doubt in my mind whatsoever that if this had not happened, and you had told him how you feel, he would have returned your feelings. Perhaps not immediately – it's been centuries since he let himself dare love anypony – but eventually. You are Kindness itself, and he longed for your friendship so badly, he turned away from the cruelty of his chaos for the first time in as many centuries as it has been since he last loved. But." She looked down again. "I was not done, telling you the things I fear you need to know from the letter," she said softly. "Fluttershy..." She looked up again, meeting Fluttershy's eyes, and her own seemed to be full of all the sorrow and compassion in the universe. "Your counterpart... raped him. More than once."

The horror of the words hit Fluttershy like a blow to the back of her neck, and she staggered slightly, wishing for a moment that she was a drama queen like Rarity and she could fall back onto a fainting couch. Rape was a rare crime in Equestria, but considered one of the most horrifying possible; it took the act of loving intimacy itself and turned it into a torture. While there was no death penalty for any crime in Equestrian law, it was common that the Royal Guard would have to be sent to protect convicted rapists on their way to prison, in small towns like Ponyville, because otherwise the citizens would lynch them, and the local constabulary would turn a blind eye. The thought of anypony doing such a horrible thing to Discord, who'd only ever had one friend and one love in his millennia of existence, horrified her. The thought that it was another version of herself sickened her utterly.

But, she realized, didn't entirely surprise her. She remembered being her cruel self, little as she wanted to. The others all thought Discord had put something on her that wasn't originally there, but that hadn't been it. Fluttershy knew there was a darkness inside her; she'd spent her life forcing down selfish impulses, cruel impulses, violent impulses. When she'd gone half-insane at the Gala demanding that the animals should love her, when she'd taken Iron Will's assertiveness training and turned into a selfish monster... that hadn't been any doing of Discord's. That was inside her.
She'd resisted Discord in the labyrinth, not because she was so innocent that she simply had no darkness inside, but because she'd faced that darkness and forced it down so many times, he couldn't trick her into giving into it.

She was much too shy to ever ask, or offer... but she was a mare like any other. She had desires. She knew that. And her cruel self had been so much like herself at the Gala, herself under Iron Will's advice. If she'd been corrupted by cruelty, if she not only no longer cared if she hurt other ponies to get what she wanted but in fact actively *liked* doing so... she'd spent her life being much too shy to approach any stallion she had a crush on, or let them approach her, and much too fearful that she would be despised if she admitted her interests in males who weren't ponies. But her cruel self wouldn't care about being despised, and her cruel self wasn't shy. Her cruel self took what she wanted, regardless of what other ponies thought about it.

Her own feelings for Discord were complicated, and hampered by her usual anxieties, but she knew she'd come to find him attractive, even as she'd felt shame for it because he was so unlike a pony. If the cruel version of her felt the same way... and Discord was under an obedience spell, forced to comply...

Now she felt even more sickened. She didn't want to know in her heart how it was that her alter ego could commit such a horrible crime against her friend. She didn't want to understand it, she didn't want to feel as if there but for the grace of fate, she could have gone. But she couldn't help it. She knew herself, she knew her own dark side better than most, and she knew exactly where the desire and the will to commit such horrible acts was coming from. She would never, ever want to hurt anypony, *especially* not someone she felt she might love, in such a way... but under Discord's influence after he'd attacked her in the maze, when her dark side had ruled her, she'd turned into a pony who *loved* hurting others. Take away her desire to never cause suffering, turn it into a desire to cause suffering, and love and desire could easily be perverted into such cruelty.

"I see," she whispered, feeling filthy. Feeling like she would never dare touch him, because the part of her that was like the one who'd hurt him lived inside her, and he knew it, he'd brought that part of her to the surface that time, so how could he not see her as being like the one who'd done such terrible things to him?

"I am so sorry, Fluttershy," Celestia said. "If this had been any other time... I would have encouraged you. I know he would have been so much happier with the love of a pony like you, and while I know from experience how hard he makes life for those who love him, I remember that before everything was taken from us, I thought it was well worth it. But... his reactions are not always what one would expect, he prides himself on being unpredictable in many situations, but... I would think it unlikely that he would be ready for that sort of love any time soon, even once he's recovered from this."

*And probably never from me*, Fluttershy thought with numb resignation. Well. So be it. She'd never really thought she could win his love anyway; she'd only started to imagine it as a possibility when the Princess had revealed that Discord *had* once loved a pony, that he was capable of it. It didn't matter. What mattered was that she would help save him, and remind him that friendship wasn't something that caused suffering. Make him remember why he wanted to have a friend, if they were trying to break him of that.

"I understand, Princess Celestia," she murmured. "I won't, I, I don't want to do anything to make him upset or, remind him of what happened. I won't... say anything..."

"I hope it can be different someday," Celestia said gently. "Perhaps, with time, it can be. But for now, I think... it's wise of you to agree not to bring this up with him."
Fluttershy nodded.

"Got it," Twilight said. "I think I've got a good fix on where that portal is... and I think I know how to open it, too." She grinned. "It's not like the one to the world Sunset Shimmer went to. It feels... I don't know how to describe it. Closer. Less complicated. Like the mirror portal was a big portcullised castle gateway at the end of a drawbridge with a moat around it, and this is just a sliding door."

"It is one of Discord's talents to make the impossible, or highly implausible, easy," Princess Celestia said, walking back into the room with Fluttershy behind her. Twilight was a bit surprised to see her come through the door, since she hadn't noticed her leave, but she had been concentrating pretty intently. "When Luna and I sealed him the first time, he had left dozens of these things around, and unlike most of his chaos, they didn't vanish when his power was locked. Luna spent several years hunting for them while I was trying to re-establish order and governance, because unicorns kept accidentally activating them and falling through."

"I think he might have fixed that," Twilight said. "This one has an image lock."

"An image lock?" Rainbow asked. "What's that?"

"Well, it's like a lock you put on a door, where the key is to visualize an image," Twilight said. "For a while it was driving me nuts, because the idea of trying to figure out what kind of image Discord might have come up with... I mean it could be anything. But then I realized, he told me about the portal in the letter and he didn't mention the image lock, so it must be something he thought would be so easy I'd get it right away. So I tried visualizing Fluttershy, and that worked."

Fluttershy turned red. "Oh..."

"I suppose somepony could have accidentally fallen through it if they were practicing certain types of magic, or teleportation, right near there, and they saw Fluttershy while they were doing it. But it's not that close to her house, so that's not too likely." She turned to Spike. "Can I see what we've got for our checklist?"

Spike showed her the list, and she ran down it. "Fluttershy, anything to add?"

"Um, you've already got the medical kit and the potions, so, uh, I don't think so."

"Had a thought," Applejack said. "Twilight, when we get a tree that's dying, or rotted, or it's just plain making bad apples, we can take a cutting from it, plant it somewhere else, and get that to grow up healthy."

"Um... ok?" Twilight wasn't sure what this had to do with anything.

"Well, the Elements of Harmony are like the fruits of the Tree of Harmony. It's a magic crystal tree, but still, it's a tree. So, I'm wondering, if the Elements are corrupted over there, maybe the Tree is too, or maybe it's too weak to fix the Elements. What if we took a cutting from our Tree of Harmony, brought it over there, and planted it?"

"What would that do?"

"Oh!" Rarity said. "Of course! One cannot keep Harmony in a vacuum; if the entire tune has changed keys, the tune is still in harmony. But if we bring a cutting from our tree, perhaps it might act as a tuning fork and disrupt what the other Discord did to the other Elements, bringing them back in key with our Tree."
"Or at the very least, mess up the Elements so they can't harmonize with each other," Applejack said. "Ain't so sure I like the idea that we'd just bring the other Elements back in key. Doesn't seem like it's much in the way of justice to just turn them back into the *us* ponies they oughta be, after all they've done."

"Oh no." Fluttershy had a look on her face Twilight had only seen a few times... usually preparatory to either the Stare, or Fluttershy doing something absolutely crazy. "No, Applejack, that would be the *perfect* justice. If we could restore them to their true selves with a cutting from the Tree to reharmonize their elements and drive out the opposite parts... they'd become just like us. But with the memories of everything they've done. *That* would be justice."

What if Twilight woke up one moment and realized she had been a torturer? That she'd employed an *obedience* spell? Twilight shuddered. Fluttershy was right. That was justice. Or possibly the cruelest possible thing they could do to their dark selves. Or both. "Well, there's no guarantee it'll work, but it's worth a shot. I think we've got a good list of supplies and plans here." She looked over the list. "We might not be able to get all this stuff together in time to cross through in daylight, and maybe we don't want to be doing it in daylight anyway. How's this for a plan? We collect everything we need, we make arrangements for coverage, we get some sleep, and we get up really really early, like 4 am, and cross over then."

"Wouldn't it be better to do it tonight?" Fluttershy asked.

Twilight shook her head. "We need to be sharp if we're possibly going up against ponies who are *us*, with all our same talents, but probably a lot more experience at fighting and a lot more ruthlessness. I don't want to leave him over there any longer than we have to, but we'll all be in a lot better shape for a rescue mission if we're not tired."

"Well, I don't see how waking up at 4 am could possibly leave us *not* tired," Rarity said, "but you do have a point. Better to get some sleep than none."

"I'll have Spike make us all a pot of his special 'wake up' blend of tea before we head out."

"And I'll make energy croissants for breakfast!"

Twilight blinked. "Energy croissants?"

"Right! You mix in high protein food like cheese, but low fat so you don't slow down from trying to process it, and that balances with the sugar, which gives you energy, so that gives you more energy! Add some spiciness with ginger and cinnamon to give you a wake up kick, and use just a little bit of sour! I do cherry cheese and raspberry cheese, with a lot of icing. When I need to pull an all-nighter I make myself a batch of them and eat them all night!"

"Huh." Pinkie actually had a potion maker's sensibility about her baking, choosing ingredients for their effect and not necessarily just the taste. Who knew? "Okay, sounds good."

"I've requested that my chariot drivers take you back to Ponyville for speed considerations," Celestia said. "Please send me status reports whenever the situation changes, and you're able to. Good luck, my little ponies." She smiled at Spike. "And my little dragon."

"We won't let you down, Princess," Twilight said.

"Hey, I can go faster on my own, so I'm gonna head back and meet you guys tomorrow in the AM," Rainbow Dash said. "I gotta go talk to the weather team in Cloudsdale anyway, and get somepony to watch Tank for me."
"All right. Please don't be late, Rainbow."

Rainbow Dash grinned. "Could say the same thing about you slowpokes. See you!"

Twilight looked around at the other four ponies, and Spike. "Let's go."

Chapter End Notes

Decided I did not like phonetically rendering Applejack's accent. Just because X-Men does it doesn't mean it's a good idea. So I'm writing "I" instead of "Ah" for her and trying to convey accent via word choice rather than phonetics.

Celestia and Fluttershy are possibly cutting Discord a bit more slack than they ought to. Personally I feel his bad decisions are pretty much his own fault. But Celestia was an Element of Kindness and Fluttershy still is; forgiving the ones you love rather more than you ought to goes with the territory.
Breaking Chaos

**Opposition, 3 PM**

Twilight Sparkle, Element of Magic and Order, approached Canterlot Palace for her thrice-weekly afternoon appointment with Princess Celestia. There was much to do today. Treaties with the buffalo needed to be signed and implemented since Twilight had demonstrated to the buffalo why it was inadvisable to challenge the Elements. The Elements of Opposition could be excellent friends and allies to those who approached them with Harmony. To those who wanted to enforce their own selfish desires, those that approached them with Disharmony, the Elements could be powerful and ruthless foes. The buffalo had seen the light of reason and agreed to yield their claim on the land they declared to be their ancient territory.

Sometimes Twilight considered returning to Canterlot to advise the princess full-time. Her friends in Ponyville would miss her, but Princess Celestia *needed* her, and missing a friend was an emotional weakness that was acceptable in peaceful times, but now, while Equestria was still rebuilding from the year of chaos, it was perhaps no longer appropriate to allow such emotional concerns to dictate her behavior. On the other hand, it was her presence in Ponyville that allowed her to maintain control over Equestria's most powerful weapon. Only the bonds of friendship between her and the other Bearers allowed them to *use* the Elements. Without her presence enforcing those ties, Fluttershy would retreat into her hermitage, viciously lashing out at any who dared disturb her; Rarity would allow her greed and ambition to get the better of her, and focus her sole attention on social climbing, self-promotion, and building her wealth; Rainbow Dash would probably leave them all behind permanently to pursue her career with the Wonderbolts, or her work as a motivational speaker, or whatever other plans had captured her fickle attention this week; and Pinkie Pie would probably kill innocent ponies. Only Applejack could be trusted to try to preserve friendships between the Bearers, and Applejack's manipulative ways sometimes backfired, now that her friends knew not to trust her completely.

Besides, right now she had her research on Discord to pursue. The Bearers had mutually agreed to carry the burden of training him to obedience themselves – except for Rainbow Dash, who enjoyed ordering him to punch himself in the face on occasion but had little patience and couldn't be bothered to help her friends with anything most days, and Pinkie Pie, who was far, far too enthusiastic about the notion of demonstrating to Discord the new perspective on humor that he had granted her. (Or, to be precise, his dead cognate had granted her. Twilight's research had confirmed, eventually, that the quantum signature of the Discord she held in custody was different than the one Spike had misguidedly killed.) In order to ensure that Discord's obedience training held firm under the control of *any* of the Bearers, it was necessary for the majority of them to participate. Thus, he was held prisoner in Ponyville, and thus, Twilight needed to be there to conduct her research.

She was quite enthused about it, and looking forward to telling Celestia her new discoveries, once they had settled the matters of state on today's agenda. The Diadem of Order had been far more active than the Element of Magic had ever been, whispering insights and new directions for research to Twilight, and with its guidance, Twilight was beginning to understand how it might be possible to shape reality.

Magic was chaos, at its fundament. Discord's power was so much greater than anypony's in part because he manipulated the raw force of magic, not channeled through the rules and structures that kept magic harmonized with the world. This allowed him to manipulate reality at a more fundamental level than magic was ordinarily capable of, because he did not need to maintain
harmony with the existing structures of reality. But his manipulations could rarely be organized or permanent because by its nature chaos rejected organization and permanence.

Twilight's experiments had long ago revealed that chaotic and harmonic magic could be converted into each other, an obvious corollary to the proposition that all magic was fundamentally chaos. Under most circumstances, that conversion resulted in a great deal of waste energy, as the magic would drastically weaken once the strictures of harmony were placed on it. By extensive experimentation on Discord, however, Twilight was beginning to see how it would be possible to use the raw force of Chaos to permanently alter the shape of reality by imposing, not Harmony, but Order. Harmony maintained balance and kept everything in the same organizational structure, even if that structure was inefficient and non-optimal. Order had the power to reorganize, to reshape the very rules that reality was structured by, permanently; but at some point in the far distant past, Discord had destroyed the Order Avatar, scattering its power, so there was no longer one source of Orderly power great enough to change reality. Chaos sought impermanent change and Harmony sought to keep things going the way they had always gone; neither Discord nor the Elements had ever had any interest in permanent change.

The equation was altered now. With the Diadem of Order, Twilight Sparkle was now capable of seeing that the Harmony she had lived her prior life by was flawed. The preservation of an inefficient system that brought undue pain and strife to ponies was too high a price to pay for the peace and unity Harmony brought. It was time to truly bring Order to the world. And by using Discord's raw Chaos magic and filtering it, not through Harmony but through Order, Twilight proposed to use him to remake the world into a better, happier place. She had already forced him to take in the entropic imbalance caused by his predecessor's death, restoring the rate of decay to where it had been before Spike had destroyed the prior Discord. She believed she could force him to take in more of it, and then use his power to enforce a change on reality, such that all ponies would become immortal.

She was very close to a breakthrough; the major point of interference with her work now was that without control of his own magic, Discord was considerably more mortal and fragile than he had been. While his pain meant nothing to her, Twilight was not foolish enough to kill the goose that laid the golden eggs; should Discord die under the strain of the energies she was channeling through him as part of her research, it would be impossible to use him to achieve her goals. So she had adopted a measured approach. She performed her experiments twice weekly, allowing Discord several days to recover between experimental procedures, and she ceased experimentation as soon as her monitoring spells told her he was unacceptably close to death.

It was unfortunate. If he could only withstand more, she felt she could achieve her breakthrough much more quickly. Perhaps she should have words with Fluttershy about feeding him more often; as food was an important tool in his conditioning, his intake needed to be tightly rationed, but judging from how thin he had become and the fact that he was able to withstand less of her experimental protocol every time she worked with him, it was possibly rationed too low at the moment.

Yesterday had been his worst performance thus far; while heart arrhythmia was quite normal for Discord, he had gone into a rhythm so erratic it could better be described as sporadic random heartbeats within only a few minutes after the point where he'd begun begging for mercy. The begging was a metric of endurance; Discord was obviously aware that Twilight was entirely unmoved by his pain and that begging her to stop was an exercise in pointlessness, so he generally began their sessions with attempts at defiant posturing, bargaining, or, lately, complete resignation. To a certain point he would endure the experiments, screaming and writhing and otherwise responding to the pain in an expected fashion but with no attempt to persuade her to stop. Once he began begging, it was an indicator that what little reason he ever possessed had been overwhelmed.
entirely, and that he was no longer able to keep himself from engaging in activities he knew were futile.

Usually he could last for quite some time after the begging began, and in the past, she had been able to maintain experimental protocols through the point where the begging stopped again because Discord would lose the ability to construct any sort of coherent speech. Last night, though, it had been merely seven point six minutes after he'd begun begging before he had begun the pattern of losing consciousness from pain, then being revived by further application of pain, with periods of unconsciousness increasing in length each time, coupled with steadily increasing frequency of skipped heartbeats or extended diastole. This was usually Twilight's primary indicator that Discord was approaching his mortal limits, so she had brought the experiments to a close as soon as Discord had remained unconscious for three minutes under the continued applications of energies from the experimental apparatus.

He had attempted a new manipulation tactic as well. When she had ordered him to lie in the circle and position himself for emplacement of the restraints and magical conduits, he had not responded with sarcasm, dark humor, threats, attempts at persuasion or bargaining, or even the stoic silence coupled with heavy breathing that he had employed as of late. Instead he had begun crying. He hadn't begged – after the first two sessions he had plainly learned not to bother with begging while he was capable of consciously choosing to refrain, because it was wholly ineffectual – and he hadn't tried to resist, but he had cried, sobbing quietly the entire time that she had been preparing him for the evening's protocol. Of course, this attempt to manipulate her emotions and gain sympathy was as ineffectual as every other such attempt. Twilight felt certain that with the aid of the Diadem to calm and control her emotions, she would be capable of carrying out experimentation on anyone who was not a personal friend if what was at stake was possible immortality for ponykind. And after all the other Discord had done, Twilight considered Discord's suffering during the experiments to be entirely just and fair.

All in all, it was regrettable that she couldn't be in two places at once. She needed to be here in Canterlot for Princess Celestia, but she needed to be in Ponyville for her research and to maintain the power of the Elements. Perhaps she should investigate the properties of the Mirror Pool more thoroughly...

She nodded to the guards as she entered. A familiar stallion intercepted her as she headed toward the throne room. "Twily!"

Twilight turned to face the Captain of the Royal Guard, her brother. "Shining. I would appreciate it if you would no longer call me by that foalish nickname."

Shining Armor sighed. "I know you don't like it anymore, but it feels like that's a symptom. Ever since you took on that thing you're wearing and defeated Discord with it... you've been so cold, Twilight. You can't be just a little tiny bit foalish with your old BBBFF anymore? Ever?"

She shook her head. "There's no place in my life for foolishness of any sort anymore, Shining. I have business with the Princess, so if there is nothing else we need to discuss..."

"I actually came to meet you so I could warn you. Her Highness is... not in good shape today."

"That's how it started, after she raised the sun this morning. She cancelled court, again, to go through her portrait collection and eat cake for breakfast. Then she started drinking, around noon. The sommelier's under my orders to water her wine, but if it weren't for her healing powers she'd have drunk enough by now to be under the table." He looked solemn. "This isn't a good day,
"Twilight. If I were you, I'd consider rescheduling."

"No. If she's drunk and going through portraits of Luna again, she needs me more than usual. I will attend her for our regular meeting. If I have an opportunity, I have a sobering spell I can cast, though even when the Princess is... inebriated, she's skilled enough to block me most of the time."

"All right. I'll give orders for the guards to leave the two of you alone. If you need anything, just summon me."

Forewarned, Twilight entered the presence of the Princess of the Sun (some had taken to calling her, now, the Princess of the Sun and Moon, but never in Celestia's hearing if they knew what was good for them), and bowed. "Princess Celestia," she said.

The Princess was looking decidedly non-regal. She was in a chair at a table, her front hooves and upper body slumped over the table. A half-full wine glass and three empty bottles told part of a story; the chocolate smeared on her muzzle and the three full-size cake platters empty of anything but crumbs told another part; the portrait books open all over the table containing miniaturized magic-made copies of hundreds of paintings of Princess Luna, most probably painted by Celestia herself from memory because the portraits of a young Luna simply weren't old enough to have been painted from life, told the rest of it. If Shining Armor hadn't forewarned her, Twilight would still have known exactly what was happening.

Celestia lifted her head, her mane smeared with vanilla frosting. "Twilight?" she slurred. "You're here today?"

"Forgive me, Your Highness," Twilight said softly, and cast the sobriety spell. Celestia's horn lit up as her face registered alarm, but her drunkenness made her too slow to fully block the spell. She jerked in her seat.

"TWILIGHT!" she shouted. "How dare you! You overstep yourself!"

Twilight didn't back down. "Apologies, Princess Celestia, but if you wish to grieve for Princess Luna, the night is the appropriate time to do so. You have responsibilities during the day."

Celestia slumped. "I have responsibilities at night as well. I have to move the moon, now. I'll never sleep again. Ever."

"Let Chrysalis move the moon tonight."

"No. She wants... she wants..." Celestia's eyes welled with tears. "She wants to be Luna for me, and I want it, Twilight. I want her to devour me alive if she can give me a beautiful illusion that my sister is still with me. I can't. I want it too much. Luna would never... she'd never forgive me." A sob escaped her. "She'd never forgive me anyway, after I..."

"Princess Luna would understand. You did what you needed to," Twilight said.

"I killed her, Twilight. I killed my baby sister... I killed..."

Celestia began to sob. She'd plainly blocked some of the sobriety spell, even if she hadn't deflected it all. "I went for a thousand years without her, knowing what I'd done to her, and I was alone, I was all alone, but I knew she'd come back, I knew that someday it would end and either I would pay for what I'd done to her, or she would come back to me... and I had her back for less than two years, Twilight, less than two years and after what Discord did to her I couldn't call her back, I couldn't persuade her, and if we'd only had the Elements to purify her again but we didn't... less than two years, and now she's gone forever..." She pushed one of the portrait books with a hoof. "I
can't do this anymore. All my strength is gone. I endured for a thousand years, I can't keep going, Twilight, I can't."

"Only a little while longer," Twilight said softly. "Just a little while, and my research will be completed. We'll make ponykind as immortal as you are, Princess. You'll never need to see a pony you love die again. And we'll use Discord to raise and lower the sun until we can train a team of unicorns in the old ways, so they can take the burden from you permanently. You only need to endure a little while longer, and then you can take a vacation. You can wear your Sunny Days disguise, and come to Ponyville with me, and live a normal life for as long as you want to. You just have to put up with the burdens of being Princess for a little while longer, Your Highness."

"It sounds so wonderful when you talk about it," Celestia said. "My faithful student. What would I do without you, Twilight?"

"You'll never need to find out," Twilight said. "I will always be ready to help and support you, my Princess, no matter what you need. I'll always be here for you."

"Thank you, thank you so much..." Celestia threw her hooves around Twilight and pulled her into a desperate hug, which gave Twilight the opportunity to cast the sobriety spell again. When Celestia finally released her, her eyes still glittered with unshed tears but her voice no longer shook, or slurred.

"My... apologies, Twilight. I... should be stronger than this." She pushed back from the table, getting out of her chair and standing on all fours. Her wings and mane were in disarray, unpreened and unbrushed. "I've tried to be stronger than this, but last night... I was moving the moon, and I couldn't stop thinking about Luna. And I knew that I can move the sun even if I'm impaired, so I knew I couldn't give into my grief at night. I had to wait until the daytime, when I'm stronger. Please forgive me."

"There's no need to ask forgiveness. There's nothing to forgive. I'm sure I would be in equally bad shape if I had to kill Shining." This wasn't true anymore. Twilight no longer felt much of anything for anypony except her Princess. Her friends were monsters, her dragon assistant was a perpetual disappointment, and her brother and her parents were always complaining about how cold and distant she'd become. It made her want to interact with them even less. "I had planned to go over the treaties with the buffalo with you today, but if you don't feel up to it, I could assist you with something else."

Celestia sighed. "I trust your judgement, Twilight. Just... read over the treaties and sign them for me if the terms seem acceptable." She lifted the cake platters and wine bottles off the table with her magic and dumped them in a chest, which she then closed. There was a family of raccoons whose job it was to clean up the detritus of the Princess' excesses, because servants weren't always the most discreet. Fluttershy had found the raccoons and talked them into taking the job. Actually they'd been thrilled enough about getting to work in the palace, with free and unhindered access to all the delightful food that ended up in the palace trash bins, that they'd willingly given up their oldest son to be Fluttershy's pet, as payment for her help in getting them this job. Twilight had ended up wiping the creature's mind and dumping him in the Everfree with amnesia after Fluttershy had come to her crying about how traumatized the raccoon had become from Fluttershy's "affection." She'd lied to Fluttershy and told her that she'd given the raccoon to a good home. The truth was, she didn't want any chance that the raccoon would recover his memories and be able to find an animal speaker somewhere to tell his experiences to. In the Everfree, either the raccoon would have ended up becoming lunch, or he would be fighting too hard for survival to worry about recovering traumatic memories.
Twilight was very glad that Fluttershy had Discord now. Unlike the innocent creatures that Fluttershy would weep over and threaten to kill herself because of what she'd done to them, Discord deserved the use Fluttershy was making of him, and apparently he satisfied her enough that she could be genuinely and cleanly caring to her innocent pets, without being compelled to take advantage of them.

She nodded. "All right, Princess. You can count on me. Is there anything else we should be going over today, or would you prefer that I get started on that?"

"Oh, there is one thing." Celestia frowned. "Did you let Discord send a letter to somepony?"

Twilight stared. "What?"

"Here. I got this from Spike last night." Celestia levitated a scroll over to Twilight. "It's very strange. It claims that Discord sent me a letter, but I never got anything."

Twilight opened the scroll and read it, growing coldly angry as she did so.

Dear Princess Celestia,

This is Spike, not Twilight. Did you get Discord's letter? I think he had some idea about how you could fix Twilight and the others. Sorry if it's too gross and hard to read, it was all crumpled up and bloody. I really hope it helps. – Your friend and subject Spike the dragon

Spike had been a terrible disappointment of late. First, he'd unleashed the acceleration of entropy by killing Discord, with a magical hammer he'd stolen from the palace, possibly from Celestia's private armory. He'd meant well by it, but it had been foolish. And now, he couldn't keep to a proper dining schedule, he actually stole gems from Rarity for snacking, his standards of cleanliness were merely acceptable by the standards she had held once and were wholly inadequate for what she required now... and apparently he was conspiring with Discord. Despite having killed the original. She felt cold rage as she read over the letter. As if anyone needed to fix her! Merging her Element with the Diadem of Order had perfected her. Yes, it would be preferable if she could undo what had been done to the others, but if she did, she would have to undo her own transformation, and that was simply unacceptable. The Diadem of Order had granted her clarity, made her more efficient, allowed her to strip away the emotional weaknesses that had dragged her down in the past. She felt very little fear or anxiety any more; she was confident and in control, all the time. Spike declaring that she needed to be "fixed" was a betrayal.

And Spike had allowed Discord to use him to send a letter? That was a far worse betrayal. And an idiotic one. The fact that Princess Celestia had never received the letter made it plain that it had been some sort of trick on Discord's part. A magical booby trap of some kind? Or did this version of Discord actually have allies he could summon?

"I see," she said, controlling her anger. It wouldn't do for Princess Celestia to know quite how enraged at Spike she was. "I'll need to question Discord about this later. Let me attend to the treaties today, and any other paperwork you need me to review." Tonight when she returned home, she would have a lengthy discussion with Spike on the topic of his idiocy and his betrayal. There would need to be punishment. Complete gem restriction, she thought. Spike could survive a week on a diet of pony food. He would hate it – gems were a comfort food for him, virtually the only thing he enjoyed eating, and if he was denied them for too long he would grow sick and weak, but seven days without gems would do him no permanent harm. She'd have to cast a spell to locate all the gems in his private hoards, stashed throughout the library. Taking his hoard from him would probably be as painful a punishment as being forbidden to eat gems, but he needed to be taught a lesson about who he should trust, and who he should not.
And then, she would contact Fluttershy to summon Discord, and question him.

But things needed to be done in the proper order. This was the time she had set aside to help Princess Celestia. She would not cut it short to go discipline her assistant. There would be time for that tonight.

"I suspect there's quite a lot of paperwork," Celestia said, a guilty note in her voice.

"There always is, Your Highness. We should really train some secretaries to take some of these administrative burdens off your hooves." Not that they were really on Celestia's hooves anymore. Mostly, it was Twilight handling the paperwork nowadays. A secretary for Celestia would free Twilight to do more useful things to assist her princess, but it would have to be an intelligent pony that Twilight could trust, and there were so few ponies Twilight felt she could trust any more. Even her brother was suspect. Shining Armor was willingly consorting with the Changeling Queen out of grief for his love, Twilight's old foalsitter Princess Cadance, who had died during one of the original Discord's attacks. According to Chrysalis, it had been Discord himself who had killed her. Twilight suspected it had in fact been Nightmare Moon, and that Chrysalis was lying to spare Celestia's feelings, since Discord had never to her knowledge directly killed anypony. The fact that her brother would feed a Changeling his love and take her to his bed for the sake of an illusion that his fiancee was still alive made Twilight think less of him. Princess Celestia had resisted a similar temptation that Chrysalis had offered, was still resisting it even today. Twilight supposed she couldn't blame Shining Armor for not being as steadfast as the Princess, but it still dismayed her that her brother whom she'd once seen as so strong was truly this weak.

"I'm sure you'll find someone," Princess Celestia said. "You're always such a help to me, Twilight."

"I live to serve you, Princess," Twilight said. It wasn't a polite cliché. The words struck her as painfully weak, given how often sycophants used that phrase without meaning it. But Twilight sincerely meant every word.

Harmony, 4 PM

"Um, how does it look?" Fluttershy asked.

"Oh, my dear, you look marvelous," Rarity said. "Nothing can compare to your natural beauty, of course, but I dare say Mane Attraction has done a magnificent job."

The hairdresser smiled brightly at the compliment. "Oh, it's hardly anything," she said. "Miss Fluttershy here is just a joy to work with. Her mane is so lovely. I almost feel it was sacrilegious to dye it."

"My turn! My turn!" Pinkie Pie said, bouncing. "I wanna be a blonde! Can I be a blonde? I want the curliest bounciest yellowest mane ever! But a bright blue tail!"

"Oh, Pinkie, your tail should match your mane!" Rarity said. "Why would you ever want them two different colors?"

"Because they won't match!"

"Why are you ladies getting your manes dyed today, anyway?" Mane Attraction asked. "Just a whim? Having a fillies' day out and thought you'd add some variety to your lives?"

"Um..."
"Why, yes, that's—"

"Actually because we're going to an alternate universe to fight evil versions of ourselves to rescue a friend of ours, so we want him to know how to tell the difference between good us and evil us!" Pinkie said. "And he likes things to be messed up and not matching so that's why I'm getting a blonde mane and a blue tail!"

Mane Attraction blinked. "Oh."

Rarity pulled her aside. "It's Pinkie Pie," she whispered. "Don't think about it too hard."

"Right." The hairdresser had been living in Ponyville long enough to know what every resident of Ponyville eventually figured out – don't question Pinkie Pie.

Nervously Fluttershy ran a hoof through her now-purple mane. "I hope the others are doing ok," she said.

"I am quite sure they're splendid," Rarity said. "Spike is with them, and if they should run into any troubles, he can contact Princess Celestia for help."

"But I wish we could have gone with them... the Everfree is so dangerous..."

"Yes, but dear, do remember. Applejack is the strongest of us, Rainbow Dash is the fastest, and Twilight is the most powerful. Our talents, while impressive, don't lend themselves quite so well to fighting the creatures of the Everfree. And—" Mane Attraction and Pinkie Pie had gone over to one of the hairdressing stations, Mane rinsing Pinkie's hair with a small hose and Pinkie giggling, announcing that it tickled. "It's important that we be able to reassure Discord that we are ourselves, and not those monstrous parodies who've been holding him prisoner, just as you suggested," she said softly. Discord was not exactly beloved in Ponyville, so the mares had decided not to let anypony know that their mission involved him. "Applejack doesn't believe in dyeing her mane, Rainbow Dash was already in Cloudsdale and with a mane like hers, I would think it a crime to dye it – and the alternate Twilight is probably not an alicorn. And we cannot exactly dye Spike's scales. So the logical answer was that the three of us get the mane coloring while the rest of them go get a cutting from the Tree of Harmony. You know how vitally important it will be for Discord to be able to tell that you're the correct Fluttershy."

Fluttershy nodded. More than you know, she thought. Rarity hadn't read the letter and Princess Celestia hadn't taken her aside to explain who was doing what over there, so Rarity didn't know that the other Fluttershy was Discord's primary torturer. On the carriage ride back to Ponyville, Fluttershy had been wondering aloud how they could distinguish themselves from their counterparts, for Discord's sake – she hadn't said so to the others, but she wanted him to know, the moment he saw her, that he was being rescued, that she and her friends were his friends and not his tormentors. Rarity had suggested the mane dye, and after some discussion, it was agreed that Twilight would go catch up with Rainbow Dash and bring her back to the Everfree Forest so she could accompany Twilight and Applejack to go get a cutting from the Tree, while Rarity, Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie got mane dye jobs. Twilight had asked Applejack if she was sure she didn't want to get hers done as well, given what Discord had said in the letter, but Applejack had pointed out that changing her appearance to distinguish herself from her alternate self was hardly honest, and that she'd just have to find a different way to do it.

Fluttershy really, really, really didn't want to read that letter, but she was beginning to think she needed to. Discord would need medical treatment and some kind of psychological support, and without knowing what Twilight and Applejack and Spike knew about what was happening to him, she wouldn't know what needed to be done. It wasn't very likely that Discord would tell her, or
anypony. She was a little bit surprised he'd written such a long letter with as much detail as he apparently put in it; Twilight had said he was under an honesty spell that had compelled him to write more than he'd probably have preferred, but even so she would have thought he would try to keep it short.

She sighed. "It's just, I know the Everfree and I get along with most of the creatures there," she said. "I know Twilight and Rainbow and Applejack can fight, but if I was with them and there was a scary creature, maybe I could talk to it and make friends with it so nopony would have to fight. But, I know this is important. I want him to know I'm not her when he sees me, so I know I needed to do this. I just... worry." Fluttershy looked at Rarity. "Doesn't it feel a little, um, silly or wasteful or something to be getting our manes done when our friends might be in danger?"

"Oh no no, not at all! We're not doing this for frivolity's sake after all. Consider this. We're going on a rescue mission to save somepony – well, actually, he isn't a pony but you know what I meant – who's suffered terribly at the hooves of ponies who look identical to us. It's absolutely essential to the success of our mission that we have some means by which he can tell the difference." If it was really absolutely essential, Fluttershy thought, Twilight would have thought of it, not herself and Rarity... but on the other hand she did think it was important. "However, we may still need to use illusion spells to disguise ourselves as our counterparts, so having a professional job done that will easily tolerate a simple illusion spell is important. If we'd tried to use home dye kits we might have ended up with uneven or blotchy results, and we'd need more than a simple color spell, which might require Twilight to maintain. As it is, I can cast a spell to make your mane look its original color again." Rarity sighed. "I do wish Pinkie hadn't chosen two different colors, though. That will make matters complicated."

"She's doing it to make Discord feel better once we find him."

"I am aware of why she's doing it, and I can respect her wishes, but I would think he would be grateful to be rescued no matter what we look like, and I feel having a more consistent look would make it easier for me to maintain a color illusion spell if she needs to look like their Pinkie." She sighed again, deeply. "But, Pinkie will be Pinkie, I suppose. Now I must address the serious issue of what color to choose for my own mane. I'd considered a dark shade of purple, but after you chose such a charming lavender for your own mane, I certainly wouldn't want to look as if I was trying to infringe on your look."

"Rarity, any color you want to dye your mane is okay with me. I didn't do it to, um, have a special look or anything. Um, I'm not really all that into that whole thing? So if you want to be purple I, I think you would look really nice with purple and you should do it, um, if that's what you want to do."

She looked over at Pinkie Pie. The peroxide needed to wash the pink out of Pinkie's mane to make room for a lighter color had made the curly mane even frizzier, so it was now almost a cloud around Pinkie's head, an effect accentuated by how pale it had become. Pinkie was giggling wildly at herself in the mirror, pointing a hoof and declaring that all she needed now were hair clips decorated with little pegasi. "Then I'll really be an air head!" she said, laughing.

"Well, to really be an air head, wouldn't we have to dye your coat blue?" Mane Attraction asked.

"Oh, do you think—"

Rarity was instantly at the two mares' side. "No, Pinkie. Don't dye your coat! We don't have time." She turned to Mane Attraction. "By no means absolutely do not dye her coat right now. She can come back later if she wants to try it." She sighed deeply. "Although I am convinced it would be a perfect disaster."
Fluttershy turned away. Pinkie was being goofy and silly, Rarity was obsessing over looks. They were always like that, even when they were preparing for a serious mission. She wouldn't ever want them to change; they were her friends and this was how they were. It didn't mean they weren't taking this seriously.

But they didn't know what she knew. They hadn't read the letter either, and Princess Celestia hadn't taken them aside to give them more details, and neither of them had the burden of knowing that they could have kept Discord from putting himself in danger in the first place, and Fluttershy wasn't entirely certain Rarity even really cared except in the abstract. Of course Rarity wouldn't want to see anypony – or anyone – tortured, but she didn't personally like Discord, she didn't consider him a friend. It wasn't tearing her up inside that he was suffering. And Fluttershy was fairly sure that it was tearing at Pinkie, but Pinkie was so very good at hiding any negative emotions under her bubbleheaded façade. If it hadn't been for Pinkie's breakdown over never having had a chance to give Discord a party, Fluttershy wouldn't know this was bothering Pinkie at all.

She felt so isolated, and she didn't know why. Her friends were on her side, they were all going to go with her to save Discord. No one but Rainbow Dash had even had any reservations about it, and Rainbow's had disappeared as soon as Princess Celestia had explained Discord's history. But for them, it wasn't personal, or at least not nearly as personal as it was for her. And she couldn't tell any of them how personal it was for her. She'd only had the courage to tell Princess Celestia how she felt because the Princess had just admitted to having felt the same way herself, thousands of years ago. None of them liked Discord. How could she possibly explain to them how she felt about him, when he went out of his way to be considerably more disagreeable and obnoxious around them than he ever was when he was alone with her? They never saw the side of him she saw because he never let them see it. It wasn't their fault, and yet... it meant she couldn't imagine them understanding her, or sympathizing.

So for them, they were carrying out a mission of mercy, or acting on behalf of Princess Celestia. None of them were out to rescue someone they really cared about. Usually when they all went on a mission together, Fluttershy felt as if her friends were on the same page she was, that they were not only united in common purpose but in common motive and common emotion as well. Right now... maybe it was just as well they no longer had the Elements of Harmony to use on this mission, because she didn't feel very harmonious right now.

"All right, you critters, listen up," Applejack said to Fluttershy's menagerie. "I know you understand me, even if I can't understand you, so pay attention. Fluttershy's going on a mission; I'm sure you're all familiar with her doing this kind of thing by now. So you're all gonna get in this here wagon, and I'm gonna take you over to my farm, where my Granny and my sister and brother are gonna take care of y'all until Fluttershy and I get back."

Behind her back, Big Mac and the Cutie Mark Crusaders were loading the chickens' coop onto a large flatbed wagon. "We're gonna bring your coops, and your hutches, and all that stuff you live in. Angel Bunny, I know you're a really smart little rabbit, so I'm expecting you to gather up all the stuff you want to bring that's important and bring it out here where we can load it up too." Angel Bunny glared at her. "Now don't you go trying to give me grief, I ain't Fluttershy and it's no never mind to me if I have to leave you here to fetch for yourself while she's gone. You can have my Granny to make you your meals and my little sis to brush your fur out like Fluttershy says you like, or you can live in an empty house and make do for yourself. Your choice." With a final glare, the rabbit hopped off into the house. Applejack was fairly sure he was going to go get his stuff.

Twilight had had to go fly to Cloudsdale to get Rainbow Dash so they could go together into the
Everfree to get a cutting from the Tree, assuming the Tree would let them do that. The others were all in town getting their manes dyed, which Applejack was trying very, very hard not to consider a frivolous waste of time. Rarity and Fluttershy had had a good point about being able to tell the difference between them and their evil selves. She just couldn't bring herself to truck with the notion of going and getting a mane dye as an important part of preparing for a rescue mission. So instead, she'd gotten her brother, her sister, and her sisters' friends (who were contemplating the possibility of cutie marks in being movers) to help her gather up Fluttershy's pets and move them to Sweet Apple Acres. The farm had more room for animals and more ponies to help out with their care than any of the others had at their place. Twi and Rainbow ought to be back shortly, she hoped, and then they could go on their trip to the Everfree, and Fluttershy could get a good night's sleep tonight knowing her animal friends were all squared away and safe in their temporary home.

"Sis, are we bringing the bird feeders?" Apple Bloom called.

"Nope, don't think so. Those are to feed the wild birds that come outta the Everfree, I think. We just need to make sure the bird bath's topped off with water and all the feeders are full, and if we're gone longer'n a few days, you fillies could come out and check, right?"

"Sure thing."

Angel Bunny reappeared, dragging a blanket and a small bed, which he had filled with various toys, a brush, two bowls, a cup, and other paraphernalia. "Land sakes, rabbit, you got as much stuff there of your own as half the foals in this town," Applejack said. "I do dearly hope you treat Fluttershy with the respect and love she deserves, for all she does for you." The rabbit chittered, but unlike Fluttershy, Applejack wasn't an animal speaker and hadn't the vaguest idea what Angel had just said. "Sweetie Belle, think you could help this lil bunny load up his stuff?"

"Okay!" Sweetie Belle's control of her telekinesis was hardly perfect, but it was sufficient to gather up the bunny's belongings and load them into Applejack's cart.

"We all good here?" A chorus of animal sounds resounded. Applejack interpreted that as a "yes."

"All right, then, here we go."

In the library, Spike ran down Twilight's checklist, gathering the library's portion of what had been on the list. "Spellbooks that Twilight listed here, check. Library closed, sign up, check. Owlowiscious, you know to go to Sweet Apple Acres tomorrow morning before you go to bed, right?"

The sleepy owl, annoyed at being woken so long before nighttime, responded with an exasperated "Whoooo."

"Okay, just checking. Hmm." Spike took a deep breath. "Well. I kind of don't want to do this, but... if he let Discord send that letter, and if his Rarity isn't generous anymore... then maybe he's not a bad guy like the ponies turned into, and maybe he's bribable." Another deep breath, and then before he could regret it, Spike bagged up several gems and stashed them with the growing pack of supplies. It violated every dragon instinct he possessed to willingly consider giving his gems away, even to another him, even for a good cause, but Spike had long known he'd need to fight his dragon instincts to be someone the ponies could respect as good.

"Anyway, Rarity will be proud of me for thinking of it," he mused to himself, which perked him up. Rarity's goodwill was a more valuable treasure to him than any number of gems. And if the other Rarity had turned selfish and greedy, then the other Spike might be short on gems, and maybe could be persuaded to help the party out in exchange. "Hopefully it won't come up. We're
just supposed to go to Other Fluttershy's house, break into the basement, get Discord out and get home. But just in case. Twilight always says we should plan for contingencies.” He wrote at the bottom of the list "Gems for possibly bribing Other Spike if needed" and checked it off.

"You gotta keep up, slowpoke!" Rainbow Dash taunted. "You've been flying a few weeks now, and you're a princess. You ought to be faster than this!"

"Faster... than... you?" Twilight gasped, wings beating harder and faster than they had since she'd flown with Spike from Canterlot to Ponyville while Discord's vines had been running riot. "Is... that... possible?"

"No way, course not! But I'm not going that fast. You ought to be able to keep up!"

"Rainbow... we're going... into... dangerous forest... to get... Tree of Harmony. I can't... be totally... wiped... when we get there."

"Yeah, but we want to get in and out before nightfall, and last time, we had to walk like an hour or something before we got to the Tree. It isn't like a short distance inside, and the Everfree being the Everfree, it's not like we can fly over and just drop down where we want to go, either."

"I'm... not... that fast."

"Well, you gotta practice more, slowpoke! I mean your wings are huge, it's not like you shouldn't be able to kick most pegasi's flank in the air."

"How... fast... were you... when your wings were... a few months old?"

"Hey, I'll have you know I was flying in day care."

"Sure... as a toddler. Bet... not... when you... were... few month old infant."

"Well, I could ask my dad, but it wasn't like I knew how to walk then either. Besides you're making excuses! I keep telling you to come out with me and practice."

"I've... barely mastered... not crashing!"

"And that's why you need more practice!"

Twilight sighed. Rainbow Dash was insufferable. But she was right. It was already four in the afternoon, and they had to get to the Everfree Forest, get in, get to the Tree, and get back out, before night fell around eight pm. "Maybe... I'll have Spike... ask Princess... Celestia... to extend... the sunset?"

"Maybe you could just fly faster instead of inconveniencing all of freaking Equestria just cause you're too slow?"

The really amazingly annoying thing about this, Twilight reflected, was that Rainbow Dash was laden down with a turtle, who'd be staying at Sweet Apple Acres with the other pets, two jars of wing rub, and a flight trophy she was wearing around her neck where she would once have carried her Element of Harmony, and she was still outpacing the exhausted Twilight without breaking a sweat, as nearly as Twilight could see.

"Fine." She pumped burning wing muscles faster, harder, pushing herself. "And when... I pass out... before I get there... you can do... any magic we need!"
"You're not gonna pass out. Come on. You can do it, Twilight. You can do anything you put your mind to, you know that. Now let's move!"

**Opposition, 5 PM**

Discord knelt on the ground in the apple orchard on all fours, head lowered, breathing deeply to try to control the terror building in him as Applejack raged at him at his inability to fill baskets of apples evenly. She kept picking things for him to do that required the ability to maintain order, to identify a pattern and follow it, and the few times Discord had tried to plead with her that he simply wasn't capable of doing those things, Applejack had said he was making excuses and beaten him before he even began the task, and then beat him again when, predictably, he'd failed to do it properly. He knew better now. The whole point to these tasks was to give him a job he couldn't possibly do well so he could be beaten for failing to do it. They wanted him to be terrified of failure, to throw himself body and soul into trying to complete any task they gave him however stupid and unsuited for him it was.

The fact that he knew what they were up to didn't change the fact that it was working, unfortunately.

"Wings flat and don't move," Applejack ordered. "Looks like you need another lesson in doin' a good job."

At this point he doubted he could make matters worse for himself. "I'd do a much better job if you gave me a job I was at all capable of doing," he said bitterly even as he obeyed, extending and then lowering his wings as if he were flapping them downward, because if he didn't obey his body would just do it and he hated that. "You just want an excuse to punish me, admit it."

"Well, it ain't no secret that I hate you, you lyin', treacherous piece of dung," Applejack said, "but if you could actually do the job I gave you, I'd be fair to ya. Twilight says you can't disobey, but sure as shootin' I reckon you can do a bad job on purpose, and I aim to break you of that."

"I'm not doing a bad job on purpose! What part of 'spirit of Chaos' makes you think I can fill baskets so they come out evenly? I tried! I just can't do it!"

"Well, tough for you, then," Applejack said. "Maybe you need to learn how to do a good job even when you don't like the work. Now shut up, I don't wanna hear any more of your excuses."

It wasn't that he didn't like the work, he thought angrily. He didn't, but that wasn't why he wasn't doing a good job. It was because he couldn't. And the task was utterly pointless anyway and there was no reason to have him doing this and it was just an excuse to—

Despite himself, Discord cried out in fear when he heard the whistling noise, even before the line of sharp-edged gems cracked against his back with full force. As the lash hit, his cry of fear turned into a scream of pain. He wasn't tied right now; he wanted desperately to get up and run, to flap his wings and fly, to do anything except lie here still for the blows, but he'd been ordered not to move, so he couldn't.

"You're gonna learn," Applejack said, and the whip came cracking down again, the gems that the rope was tied through cutting viciously into his flesh. He screamed again. "If I gotta take all the skin off your back, sooner or later you're gonna learn. You got a job to do, you do a good job, whether you want that job or not." Another blow, and another, and another, and all he could hear was the crack of the whip and the blood roaring in his ears and the sound of his own screams, and another, until he lost count, not that he was really all that good at counting in the first place. He put his head all the way down on the ground and put his paws over his face, whining like a dog, trying
to shut out the world of pain, but the blows kept coming.

A sob broke free from his throat, finally. And then another after the next lash fell, and another, and then he was crying, his body racked with sobs between his screams, as the whip slashed against him again and again. He'd tried so hard to be strong, to resist the pain, not to give his tormentor the satisfaction of breaking him down like this, but he was helpless and he strongly suspected the point to this was to break him down, so that if he never started crying and begging, it would never end.

One of the lashes hit him in the upper part of his back, near his neck, where the skin under his fur had no protective scales at all and was entirely soft pony skin. There, even the rope itself was a stinging agony, and the gems embedded in it stabbed into him deeper and more painfully than on his draconic tail or in the lower regions of his back where his skin was protected by dragon scales under his fur. His neck arched up as he screamed, his muscles everywhere tensing as if he were about to leap away, but the motion couldn't complete because the obedience spell wouldn't let him leap or fly. "Please stop," he pleaded at last, pride broken and all ability to resist begging shattered by the pain. "Please, please stop, please...."

"You sorry yet?" Applejack grunted, swinging the whip down on him again.

"Yes! Yes, I'm sorry!"

This time she paused the beating for a moment. "You sorry because you screwed up the job, or you sorry that you got caught at it and you're gettin' punished?"

"I'm sorry I'm getting punished!" he howled, and cringed in renewed terror when he heard what had just come out of his mouth. The truth-telling spell wouldn't allow him to lie and say what she wanted to hear... and that meant there would be more pain, more of the relentless beating. But it was true. He wasn't sorry he'd screwed up the job, because he couldn't possibly do a good job at something so pointless and orderly as making the apple baskets evenly packed. It was in his nature, and he wasn't ashamed of his nature, he wasn't sorry for what he was, so how could he actually be sorry for failing to do something it was antithetical to his nature to do?

"I thought so, you piece of trash!" Applejack shouted at him, and renewed beating him with greater vigor. The whip slashed at his bat wing, tearing holes in the delicate skin and muscles; it tore at his back and his upper tail, leaving bloody slashes and cuts all over him. Discord dug his claws into the dirt as hard as he could, trying to endure, as he sobbed and screamed. Over and over he tried to move his muscles, summon magic, do anything to get away from this torture, and over and over he was reminded that he had no control. The obedience spell bound him as tightly as the spell that had turned him to stone once had; the order not to move overrode his every attempt to get control of his body back and flee or shield himself. At that he was lucky, he thought; the spell wasn't demanding total immobility from him, simply that he stay still and offer no resistance to the beating. He could still clench his fists, clutch at the dirt below him with his claws, grit his teeth, drive his fang through his bottom lip so the pain in his lip would blot the pain in his back for precious seconds. He could still cry, scream, beg. He just couldn't escape.

"You tell me you're sorry you screwed up those baskets, and you mean it, or so help me you creature I will whip you to bloody pieces!"

"I can't! I can't make baskets come out evenly! Consistency is the opposite of chaos, please, please, I tried, please, I can't! Please stop, please, I tried, I tried..."

"You gonna tell me you're sorry? Are ya?" The lash came down again and again, and it seemed to him that each blow was more vicious than the last, as she demanded something from him that the honesty spell binding him wouldn't permit him to give. He shrieked, and pleaded, and wept with
agony, but nothing stopped her from bringing her whip down on him over and over.

Eventually something inside him broke, something shifted and for a moment he felt sick guilt and regret at what he was, that he was not like the ponies, not like practically any other creature on Equestria, that he had limitations they didn't share. That without his magic, his affiliation with Chaos crippled him in some ways, and even Pinkie Pie was better at getting by in a world of Order than he was. And in that moment of hating himself and wishing he was anything other than what he was, he could finally say the words Applejack wanted to hear, because he could finally sincerely mean them. "I'm sorry," he sobbed. "Please, I'll do better, I promise, please, I'm sorry ..."

"You really sorry now? You sorry you failed that job, not just that you got caught at it?"

"Yes! I'm sorry I failed, I'm sorry, please, I'm sorry, please stop, I'll do it right next time, I'm sorry, please..."

And Applejack finally put the whip down. "Well, that's better, sugarcube," she said, her rough voice almost kind. "Ain't no shame in failing, long as you did your best and you're genuinely sorry you couldn't do better."

He wanted to protest that he had done his best, except that that couldn't be true, he couldn't let that be true because if he had done his best and still failed he would fail every time and then there would never be an end to the beatings until he died, or until his Twilight Sparkle came to rescue him, which was basically impossible so it would be until he died, and he was technically immortal so even without his magic he wasn't 100% sure he could die. Well, they could murder him with that hammer the little dragon had killed his counterpart with, but why would they when they could just keep beating him bloody? "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," he cried, brokenly. "I'll do better, I promise, please, I'm sorry..."

So much pain. He'd thought he knew pain. He'd been beaten as a child, but never this severely; he'd taken injuries in battle, before coming into the full power of his potential and in fights with creatures of his own power class, but he'd given better than he'd gotten and in the heat of combat, pain could be exhilarating; he'd been turned to stone, twice, but that had been moments of excruciating pain and then cold nothingness. Nothing like this.

"I'm proud of ya, finally recognizin' that you did bad," Applejack said. "You stay right here, I'm gonna get you something."

She left. Discord twisted his head around so he could see the extent of the damage. Dark red rivulets ran all over his back, and in some places, the skin hung loose and what was underneath was raw red meat. His bat wing was ruined, more holes in it than in a changeling's legs, all bleeding. He lowered his head again. Nothing he couldn't heal once they gave him permission to do it, but looking at the ruin they periodically left his body in made him shudder in horror and grief.

He closed his eyes, trying desperately to get control of himself, to stop crying. He was the avatar of chaos. He had destroyed the dragon empire, he had brought himself back from the dead more than once, he had ruled Equestria and done anything he wanted to do for nearly a thousand years. He had traveled the dimensional gates, he had walked in the land of the dead, he had changed the face of his world forever. He was not some weak, helpless little pony to cry because somepony was being mean to him. He was disharmony incarnate. He should be stronger than this.

But just as he'd been completely unable to break himself free from the stone as long as those who had bound him still held their Elements – it hadn't been until the Elements had transferred from Celestia to the new Bearers that the seal had broken and allowed him to start trying to work his way free – he was completely unable to break the spells that Twilight Sparkle had layered onto him.
via the transformed Elements of this timeline. He was fairly sure that the Elements of his home dimension couldn't even do this, that maybe they could have handled the spells of honesty and loyalty but the obedience spell was far, far too dark to funnel through the Elements that he knew. Except that he'd left behind the Elements that he knew to come here because he'd wanted to misbehave without Fluttershy getting angry with him. So he'd come to a dimension where his previous self was dead. And now he'd learned the hard way why his previous self was dead here, why someone – not somepony, it had been a baby dragon actually – had hated him enough to kill him.

His other self, the one who had belonged here, had changed the Elements, forced them to absorb their opposites. He wasn't entirely sure how that worked in Twilight's case; the Element of Magic had no inherent opposite. When he looked at her he kept thinking he knew what was wrong with her, but with his magic as limited as she'd made it he couldn't quite figure it out, only that being anywhere near her made his skin crawl and filled him with visceral horror, sometimes even brief horrifying hallucinations that he was turning to stone again. Flashbacks. His own Twilight didn't trigger flashbacks like that in him, and this one had started doing it from the moment he'd first encountered her, when he'd still had his powers and she hadn't defeated him yet, so it was something about her, not about the situation he was in. It didn't help that she tortured him in interrogations or experimentation on a regular basis, but that wasn't the original reason. But it hardly mattered; even if he knew exactly what was wrong with this world's Twilight, he couldn't fix it. She'd taken control of his magic from him.

The obedience spell constrained him as tightly as the stoning spell once had. The collar around his neck restrained his magic so that he could only use it when ordered to, but it was not what enforced his obedience. When he was given an order, he could choose to obey it more or less of his own volition, or he could choose to try to refuse, at which point the spell would take control of his muscles and move him like a puppet. It had limitations; the spell could only compel him to use his magic if he was given precise instructions about what exactly to do, because it couldn't compel him to think certain thoughts. Improperly worded instructions on how to use his magic could allow him far more freedom than the Elements of this world wanted him to have. So they rarely ordered him to use his magic, unless they were telling him to do something very specific.

Instead they used him as a slave, ordering him to perform tasks that he could use his physical body to do. That wasn't the endgame, he was sure. That was pointless. Maybe they were enjoying his enslavement as revenge – certainly Applejack seemed to enjoy beating him and ordering him around – but that wasn't the goal in and of itself, he was quite certain. The goal was to break him to the point where they could give him instructions and trust him to use his own intelligence and judgement to carry them out in exactly the way they wanted without him hunting for and finding loopholes, and then they'd be able to force him to use his magic.

He was hoping desperately he'd be dead before he got to that point, but there were days he felt so hopeless he wondered why he was even trying to resist. Maybe if he just gave in and let them break him it wouldn't hurt so much. Maybe they'd stop torturing him all the time if he stopped making sarcastic wisecracks and pleading with them and trying to fight his orders, if he just gave up and did whatever they wanted without resistance. But he couldn't do that. Resistance to authority was a fundamental part of his nature, an aspect of chaos and disharmony, and if he stopped resisting, he would stop being him. Not that he was really enjoying being himself right now, but the thought of being anything else still filled him with greater horror than the thought of being tortured... at least most of the time.

He squeezed his eyes even more tightly closed at the sudden burning rush of shame as he remembered. Not five minutes ago, he'd felt ashamed of who and what he was, he'd wanted to be something else, because what he was guaranteed him endless pain and just for a few moments, he'd
broken and wanted to be something he was not. He'd thought only Fluttercruel could do that to him. If now Applejack was pushing him to that edge as well... how long before he fell over the side permanently and stayed there? How long before the desire to escape pain eclipsed the desire to be Discord, and he became what it was they wanted him to be?

He heard hoofsteps, and cringed. Tentatively he opened one eye, as if opening them both would make whatever terror he was faced with now more real. But Applejack was only carrying a tray in her mouth, not preparing to whip him again.

She set it down in front of him. There were four apples on the tray. Despite the pain he was in, Discord's mouth watered, his eyes fixed on the apples like they were lifebuoys and he was drowning. He was so hungry, all the time; even the agony in his back and his wing couldn't overwhelm the craving for food when something that would actually taste good was put in front of him. All he'd had to eat all day was a bowl of hay with hot sauce, and all he'd had to eat yesterday were things so disgusting they couldn't even be considered food and then he'd vomited them all up anyway. Fluttercruel never gave him enough to eat and none of it tasted good; when she wasn't deliberately feeding him things that were appallingly disgusting and forcing him to eat them to make him feel sick, she was feeding him a subsistence level of hay and oats and grass and other very, very basic, boring pony fare. Sometimes she gave him raw eggs because he needed high levels of dietary protein, unlike a pony; on occasion as a reward she gave him a bowl of milk. Not chocolate milk, regular milk, but it was the sweetest substance she allowed him to consume and when she let him have some, he actually felt pathetically grateful to her, even if she made him drink it from a bowl like a pet and not from a cup. He never got anything as nice as an apple.

When he'd had his powers and freedom, natural apples would have bored him. Now his gaze was riveted to them like a dragon to gems. He had been ordered not to eat any of the apples when he worked here, a torment that maddened him given how hungry he was and how delicious they looked in his desperate state... but why would she be putting them on a tray and laying them before him if she wasn't feeding them to him? Was this another trick? A game to torture him? Or did she really mean to feed him such wonderful sweet things?

Discord held himself still, trembling. Was this a trick? This version of Applejack did love to play cruel tricks on him, forcing him into no-win situations or presenting him with overwhelming temptations and then punishing him for succumbing. He wasn't going to give in this time. He wasn't going to let her trick him into earning another punishment. He would be good.

"Go ahead, hon," Applejack said. "These four are for you. You earned 'em bein' honest with me and acceptin' what you did was wrong. You can eat 'em."

He needed no other encouragement. Discord's head lunged forward and he devoured the apples whole, unconcerned with cores and seeds, chewing them just enough to release the delicious sweet flavor into his mouth. The first two, he was hungry enough to eat too quickly, barely getting to taste them before his hunger compelled him to swallow them down; the next two he savored, chewing and sucking until the flavor had all been extracted. They tasted so good. He was dehydrated from blood loss, tears, and working in the hot sun for hours, and the sweet liquid juices of the apple were so soothing and delicious and necessary he almost forgot the horrible pain in his back and wings. Almost.

When he was finished, when his belly was almost full enough to stop cramping in pain and his throat was almost quenched enough to not feel cracked and dry any longer, he realized, too late, what the apples had been about. Carrot and stick training. Applejack had beaten him until he'd twisted his very mind around to meet what she required of him, which was that he felt shame for what he was and wished he could change; and then she'd given him an extravagant reward, or at
least extravagant in the context of his current hellish existence, to reinforce the conditioning.

Discord whimpered, recognizing the trap he'd just fallen into. He was the spirit of disharmony; he understood how torture and brainwashing worked, he'd used many of these techniques himself, since his mind control spells weren't permanent but proper conditioning could be. He'd never done anything to anypony as horrible as what was being done to him, but the principles were the same. Now that he'd received and accepted the reward, some part of his mind would associate giving in and hating himself with not just the end of pain but with the pleasure of delicious food... and food was a weakness of his anyway, he'd spent much of his childhood as a starving scavenger and even becoming nigh-omnipotent had never quite washed the obsession with food away. And the next time, that tiny part of his mind would betray him for the reward, and he would give in more easily. And so on until he was totally subservient.

And yet what was he supposed to do? He couldn't refuse food right now. He was too hungry and miserable. He didn't have the strength to refuse food that wasn't disgusting, let alone food that was actively delicious. How was he supposed to protect himself from this?

"Fluttershy's on her way to pick you up," Applejack said, and Discord cringed in terror again. "I told her you needed a whippin' today but you did good finally and owned up to your own wrongdoin'. She'll bandage you up."

She tied a rope around a tree and knotted the end of it through the loop in the back of his collar, leashing him. "Now, you don't go tryin' to get yourself free of that, mind," she said, and the dull horror took hold again as it had so many times before, the order sinking into him and denying him the ability to free himself. He wasn't sure what was worse, when he was tied paw and hoof and literally couldn't do anything to get free, or when he was left unbound or bound more lightly, with the physical capability of freeing himself, and the compulsion of the spell on him prevented him from using that capability no matter how badly he wanted to.

Applejack left him there. Discord wasn't allowed to untie himself from the tree, and he hurt too badly to move very much, but when he was sure she was gone, he nosed around the tree, dragging his injured body slowly, until he found a half-rotten apple that had fallen to the ground prematurely. With his talon, he sliced away the rotten parts, and then he stuffed the remainder in his mouth, savoring it as long as he dared. He found two more, one riddled with worms, which were protein and better than what Fluttercruel usually fed him for protein so he ate the entire wormy apple, and another mostly rotted one that had been lying on the orchard ground. Their actual taste wasn't nearly as delicious as the ripe, healthy ones Applejack had fed him, but the taste they left in his mind and soul was wonderful, much sweeter than his reward for breaking had been. He'd taken these for himself, despite the various restraints on him; he'd exercised his nature as a spirit of trickery and rule-breaking and strengthened himself against the torture the same way that Applejack's treats had weakened him. If he hadn't been so weak and in so much pain and so afraid of getting caught at this, he would have laughed heartily.

He used his tail to brush fallen leaves over the tracks his body had left, taking especial care to cover any bloodstains, so nopony would know he had moved... he hadn't been ordered not to, but he knew that if Applejack had guessed that he would crawl around looking for rotten apples to eat rather than depending entirely on her conditional "generosity", she would have ordered him not to. So he was getting away with something, which made him feel a savage happiness and triumph totally out of proportion to the size of the victory but also fear, because if he was getting away with something he could get caught. Then he settled himself back into the bloody depression in the fallen leaves that he'd been lying in after Applejack had beaten him, to wait for his cruel captor to come for him and do... whatever she was going to do.
It turned out that unpredictability in pony behavior was much, much less fun when the range of possible reactions he might get from the pony in question went from "soothing ointments and bandages and cooing words of comfort" to "vicious screaming, brutal torture and occasional violent rape with objects or animals." Maybe if Fluttercruel was always nothing but a sadistic tormentor, he could resist what she was doing to his mind better, but the fact that she was often gentle and sweet kept him unable to muster all of his necessary emotional defenses against her all the time. Who would have thought that he of all beings would ever crave predictability? He'd give a great deal to know what Fluttercruel was going to do to him before she did it.

He was tired, and weak, and he hurt so much, and the shade of the apple tree was soothing after he'd been forced to sort apples in the heat of the field, nothing to protect him from Celestia's brutal sunshine all day long. He wanted so much to sleep. It was horribly boring, lying here tied to the apple tree, nothing to do, unable to try to escape, and if he could sleep he could escape the pain and fear and boredom for at least a little while. But he was too afraid of what Fluttercruel would do when she got here; he couldn't bring himself to let go and drift off to sleep when she was coming and might do anything to him.

At least he'd stolen those three fallen apples. That counted for something. He clung to that. Maybe he had broken for a few minutes under the torture, but he hadn't stayed that way. He'd come back to himself. He was still totally disobedient and unruly in his heart, even if it was so very infrequently that he found a way to express it despite the spells binding him.

And maybe the real Twilight Sparkle, the one from his universe, had gotten the letter he'd sent yesterday and would muster up a rescue expedition and come and save him.

Yeah, as if.
Cruel Kindness

Chapter Notes

Remember when I said I wasn't pulling punches with this fic?

This chapter contains rape and torture (not at the same time; the rape isn't physically violent. The torture scene, however, is more violent than the one in the last chapter.) Reader discretion is advised.

Originally I thought this chapter would also include our heroes' journey to their version of the Tree of Harmony. I have decided to move that piece to the next chapter in order to avoid mood whiplash, and also so that those who so choose can avoid this chapter. I don't think it's a good idea -- I'm not writing a porno here, I included these scenes because I felt as a writer that they needed to be here -- but I wanted to provide it as an option.

There are some silly in-joke references but I'll credit them next chapter. Avoiding mood whiplash.

Opposition, 6 PM

Fluttercruel was in her gentle aspect when she arrived, which made Discord struggle not to cry with relief. He cried so much lately. It was completely humiliating. He'd even cried in front of Twilight last night, hunger weakening him to the point where he hadn't been able to endure being prepared for another torture session without breaking down in tears of despair. He had to muster up more strength than this. Apparently, seeing him already covered in blood and injuries that she didn't have to inflict on him, and hearing from Applejack that he'd broken at the end and therefore deserved to be rewarded for breaking, not punished further for resisting, triggered Fluttercruel's kindness instincts, and she bandaged and treated his wounds with compassion, using a great deal of painkilling salve. By the time she was done he couldn't feel his damaged wing anymore, which was an improvement over the agony it had been in.

She led him back to her home the usual way, the leash on his collar attached to a harness around her hoof, forcing him to walk on all fours. Discord was as adept at moving on all fours as he was at going bipedal, but they meant different things to him; fours was for covering distance rapidly or for sneaking, bipedal was for interacting with ponies since it allowed him to use his full height for its intimidation value. Being forced to walk through Ponyville, injured, at Fluttercruel's pace, on all fours with a leash around his neck, was sickeningly humiliating.

At least she didn't have a muzzle on him this time. Or a bridle and a bit in his mouth. If a pony put reins on another pony in public it would be viewed as obscene, a bedroom game that the participants should have kept in the bedroom; but on a creature that wasn't a pony, it made ponies think not of kinky sex games, but of pets and of dangerous wild animals being restrained to tame them. Most ponies weren't xenophilic enough to recognize him as a potential sex object, so Fluttercruel could drag him through the town in abject slavery without embarrassing herself; her fellow townsfolk saw what she was doing as playing her role as an Element of Harmony and taming the cruel chaos monster, not as what it actually was, a sexualized dominance ploy. So
Discord got to be simultaneously humiliated that he was being viewed as an animal rather than a sentient being, and that his captor was enjoying his humiliation and submission entirely too much and in thoroughly unhealthy ways.

In the beginning she'd never taken him anywhere without muzzling or bridling him first, so he'd never been able to talk and prove himself sentient; now she let him keep his mouth free so long as he didn't use it, but the moment he tried to talk she'd order him to conjure a muzzle or bridle around himself. Of course, the ponies of Ponyville knew who he was, and they feared and hated him for it, but Discord knew very well that ponies would automatically perceive a large predator as a fierce and dangerous beast rather than an intelligent being like themselves unless said predator talked, and at his size and with the natural weaponry on his body, the parts of him that were ponylike were not enough to make ponies perceive him as one of them. So he knew, as he walked through the town silently, that even though they knew who he was and even though they knew he was intelligent, they were perceiving him at some level as a monster, a mindless vicious animal, that Fluttercruel was taming -- not a being with the same feelings and intelligence as a pony who was being mistreated and enslaved, not even a criminal who deserved to be publicly humiliated. An animal.

He wondered if Celestia had told Fluttercruel about his past (or if he'd even had the same past in this timeline), or if she'd just managed to get lucky and hit on the ancient sore spot. It had been thousands of years ago but Discord still remembered being captured by ponies when he was a child and didn't speak their language, mistaken for a non-speaking animal, and caged and treated like a ferocious beast rather than the terrified little colt that he'd been. If this one had had the same background... then this Celestia was definitely actively in on this, because there was no way this was a coincidence and there was no way any being but Celestia would know his past.

Once they were back in Fluttercruel's house, Fluttercruel unbuckled the leash from his collar. "Put the shields up around the house?" she said, in the same quiet, uncertain, questioning tone that the real Fluttershy, his Fluttershy, would have used, except that the magical shields in question were intended to keep anypony from hearing, seeing or walking in on the things Fluttercruel tended to do to Discord, and the incongruence between the gentle tone of the order and the purpose of it was a knife in Discord's heart. Funny. He was normally a big fan of incongruence.

"Now lay down, wings flat," Fluttercruel said. "We're going to treat those injuries, okay? After what Twilight put you through last night, you should have been a little bit more obedient for Applejack; I let you heal yourself last night, but I can't give that to you again so soon. You should have known."

He had known. It hadn't changed the fact that he couldn't do the job. He'd packed the baskets full of apples, but Applejack had demanded he do it evenly, except that didn't even mean make it the same number of apples, it meant make it come up to the same level and there had been no way. Discord couldn't even see unevenness; the baskets had actually looked entirely too even and regular to him, so he had thought he must have done it right. He didn't bother to point this out. It wouldn't help him any, and if Fluttercruel decided it was backtalk, it could hurt him quite a lot.

Last night... well, last night had been awful, as every time he was sent to Twilight was, but he'd accomplished the goal he'd been working toward. For what felt like it had been nearly forever, Discord had been writing a letter, using his own blood and the dirt of his basement prison for ink and his talon for a quill (except on the days when it was hurt too badly to move it, when he'd use one of the digits of his paw), on paper he used the remnants of his magic to make out of wood shavings and his own torn skin. Realistically he thought it was about three weeks, almost half of the two months he'd been here; he was forced to see Twilight two days a week, like clockwork, and he'd been to see her six times during the time he was writing the letter. He'd poured out the entire
history of how he'd gotten here and everything that had happened to him since in a desperate and lengthy plea for his own Twilight Sparkle to come save him. The whole time he'd been writing it, he'd been more than halfway convinced it wasn't going to help, that his Fluttershy might care for him and call him a friend but his Twilight still despised him... but he had no choice. It was the only hope he had. He had saved a tiny bit of magic to cast onto Spike so that the letter would go to Spike's cognate in Discord's own universe, and he'd managed to persuade Spike to send it last night, after Twilight's experiments were done for the evening.

Spike had thought Discord was asking him to send the letter to Celestia. It had been so, so hard not to tell the little dragon the truth. Discord couldn't actively lie at all; the spell simply wouldn't let him form words that weren't true. He could omit information, but at a price, a price he'd paid last night when he'd vomited so much and so hard that in the end nothing had been coming up but thin bile and blood. But he'd done it. Spike had jumped to the conclusion that Discord was sending the letter to Celestia because he had some advice for the princess on how to return the Element Bearers to their prior selves, and Discord had carefully managed to never address that conclusion for yay or nay, focusing on telling Spike why somepony had to fix the Elements and managing to never mention the fact that that had no connection to his letter.

The omission of facts had led to acute nausea and finally vomiting when it had overwhelmed him, and he'd had a very close call when Twilight had guessed that Discord throwing up meant Discord had been close-to-lying, and had said so in front of Fluttercruel, and the sadistic glee in the pegasus' voice when she'd pronounced that Discord needed a special punishment for that... he'd wanted to die. He'd been so exhausted and he'd hurt so badly from Twilight's experiments and he'd just drained every last dram of Chaos magic in his body and then every last bit of food or water in his stomach, and the thought of what Fluttercruel would do to him was just unendurable. But Spike had saved him, lying for him, claiming that Discord had said nothing at all... because Spike had believed him when Discord had confessed to him that this wasn't his universe, that the Discord who'd destroyed the Elements by fusing them with their opposites and in turn had been destroyed by Spike with a sledgehammer was still dead, just as Spike had left him, and Discord himself was from an alternate universe and innocent of that particular crime.

He didn't expect anything further from Spike. He hadn't, in fact, expected quite as much as he got. The little dragon was entirely under Twilight Sparkle's control, not through a spell but through the bonds of love and friendship, even though Discord would have thought those wouldn't work anymore because of how much Twilight had changed. But then, what did he know about it? He was no expert on friendship. And if a friend acting completely unlike the pony they'd been before made the bonds of love and friendship stop working entirely, then Fluttercruel's tortures wouldn't be nearly so hard for Discord to deal with.

This wasn't his first encounter with the concept, he supposed. He'd done things for Celestia long after she'd turned on him, after all.

But he was disharmony. He'd been closer to his enemies than to the friends he didn't actually have for centuries. He'd never held it against a pony that they were trying to kill him or turn him to stone; he'd felt great amused affection for many a pony who'd hated him and treated him with defiance and anger. To be honest, he hadn't really stopped loving Celestia until some centuries of being imprisoned in stone had gone by, even though long prior to that she'd abandoned him and then turned on him and fought him for years. Discord had always assumed that that came with the territory of being the spirit of disharmony, since it was much, much easier for him to break apart pony friendships than it was for the enemies he loved having to get him to genuinely hate them. Why would a being who was used to having genuine friends be willing to put up with them when they turned cold and cruel? Discord had caused friendships to break up over much less than how new Twilight was treating Spike.
It didn't matter. The letter was sent. It would probably come to nothing and he didn't quite dare
hope it would actually lead to a rescue... but now he'd done everything it was in his power to do to
save himself. All he could do now was endure without breaking for as long as he possibly could.

Which... might not be all that long, anymore. Fluttercruel had been putting more salve and
bandages on him, and then had had him lie on his back, once the injuries on his back were dressed
and slathered in painkilling ointments, so she could get at the underside of the damaged wing,
where she'd stitched it and dressed it so it almost didn't hurt. And now she was nuzzling him, nose
against his side, the soft fur of her foreleg and the tough skin-covered flexible cartilage of her hoof
stroking over the fur of his chest and belly, down to where the fur grew through dragon scales and
hid the transition between his upper and lower body. Discord shuddered. This wouldn't be nearly
as horrible if it didn't feel good. He'd considered his Fluttershy a friend, nothing more, but if she'd
wanted him as hungrily, desired him as strongly, as Fluttercruel did, he would have responded;
what Discord found most attractive in a potential sexual partner was them finding him attractive.
Given how few ponies did, that particular preference had probably saved him a lot of heartache
over the years. If Fluttercruel was the pony she looked and sounded exactly like, her caresses and
nuzzles would feel wonderful.

But she wasn't.

"Applejack says you were a good colt today," Fluttercruel said sweetly, teasingly. "She said you
messed up your job but you were sorry about it, that you took responsibility for your mistakes and
regretted them. I like to hear that." She flapped her wings slightly and repositioned herself,
nuzzling his neck now. This time the shudders that went through Discord were not of horror.
"You're really starting to learn. I think you're well on your way to reforming, don't you?"

Discord closed his eyes. She had to use that word, the word his Fluttershy had used. "I'm trying,"
he said softly, because it was true enough; he was trying to obey, to succeed at the tasks he was
given, because he didn't want to be punished. He didn't want to be obedient, but he didn't want to
be tortured either, and most of the time that took precedence nowadays.

"You make me so happy when you're obedient," Fluttercruel said, sighing happily, sounding just
exactly like his Fluttershy did when she was pleased with him and no, he was not going to break
down in front of her, he was not going to cry, and he wasn't going to pretend she was really
Fluttershy either. He would keep his eyes closed so he didn't have to watch, let her do what she
wanted, and endure. This couldn't be breaking his heart, Celestia had done that centuries ago and
now he didn't have one. He could take this. He had to.

"Will you make me happy, Discord?" He felt her shift on top of his neck, her legs on either side of
his head, pinning him. "Open your eyes." Discord obeyed, looking up into those deep blue pools
that looked just like his Fluttershy's eyes. "Will you make me happy?"

"I'll do whatever you say," he said dully, because that was true too; he didn't have a choice.

"Oh, don't look so sad about it. You know you'll like it." She planted a kiss on his nose, and then
slid her body forward. "Make me happy, sweetie. You know what I like."

Yes. He did. He was grateful that the beating Applejack had given him seemed to be all the
buildup she needed and she wasn't going to have to hurt him herself first. He was also grateful that
he had the most amazingly flexible, lengthy and useful tongue of any creature on Equestria,
because it made this a lot easier. She didn't have to sit directly on him, just stand over him,
shuddering with excitement and whimpering in a tiny quiet voice that sounded much too much like
his Fluttershy as he used his flexible neck and even more flexible tongue all over her underbelly,
finally coming to where she wanted his attention the most and giving her what she wanted.
She was a toy. She was an object for him to manipulate, just like all ponies had been for centuries, a thing for him to do things to and get a reaction. She wasn't a thinking, feeling being that he actually cared about. He was pushing buttons – almost literally in this case – to achieve an effect, just as he'd done thousands of times to thousands of ponies that he'd tormented and terrorized. The only difference was, he'd done chaotic, non-sexual things to toy with their emotional states for his own amusement, in the past, and here, he was performing semi-predictable, sexual activities to toy with Fluttercruel's state of arousal for her amusement, at her orders. But it was the same thing. He told himself that.

She was not Fluttershy. He didn't care about her. When she moaned, and made her tiny little cries, and finally called his name as her hips bucked against his tongue, and she sounded exactly like his Fluttershy while she was doing it, exactly like he imagined she would anyway since he'd never taken the real thing to bed and had never expected to... that didn't mean anything at all. She was just an object he was manipulating. That was all.

He was pretty sure he used to be better at lying to himself.

"Oh, you're wonderful, sweetie," she sighed, snuggling against him. "You, uh, your, uh..." She lifted her head, her face red with embarrassment, blushing through her fur. "Your tongue was just made to please mares," she blurted out quickly and then buried her red face in his fur. Embarrassed by her own risque talk, despite what she did to him on a regular basis. Just like he suspected the real Fluttershy would be, if she took it into her head to try to talk dirty.

He was not going to cry. He was the God of Chaos for the sake of all that mattered. He had terrified ponydom for nearly a millennium. He was not going to cry because his torturer sounded just as embarrassed and shyly excited about her not-even-that-lewd praise of his bedroom techniques as his real best friend might have if he'd been with her by mutual consent and this wasn't rape and she wasn't holding him prisoner and torturing him on a regular basis and any of this had been real. Not going to cry.

She was nuzzling him again. All and any gods that were or are or will ever be... please make this stop. Please. No more. "Such a good colt," she said. "You deserve a reward, sweetie."

"You don't need to," he said hoarsely. "All I was trying to do was make you happy. I don't want anything for myself." Except peace and quiet and rest. Well, or impossible things, like full control of his powers back, or his former nemeses charging out of the portal he'd left by the Everfree to come to his rescue, or to suddenly have a heart attack and die.

"Oh, but you were so good," Fluttercruel said. "You deserve a reward."

His voice broke. "If it's a reward then why am I not allowed to say no?" he asked, breathing raggedly, trying not to crack.

Immediately he was afraid after he'd said it, and regretting the fact that it was very, very hard for him to keep his impulses under control even when the consequences of failure could be so dire. But she just giggled. "Silly! You're not allowed to say no to anything. That's why it's obedience training."

That's why it's rape, he thought, but managed not to say it. The last time he had called her ministrations rape, she had flown into a rage and told him that if he thought her being gentle and loving was rape maybe he needed a reminder of what rape was really like and that was quite enough of remembering that, thank you very much.

"Besides, you know you'll like it," she said. "You know you enjoy it when I'm nice to you." The
Discord froze, his whole body tensing. No. No no no no. The last time she had felt the need to point out the difference between the behavior that was almost like the old Fluttershy and the behavior his counterpart had instilled in her, it had resulted in a lengthy demonstration of why he should prefer her being nice and why he should regret the day he had ever made her cruel. He remembered screaming that he was sorry, over and over again -- which he was, not in the sense of guilt, because he hadn't been the one that did it, but in the sense of regret, because once upon a time she had been a Fluttershy just like his Fluttershy and it was his cognate, his alter ego that had changed her and he was so very sorry that had happened to her and not even just because of what she was doing to him... although admittedly it was mostly because of what she was doing to him. It hadn't mattered. Nothing he'd done had mattered. It had all been about Fluttercruel wanting to hurt him, and it hadn't ended until she'd been satisfied, long long past the point where Discord had stopped being able to beg or scream because his throat was too raw and he'd been reduced to weak, hopeless sobbing interspersed with moments of blacking out entirely.

Fluttercruel hated what she was even as she reveled in it, and frequently, she took her mixed feelings out on him, punishing him for giving her these horrible new urges and satisfying those urges at the same time.

"Yes," he said hastily. "I-- I definitely prefer it when you're nice." He hated it. But he hated it less than when she was cruel, so he could honestly say he preferred it. Funny. He remembered telling Fluttershy it was time to be cruel, and placing a mind control spell on her. But the cruel Fluttershy he'd created was simply a hilariously mean jerk. She wouldn't have been capable of this exquisitely evil combination of kindness and cruelty that was so, so much more destructive than straight-up cruelty ever could have been. He'd have to remember that, if he ever needed it in the future. Well, except that he didn't promote cruelty in ponies anymore, not since the real Fluttershy had become his friend. Which made it so unfair that this was happening to him now.

"Then stop telling me you want to say no," Fluttercruel said. "You wouldn't want to make me unhappy, would you?"

"No, of course not!" Because her being unhappy had a direct correlation with how much pain she'd inflict on him.

She kissed him. "I think you should be quiet now? Unless you want me to put the muzzle on you. We could do that if you'd like it that way."

"I'll be quiet," he said desperately. "Please, I—" She would not be moved by his terror of being completely unable to open his mouth. Quickly he thought of something, and then quickly rephrased it in his head so the whole sentence was technically true. "You can't kiss me when you muzzle me."

"Oh, you like it when I kiss you?" She did it again, and this time he tangled his tongue with hers, lifting his head and pressing his lips hard against her lips, feigning passion, so she wouldn't force him to actually answer that question, because she wouldn't like the answer he'd be forced to give. He wanted to put his arms around her to complete the pretense, but he wasn't allowed to touch her without permission.

"Mm, you do like that, don't you," Fluttercruel said. She was breathing hard. "Oh, I know what reward to give such a sweet little colt."

She kissed and nuzzled her way down his body. He was shaking, arousal that he didn't want but couldn't afford to try to fight off uncoiling inside him, terror of what would happen if this didn't and
utter despair of what would happen if this did. When she reached his lower body, he was still sheathed, too frightened and miserable for the unwanted pleasure of her caresses to do its job. "Discord, sweetie, get hard for me," Fluttercruel said, face bright red again. "There's a good colt."

That was an order. He didn't have to try to force his body to respond or to not respond; it was out of his paws now entirely, the obedience spell taking over his autonomic nervous system. He felt his body respond to her order, the sheath being pushed out of the way and the growing organ within it pressing outward, but he felt almost completely detached from it. It didn't feel good, or bad for that matter, it was just a fairly meaningless physical change, like stretching his tail would be. That was actually a relief, one of the few times he appreciated the obedience spell.

Once she had enough of him exposed that she could accomplish her goals, he started feeling things again. Discord moved his head restless, looking everywhere except down at his captor and what she was doing to him. This wasn't going to end until he responded the way she wanted, so he didn't try to stop himself from feeling pleasure – not that that would have been particularly easy anyway, Discord had never been nearly as good at not feeling what he felt as he had been at not reacting the way anypony else would to those feelings. Instead, he pulled away in his mind, abandoning the place and time where things were happening to him that he didn't want. The world was dissolving into a cacophony of meaningless patterns upon patterns layered on top of each other where nothing had significance and nothing was important except snapping or reshaping as many of the patterns as he could; but he didn't have the power to do that right now, so the compulsions that usually overtook him when this happened felt more like deeply desired wishes than anything he absolutely had to do. Good enough.

Someplace there was a creature moaning in pleasure as a yellow pegasus sucked and licked and nibbled and finally climbed up on him and rode him, but that was meaningless too because it was all noise, all stupid patterns and how breakable they were. Why was up up? Why wasn't it down? Why wasn't it purple? What if gravity and gravy were the same thing? What if field trips were avocados? What if skies could ride ponies? What if the secret of the universe was a nectarine? What if you could surf rugs? What if you could surf rugs on the ceiling? What if evil rabbits were rugs and you were surfing them on the ceiling? What if the draconequus on the floor had an orgasm and it didn't matter because nothing mattered because all there was, was patterns and nothing meant anything?

He wanted to laugh at how silly it all was but some survival instinct kept him grounded just enough to know to keep quiet. Things started to feel real again. The pony lying on top of him, panting. The hard wooden floor under his back. Aches and occasional shooting pains from the injuries all over his back and wings. The puddle of moisture on the insides of his hips and the exposed underside of his tail, slowly oozing down the sides of his tail and thighs to the floor.

"Oh, sweetie," Fluttershy was saying. She was on top of him, no longer engulfing him but legs still straddling him, the point of heat and moisture between her legs still pressed against his body, and she was blushing. No, not Fluttershy. Fluttercruel. There was a difference. It was important. He had to remember. "I love to make you happy. I wish you were obedient and good all the time, then I would never need to be mean to you."

He wished so profoundly that any of that were true. As reality and memory came back, he realized the danger he was in right now. Fluttercruel seemed to genuinely believe, or at least was fooling herself into believing, that she'd really rewarded him. And if he disabused her of that belief, he could expect nothing but pain. But with the honesty spell, if she actually asked him if he'd enjoyed it, there was no way he could give her a safe answer. Certainly he couldn't risk being pushed into
telling her that he'd taken refuge in his chaos perceptions and the state of near-madness they brought so that he wouldn't have to be consciously aware of what she was doing to him. Discord felt incredibly vulnerable, on his back with belly and neck exposed and genitals not fully resheathed yet, with the tiny pony who had near-absolute power over him still on top of him, pinning him to the floor. Quickly, trying not to think about what he was doing, he whispered, "Can I thank you? Please, Fluttershy?"

Her voice grew suddenly hard. "Is that what you call me?"

"Please, mistress." He hated that. He hated it so much. He had never called anypony master or mistress. Well, okay, he'd called Starswirl master for about a month and a half before he'd decided to call him "teach" instead, because Discord had always considered it very important to make absolutely sure that everypony knew that he didn't think any of them were better than him. Starswirl had not been pleased, but the opportunity to train such a powerful student came along once in a lifetime, so he hadn't tried to pawn Discord off on a less knowledgeable teacher who'd put up with the lack of respect better.

"I'm not completely sure I'm hearing enough respect..."

"Please, mistress Fluttershy, can I thank you? Can I please you for what you've done for me?"

Fluttercruel giggled, a huge happy and embarrassed grin on her face. She was still aroused. He'd guessed right. He'd been too out of it to tell at the time but she hadn't come during intercourse; she'd gotten herself riled up and now she'd want more, and if he was proactive, and appeared to be submissive and genuinely desiring to please her, then she probably wouldn't hurt him to excite herself enough for a second one. He didn't want to do this, but if he did it, she wouldn't ask him whether he'd enjoyed being raped because his mouth would be otherwise occupied, and she wouldn't hurt him to prove her power over him because the fact that he appeared to be submitting willingly would be proof enough, and maybe he could fool her into thinking that he actually cared about her even slightly.

She fluttered up and forward, landed on his upper body, and snuggled against his neck. "Oh, you animal," she said, still giggling, though the term took on an entirely uglier meaning when you considered she was a xenophilic rapist who used to prey on non-sentients until she got hold of him instead. "Yes, you can thank me. But let's go to bed first, this floor isn't very comfortable, is it?"

It certainly wasn't. His injuries burned, not as badly as if there was no painkilling salve at all but much worse than they'd felt before she'd made him have sex with her on his back on the floor. He got up, aching, wishing he could go all the way up to two legs, but she never let him do that anymore. How a quadruped had figured out that being forced to go four-legged would humiliate an optional biped, he didn't know. Maybe she'd just figured out that she never wanted him to have his natural height advantage; his limbs were proportionately much shorter than pony limbs, so being four-legged left his torso at slightly shorter than average stallion height, and having a really long body didn't seem to intimidate ponies nearly as much as having a really tall body did. His neck was still longer than any pony's could possibly be, but he'd learned to keep his head more or less lowered to the same level as his torso or bent to be only slightly higher, because every so often Fluttercruel would take his attempts to keep his head raised as a symbol of defiance or arrogance, and what came after that was never anything he wanted to have to endure.

They walked to the bed. "Now, I don't want you bleeding on my sheets, so I'm going to let you heal a little bit, ok? I want you to scab the wounds over so they aren't bleeding anymore, but they should still hurt. That was an important lesson Applejack had for you today, and if we don't let it take some time to sink in she might have to do it again, and I know you wouldn't like that, right?"
He nodded as he obeyed. The flow of his magic felt wonderful, like water to a being dying of thirst, and the relief of the acute burning pain was lovely... but it was all too brief. He wasn't allowed to heal all the way, he wasn't allowed to continue to command his magic.

Discord cried out in pain as Fluttercruel suddenly punched a hoof into his injured wing. "What was that for?" he gasped, forgetting that he wasn't supposed to question.

"Just checking to see if you did it the way I told you to," Fluttercruel said. "And you did. Good colt. I'm so proud of you. Why don't you lay down on the nice soft bed?" He started to climb up into it and curl himself, as if he was going to go to sleep. "No, no, on your back, remember? You wanted to thank me." She giggled.

Right. He lay down on his back again, and then propped himself on his side with his talon. "Can I touch you... mistress?" Oh how he hated that word.

"You want to touch me?"

No. No, he didn't. He wanted to run away screaming. Instead he offered her his paw. "Most mares really enjoy it when I stroke them with this," he said. "They say it's very soft."

Fluttercruel's eyes narrowed. "I don't want to hear about other mares right now, Discord."

He cringed. "I—I'm sorry. I didn't mean – I just wanted to say I think you'd enjoy it if you let me touch you..."

Her dark expression softened, became a tender smile. "Oh, okay. Since you want to." She lay next to him, on her back, wiggling, offering herself. "Go on, Discord. Thank me if you want to."

This was almost bearable. He was sort of in control here; he'd volunteered rather than being ordered, he was being allowed to use his paw and to move his body rather than being pinned under her. The spells kept him from doing anything that might possibly cause her harm, but if he licked and stroked her to orgasm multiple times until she fell asleep from exhaustion before putting him back in his cell, that wasn't harmful at all. She'd love that. And he'd love to be able to sleep in a bed for once, in a moonlit room that would fill with sunlight in the morning, even if it meant sleeping next to his tormentor. Oh, what if he could get up once she was asleep and raid her pantry? What if he could have a peanut butter and jelly sandwich? Or two? She'd surely catch him if he stole food that was easy to count, like apples, but two slices of bread from a whole load and enough peanut butter and jelly from the jars to slather on the bread wouldn't be missed, and if he cleaned up any mess he made she'd never know.

What if he could use a bathroom instead of pissing in a corner and having to smell it until she allowed him to use his magic to clean it up? What if he could drink as much water as he wanted? The possibilities danced before him. All he had to do was please Fluttercruel until she passed out. Given how exhausted he was, that wasn't the most pleasant of prospects, but the possible reward if he pulled it off gave him energy.

Discord had been very, very experienced before he'd spent a thousand years in stone. Xenophiles were a minority among ponies, but when you were the most famous, powerful and strange-looking creature in Equestria, there was no need to go looking for xenophilic partners; they'd found him. After Discord had taken over Equestria he had never had any shortage of ponies, and other species, seeking him out. This did mean he hadn't had opportunities to get back into practice since being un-statued, either after breaking free on his own or after being freed at Celestia's command – he found partnered sex pointless if it wasn't with someone who wanted him badly enough to approach him with an offer, and he'd had much higher priorities than sex since getting free -- but sex was one
of those things you just didn't forget how to do even if you spent a thousand years as a statue. And it had always been a point of pride for him that his ability to manipulate ponies into paroxysms of ecstasy was as well honed as his ability to manipulate them into acts of greed, malevolence or despair. Admittedly it'd been easier to do it with his powers, but he'd learned to use his body to please a lover before he'd learned fine control of chaos. That wasn't something he'd forgotten, either.

Back in the old days, many of the ponies who'd come to him had been more than a little frightened of or shocked by their own desires. And he'd enjoyed that, truly he had, he liked straightforward honest lust but he also liked messing with pony heads. When they'd been trembling with desire for him and simultaneously afraid of him and sickened by their own belief in how wrong their desires were, it had been so delightful to pleasantly torment them into boneless puddles of pleasure (not literally; he could have done it literally but that didn't actually sound like any fun at all) without taking anything for himself, just to hit their expectations upside the head and knock them over, because they'd thought they were giving themselves to a monster out of sick, twisted, perverse desires and ended up with a lover who really, really enjoyed making them love every moment of it. Oh, and then they felt so guilty over having seen him as a monster and how selfish they'd been giving nothing back to him, and then they'd fallen all over themselves to please him and that had been marvelous too. (And then the part where he'd declared that he was bored with them now and had tossed them out on their rumps as soon as they'd started the sappy talk had also been tons of fun but that made him feel more than a little guilty now.)

So he knew exactly what he was doing. And by the time he was done with it, Fluttershy (no, no, Fluttercruel, remember it) was practically purring with delight in the afterglow of multiple orgasms. She snuggled up next to him and fell asleep right there on the bed, just as he'd planned, leaving him totally unsupervised and unchained.

He could escape.

The thought struck him like a thunderbolt. He'd been thinking so small. Go steal snacks. Go pee in a bathroom. The door wasn't locked. Neither were the windows, and while jumping out of a window with no magic and his wings in this condition wouldn't be pleasant, he was tall enough that the distance to the ground was not much more than his full height standing. Or, a downstairs window would work too. The portal to his home dimension was near the Everfree, and maybe, maybe he could summon up enough magic to open it, or at least maybe he could hide in the Everfree until he managed to build up enough magic to open it.

He could be free. Without waiting for rescue, without having to die. He could be free.

Discord started to sit up, at which point he realized that Fluttercruel was sleeping on his bad wing.

No. No. He wasn't going to let something like this stop him. Not when he could be free. He pulled, gritting his teeth against the pain. Fluttercruel didn't budge, and his wing remained stuck.

Without his magic, Discord's wings weren't very strong, almost vestigial. He'd spent a few years in his childhood with them clipped together more or less perpetually, and they hadn't really naturally grown with the rest of his body since. It wasn't an issue he'd ever bothered to try to permanently fix, since most of his magic was deliberately impermanent anyway and because when he actually needed powerful working wings he could always grow them out, and he rarely needed powerful wings because his magic could negate gravity anytime he wanted. So now that he didn't have his magic to either negate gravity or expand his wings, it was very difficult for him to fly and it turned out it was incredibly difficult for him to pull the wing out from underneath a little yellow pegasus without disturbing her sleep. Maybe he'd have been able to do better if the wing weren't injured, but
Fluttercruel hadn't let him completely heal it.

He lay on the bed, panting with effort. He couldn't be kept from escaping, from freedom, by such a stupid thing. Pain didn't mean anything, couldn't mean anything. He couldn't allow it. He had to get his wing loose.

The spells on him wouldn't allow him to touch Fluttercruel without her permission. He couldn't simply pick her up and lift her off the wing, even though his arms were strong enough to do so and he could do it gently, without disturbing her, because he wasn't allowed to touch her. The thought occurred to him that she had given him permission to touch her, that she'd never technically rescinded that permission, but when he tried, the loyalty spell – really a spell intended to prevent him from harming his captors, but Twilight had insisted on calling it a loyalty spell – caught him and froze him, because his intent wasn't for his captor's benefit. He didn't intend to harm her, just get free – by now he didn't even fantasize about vengeance, he just wanted to escape and never see these twisted parodies of the ponies he knew again – but he could touch Fluttercruel when she ordered him to or during sex, with her permission, because it was for her benefit or at her command. He wasn't allowed to touch any of them for reasons that benefited him.

Discord pulled again. No good. The wing wasn't even budging. At this point, like an animal in a trap he was seriously considering ripping the wing off with his talon. He could wrap his tail around the bone, break it, then use his talon to rip the skin and muscle free so he could pull his wing off entirely. Once he was home and free of these spells he could regrow the wing.

Except that Discord knew exactly how much it hurt to be dismembered. Pinkie Pie hadn't taken his wings because she'd been using them, along with his shoulders, to pin him to the wall, using a handful of sharp spikes through them, like pins through a butterfly. But he couldn't imagine that ripping off his wing would hurt less than having his arm sawed off. He also remembered fainting from blood loss and pain repeatedly, and only the obedience spell and Pinkie's repeated orders to wake up and pay attention because it was no fun if he was going to sleep through it had kept him conscious. Even if he could bring himself to rip off his own wing, if he then blacked out from pain and shock he still wouldn't get away. And it would be obvious to Fluttercruel what he'd been trying to do, and then losing his wing would probably be the least painful thing he suffered.

He was stuck. He had a perfect chance to escape and he was going to lose it because he hadn't been careful to prevent Fluttercruel from falling asleep on top of his wing and he was never going to have a chance like this again and he was never going to be free—

Raw panic hit, the horror and claustrophobia of being trapped immobile in stone for a thousand years and now two months of this crashed over him, and he lost all sense of reason, of control. He flung himself away from Fluttercruel wildly, desperately, over and over, tail curled around a bedpost and pulling with all his strength, arms flailing out to try to grab the other bedpost so he could increase his leverage, throwing and pulling and throwing and pulling until finally, finally it felt like the wing was starting to budge and he threw all his strength into folding it back, pulling it free, knocking the pegasus loose and he fell, free at last, tumbling off the bed onto his face but it didn't matter because he could get up and get free and—

"What do you think you're doing?"

No. No no no.

She hadn't given him an order yet. Discord ran on all fours for the window, desperately.

"STOP!"
Five seconds. He had five seconds after an order. He could keep running, he could throw himself through the window. But then the spell would force him to stop. He'd be out of the house, down on the ground, but he wouldn't be able to move... and Fluttercruel would know he had just tried to escape. He couldn't do it. It wasn't going to succeed, and if it wasn't going to succeed, he couldn't afford to give away that he'd tried. Tears welled up in Discord's eyes as he brought himself to a halt before the spell forced him to. He'd been so close. So close.

"So." Fluttercruel's voice was cold and vicious. "Exactly what were you trying to do?"

"I'm sorry," Discord whimpered, which was true, he was very, very sorry that she'd woken up and stopped him. "You were sleeping on my wing, it was hurting me, I'm sorry..."

"You yanked yourself out from under me and knocked me off the bed just because your wing hurt?" Fluttercruel shouted.

That was not a question he dared answer, because of course the wing hurting, while true, hadn't actually been his motivation at all. Instead Discord lowered his head to the floor, trying not to sob. "I'm sorry, mistress, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to wake you or disturb you, I'm so sorry..."

"I bandage you up. I give you a reward. I let you sleep in a bed, I even let you heal yourself most of the way. And THIS IS HOW YOU REPAY ME?" The last was a psychotic shriek. Discord curled his tail around his legs, trembling, wings and limbs pulled in as close to his body as he could, as if there was any way he could protect any part of himself once Fluttercruel started.

The thought occurred to him that she hadn't told him not to start running again. "Stop" was a discrete activity; now that he had stopped, he had satisfied the requirements of the spell. Maybe she would turn away for a moment and he could run again. If he could get through the window before she told him to stop again...

"Oh, don't you dare even think about running," Fluttercruel snarled, and destroyed that hope. "You think I didn't see you trying to run away from me before I told you to stop? You had better stay right there and take your punishment, mister."

And now there was no way out. He couldn't run. "I'm sorry, please, I'm sorry..." In mid-plea his voice broke and he started crying with fear (and grief at the lost opportunity, he'd been so close, so close, but he couldn't let Fluttercruel know that, whereas he absolutely needed her to know how terrified he was because if she thought he wasn't scared enough she'd make it much worse).

"Oh, you will be sorry," Fluttercruel said. "You'll be very, very sorry. I was kind to you tonight, but that was a mistake, wasn't it! You're the one who told me it was time to be cruel; I should remember that that's the only thing you respect!"

"Please, please, mistress Fluttershy, please don't punish me, please, it was an accident, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I never meant to wake you, I'm sorry..."

"Muzzle yourself. With the gag bit," Fluttercruel ordered.

Discord's eyes went wide. "No, please, I'll be quiet, I'll—" And then he couldn't speak anymore as his own magic betrayed him, as the obedience spell forced him to materialize a buckled muzzle around his snout, with a bit in his mouth keeping him from biting down all the way and a cylindrical rubber gag attached to the bit, unpleasantly phallic, pinning his tongue in place and filling his mouth. He choked, gagging, for a moment, before he managed to shift his jaw and tongue in a way that accommodated the thing he'd been forced to put in his mouth. Discord breathed heavily through his nostrils, panting, wild with terror and now unable to get quite enough
air to satisfy lungs that wanted to hyperventilate.

"And not only did you wake me up, not only did you try to run away from me when you first woke me up... now you just tried to resist your orders. That's bad, Discord. That's very, very bad. That's even worse than waking me up." He whined with fear. There was no escaping this, whatever it was going to be. He couldn't even beg with the gag in.

Fluttercruel walked around in front of him. "Now." Her voice was cold. "What do I have to punish such a naughty little colt with? Applejack gave you a whipping today and it doesn't seem like it taught you anything, did it? Maybe we need something... special."

Stop crying. Stop crying. She isn't even doing it yet, you look like such a pathetic coward, can't you save the waterworks until she actually starts the punishment? Stop crying!

His angry admonishments to himself didn't do him any good. He was still sobbing with terror, the sound muffled by the gag and the muzzle pinning his mouth closed but in his own ears it was louder than anything. If he'd had time to brace himself, if he'd known she would wake up or that he would be punished, he could have held the tears back, but he'd been so, so close to being free and now he was going to be tortured again and he just couldn't take the sudden snap from one extreme to the other. Which admittedly would have its funny side, that he of all beings would be breaking down in terror because of events he could have handled better if they'd been predictable, except that right now nothing was funny.

"Twilight gave me a present last night," Fluttercruel said. "When I came to pick you up."

After he'd gotten Spike to send that letter. Please, let the letter have gone through. Please let Twilight Sparkle have compassion for him and come and save him from this. He had no idea who he was asking for these things, he didn't believe that any of the gods higher than him actually paid attention to such pleas, and why would they? He certainly didn't.

"She gave me a special new whip. Very special."

Discord's mind fixated on his world's Twilight. Princess Twilight, the alicorn, different from this world's Twilight in every respect imaginable. Unlike all the others, they didn't even look that much alike. He could picture his Twilight in his mind without any interference from images of his tormentor because the Twilight of this universe had no wings. Help me, Twilight, please, please, help me... Not that she could possibly come in time to save him from what was about to happen right now. Nothing would save him from that.

"She said it's a diamond that's been spun into a single thread, with magic. She said it's the sharpest, strongest wire magic can produce. You don't seem to be responding to the rope with the diamonds in it so well anymore, but let's see what you think of a whip that is a diamond."

Discord went ice cold. He felt like his heart had just stopped. And then he forced himself to breathe, forced the terror down, as numb resignation washed over him. If Twilight had turned a diamond into a thread, then the whip Fluttercruel was picking up, mouth on its handle, was monofilament carbon. With his magic, Discord would easily have been able to deflect or heal from such a weapon; monofilament carbon didn't have magical properties per se. But it had physical properties. Namely that it could cut through flesh like a knife through jello. And without command of his powers, Discord was as much flesh as any other creature.

This was how he died, he thought, hopelessness stilling his limbs and quieting his sobs. He couldn't speak to warn Fluttercruel that this weapon would slice right through him, that the whip she was about to wield would literally cut him in half. Well. It was ironic after he'd just managed to
send the message to call for help, and bitter after he'd just been thinking he might be able to get free without dying, but the truth was, it would be a quick death and then he would be free. Not painless – he was sure being sliced into pieces was actually going to hurt a great deal – but quick.

He was resigned, even accepting. A quick death was actually a much more merciful fate than what he'd been expecting from Fluttercruel's rage. And hilarious, really, she didn't know she was about to kill him and then wouldn't she be so upset that she'd broken her toy? Discord was quiet now, eyes closed, waiting for his end. His body wasn't quite as resigned and accepting as his mind was; he trembled, he was still hyperventilating, his heart was still thundering in his chest, his wings and his back muscles cringed as if they could possibly curl themselves away from the oncoming whip and save him. But he couldn't control these physical reactions. In his mind, he had gone all the way through surrender and despair and out the other side, almost to a fragile sense of peace. Maybe at least he could die with dignity, if he couldn't have anything else.

It was actually pathetically funny when you thought about it. She didn't even know he'd been trying to escape. She was about to kill him by accident for knocking her out of bed when he was trying to get his wing free. What a totally ridiculous reason to die. Fitting, really. He should have known his death would come for an enormously stupid reason.

He'd died before, but with his magic, so he'd been powerful enough to bring himself back. With his magic so limited, he knew this would be the last death, the end he wouldn't return from.

He wondered if that meant he would finally get to see his mother again. He'd never found her before when he'd walked in the land of the dead, but he'd never spent much time being dead so he couldn't know for sure.

He wondered if his Fluttershy would actually miss him when he was gone.

He was pretty sure Celestia wouldn't.

And then the whip came down.

It didn't feel like a whip. It felt like a sword, slicing through his back. Discord screamed through the gag, unable to stop himself from reacting to the pain. He'd wanted so much to have some dignity when he died. Well, looked like that wasn't going to happen any more than a rescue would.

It came down again, opening another line of fire across his back, and then again, and wait, what? Why wasn't he dead? The wire should have sliced through him and cut him in half. Was it so fine that it was simply going through his cells, not even splitting him apart? He twisted his body, putting his muscles under torque so that if a force sliced through them, gravity would pull the two halves apart. Another razor blow, and he still didn't fall apart. It wasn't killing him.

Discord craned his head back to see the weapon, just in time to watch it slice through his injured wing. He cried out in agony. The membrane and the lower bone had been sliced through entirely, and now a third of the wing was dangling off the thicker upper bone like a piece of cloth dangling from a rack. So much blood. He could see his own spine through the new wounds on his back. The wire was braided, not a single strand.

Hilarious. Discord started to laugh hysterically through his screams. Each individual wire was sharp enough to slice through bone as if it were butter, but braid several of them together and they interfered with each other, canceling each other out in a perfect expression of disharmony so that now the thing was only sharp enough to cut through skin and muscle and the light wing bones. Maybe if someone stronger than Fluttercruel was wielding it, it would kill him, but in her hooves it was only going to maim him. He sobbed, and screamed, and laughed brokenly through the gag,
because disharmony was sparing his life at a moment when he really, really wanted it not to, which was pretty much par for the course with disharmony and he probably should have seen this coming, but oh please this hurt so much and his bat wing was hanging from the bone in literal ribbons and now she had started in on his pegasus wing and if he couldn't die at least he could black out, couldn't he? Why hadn't he passed out by now?

A piece of his bat wing fell to the floor, the damaged upper bone finally snapping under the whip. He couldn't see the patterns anymore, couldn't feel his own magic, couldn't feel the muscles in his own throat. Couldn't even feel the gag and muzzle anymore. The only way he knew he was still screaming was that it was the only thing he could hear. The world was burning up in white fire, all over his wings and his back, and it was all he could perceive, drowning every other sensation. Every time the lash fell he thought this was it, this was the maximum of pain he could bear, surely he couldn't feel any more pain than this, surely all new sensation would be swallowed by the fiery agony that already existed. And every time the lash fell again he was proven wrong. Some infinities were larger than others. Even with the pain overwhelming him, destroying mind and thought and dissolving the world in excruciating webs of fire, he could still feel more of it every time the lash fell.

In desperation Discord flung his head backward, bending his neck back as far as it would go, hoping the lash would fall against his throat and cut it. Instead it sliced across his face, cutting from one eye, across his muzzled snout, on a diagonal to his cheek, tearing it open. Agony in his eye, and half his vision turning into a red blur. An explosion of blood in his mouth, and cool air against the side of his gums where air shouldn't be unless his mouth was open and teeth bared or unless he was deliberately rearranging his face for fun. The shock and pain finally pushed him over the edge. He felt his head falling sideways, his body tipping in the same direction, felt the side of his body where his wing was mostly gone fall against the floor, and then blessed nothingness.

And then there was something so cold it burned, splashing over his injured face. He was cold, and sick, and in utter agony, and one eye wouldn't open at all. "Discord! Heal yourself!" Fluttershy was shouting, in a panicked voice, as she splashed cold water on his face to rouse him. "Please! Heal yourself now or you'll die!"

It was an order. And now that he was conscious enough to hear and understand it, he had to obey. He felt his magic flowing, not really under his control, though it was always arguable how much control he had over chaos anyway and how much control it had over him. Healing magic was not chaotic, but transformation to an unexpected state was, so what he was actually doing was transforming his injured self into his uninjured self. It didn't feel warm, like he dimly remembered healing magic working back in the days when it still worked on him; it was cold, and he shivered uncontrollably. If he had control of his own magic he'd have warmed himself at the same time, but he couldn't, and after all the blood he'd lost he was so very, very cold.

"I'm sorry," Fluttershy was saying, holding his head in her lap, unbuckling his muzzle. "I'm so sorry, sweetie, I went too far, I never meant to hurt you so badly, I'm so sorry..."

Some part of him still knew it wasn't Fluttershy. But he'd just nearly died in agony, he was still lying in his own blood, and there was a pony hugging him and apologizing to him and she was warm and soft and Discord gave up. She was Fluttershy. For just a little while. Just until he didn't need her to be anymore.

She pulled the muzzle and the gag free. Discord was no longer actually injured, but he was cold and weak and shaken and the memory of pain and fear had burned into him, so he could still feel aching echoes of the pain even now that he'd healed himself. He put his lion limb around the little pegasus and drew her close, buried his snout against her soft fur, and sobbed, as she petted him and
stroked his head and told him lies about how she would never hurt him like this again and just for a little while he wanted to believe it. Not forever. He wasn't breaking. He was just pretending. For a little while.
Zecora's Tale

Harmony, 6 PM

After checking in with Spike -- who had not only completed the checklist, but had actually brought himself to contemplate sacrificing some of his own gems to bribe the alternate Spike with, which had made Twilight want to hug him -- Twilight headed over to the meeting point by the Everfree. Spike, having woken up ridiculously early, was exhausted, so she gave him permission to go to bed; thus, he wasn't coming with her. That was probably a good thing. She could make much better time flying, and after that day with the plunder vines, Spike had been decidedly reluctant to fly with her.

Rainbow Dash was already there, leaning against a tree on her hind legs, forelegs folded, ostentatiously tapping her back hoof. "Finally one of you slowpokes shows up," she said.

Twilight sighed. "I had to make sure Spike was doing okay. Where's Applejack?"

"On her way. I passed her when I dropped Tank off at her place. So what's the plan? We just go in, get a cutting from the Tree, and get out?"

"Pretty much," Twilight agreed. "I do wish I had time to look for a spell that would let us communicate with the Tree. I don't feel right just taking a piece of it off. But Applejack knows trees better than I do, and she's as connected to it as any of the rest of us, so I suppose maybe she'll be able to, I don't know, tell the Tree why we need it or something."

"I've never seen Applejack talk to a tree," Rainbow Dash said. "Outside of 'you durned thing, leggo my apples now or so help me I'll buck you to next week', but I don't think that counts."

"I had Spike pack us climbing rope and pitons," Twilight said. "If we end up having to go to Canterlot, we might actually need such things. I mean, you and I probably wouldn't really, and Fluttershy, but if we needed to sneak into a palace window or something, the others would need some way to climb."

"Didja pack a canteen? Daring Do always packs a canteen."

"Eight of them. Including one for Discord when we find him."

"Y'all ready to go here?" Applejack said, trotting up to the two of them and panting slightly. "Figure we should get moving; we've only got about two hours of good daylight left."

"Right," Twilight said, and trotted forward, into the forest, her friends following her.

The Everfree Forest was much less dark and foreboding today than it had been the day with the plunder vines, but it was never a cheerful and friendly place. Still, there was good sunlight, which wasn't usually the case on most of her trips into the forest for some reason, and the two friends at her back were the ones Twilight trusted the most to handle themselves in a physical confrontation -- Rarity's martial arts were more effective on ponies than Everfree creatures, Pinkie was great in a fight when she wasn't distracted but entirely too distractible, and Fluttershy would be far better at convincing a wild animal not to attack them in the first place than she would be to fight it off. They made good time, and were about halfway to the Tree when a familiar zebra hailed them.

"My friends! Where are you going today? You look like mares who know their way."
"Hi, Zecora," Twilight said. "We're headed to the Tree of Harmony."

"That sounds like a very interesting quest. But I count three. Where are the rest?"

"In town, getting their manes done," Rainbow said with a half-snicker.

"Now you know as well as I do they've got good reasons," Applejack said. "We're on a mission, Zecora. Discord got his fool self stuck in some alternate universe thingummy where the six of us all got corrupted somehow and turned rotten. Our friends are gettin' their manes dyed so as to tell them apart from the bad seeds, while meantime we're gonna see if maybe we can get some kind of cutting from the Tree to try to re-harmonize our other selves or something like that."

"Discord? Oh dear. It's just as I feared," Zecora said. "I warned him this might come to be, but I expected he might not listen to me."

"You knew about this?" Rainbow Dash asked, surprised.

Zecora kept up with the three of them as they trotted through the forest. "I had a vision that a dire fate might befall Discord... but I warned him too late, or else he fell to his own disbelief. How did you learn that he had come to grief?"

"He sent us a letter," Twilight said. "He got the alternate version of Spike to send it, and cast some kind of spell on him to make it go to our Spike. Apparently he has very, very little access to his own magic, so it took him a couple of months to manage it. What did you see happening to him?"

"The future's not stone; it's something we make every day we're alive with the paths we do take. I saw many things, not a one of them certain; that's how often it is, when we draw back fate's curtain. But the sense of my visions I drew overall was that Discord's quest for chaos would cause him to fall. I saw him in pain, tormented for gain... by a mare harsh and cold, who looked just like you, of old." She looked directly at Twilight as she said it. "In... some of my visions, she used such brutality, his death came to be an eventuality."

"He... didn't say much about the alternate me," Twilight said. "He never mentioned if she was also an alicorn, so I'm guessing she's not. She's talented with magic, maybe even more than me in some ways; she's really cold and hard... he said she interrogates him, but mostly he talked about what the others were doing to him."

"If you were the one he was begging for aid, it makes sense he'd not focus on the suffering she made. Even Discord would probably prefer not to offend the one on whom his life and freedom depends." She sighed deeply. "I wish he had listened. If your rescue plan fails... I shudder to think of what that entails."

"Are you, um, friends with him or something?" Rainbow Dash asked. "I mean, we all want this rescue mission to work, but it sounds like you're kind of taking it personally."

Zecora laughed wryly. "No, it's safe to say that we don't get along," she said, pushing some low-hanging vines out of the way and holding them up for the other mares to pass underneath them. "But he has his place in Equestria's song. If he doesn't come back, there's a very real danger. Strangeness will fall in the hooves of a stranger."

"Sorry, I don't get your meaning," Applejack said. "'Strangeness will fall in the hooves of a stranger?' Can you explain that?"

"I will walk as we walk. The explanation is long. Many things that most think about Discord are wrong. He can certainly be a stink-encrusted plot, but Equestria needs him more than it does not."
Twilight had to control the inappropriate urge to giggle in shock at Zecora's crude insult. Somehow she had never expected Zecora, of all ponies, to call anyone a "stink-encrusted plot". "I, uh, sure! We'd be glad to listen!"

Rainbow Dash gave Twilight a "speak for yourself" eyeroll, but didn't contradict her.

Zecora began to speak as they walked, her voice taking on a sing-song cadence, almost as if she were reciting a poem. "The world by its nature contains avatars three: Chaos, Order and Harmony," she said. "Order is bedrock, the foundation of all. Without the laws made by Order, life would surely fall. Gravity, energy, our very reality; these are what Order has caused to be. But Order seeks a world that math can predict. Such a rule would place magic under its interdict. Order is rigid, unchanging, unkind; it seeks all to be ruled by strict laws, and not minds. If taken as far as its furthest ending, Order's like diamonds: beautiful, but unbending. Order is judgment, Order's control: it cannot allow for change. It has no soul."

"I've never heard of an avatar of Order," Twilight said. "Discord is chaos, and the Tree is harmony, so... what's order?"

"Be patient. In time I'll arrive at that rhyme," Zecora said, smiling. "To eliminate doubt, I shall lay it all out. I will tell you in turn of each power; it won't take that long, Rainbow, why a face so dour?"

"I just want to keep moving," Rainbow said. "I don't mind listening to your story but I don't want to slow down, and I'm worried if we get distracted, what if some animal comes after us?"

"Oh, if something comes for us, I'll be able to tell," Zecora said. "There's no creature here I can't detect from its smell."

"Just go on, Zecora," Applejack said. "Don't mind her, I figure we can all listen to you and look out for critters at the same time."

Zecora nodded, and resumed her chant. "Chaos brings change, both wondrous and strange. Raw magic is chaos, of that there's no doubt; the power that allows what's inside to come out. Chaos is art, creativity, life; it also brings madness, confusion and strife. Without chaos, all magic itself would end; but pure chaos finds no rules it'd rather not bend. Chaos is freedom, but there is a cost; with no bonds and no structure, all are anchorless, lost. Order and Chaos, both are needed to be; to mediate between them, we have Harmony.

"Harmony's power, you well understand. It is the power that founded this land. Harmony moderates the chaos of magic, with structures and rules to avoid outcomes tragic. At its essence, Harmony is working together, beings united by bonds that do tether so that each individual performs their own part of a goal indivisible. Neither pure freedom nor total control can govern those who hold Harmony as their goal. Harmony's order, but not order pure; it makes allowances, it can endure changes and difference and rules that can break, so that out of chaos order it can make.

"To stay balanced, the world needs all of the three. To lose one would cause a catastrophe."

That made sense. Twilight nodded to herself. She'd always thought the presentation of Chaos as the opposite of Harmony was... not wrong, but not complete somehow. Classically, the opposite of Chaos was Order; Harmony required Order but seemed more flexible. Anything that could select Pinkie Pie as one of its representatives couldn't truly be the opposite of Chaos, after all.

"So what you're saying is that if Discord dies, the whole world gets unbalanced and something bad happens to magic?" Applejack said.
"In principle, yes; in actuality, no," Zecora said. "That is not the way I expect things to go. Let me finish my tale and I'll explain in detail."

'The path's blocked," Rainbow said. "There's a big dead tree over here and a whole tangle of vines. Twi and I could fly over, but..."

"Yes, for those of us here on the ground, I suppose we will have to go around," Zecora said.

"Actually—" Twilight focused her magic. "I can get them out of the way." The lifeforms of the Everfree were resistant to magic, but not impervious. With a bit of effort, she pulled the tangle of vines out of the ground and tossed them to the side. "We can just step over the dead tree now without the vines in the way."

"Thing's mostly rotted," Applejack said. "I could buck a path right through it, easy."

"I didn't want to ask, but if you'll take on the task, it's a better idea to leave the path clear," Zecora said.

"I figured."

It took only a minute or two for Applejack to clear a path wide enough for the ponies to walk single file. Zecora continued her story as they walked through. "Now Order, Matrisse, was a mountain of crystal. When once long ago it attempted to distill the world from its magic, Discord did act; it was smashed into gems by his attack. No longer was Order a centralized tower; by smashing it, Discord scattered its power. But though scattered, the Order avatar is still here. Its power's reduced, it's no longer to fear, but it still does remain. The gems maintain the laws that form the shape of reality, weak enough to allow magic, strong enough to allow Harmony."

"Are you saying the Order avatar tried to destroy magic?" Twilight asked.

"Indeed. Magic and Order stand in opposition; presumably Matrisse didn't like its position. Discord's motives were selfish, you can certainly bet, but by shattering Matrisse he put us all in his debt. So the avatar of Order now is decentralized; it can preserve reality, but darker plans can't be realized."

"In opposition," Twilight breathed. "You said Discord turned Matrisse into gems? Are all gems part of Matrisse?"

"No, no. Most gems are just as they appear. To find a piece of Matrisse, you might search for a year."

"He didn't know how she managed to harmonize with the others," Twilight said. "The others were all combined somehow with their opposite principles, but what is the opposite of Magic? As long as she was only Magic and they were both their Elements and the opposite of their Elements, they wouldn't have been able to synchronize, so they couldn't harmonize; she'd have to have added to her Element the opposite of Magic... but if the opposite of Magic is Order and the power of Order is concentrated in crystals... I wonder if Sombra had any of the pieces of Matrisse?"

"What're you talking about, sugarcube?" Applejack asked, genuine curiosity in her tone.

"I think maybe I know how the other me managed to make herself harmonize with the other mixed-opposite Elements," Twilight said. "Maybe she got one of those pieces of Matrisse and she's using that."

"Perhaps it is so, I wouldn't know," Zecora said. "Of the other avatars, you do have some
knowledge; but there are things I want to make sure you acknowledge."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt," Twilight said. "Go on."

Zecora began to speak again. "The Chaos avatar is always a creature, for whom movement and thought are always a feature. There has been more than one in the fullness of time; one falls, and before long, a new one does climb. Should the world be without one, magic would falter, and some of what we depend on for life would halt, or so it is said, but there's no need for dread; that fear is the lesser. The power of Chaos will likely choose a successor." She sighed. "Discord's but the most recent. For a spirit of Chaos, he's been unusually decent. If he does not come home, we will all need to fear who will take up his mantle in the coming years."

"So if Discord dies, somepony else ends up with his powers?" Rainbow Dash said.

"Not likely some pony, but yes. A dragon or something, so I would guess."

"I ain't sure I like the sound of that," Applejack said. "Discord's the devil we know, at least."

"Indeed, that was my meaning when I spoke of the danger that strangeness would end up in the hooves of a stranger," Zecora said. "In the past, chaos avatars have brought death and despair. Discord's never sought harm; he just doesn't much care if his chaos causes sadness and mental distress, but even still, he's an improvement over the rest. If Discord is lost to us, then as I have said, we must fear that his heir might be truly quite deadly."

Twilight took a deep breath. "So this is even more important than we thought. Discord's friends with Fluttershy; we can keep him at least a little bit under control. If there was some... being with his powers, but who actually enjoyed killing and physically torturing ponies... and us without the Elements..."

"Yeah, that's bad," Rainbow agreed. "We'd have to take the Elements back... but would that even work, or would that kill the Tree?"

"When I think of that course, I feel fear and doubt," Zecora said. "So let us hope we never need to find out. If you're still willing to listen to me, I can tell you more about the Harmony Tree."


"Definitely. This is fascinating," Twilight said.

"The Harmony Tree is the one you well know. This avatar uses its power like so: it's a plant, made of crystal, that exerts all its force through partnership with animals, as a matter of course. Usually ponies, but they needn't be always; there have been times, in olden days, when zebras, buffalo and others held Elements. Any race with magic; that's common sense. Harmony's power's unmatched by either Order or Chaos, but its weakness, well-known, can often delay us from winning the day. Harmony cannot stay without hearts united. If too much strife is excited, the power of Harmony's bound to fail. You've all lived through that, I needn't give you details."

"Yup. Been there, done that, turned ugly gray," Rainbow said.

"That's how the other Discord tried to take the Elements out of commission permanently," Twilight said. "The ones that were mixed with their opposites couldn't unite with the one that was still pure. She had to make it impure, combine it with its opposite, or the Elements wouldn't work at all." Order shouldn't have made the other Twilight evil, though. But then... Zecora had said that the other Twilight was torturing Discord for gain, meaning there was something she expected to get as a result. Was it research? Was she trying to gain knowledge? Pure Order wouldn't have emotions,
and without emotions, maybe the other Twilight couldn't feel sympathy for her victim... or maybe, because Chaos and Order were direct opposites, she couldn't have sympathy for Discord in particular.

Zecora continued softly. "If Discord should fall, a new Chaos will rise; but who, is the question before our eyes. If the power chooses a pony, that would be bad. Ponies who wield Chaos magic all go quite mad. The same can be said for zebras and buffalo; to none with harmonic magic should Chaos's power go."

"They go crazy?" Applejack said. "Crazier than Discord? I mean, he's pretty nuts himself..."

"There once was a pony named Brightest Star, who sought to take from Discord the position of avatar. Chaos devoured her mind, and left madness behind. She tried to bring all Equestria to a dire fate by performing a rite to open a gate to ancient powerful entities, incarnations of entropy. The princesses fought her, and even Discord assisted; the destruction of all things had never been listed among his desires. Only she so aspired, because she was mad. So you can see why I say the results would be bad."

"Um, yeah!" Rainbow said. "That does sound pretty bad! What's entropy?"

"Depends on who you ask," Twilight said. "Most of my textbooks define it as disorder, which makes it synonymous with chaos, but it's also a measure of energy running down or coming to equilibrium. Discord says it's specifically the disorder caused by energy running out, and he thinks that makes it different from the disorder caused by infusing energy into a system." At Rainbow Dash's blank look, she sighed. "It's death and destruction, basically. Chaos, but chaos caused by decay and ruin."

"If her plan had fully unfurled, the result would have been the end of the world," Zecora said. "So we can but hope the power won't choose a pony, or else the whole world might lose. But the problem remains then, who is left? For of creatures who can wield Chaos, the world's become quite bereft."

"Seems like there's a lot of chaotic creatures here in the Everfree," Applejack said.

"But the chaos avatar must be a creature with speech, or control of magic will be out of its reach. And if we look at the world, I think you'll agree: most speaking creatures prefer Harmony. Now dragons can easily align with Chaos; they're individualistic, and most would betray us as soon as befriend us. But a problem is there. Dragons who can wield magic have become very rare. Magic's inherent in dragons, it's true, but to use and control magic, now that is the issue."

"I didn't know there were any dragons who can wield magic," Twilight said.

"You will find that the dragons most ancient of days are the ones most likely to know the old ways. Young dragons know little, and their magic's but a piddle. So I have my doubt that the power would select a dragon, though I can't completely elect to rule it right out. And the others who once might have followed chaos's ways are far less likely a choice, in modern days. Goats were once chaotic; the avatar Pan was a goat of chaos who brought madness to the land. But goats living with ponies for many a year have become tamer and far less chaotic, I fear. Goats wielding magic have also become uncommon; nowadays one can barely find a goat shaman."

"Can't say I ever met a goat who could do magic, myself," Applejack said. "And I've known a few goats. They're a proud folk, they keep to themselves for the most part, but I wouldn't call them chaotic. Just not entirely friendly toward ponies, all the time."
Zecora nodded. "Many chaos avatars came from the draconequus race. But from this world they have been erased. Their time is past; Discord is the last. And gryphons, in main, don't wield magic at all. So one wonders, on whose shoulders would Chaos' power fall?"

A horrible thought occurred to Twilight. "Um... assuming that the power can't choose a full-grown ancient dragon, which I'm guessing you must mean because otherwise the fact that there are ancient dragons who know magic would make them the logical choice... although does it even make sense to worry about whether Chaos would choose something logical?"

"Even Chaos must follow certain laws, when it's not pure, but working through hooves or paws. And yes, an adult can't become the spirit of Chaos; else perhaps one could take the power and force it to obey us. Not unless the inclination is already there; only then could the burden of Chaos one bear. An ancient dragon, well-experienced with magic, couldn't suddenly switch to an avatar's power; if they were so bewitched, the results would be tragic, for them and the world. They would lose all control. So most likely a young creature will take the role."

"Right. So... if a dragon who can't do magic is nonetheless pretty well knowledgeable about it and understands it about as well as a non-mage can... would that make them a better candidate for the power?" Please say no. Please say no. Oh, Celestia, if we fail to rescue Discord and as a result I lose Spike... please say no!

"Hmm. I do not think that would matter at all. One's heart affects who'd answer chaos' call." Zecora turned around and looked at her. "Are you afraid for your young friend Spike? I wouldn't fear; he's not near enough like the ones drawn to Chaos. It's not your race that decides if you could be a chaos spirit, but your feelings inside. It's not enough to be a dragon; the power would need its wielder to be, well, chaotic. Spike's sole vice is greed."

Twilight sighed. "Oh, thank Celestia. I have every intention of saving Discord and not letting it come to that anyway, but it's a big relief that even if we fail, it's not going to go to Spike."

"Simply belonging to a chaotic race doesn't mean an individual could take Discord's place. No race is naught but chaotic, or it couldn't survive; only races with some harmony within them can thrive. The ill-famed dark mage of Tambelon, Grogar, was a goat, but an overlord strong-willed and ordered. His magic was dark, but it wasn't chaotic; his actions were evil, but weren't psychotic. And it's said that even the draconequus, before their last days, did embrace Harmony. Most races have within them much the same range of emotions as ponies, so it isn't that strange that even of the races most apt to wield Chaos, only a scant number can use it to dismay us."

"How'd they die out anyway?" Applejack said. "I always figured that if Discord had ever had a people, they'd have been too crazy and chaotic to last, but you just said they embraced Harmony. Wouldn't expect a race to die out right after that."

"That is, I fear, a common misconception; because Discord's been their sole example so long, ponies have the perception that draconequus were creatures of mix-matched pieces. Actually they were chimeras of two different species, Eastern dragons and unicorns. Discord is as he is because he is the one touched by Chaos's kiss. Any chaos avatar would take on a mixed-up form; for his species, Discord is far from the norm."

"Huh. In *Daring Do and the Island of Mists*, Daring Do goes to this ancient city where everything is oversized, but not big enough for dragons -- like the rooms are two or three times as big as rooms for ponies, except most of them are wrecked because it's ruins. And she finds the bones of unicorns mixed in with the bones of dragons, but she's looking for a tome of magic spells so she doesn't really have time to investigate it too much, but she thinks maybe it was a city where unicorns and dragons lived together because none of the bones have teeth marks on them. You think maybe that
could have been one of their cities?"

"Isn't Daring Do fiction, Rainbow?" Twilight asked.

"Well, I guess so, but A. K. Yearling does a lot of research!"

She had a point. A. K. Yearling was an archaeologist and researcher of artifacts in real life, which was the reason Twilight figured that her books had so much verisimilitude. "But the city was full of bones, like everypony just died of a plague or something and no one was left to bury the bodies. Do you know what happened, Zecora?"

"To that city, no, but I can certainly guess that the fate which befell nearly every other draconequus affected them as well. Their race was a powerful one of old... but they were never built to survive in the cold. When the windigos came, most of them died. The few that remained were lost to their own pride."

"I didn't know the windigos affected the other races!" Twilight said. "I thought it was just ponies."

"No. The folly of ponies brought the windigos here, but the blizzards they brought caused all races to fear. Western dragons and griffons had the power to roam, and Eastern dragons were far away, safe in their home, but many a creature of another race died when the windigos came to this place."

"I guess Discord survived it because you can't just kill the spirit of chaos with it getting too cold, then?" Applejack said.

Zecora shook her head. "When his species passed on, Discord was but a child. He was left to survive by himself in the wild. The windigos were all gone by then, so it was possible for a child to fend for himself and survive, though hardly to thrive. He had some power back then, though he was just a pup, but his full power didn't come until he was grown up."

For a moment Twilight stood stock still, absorbing that.

She'd known Discord had had no friends. Princess Celestia had said that she and Luna were the closest thing he had to family. And she'd known that his species had died out long ago, though almost nothing was known about them. She'd known that at least on some level, he didn't trust ponies, and assumed that he would be disliked and unwanted; she'd known that he seemed to crave attention desperately when he was around ponies, but that as nearly as she could tell he spent most of his time off by himself. All of that was sad, though not quite an excuse for being as incredibly annoying as he was. But if his family, and in fact his entire species, had died out when he was a little child, and he'd had to fend for himself, living off nature... with no friends, no parents, nothing until he met Celestia and Luna and who knows how old he'd been by that time...

"Well, throw me in a turnip truck," Applejack said softly. "I had no idea. He never said anything about it."

"These are not matters of which he would speak; above all else, Discord doesn't like to seem weak." Zecora sighed. "He'd be easier to bear if he could recognize that others care."

"I wonder if Fluttershy knows anything about any of this," Rainbow Dash said. "She'll keep secrets to the grave, if a friend asks her to, so if he told her, and asked her not to tell us, she wouldn't have breathed a word of it."

The lip of the cavern where the Tree was hidden loomed into sight. "Zecora... do you... this might sound crazy, but can you talk to the Tree?" Twilight asked.
"All the time," Zecora said, smiling. "It appreciates a good rhyme."

"Well, but I mean... does it talk back?"

"Not... precisely. It *is* just a tree."

"What I mean is... we're here to get a cutting from it to take to the other universe, because we're hoping that could help us to re-harmonize the Elements of that universe. I'd really like to get the Tree's permission, if that's possible."

"The Tree knows of your quest, and approves. You may take a small cutting into your hooves."

"How do you know?" Rainbow Dash asked.

"The Tree does have its ways to communicate. But be quick; dark comes soon. You don't want to be late."

Rainbow flew down to the base. Twilight considered doing the same, but then she and Rainbow would outpace Applejack by a good deal. She elected to walk down the steps instead. "Are you coming with us, Zecora?"

"No, to join you this time wouldn't make sense. This task is best left to those who bear Elements. I have a few potions I need to churn, so back to my home I'd best return."

"Can you find Fluttershy and work with her to get a collection of potions that might help Discord? His letter suggests he might be hurt pretty badly, so you know, painkillers, antiseptics, any kind of healing reagent that would actually work on him..."

Zecora frowned. "Few healing magics can work with his chaos, but perhaps I can find something that will not much delay us. I'll meet up with Fluttershy, and then I will see what sort of potions she might need from me."

"Thanks."

She and Applejack went down the steps to the cavern as Zecora headed off. "I'm wonderin' where's the best place to take a cutting," Applejack said. "This ain't an apple tree, that's for sure. Can't really tell which parts will take root best if I take a cutting of them." She looked down at the tree and then back at Twilight. "Might be I could use your help, Twilight. An ordinary tree, you just listen for where the branch is gonna break just right, and then a real quick buck and you've got your cutting, but this ain't no ordinary tree. I could do with some magical help in breaking off a piece just right."

"It's too bad Rarity isn't here," Twilight said. "The Tree's made of crystal; her affinity with crystals might have helped us."

"I gotta reckon probably not," Applejack said. "Ordinary crystals aren't alive. You need to cut a crystal into a pretty gem, Rarity's your mare. You need to grow a crystal into a tree... well, you know who might have some surprising insight into this would've been Pinkie Pie. Mare did grow up on a rock farm, after all."

"Do they actually grow rocks on rock farms?" Twilight said skeptically.

"Rocks ain't alive, for the most part anyways," Applejack said. "They can't grow. But you treat 'em like a thing that grows, and what happens is, they fill up with a kinda, I dunno, I guess you could call it an earth pony magic. We don't usually call it magic; you unicorns and your flashy horns,
that's what magic means to us. Feels more like bein' kind of kin to nature, feeling the way the world wants to grow and live. Pinkie brought me one of her family's rocks once; thing's like a giant boulder, but you put it out by trees which are sickly or where you're growing fallow so as to not make your fields turn barren, and what do you know but the trees and the grass and every living thing practically explodes, they grow so well. I shipped it out to Appleoosa, since my kin there struggle with raising apple trees in the desert. They got some low-moisture varietals good for drying and for tart or sour flavors, but the juicy kind we have out at Sweet Apple Acres just won't grow without moisture... till you put one of Pinkie's family's rocks out by it."

"That's really interesting. I never knew that." *Note to self: study Earth Pony magic. They haven't written much down about it, or I'd have found books on the subject, so this will be original research!*

"Are you two slowpokes gonna talk all day or are we doing this?" Rainbow called.

"Some of us would prefer as to not break our necks on these stairs," Applejack retorted. "Unless you and Twilight want to carry me down, I guess we're gonna go at my pace, not yours, speedster."

"I could totally carry you."

"That so? I've got a lot more muscle mass than you might be thinking."

"Applejack, do not challenge Rainbow Dash to carry you down the stairs. She'll do it, and then what if she can't hold onto you and you guys get hurt?" Twilight flapped off the last few steps, coming to land by Rainbow so the pegasus didn't get any silly ideas about speeding this up by grabbing Applejack. "Rainbow, you and I should fly around the tree and see if we see anything that looks like a good area to take our cutting from."

"Uh, I'm not a tree farmer. What are we even looking for?"

"I have no idea," Twilight said. "I'm kind of hoping the Tree has some way of communicating itself to us, since we're still Bearers of its Elements even if the Elements themselves are hanging back up."

Unfortunately, by the time Applejack reached the Tree a minute later, Twilight had seen no evidence whatsoever either that the Tree could communicate, or that any of the branches could be broken off and grafted or rooted elsewhere. Her attempts to investigate it magically were stymied. The Tree had something like a heartbeat, made of magic; waves of pure harmonic force came off of it in a gentle rhythm that disrupted every spell she tried to cast. *Funny. Pure harmony, set to a different frequency that doesn't match what you're trying to do, is even more disruptive to a signal than pure chaos.* Discord was hard to scan magically too, but nothing Discord did was rhythmic, and if you watched him carefully you could dart in during moments when his magical field ebbed or pooled in a different direction, and grab information... much of which came back scrambled and nonsensical (she was fairly sure that his heart was not in fact a baked potato, he didn't seem to actually have a kangaroo pouch with a purple earth pony filly hiding inside it, and despite what her magical scans told her, she could tell with her other senses that his horns were not really singing a blueberry-flavored song), but some of which seemed accurate. Twilight simply couldn't read the Tree at all because the eddies and waves caused by its magical pulses drowned her attempts to scan.

"I'm stumped, girls," Twilight said, realized what she'd just said, and facehooved. "Uh, no pun intended. I can't figure out how we'd go about getting a cutting without running the risk of accidentally taking something we shouldn't."
"Lemme try," Applejack said, and knelt down on the ground by the Tree in a strange position, her barrel pressed against the earth and her four hooves dug into the dirt, like she was trying to do a gymnastic split. It looked awkward and painful. She pressed her head to the dirt as well, on one side, ear flicking. Then she got up.

"What are you doing?" Rainbow asked.

"Getting the feel of the land," Applejack said. "Ain't spent near enough time out here to truly get a feel for it, and this is the Everfree. The Everfree itches me. But this part, right here? Feels like..." She seemed to struggle for an analogy. "So imagine you're sitting on an anthill, and ants are running every which way around you. And then there's a stream of water, running over you, drowning the ants... but the farther away from its source that the stream gets, the more the ants break it up. Somehow. This ain't coming out sounding like a thing that makes a durned bit of sense."

"No, it makes sense," Twilight said. "The Tree harmonizes magical energy. Earth ponies can feel out the magic in the earth, I'd guess; that's how your magic works, just like pegasi can feel the magic of the sky and the air. So in most places, earth pony magic just does whatever you guys are making it do. In the Everfree, the magic is... not drained, it's actually so powerful I can feel it for myself, but it feels... chaotic. Disorganized. Like... if I were going to try to pull on it... it would run through my grasp like flour through a sieve. Here, though... it runs straight and even, but it's so strong, you can't pull on it. So it has almost the same effect. You can't affect the magic of the earth here any more than you can in the rest of the Everfree, but for different reasons." A thought occurred to her. "Huh. You know... I've been in the Everfree so many times, but not that many since I became an alicorn. I didn't even notice this before."

"You think it's just you got so powerful since you became a princess that you can sense all kinds of magic now?" Rainbow asked.

"No... it's because I have earth pony magic now. Alicorns aren't just pegasus unicorns, we're actually a combination of all three pony races. I don't have any training in using my earth pony magic because it doesn't look like you guys ever write anything down about it."

"We don't even rightly think of it as magic, Twilight; we just feel it like that's the way the world is."

"The air feels the same way, kind of," Rainbow said. "Like, you find a really good, strong thermal, you pull at it to redirect the wind... and it's like rain running off your wing. You can't grab it. Is that what you're talking about, Twi?"

"Kind of. Can you feel the air here, Rainbow?"

Rainbow Dash opened her wings, and then cocked one ear as if she were listening to something. "Huh. Yeah, what I thought."

"What did you think?"

"The Tree is singing. I mean not singing singing, but there's music. Can you hear it?"

Pegasi didn't so much have better hearing than other ponies as they had excellent skills in filtering and separating different sources of sound, a vital ability when trying to communicate with air rushing past your ears. But as Twilight had just pointed out, she was part pegasus herself now. She ought to be able to do it. She opened her own wings.
With four hooves on the ground, with wings spread, she felt the pulse of Harmony in the air, in the ground, throughout the thaumic field. The magic in the earth, the magic in the air, ebbed and flowed in time with the pulse, the same as the magic of reality did. She held absolutely still, barely even breathing, and began to hear chimes. Like the wind whistling through the crystal branches, making them shake like wind chimes. Except there were no branches, and the chiming sound was too regular, too melodic, to be like wind chimes.

She began to hum, trying to catch the tune. After a moment Applejack joined in, humming beside her. Rainbow Dash couldn't do anything so uncool and mundane as hum; she joined in with whistling.

And as the three of them hummed (and whistled) in tune with the sound of Harmony, one of the small branches lit up, glowing brightly.

"That's her," Applejack said reverently. "That's our tuner. Twilight, can you get that branch to come off nice and clean?"

"I think so," Twilight said, and resumed humming. It was so much easier to match her magic to the pulse, to work in tune with the sound of Harmony, when she was humming the song. It was a gentle, peaceful tune that made her think of a sunny spring day, maybe in a glade by the Whitetail Woods with a running stream, or maybe out by Fluttershy's cottage.

With a single cutting slice, she sheared through the joint between the branch and its parent. The branch fell free, and Twilight caught it with her magic.

*take me*

"Wh-what? Did you girls hear something?"

"Reckon so," Applejack said. "It said to take it?"

"Girls, that wasn't a sound," Rainbow said. "I heard it too, but I can't tell where from, and I can always tell where from."

*take me with you to heal the sister*

"It's the branch," Rainbow said. "I don't hear it from anyplace, it's just... everywhere. But it's the branch."

"I know," Twilight said. "Applejack?"

Applejack sat on the ground and took the branch in her forehooves. "Baby Tree, if you can talk, can you tell me if my aim to keep you moist, with your bottom end firm in a bag of dirt, is the right way to grow you? Because I've never grown a Harmony Tree before, and I must admit to you, I'm eager to do right by you, but I'm not sure I know how."

*i am a tree*

"Sure, but you're a right strange tree. I wanna make sure I'm giving you the right sort of care."

*do what your heart tells you is right... i am a tree... care for me as you would a tree*

"So, what do we do with you when we get where we're going?" Twilight asked. "Just plant you?"

*no, the sister must be able to hear my song, but the children as well*
"I don't know what that means."

*chaos must smash chaos or the song cannot relay... plant me outside the everfree, where my song can reach ponies, but my song cannot cross the barrier to the sister... plant me inside the everfree, where i can sing to the sister, but then the ponies will not hear... chaos must smash chaos for the song to reach*

"What does that mean, chaos must smash chaos? How would that even work?"

*i am sleepy... i am only a very little tree... i will sleep now until you plant me, for i must save my strength for growing*

The branch stopped glowing. Twilight sighed. "I'm... gonna hope Discord will know what the tree means when it says chaos must smash chaos. It sounds like it will need him to do something before it can re-harmonize the Elements... I just hope he'll be in any condition to do it."

"That might be a tall order, Twi," Applejack said soberly.

"Oh, no, it'll be fine." Twilight helped Applejack get the tree branch into the little bag of moist dirt Applejack had brought. "We'll just need to get that collar off him."

"Collar?" Rainbow Dash asked.

"Yes. They put a collar on him that blocks him from using his magic unless he's ordered to, but the collar itself isn't reinforced by the Elements. We might not be able to break the obedience spell on him, since we don't have our own Elements, though I suspect if we can re-harmonize their Elements that all of the spells using the, huh, what would you call them? Dark Elements? No, Princess Luna had a good point, dark and evil aren't synonyms..."

"Evil Elements," Rainbow Dash said.

"But they ain't. They're half and half, the good and the bad," Applejack said, while she and Twilight maneuvered the small bottom-bagged branch into a larger, protective bag, and hung that around Applejack's neck. "So sometimes those mares act just like us, and sometimes they're monsters, and I reckon in some ways that works out to be worse than if they were just bad all the time. Discord said in that letter of his that Fluttercruel -- he calls her Fluttercruel so as to not confuse her with ours -- that her being nice and kind and sweet sometimes, and torturing him other times, is messing him up in the head something fierce, and I can see that. How could you ever predict what somepony would do and know what you're getting into when you have dealings with them, if sometimes they're themselves and sometimes they're the right opposite?"

"Elements of Opposition!" Twilight said triumphantly. "They're not Elements of Harmony, and they're not Elements of Disharmony, considering that they were able to get them to harmonize." Now she'd lost her train of thought. "What was I saying?"

"That we got our tree branch and it's time to get home before it gets dark?" Rainbow Dash said.

"Well, that's true, but that's not what I was thinking."

"You were talking about trying to break the spell on Discord," Applejack said, starting toward the stairs. "And Rainbow's right. Let's get a move on."

"Right. If we can re-harmonize the Elements of Opposition back into Elements of Harmony, I suspect all the spells cast with the Elements of Opposition will just end, like that. But if we can get Discord's collar off, he can use his powers as long as they didn't order him not to, and if they're
using a collar to keep him from using his powers then why would they bother to order him not to? They wouldn't think they'd need to."

"He could be hurt bad, though," Applejack pointed out.

"Yeah, but couldn't he heal himself if he had his powers?" Rainbow Dash asked.

"Probably," Twilight said. "So it should be okay. We go to Fluttershy's house, we break into the basement -- I can cast a sleep spell so the other Fluttershy doesn't wake up -- we get Discord's collar off him and at that point he can heal any of his injuries, and we get him to do this thing the Tree cutting is saying about chaos smashing chaos. Then we plant the Tree cutting, and we get out of there. This seems like it could go really smoothly."

"Why'd you have to say that?" Rainbow Dash demanded. "You know things are gonna be a mess now!"

"They were gonna be anyway," Applejack said. "This is Discord we're talking about. How could anything ever involving him possibly go smooth?"

"Well, it's not like he'd be disrupting a rescue operation on purpose. And until we get the collar off him, he won't have any magic."

"Pretty sure Discord can generate a whole lot of chaos using just his mouth, without even meaning to. We've got no idea what shape we'll find him in, sugarcube; best to be prepared for anything."

"I intend to," Twilight said. "Let's get back."

Fluttershy opened the door to the library. "Hello? Spike? Are you here?"

A few minutes of searching located the baby dragon, fast asleep in his little bed. Fluttershy smiled despite herself at the adorableness of it, before remembering why she was here and losing the smile.

Quietly she went back to Twilight's desk, rummaging through the papers there. None of them were in Discord's handwriting. She knew Discord's handwriting. Her thoughts went back to the letters she had at home, tied neatly in a velvet box with a sachet of lavender with them.

Dearest Fluttershy, I must confess to a lack of experience with this 'pen pal' phenomenon. It's so wonderfully splendid! After over two millennia, I thought I'd done virtually everything worth doing, so to find something new that I've never done is astonishing. But I can't recall ever sending anypony a letter before... perhaps because I never had anypony to send one too. Or perhaps because my hoofwriting is terrible. Actually it's handwriting, I'm certainly not doing it with a hoof. Can you read this? If you can't, simply tell me so and I'll have the letters recite themselves...

My dear little friend, how are you? How are your chickens? How is your evil rabbit? Yes, I know you prefer that I don't call names, but you've also asked me to practice my honesty and on this matter I cannot lie, your Angel is misnamed. The truth is I actually don't really care about your chickens, or your rabbit, except I suppose that if they weren't doing well that would make you unhappy, and I do so want you to be happy...

Darling Fluttershy, I hope you enjoyed the small snowstorm I included with this letter. Don't worry, it should melt away within a couple of hours, but you should take this opportunity to make a snowball and hit Rainbow Dash with it. You know that she's been pestering you to play a prank or two for some time, and I have to say, it's about the only thing that mare and I can agree on: you
need to have more fun! Loosen up! Be less shy. Be Fluttersomewhatlesshy. Obviously if you completely changed your personality you'd be Flutterbold and then you'd have to update all your stationery and what a pain! So I don't suggest it. But I do suggest snowballs. Trust me, your pal Dashie will be thrilled if you hit her with a snowball...

Dear Fluttershy, I've found you the most wonderful present! No, I didn't make it, because if I had I would have to say I made it and not that I found it. I thought about enclosing it with this letter, but the truth is, giant dragonflies get quite irate if you try to stuff them into a letter! So I'll be bringing it the next time I visit. This one is one of the very rare, nearly extinct crystal dragonflies -- which you'd think would live in the Crystal Empire, but they absolutely do not...

Fluttershy, I have to confess, sometimes I am so mind-numbingly bored that I wonder what the point to any of this is. Here I am, performing incredibly tedious tasks at Celestia's behest (she has me sealing the dimensional borders. Possibly I shouldn't have told her how porous they are, but seriously, can't a unicorn do this? It's taking FOREVER! And at my age, I know how long forever takes!), wondering if this is actually better than being a statue... and then I get one of your letters, and it brightens my entire day. So now I am performing a mind-numbingly tedious task but getting to write a letter to you in response at the same time (yes, I can multi-task, quite good at it actually), and this is an enormous improvement over my previous situation...

Her eyes filled with tears, thinking of the silly rambling letters, the snowstorm enclosed in one, the platypus egg in another, the large stuffed mouse that had an entire family of baby mice and their mother sleeping inside it, the ones that had slideshows of the various places he was traveling around the world, the breathtakingly beautiful flowers that had sprouted all over one of them... Would he ever be able to send her one of those letters again? Would he ever be himself again? Would he still even want to be her friend after her alter ego had done such terrible things to him? None of these papers were in his handwriting. She swallowed. Maybe the letter wasn't here. Maybe she wouldn't be able to read it! It wouldn't be her fault for not reading it if it wasn't even here, right? And all her friends would actually prefer she not read it, and it wasn't letting Discord down if she'd tried and she couldn't...

...no. She needed that information. She wasn't going to be able to help him unless she knew everything he'd been willing to tell anypony about his situation. She had to find it.

Everything here was in Spike's handwriting. Or Princess Celestia's. Or Twilight's. And then she remembered that Twilight had said, Spike had made a copy of the letter and then sent the original to Princess Celestia. Armed with that memory, she found the letter quickly.

I'm afraid I have to admit it, this is entirely my own fault. Now I'm told that many individuals in a situation such as the one I find myself in might engage in a bit of unproductive self-blame, such as "If only I'd been stronger" or "If only I'd noticed that my drink was spiked" or "If only I'd gone to the mountains and become a hermit, far far from any ponies anywhere," but rest assured, I'm not one for self-blame where it's nonsensical and unwarranted...

It wasn't his handwriting, but she'd know that style anywhere. She picked up the sheaves of paper in her forehooves and flew over to Twilight's chair, sitting down so she could use her hooves to turn the pages. It's not, it's not your fault, it's not, Fluttershy thought, ferocity and grief warring within her. I don't care what you did, this isn't your fault. It isn't.

She read the letter, forcing herself through some parts of it because she had to know. Her friends had tried to shield her, and she loved them for it and she appreciated how they all watched out for her but really, she was stronger than they thought she was. She could do what she had to, for a friend. There were points, many of them, where her vision blurred and she couldn't read until she
wiped the tears out of her eyes with her foreleg, and there were some parts where she had to stuff her hoof into her mouth to stifle her own sobs, because she didn't want to wake Spike.

When she was done, she wobbled off, leaving the library behind, her movements shaky and her vision entirely obscured by tears that she couldn't wipe fast enough and still be able to walk. Instead of heading home, she headed for Sweet Apple Acres, where she knew Applejack was supposed to have brought her animals. She needed to spend the night surrounded by her small friends. And maybe in a house with some of her normal-sized friends.

*Please hang on. Don't let her trick you. This isn't your fault, sweetie, you're right, you don't deserve this, no one could ever deserve this. She's lying to you. Please hold on.*

*We're coming for you, Discord. We'll save you, I promise. I promise.*

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**Harmony, 9 PM**

They all regrouped briefly at Sweet Apple Acres to go over the plan.

"We're getting up at 4 am," Twilight said. "Pinkie will have breakfast packed for all of us—"

"Does that include coffee?" Rarity, whose mane was now sky blue, asked. "Because I simply cannot face the notion of waking so early without coffee."

"Yuppers! I'll have triple extra strength espresso with sugar and cream, and I'll have Columbia dark roast black, and I'll have—"

"Tea, too, if you wouldn't mind," Twilight interrupted.

"Okie dokie lokie!"

"We'll meet at Fluttershy's cottage by 4:30, and head out to the portal." Quickly she outlined the strategy she'd suggested earlier.

"Um... I have the medical kit and some potions from Zecora... so if he's, um, if he can't... if he's too weak to do magic maybe we can get just enough energy into him that he can heal himself... so it should work..." Fluttershy's voice trailed off.

"The alternate strategy, if he's too weak to cast magic at all, is that we give up on the reharmonization plan, since it seems to require that Discord be able to do something, and we just get him to the other side of the portal. I ought to be able to levitate him without much trouble; he's big but he's not very heavy."

"And if we run into any of our other selves?" Applejack asked.

"Kick their behinds before they know what's going on," Rainbow Dash suggested.

"That would be mean!" Pinkie objected.

"Pinkie... they're mean. We have the element of surprise, and that's possibly the main advantage we have over them. We can't not take it," Twilight said.

"If we should be in the other world long enough for the sun to come up, I'll cast a simple color transformation spell to make all of us look like we did before," Rarity said. "And then drop it once we actually find Discord. That way anypony we run into will assume we're their versions."
"I'm leaving my hat," Applejack said. "Ain't no way I wanna risk losing it in another universe. I couldn't see my way to getting a mane dye, but I'll put it in a bun. I don't see much chance that the other me would be doing the same thing."

"You'll just have to tell which one is the real me by which one is awesomer," Rainbow Dash said, "because I'm not doing anything weird with my mane. But if you need to be able to tell me from her, we know Discord didn't reform in that world, so I'll talk about something from that day. Like the soup tureen spilling all over us."

"All right. I think we have a plan. Let's get some sleep and meet up in seven hours."

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Opposition, 12 AM

"Discord. Wake up!"

He jerked violently, trying to come to a sitting position before he was even awake enough to know where he was, only to briefly strangle himself against his collar, which was hooked by a short chain to the bedpost at the foot of Fluttershy's bed. Gasping, he fell back to the floor. Fluttershy was standing over him -- no, no, it was Fluttercruel, he wouldn't be collared and chained if it was Fluttershy.

Memory came back. She'd lashed him with a razor-sharp wire whip until he'd nearly died from shock and blood loss, then ordered him to heal himself. After his body was repaired, more or less, he'd broken down crying in reaction, sobbing uncontrollably, and she'd held his head on her lap and petted him and let him cry himself to sleep. At least he assumed she'd fallen asleep; he didn't remember Fluttercruel leashing him to her bed, so he must have fallen asleep on the floor, right here, and she'd granted him the small mercy of not waking him up and dragging him down to his cell in the basement. He'd been bone-deep exhausted before the beating; he'd been woken early, after having suffered a horrific session with Twilight and her experiments the night before, and had been made to work in Applejack's orchard, sorting apples in the hot sun, all day. He'd been beaten badly by Applejack, and forced into sex with Fluttercruel after she'd tended his wounds, and he'd had little water and even less food, all day. And then Fluttercruel had almost killed him.

Discord had little ability to tell time accurately, but he knew he was much too tired to have had a full night's sleep, and when he looked out the window the moon was up. It was still nighttime. He was far too tired to deal with this, but he didn't have a choice. "It's still nighttime, isn't it?" he asked, pleadingly. "Please, mistress Fluttershy, I'm so tired..."

"I'm sure you are, but I'm afraid I can't give you any leeway right now," Fluttercruel said. She unhooked his collar from the chain on the bed, and hooked a leash to it instead. Against his better judgment, his paws clenched, watching her work. The clasps of the various chains and leashes they used to restrain him were simple, hoof-operable, and would be mindlessly easy for him to undo if they weren't frequently ordering him to never, ever touch the clasps on his collar or try to escape. "Twilight has called us. I have to take you over there."

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Discord's eyes went wide, his breath catching in his chest. Oh no. No no no please no.

Twilight was the worst of all his tormentors. Not because she caused him the worst physical pain, although she did, but because she had no interest at all in his reaction to it. All of the others tortured him to get a reaction, to make him demonstrate fear or despair, to make him submit. Fluttercruel got a sexual thrill out of his pain, Applejack tortured him to teach him "lessons" about obedience and "doing a good job", Rarity got sadistic amusement out of using the obedience spell to make
him suffer -- such as the time she'd freely allowed him to drink as much apple juice as he wanted, on a day when he was dehydrated and thirsty, and then refused to allow him to relieve the pressure in his bladder, all day, or the time she'd made him take an uncomfortable pose and then ordered him to hold completely still and left him that way for hours, hanging bolts of fabric on his arms and horns as she worked. Rainbow Dash was hardly ever around but when she was, she generally just wanted to get a bit of visceral revenge by ordering him to punch himself in the face or stand still while she bucked him in the head, and even Pinkie Pie had plainly wanted his pain and terror when she'd cheerfully dismembered him, giggling. So if he cried, begged, screamed his head off, prostrated himself and swore to obey, or in the case of Fluttercruel offered to sexually service her, he could, maybe, shorten his torture a bit. Give them what they wanted, show them how much he was suffering, and they'd be satisfied, and stop. He had some -- not control, but influence at least, over what they did to him.

But Twilight didn't care. Her experiments were to obtain some sort of information about how his magic worked, how he worked, how chaos and harmony interrelated, and secondarily, she seemed to be trying to use him and his control over chaos to *lessen* the ambient disorder of the world, to force him to pull back chaos that he didn't even make. It didn't matter to her that the experiments made him feel as if his whole body was on fire from the inside out. It wouldn't matter to her if they tickled or gave him orgasms or put him to sleep. He'd tried begging, he'd tried bargaining, he'd tried arguing, he'd tried reverse psychology, he'd tried as much stoic self-control as he could possibly muster up, but nothing made any difference at all. His reactions were completely irrelevant to her; he was a thing, an experimental subject, not a sentient being who could suffer. The only concession she made to his status as a living creature whatsoever was that she'd stop before he died, a fact that he'd found comforting in the beginning but was now honestly just an addition to the torment.

The only control he had at all, the only thing whatsoever he could cling to that would give him any way to deal with his utter helplessness in the face of the pain, was to keep track of the days. This Twilight was much, much more ordered and rigid than his Twilight, which was saying something. Her experimental sessions happened twice a week, on the same two days of the week, in a pattern of three days and then four days. Because he wasn't naturally good at telling time, he'd been scratching marks in the floor of his cell to count the days, so he would know what day was a Twilight day. While it had the downside of filling him with fear and dread all day long when he woke up and knew he was going to Twilight that night, it spared him the fear on the other five days of the week. No matter how horrible the day was going to be, no matter what he endured, he'd know, at least, that he wouldn't have to go to Twilight and suffer through her experiments.

It had been just last night that he'd last gone to Twilight, just last night that he'd talked Spike into sending the letter he'd been writing for three weeks, and maybe (though probably not) spurring a rescue operation from *his* Twilight. He was supposed to have three more days after this one before he had to see her again. Twilight *couldn't* be breaking her pattern; this Twilight never broke a pattern. "I, I was just at Twilight's last night!" Discord said desperately. "She can't want me back this early, she can't!"

"All I know is that she asked me to bring you over there, sweetie," Fluttercruel said, her tone gentle and false-understanding as if she had to give him a shot or unpleasant tasting medicine for his own good, rather than that she was bringing him to a torture session. "So we'd better get going, don't you think?"

The fact that he cried so often and so easily nowadays was generally a source of intense humiliation to Discord, and he generally *tried* to hold the tears back. He made no such attempt right now. Discord prostrated himself, eyes welling with tears, a sob breaking free of his throat. "Please, mistress, please don't, please, it's too early! She always does it only twice a week, three days and then four, this isn't the day I'm supposed to go to her, she can't want me after she just had me
yesterday! Please, I'll do anything, mistress, please don't take me to Twilight, it's not the right day, please, please..." He was sobbing freely, his vision blurred with tears, but he didn't take his eyes off Fluttercruel, looking up at her from his position on the floor, despite the fact that she was nothing but a yellow blob now. "Please, please, anything but that, please..."

"Oh, sweetie, you've learned the importance of schedules!" Fluttercruel bent down and hugged him around the neck, pinning his prostrate form under her weight so he couldn't have lifted his head if he tried. At one point he'd have been strong enough to lift something of Fluttercruel's mass with just the muscles of his neck, without even using his magic, but he'd been systematically starved for two months and most of the physical strength of his body was gone as well. "I'm so proud of you! You finally get why things should happen at a certain time, and why it makes ponies so unhappy when they don't!"

Was this a test, then? Discord relaxed very slightly, his sobs lessening just a bit. Fluttercruel was always trying to "teach" him why chaos was a bad thing; was this just another lesson? He didn't agree with it, of course; making the sun and moon rise erratically or causing it to be winter when he felt like it and summer when he was bored with that couldn't be having nearly the impact on ponies that the thought of going to Twilight early was having on him. Ponies *liked* winter and summer, they liked day and night. They weren't barely clinging to what was left of their own sanity by studying the pattern of something awful that was inevitably going to happen to them and trying to predict when it would occur. But if this was just a cruel test, then if he acknowledged the lesson he wouldn't really have to go to Twilight. "Yes, yes, I understand now," he gulped, breath still hitching, trying to get control over himself. He focused entirely on his understanding of why the thought of having to go to Twilight early was breaking him, not allowing himself to think of the fact that he didn't honestly think this was the same situation as his own preference for spontaneity at all. "Schedules are important, I see that now, mistress, I understand."

"Such a good colt. I'm so proud of you," Fluttercruel said, giving his neck an additional squeeze before getting up. "If it was under my control, I'd give you a reward for this. But, unfortunately, I really do have to take you to Twilight."

He put his paws over his face and wailed, wordlessly, his ears folding back. It wasn't just a test. She was really going to make him do this.

"Now come on. It can't be that bad."

"It is," he sobbed. "It's the worst thing, oh please, mistress, I'll do anything, please don't make me do this..."

"We have our orders, Discord," Fluttercruel said sharply. "You know that Twilight speaks with Princess Celestia's authority. If I didn't do what she said, I'd get in trouble. Do you want me to punish you for crying and begging like a baby?"

"You couldn't possibly do anything worse to me than she will," Discord moaned, some part of him aware that this might not be the most intelligent thing to say, but the truth spell and his level of distress didn't allow him to muster up enough control not to say it. "She doesn't even care..." What he'd meant to say after that dissolved into sobs.

"Oh, honey," Fluttercruel said. She knelt down next to him and kissed him on the top of his head, near his antler. "Oh, I had no idea how much it means to you that I care about you. I understand. You know that I only hurt you because I care about you and I want you to do better, right?"

That wasn't what he'd meant at all, and what she had just said was so ludicrously untrue that he didn't dare make any response to it whatsoever. But if Fluttercruel thought that he believed she
cared about him and that that mattered to him, maybe she might show him mercy. Just a little bit. Maybe. "Please, mistress, I'll do anything for you but please don't make me go to Twilight, please..."

"I have no choice." She kissed him again, and kept doing it, on his tear-filled eyes, on his snout, on his nose, on his cheek. "But I'll make it up to you later. I'll make you feel good. You be a brave little colt for me and come with me to Twilight's, and I promise I'll make you happy afterward, all right?" She kissed his lips, running her tongue over them, then pulled his head back by pushing down on his antler, forcing his head to tilt up, so she could kiss him harder and more deeply. He responded, hopelessly, letting his tongue tangle with hers as she'd trained him to do, feeling despair shut down his emotions and start to dissociate him from what was happening. She'd just promised to rape him as a reward for enduring torture. He was the avatar of Chaos and yet his life was so much more impossibly absurd now than it had been when he'd wielded his power.

There was nothing he could do. What she was telling him she would do to him probably would feel good when she did it, even if right now the thought made him sick. It wouldn't even begin to make up for what he'd suffer at Twilight's hooves, but maybe he would pretend she was really Fluttershy and she was really trying to comfort him and please him, and maybe that fantasy would get him through it and even let it make him feel better. He couldn't do anything about it now anyway. Right now he had to face the immediate horror -- she would take him to Twilight for another torture session, and there was absolutely nothing he could do to get out of it.

Fluttercruel broke the kiss and backed away. "Come on, sweetie. We have to do this. Be strong for me."

Discord swallowed down the last of his sobs, and got up to all fours, shakily. "Will -- will you stay with me?" he whispered. If she saw how he was suffering under Twilight's protocols, either her old Kindness might kick in and make her pity him, or her new Cruelty might arouse her to the point where she'd try to get Twilight to release him early so she could make him satisfy the lusts his pain would have awakened in her. "When she does it? Please?"

Fluttercruel's face softened. "Oh, of course I will," she said. "If you want me there."

He nodded, miserably. He couldn't think what else to do. Fluttercruel thought he wanted her there for emotional support; he thought he was tricking her into being there because she responded to his pain, unlike Twilight, and might be able to save him from a little bit of it. But was part of him actually looking for emotional support? Was some part of him pleading for Fluttercruel to be there with him because he really did need a friend to help him deal with the torture, and she was the closest thing he had?

Discord felt as if he was teetering on the edge of something, maybe as if he was about to break. He wanted Fluttercruel there with him. He had perfectly rational, acceptably trickstery reasons why he had begged her to stay with him through the torture, but what he felt was an overwhelming craving to have someone there who'd feel any sympathy at all, someone who would hold him and comfort him afterward and touch him and make him feel loved. This was wrong, this was all wrong, he didn't want to be feeling these things, he wanted just to hate her and trick her into doing what he needed to have any hope of shortening his suffering. He didn't want to genuinely mean it that he wanted her there.

But he couldn't stop himself. He was too exhausted, too frightened, too deeply sunk in despairing misery. Twilight wouldn't care about his pain at all. He needed someone to be there who would. Even if the reason she cared was that she enjoyed his pain and it made her want to rape him, that still meant his pain mattered to her in some way. Being hurt by someone who literally didn't care,
at all, who didn't even enjoy his pain but simply found it irrelevant, made it much worse than when someone was hurting him because they cared about getting a reaction from him.

When Fluttercruel pulled on his leash and began walking, he followed after her, head so low his beard would have been dragging on the ground if Fluttercruel hadn't shaved it off weeks ago to humiliate him. His whole body ached; he was hitting the limits of what he could do to heal himself, when they wouldn't let him perform a full-body transformation, and he was so tired and weak, and so afraid of what would happen at their destination. The thought occurred to him to lay down and refuse to move; the obedience spell would make him get up and walk, but at least he'd have the tiny satisfaction of knowing he wasn't cooperating with his own torment. But no. Being a puppet, his limbs moving in total disregard of his will by the obedience spell, was a torment in and of itself.

She brought him outside, and led him over to a tree at the edge of her property. "You ought to use the bathroom now, sweetie," Fluttercruel said. Which, if her words were taken at face value, was nonsensical, because the bathroom was inside the house, but he knew what she meant. She never actually let him use a bathroom; none of them did. Bathrooms were for ponies. They made him go outdoors, or in a small corner of his cell, like a non-speaking animal. Rarity was the only one who ever let him use a bathroom, because she was disgusted by the thought of anything else, but most of the time she just tormented him by ordering him to simply hold it all day. She only relented when her little sister was present; Applejack didn't seem to care if Apple Bloom saw her older sister torturing Discord, but Rarity was much less unkind to him when Sweetie Belle was around to witness it.

Discord obeyed, too miserable and broken to even feel humiliated by it anymore. He knew why she'd ordered him to do this, and the thought made him even sicker with fear and despair than he already was; once Twilight started, the pain and shock of Twilight's magic tearing through his body would make him lose anything in his bowels or bladder, and often his stomach. So Fluttercruel made him go ahead of time so that Spike wouldn't have to clean it up. Very considerate of her. He closed his eyes against a fresh wave of tears, trying to hold them back.

"What a good colt," Fluttercruel said, patting his head like he really was a pet animal. "You're so obedient. Go ahead and use your magic to clean up."

It might have filled him with horror that her praise actually made him feel a little bit better, except that he was so full of fear already there was no room for anything else. He leaned his head into Fluttercruel's strokes as if he were a cat and she was his owner, taking what tiny comfort he could from the gentle touch.

'I'm starting to crack,' he thought, and felt a surprising lack of emotion at the prospect. Apparently he no longer cared all that much if he broke or not. Or at least, in this moment he didn't particularly care.

He prolonged the cleanup as much as he could, making scrubbing bubbles appear all over the ground and the tree where he'd urinated, scouring and cleaning the area almost manually rather than simply snapping his talon to make his own wastes disintegrate. But there were limits. Fluttercruel stopped petting him. "All right, it looks like you've gotten it all nice and clean," she said. "Make those bubbles go away, and let's go to Twilight's."

No more stalling was possible. He obeyed, and followed Fluttercruel, feeling as if he was being led to his own execution. Though that would actually frighten him less than this did.
Notes and warnings (contains spoilers): As with Chapter 4, this chapter contains physical and psychological torture, and rape -- the torture is somewhat less violent than in Chapter 4, and the rape is somewhat more so. It also contains material pertaining to cannibalism and the eating of sapient beings (not vore -- that's a sexual fetish, this is horror). While I do not recommend skipping it -- this chapter contains material that is necessary to the plot -- I will be posting a "what has come before" preface to Chapter 7 to catch readers up, now that this has gotten long, so if you feel you must skip it, the essential plot points will be covered in the preface to the next chapter.

This is not the chapter where the Harmony team come in. I had intended that to happen here, but this chapter got way too long. So the Mane 6 and Spike from Harmony will be crossing over next chapter.

Opposition, 1 AM

Deep breaths. Discord concentrated on breathing slowly and evenly, not hyperventilating, not letting panic take over, as he obeyed Twilight's first and usual order. "Lay down on your back in the circle and spread out your limbs." It hadn't started yet. It hadn't started yet. Don't think about the future. Last night he'd started crying at this point, after enduring torture in the morning, no food he considered remotely edible all day, and an entire day of knowing that this was going to happen to him once night fell, and he'd just been too broken and miserable and weak to stop himself. He wasn't going to break down so easily this time, he promised himself. He was going to make her work for it.

Her magic connected the cuffs and rings on his various limbs to the chains attached to six of the seven posts around the magic circle, and his breath caught. No. Don't think about the future. It hadn't started yet. His tail was pulled out to the edge of the circle, instead of being pulled back behind him as it usually was, and the ring in it was connected directly to a grounding ring on the floor. This was a little unusual, but it wasn't the first time she'd used this particular protocol. His heart felt like it would break his ribcage and he was actually beginning to feel lightheaded with fear. There was a click by his head, and he looked up and to the side. The chain from the post near his head had just connected itself to his collar instead of his tail. That drew another sharp, irregular breath from him. The chains pulled his limbs and his body itself taut, but not yet hard enough to lift him off the ground. His wings ached already from being stretched out like this. Breathe. Deep and even. He couldn't let it make him break down this early. It wasn't even happening yet.

He felt so totally helpless, with every part of his body stretched out tight enough that he could barely move, on the floor, on his back, with Twilight standing over him. How ridiculous. It didn't matter what position he was in, he was always helpless. Stupid to be more afraid when he was exposed like this. Fluttercruel might spread-eagle him like this to rape him or stomp on him or beat him on his belly and between his legs, but Twilight was going to do what she always did and it really didn't matter what position she put him in, the pain was always the same. Still, he had to close his eyes and focus on his breathing.
It was a game he played with himself, since there was nothing else he could control or even affect. How long could he go without screaming? How long could he keep from begging? How quickly could he make himself pass out? There was no prize for beating his previous record and no actual way to tell how long anything was taking, so he really couldn't even figure out how long he was lasting or if it was better or worse than he'd done last time, but the effort of trying to hold out gave him something to do, something to strive for, since he couldn't actually save himself from anything she was going to do.

He looked over at Fluttercruel, pleading with her with his eyes. She cleared her throat. "Um... Twilight? Discord asked if I could stay with him during this session, if that's okay with you?"

"It shouldn't affect anything," Twilight said.

Breathe deeply. Fluttercruel was watching. It wasn't going to save him from much of anything but maybe it would help a little this time, maybe it would make this just a little shorter.

The copper wires descended toward him. He braced himself, his paws clutching at the chains that held them. He knew what came after this; time and time again he'd been here, bound, and the wires had pierced into his limbs and tail, looping and biting in over and over. Then Twilight would attach clamps to his body, sharp enough to bite into his flesh, and then the wires would connect to the clamps, and then those spots would be the first to feel the pulse of white-hot pain before it swept inward to consume all of him.

But this time it didn't happen.

The wires wrapped around his limbs instead, not puncturing his skin and flesh. She took the ends, pushed them under the last loop the wires formed and poked them into him there, which hurt, but she didn't pull them through his body and draw them back out through a different puncture wound like she usually did; they were just sticking into him slightly.

She was varying the pattern. This couldn't be good, could it? She'd already varied it by summoning him early. He looked up at her, not even trying very hard to hide the shock and surprise he felt, but he didn't say anything -- he didn't trust himself to speak without breaking down.

"Today I am going to ask you some questions," she said.

If he could have moved at all he would have sagged with relief. Questions! He could answer questions. If she wanted answers then she wouldn't torture him if he gave her answers and maybe he could get out of this without being hurt very much. Maybe that was why this was off-cycle, because it was an interrogation and not an experiment. And she was hooking him up to the apparatus only partially, and only to make him feel vulnerable so he'd be more frightened and more willing to answer. Well, it'd worked splendidly. He was terrified, and desperately eager to answer anything she might ask in hopes of being spared the pain.

"Is that why I'm here? To answer questions? I can answer questions," he babbled. "Ask me anything. I'll tell you whatever you want to know, you don't have to hurt me, I'm ready to talk. Anything. Please. You don't have to hurt me."

"Very well then," she said. "Where did the letter you gave Spike actually go?"

Oh.

Well, that explained everything. Really, he should have seen this coming.

"I-- I don't know," he said. "It, chaos magic is unpredictable and I had very little of it to spare so I
don't even know if it went anywhere. It could have gone into the void for all I know. I don't have any way to find out what happened to it."

She simply looked down at him, coldly, after he finished speaking. Under her pitiless gaze he wanted to start babbling again, to tell her everything he knew. The answer he'd given was honest but very much incomplete, and he had to swallow back nausea.

And then the wires lit up with magic, and he screamed, convulsing.

It lasted only a few seconds, but when it was over he was panting and gasping. If there'd been any wastes left in his body he'd have expelled them. "Tell me where you intended the message to go," Twilight said, her voice and expression unchanging. "And if you attempt to answer a question in a misleading way again, your suffering will last considerably longer than that did."

"I -- I won't, I promise, I'm sorry, please don't--"

"Answer the question, Discord."

"I, I, how did you find out?" He forced the question out in an agonized wail, desperate to buy himself some time and to find out as much as he could about what she already knew, so he could at least try to avoid telling her more than she was going to directly ask him for. "Did Spike tell you?"

"He sent a message to Princess Celestia to confirm her receipt of your document," Twilight said. Inwardly Discord winced. Why hadn't he foreseen that? Well, probably because he was desperate and it had been the only hope he had. "Naturally she was surprised, given that she had received nothing. She informed me this morning. Now answer the question. Where did you intend the message to go?"

He'd kept from telling them of the existence of his universe because he'd feared they wanted him broken for some sort of program of conquest, and if they knew he came from another universe, he'd been afraid that his would be the first they'd go after. He'd believed that, in fact, until about a week and a half ago, when Twilight, verbalizing her notes as she took them, had accidentally revealed to him that she thought he could be used to make ponykind immortal... which had simultaneously reassured him that she probably wouldn't be willing to send him to enslave ponies, and made him recognize that it was pointless to confess his origin to her anyway. If she thought she could use him to make ponies immortal, she was far gone, and wouldn't care in the slightest that he wasn't the Discord she thought he was.

So he could answer this question without betraying his entire homeworld, he thought. But if he answered this, if he revealed that he was from a parallel universe and that he'd called on his Twilight Sparkle for help, and then his Twilight actually came... he might be betraying her. She wouldn't know from his letter that the other Twilight was prepared for her arrival. On the other hand, what were the odds that she was even going to show up? Was it worth it, to try to hold out, to endure agony and nausea and what would probably end up being seizures if he refused to answer for long enough, just on the tiny chance that his Twilight was actually coming?

He didn't always have to answer questions -- the spell on him couldn't compel him to make complex statements any more than it could compel him to perform complex spells, unless he was told in great specificity what to say or do. And this one was vague enough that it fell in that area. He could keep his silence, if he chose, if he was willing to endure nausea and a sense of building pressure that would eventually end in a seizure. But he couldn't lie, and quite aside from what the obedience spell would do to him, this Twilight would torture him if he didn't answer at all...

...who was he fooling? He knew he wouldn't be able to hold out. If he'd ever had the strength to
stand up to the kind of torture this Twilight would inflict on him, he'd lost that strength weeks ago. No matter what he resolved this minute, he'd crumple the moment the pain hit. He was better off giving in now, and sparing himself.

"A Twilight Sparkle from a parallel universe," he said, turning his head sideways and laying it against the stone floor in a gesture of defeat, his ears folding down against his head.

"Why?"

"I... I hoped she'd come rescue me. I doubt that she will, but you haven't left me very many other options," he added with a tiny bit of sharpness in his voice.

"Why would any version of myself from any parallel timeline help you?"

There was actually emotion in her voice for once. Disgust, but any emotion was better than the blankness she usually presented him with. "Because she says she's my friend." Even in as dire and horrifying a situation at this, he couldn't help smirking just a tiny bit at the expression on this Twilight's face.

"Discord," Fluttercruel said warningly. "Get that grin off your face. Do you really think now is the appropriate time?"

"No, mistress," he said hastily. He didn't actually have to do anything to stop grinning as she'd told him; the moment he'd heard the tone of her voice, a surge of fear had gone through him and wiped out his smile. "I'm sorry."

"Why would my counterpart claim to be your friend?" Twilight asked, her disgust mixed now with utter bewilderment.

"Maybe because she is. I've never known for certain if she's really my friend or not."

Twilight snorted in frustration. "Is this some sort of parallel timeline where I've turned evil?" she asked in a sarcastic tone. "Straight out of the pages of a comic book or something?"

"No," Discord said, and bit his lip to keep from saying, "That would be this universe." When the urge to provide his opinion had passed enough that he dared speak again, he said, "You're not the difference between the two worlds. I am."

"Consistent with what you claimed to Spike," Twilight murmured. "But implausible all the same." She focused on him again, speaking in a normal tone once more. "Explain yourself. How are you the difference between the two worlds?"

"When we fought the first time, I, I lost to you. You undid my work, you restored your friends and the six of you turned me back to stone. The spell that the me from this world cast on your Elements? That never happened there. I never did that. I'm not even certain how he did it." This wasn't a lie. Discord had a lot of ideas about how his counterpart might have accomplished the task, but while he was denied the use of his own magic to probe the spell, he couldn't know for sure exactly what the other him had done.

"And yet you're not in stone now."

That wasn't actually a question. He fought the urge to volunteer information. A slight touch of nausea churned in his gut, but he knew from experience that the spell wouldn't force him to answer questions that hadn't been asked; it would just make him uncomfortable. The severe nausea only occurred when he avoided answering questions that had been asked.
"Why aren't you?" Fluttercruel asked. "How did you get out?"

"My Princess Celestia. She had the Bearers of the Elements release me."

Twilight face-hooved. "That is so thoroughly implausible I'm going to need to do a spell check."

Terror shot through him. "No, wait, I'm telling the truth! You don't--"

"Be quiet until you're told to speak," Twilight said. Her horn lit up, and his limbs began to burn with pain. It was a much lower intensity than she used in the experiments, but still bad enough that he couldn't stop himself from writhing and whimpering, struggling uselessly against his bonds and squirming like a wounded snake. "I am going to ask some questions. While you are speaking, the pain will cease. Only when you hold your tongue will you feel this pain. You may speak to answer the questions. What is your name?"

"Discord," he gasped, and when he felt that she was telling the truth and the pain eased when he was talking, he added, "Spirit of Chaos and Disharmony, former unruler of Equestria, last of the draconequi, to the best of my knowledge, if you don't count the long-ma, which they--"

"Answer only the questions I ask."

"But then you'll hurt me," he whined. "If I have to keep talking or the pain will start again, then it's not fair for you to tell me not to talk when it's your spell that will hurt me if I don't taaahmgh!" The full force of the pain from earlier shot through him again for several seconds.

"I am wholly unconcerned with being fair to you," Twilight said. "You will be silent unless you are answering a question, you will answer only the question that I asked, and if this protocol causes you pain, that's not my problem. Do you understand?"

"Y-yes," he gasped out as the pure agony ended. The lower levels of pain came back as soon as he was finished with the word, but they were far less awful in comparison to what she'd just done.

"It really isn't fair," Fluttercruel pointed out.

"I really don't care," Twilight replied. "Who rules Equestria?"

"Technically speaking both Celestia and Luna, sorry, Princess Celestia and Princess Luna, but everyone knows that Luna doesn't really do much of any ruling, since being on the moon for a thousand years doesn't exactly leave one au courant with current legislation and jurisprudence, so honestly it's really just Celestia and she tells Luna she's a co-diarch just to make her happy and not feel left out." He wanted to stretch his answer out even longer but couldn't think of anything to say that wasn't really an answer to a completely different question.

The pain in his limbs started up again. This time he managed not to whimper, but he had to grit his teeth to endure it. "Are you aware that Princess Luna is dead?" Twilight asked, as if she was asking him if he knew the price of bread.

"I -- what? No! No, I didn't, I -- in my world she's not dead, she's just fine, I -- did he kill her, the other--" The five seconds it took for the obedience spell to kick in ended, and Twilight's order not to speak anything except answers to her questions took hold, silencing him. He made a sound halfway between a grunt and a whimper as the pain came back.

"Indirectly," Twilight said. "He turned her to Nightmare Moon again and forced Princess Celestia to have to kill her. What color is Fluttershy's mane?"
"Pink, well, I'm sure Rarity could tell you the exact shade of pink, whether it was salmon pink or nadeshiko pink or orchid pink, I'm not really sure of the gradation precisely, but it's definitely a shade of pink."

"Tell me a lie."

Discord blinked up at her. "What?"

"Tell me something that is not true. This is an order."

Nausea surged. He wasn't capable of speaking words he knew were entirely not true, not under this spell, but he wasn't capable of refusing an order either. "Tell me something that is not true" was maybe vague enough that it wouldn't force him to comply. "I, I, you know the spell you put on me won't allow me to do that, please don't tell me to do that, please--"

Fluttercruel said, "Tell Twilight that she is a seventeen headed gorgon with the wings of a dragonfly."

*That* was specific enough that he couldn't refuse it. He choked for a moment, nausea overwhelming him as he contemplated telling a lie, and then found himself a way out of the paradox. The nausea eased. "Twilight Sparkle is a seventeen headed gorgon with the wings of a dragonfly, is what my mistress Fluttershy told me to say." He panted, weak with relief at having found a way out of the trap.

"Tell me a lie and do not elaborate to make it no longer a lie," Twilight said. "The pain will intensify until you obey."

"No, please, I can't, please, Twilight, don't, don't do this, please..."

As she'd promised him, the pain slowly grew worse, as well as the nausea as he thought desperately of lies he could tell, only when he tried to say them nothing could come out. A sob caught in his throat. "Twilight, I can't tell you a lie, your spell won't let me, I'm trying, please, I'm trying but I can't, the words won't even come out, please, please, it hurts, please stop, please..."

"You are disobeying an order. Tell me a lie, Discord."

The red-hot pain in his limbs where the wires touched him was joined by agony blossoming in his head, and the objects in the room began to glow with multi-colored coronas around them. "Please, please, I'm going to have a seizure, please stop, I can't, no, please, I'm begging you..." Frantically he searched his mind for some way to satisfy the contradiction. His head hurt badly enough that it was beginning to drown out the pain in his limbs, and the patterns of the world were bleeding together, everything he could see starting to melt like chalk paintings in the rain.

Twilight was pitiless. She wouldn't stop. He looked over at Fluttercruel, hoping against hope that maybe she would save him, but from her intent, hungry expression and the cruel smile on her face, it was obvious that she was enjoying watching him suffer. No help there.

Or was there?

When he squinted, the halos drowned out her expression so he couldn't see it at all. She was a blur of pink and yellow, and he could pretend she was really Fluttershy. Fluttershy, his true friend. Fluttershy, who was the only pony in the universe he could be certain cared about him.

"Fluttershy, I... I love you," he choked out, because if it was his Fluttershy, it was true, and then he could say it.
The pain in his limbs stopped. For a moment the incipient seizure faded, the headache and the halos retreating. And then he saw the look of surprise on Fluttercruel's face, and realized that she thought he was talking to her, which was exactly what he'd meant her (and more importantly Twilight) to think so they'd think he was telling a lie, except he hadn't been telling a lie because he meant his Fluttershy, except he'd been looking at this Fluttershy when he'd said it and he hated her so it was a lie and he'd had to tell a lie to satisfy his orders, but he couldn't tell a lie, but he'd just told a lie...

Every single muscle in his body convulsed wildly, including the ones in his guts. Bile and phlegm and water and blood exploded from his mouth. It was the last physical sensation he felt, as his senses melted into the glorious disorder of pure synesthesia. Pain became bright and clashing colors. He smelled sound and felt light and heard his muscles contracting and expanding arrhythmically as his body thrashed with no more input from his mind whatsoever. It was beautiful, and for a moment, he felt a profound gratitude to the universe at ending his suffering with such a wondrous and incomprehensible blur of chaos. And then there was nothing.

Ice-cold water pouring over his face shocked him back to consciousness.

He gasped and spluttered. Fluttercruel was flapping above him, holding an empty bucket. "...confirmed that the truth spell is holding," Twilight was saying, and when he shook the water out of his eyes and looked at her, he could see she was writing something in a notebook. "While he's capable of telling a lie, it requires extreme duress and it immediately causes vomiting and seizures afterward. Therefore, implausible as it seems, he must be telling the truth." She turned to him. "Are you awake, Discord?"

"Yes," he moaned. She wasn't feeding pain into his limbs anymore, but it didn't matter; every muscle was in agony, after he'd pulled on all of them so hard during his seizure, and the piercings in his tail and wings felt like he'd at least partially torn the flesh they went through. "It hurts, everything hurts, please can this be over? Please, I hurt so much..."

"I haven't yet gotten a sufficient explanation from you," Twilight said. "You said Princess Celestia ordered your release. Why would she do that?"

Discord felt too exhausted to try to drag this out any longer. He'd been answering Twilight's questions as briefly and specifically as possible to avoid betraying useful intelligence she could use against his friends for as long as he could, but he was done. He couldn't push it any further. "She asked my Fluttershy to reform me because she said she had use for my magic. So Fluttershy became my friend. I'd never had a friend before, not really. I... it turned out, I wanted a friend more than I wanted indiscriminate chaos. Fluttershy would be angry with me if I just did whatever I wanted, so... so I had to control it, if I wanted to be her friend. I can't... I don't just spread chaos everywhere like I used to." He looked up at Twilight pleadingly. "I'm reformed. I'm trying to be good now."

Twilight raised an eyebrow. "In your world, do fish raining in Canterlot and ponies stuck on the side of buildings qualify as good?"

Tears welled in his eyes. He closed them tightly so the two mares wouldn't see. Not that they both hadn't seen him cry before, many times, but crying because he was being tortured was different than crying out of genuine guilt and regret. If he'd only done what Fluttershy would have wanted him to do, he would be home, and safe, enjoying the limited chaos she'd allow him to make, instead of being tied up and tortured on the floor of an evil alternate Twilight's workroom. "No... I said I was trying to be good. It was... it was too hard, I couldn't... I needed chaos, and I knew Fluttershy would be angry with me... so I came to an alternate universe to do it. I was just going to
play with you for a few days and then go home..." A sob escaped him. He forced it down. "I know I shouldn't have, I know it was wrong, I just... I wanted it so badly, just a little bit of fun and then go home... I just want to go home, please, I won't cause you any more trouble, please just let me go home..."

"I'd have thought you would have realized by now," Twilight said, looking down at him. "You will never go home again. If you didn't devastate your world as the Discord here did to us, then your Princess Celestia does not need your magic to repair the world nearly as much as we do. And as foolish as they are for trusting you, I cannot in all conscience allow you to return to a world where they permit you free reign, and expect to control you with friendship instead of spells. You are the antithesis of friendship; perhaps you do desire it, but you're not capable of it. As proven by the fact that you went behind your supposed 'friend's' back to cause chaos here. Since they will not be ruthless enough with you to truly control you, it would be irresponsible for me to ever let you go."

Another sob escaped him. He'd known it wouldn't work, he'd known she would never be willing to let him go, not when she thought she could use him to grant eternal life to ponykind. But hearing the words crumbled a tiny crystal of hope in his heart to dust. "Then just let me die!" he begged. "If you hate me so much, then just kill me!"

"That would be wasteful."

"I'm not going to let you die," Fluttercruel said sharply. "I've lost you once already. This time I can make you obey, I can make you learn how to be obedient and good. And then you can save our world, and I'll never need to hurt you again, and nopony will kill you or turn you to stone or take you away from me. Ever."

He'd known that wouldn't work either. Fluttercruel's words were disturbing him greatly, though. "Mistress... you know I'm not the same one, right? I'm from another universe. The other--"

"Shut up," Fluttercruel ordered. "Of course I know. I've known all along. But I wasn't going to turn down a second chance." She knelt beside him and stroked his head. "I wanted to hurt you so much," she confessed. "Well, him. But it's the same thing. I'd tell him how much I hated him, when we were together, and he'd laugh and tell me he knew. But I never -- after he broke me and made me this, I never wanted to hate him. I had to hate him because he was evil and he was doing evil things, but... but after he changed me I was so much like him, and he was the only one who understood. Even Pinkie doesn't understand. She's just crazy." She laid her head on his chest, carefully avoiding the vomit that stained his coat, and hugged him with her forelimbs. "I hated him and I loved him," she said. "And I know you were lying when you said you loved me, but someday, you will. Someday, I'll break you, and you'll stop wanting to disobey and be evil, and you'll love me. I can't have that from him now, but I can have it from you, and you're the same."

"What did you say in the letter, Discord?" Twilight asked.

His breathing was ragged as he tried not to cry. "I... I told her what you were doing to me and I begged her for help."

"Why not contact your friend, your Fluttershy?"

"I had to send it to Spike. I... I had almost no power, you've taken almost all of it. The only way I could get it to my world at all is to send it between dragons who are cognates. Counterparts in different universes. I let Spike think I wanted it to go to Celestia but it was supposed to go to the other Spike. But I have no way of knowing if he even got it and if he did I don't know if Twilight is going to do anything about it."
"Do you think she will?"

Despair closed its jaws around him. "No," he admitted. "No, I'm almost sure she won't. Why would she? She says she's my friend but she's not. I know it, she knows it, it's not even a secret really, but she won't admit it because she's afraid I won't stay reformed if I don't have friends, even though we all know my only real friend is Fluttershy." He forced back another sob. "She'll probably be happy that I'm here. Then she doesn't have to worry about what I might do anymore and her world is safe from me."

"What was the nature of the work you were doing for Princess Celestia?"

"Closing the dimensional gates. They're porous. Something could get through."

"Is that true of our world as well?"

"Mostly, yes. My counterpart closed up some of them but he left enough open that I was able to find this world easily."

"Is that why you chose this world?"

"No, I chose it because your Discord is dead. I didn't want my counterpart to interfere with me so I wanted a world where my other self was dead."

"How did you expect your Twilight to be able to find you in this world? Does she have the power to cross between dimensions as well, and if so, how did she acquire it?"

"No, I told her... there's a portal out by the Everfree, I figured that her magic would be sufficient to find it and open it." Her alicorn magic. This Twilight would never be able to find the portal. Even if whatever strange power she had added to her own made her as powerful as an alicorn, and Discord found this doubtful, it was the wrong kind of power. Alicorns were tied into the planetary thaumosphere and the Platonic metaconcepts that were the underpinning of magic, each of them representing some principle or force, as Discord himself represented chaos. Only beings with such a connection had the ability to sense meta-magical disruptions. No alicorn could sense the thaumosphere as closely as he could, of course, but if an alicorn got close to an unbound portal and started actively looking for it, she could find it. A unicorn, however powerful, wouldn't have that ability. There was no way this Twilight could find the portal. He thought. He hoped.

"Describe where."

"I can't, I'd find it myself by feeling for it magically. It's near the edge of the Everfree within a few trots of Ponyville, that's all I can tell you. I'm not good at taking measurements or remembering landmarks with precision, I find things by using my magic." He closed his eyes. "It doesn't matter anyway. She's not coming and you're not going to let me go, so it doesn't matter."

"Don't be so sad," Fluttercruel said. "I know life is hard but if you'd just give in and accept that we own you and stop trying to fight, you could be much happier. I could make you very happy, Discord." She kissed his neck, directly above his collar. "You just need to learn to love me, because I love you and I just want you to be good."

He opened his eyes and stared up at the ceiling, unmoving. There wasn't any response he wanted to, or dared to, make to that.

"Fluttershy," Twilight said. "Come with me. We need to talk."

"I need to clean him up," Fluttercruel objected. "He threw up before, it's all over him."
"I intended to have Spike do it."

"But we already know he can subvert Spike."

Twilight sighed. "I believe Spike has learned his lesson. But I suspect I know your intention. We need to talk with the others, and then you can come attend to Discord. Clean him up and make sure he's fed; he's growing dangerously thin."

"I'll get him something," Fluttershy said. "I'll just need to stop off quickly at home. I can get my cleaning supplies while I'm there."

"Can I sleep?" Discord whimpered. "Please? Is it over?"

Fluttercruel looked at Twilight. "I have all the information I need," Twilight said.

"Okay, good," Fluttercruel said. "If you could take the wires off him, please... but don't untie him. He'll be easier to clean this way, and besides..." She flushed red. "Well, um, I like seeing him like this."

Twilight sighed. "I suppose it's necessary," she said. "Very well, but make sure you clean up after yourself once you're done."

"Oh, of course." She turned to Discord as the wires started peeling away from him. "Yes, sweetie, go ahead and get a little nap. I'll wake you up when it's time to clean you." She smiled broadly at him and winked.

What she intended to do to him after Twilight let her come back was obvious. But it didn't matter. He was never going to get free. He was going to spend the rest of his life as a slave. So what did it matter what she did to him? Discord closed his eyes. It was very uncomfortable, lying on a cold stone floor with his limbs stretched out and his body pulled taut, and his muscles were still in a great deal of pain from the convulsions, but he'd been exhausted beyond belief when he'd first been brought here, and the torture had taken every last erg of energy he had left. All he had to do was close his eyes and let go. Sleep was the only refuge he would ever have from the horror of his current existence, ever again. Let it swallow him, let it give him a few minutes or hours of respite. He could cry with despair later. Right now all he wanted to do was close his eyes and fall into darkness.

Opposition, 2 AM

"This had better be good, Twilight," Applejack grumbled. "Some of us have real work we've gotta do in the mornin'."

"Yes," Rarity yawned. "It's nearly two in the morning, Twilight, surely whatever this is could have waited until the Princess raises the sun, at least?"

"Not like you'd be up then either," Applejack said.

"It must be super duper important if Twilight's making us wake up in the middle of the night for it!" Pinkie said. "Twilight wouldn't just make us wake up early 'cause she felt like it. Fluttershy might just to be mean and Dashie might for a prank and Applejack might if she thought it would make us too sleepy to think straight and then we'd all agree to something we wouldn't have agreed to do if we were awake--"

"Hay now," Applejack said warningly. "No need to get personal, Pinkie."
"I wouldn't wake you up just to be mean," Fluttershy said. "You're my pony friends. I don't have to be mean to ponies anymore now that I've figured out how to stop."

"You woke up Gummy two weeks ago just to be mean and that woke me up."

"Thought you ate Gummy," Applejack said.

Pinkie giggled. "No way! That was just a prank. I only ate his tail! I'd never eat him all up."

"Oh my Celestia, I hope you didn't try to feed that tail to any ponies," Rarity said. "Your eating habits have only become more disgusting over the years."

Pinkie stuck out her tongue at Rarity. Twilight resisted the urge to face-hoof. What were they all, nine?

"Anyways, Twi, some of us would like to get back to bed, so maybe you could tell us why you called us here? Sometime this week?"

"We're waiting for Rainbow Dash."

"Oh bread me and fry me like a fritter, we will be here all week. Tell you what, I'll just take a nap in your guest room and you can call me when Her Majestic Awesomeness bothers to show her face, which'll probably be Tuesday. If she ain't got some super important autographing session or some bull puckey like that."

"I'm with Applejack," Rarity said. "But since you have to stay up to wait for her anyway, I believe I'll take my nap in your bed."

Twilight's horn flared and grabbed the two mares before they had a chance to trot up the stairs. "We are waiting for Rainbow Dash. She should be here soon."

"I could go get her!" Pinkie said, bouncing up and down. "She always wakes up when I come into the room!"

"Couldn't have anything to do with that prank you pulled where you pretended you were gonna cut her up and make her into cupcakes, could it have?" Applejack snorted.

Pinkie laughed. "The silly filly, she actually believed me. Like I'd put meat into cupcakes! Meat is a savory, cupcakes are sweet! And anyway she's my friend. I only cut up and cook the mean ponies, and I never put them in cupcakes! That'd just be gross!"

"Everything about you is 'gross'," Rarity said, "and by that I mean grotesque."

"You just don't have any sense of humor, Rari-barity!" Pinkie giggled. "You gotta see the funny side of things. Things that are gross are funny! Like poop! You can't tell me poop isn't funny."

"I most certainly can. There is nothing funny about poop."

Pinkie giggled again. "But it sounds so funny! Especially when you say it!" She imitated Rarity's voice. "Poop poop poop."

"Twilight, is Dash gonna show any time this year or should I make arrangements with Mac that he's gonna need to hire hands to replace me for this year's harvest?"

"I sent Owlowiscious to get her," Twilight said, trying very hard to be patient with her so-called friends. And keep her rage directed where it belonged. Discord had done this to them. Not the one
in her workroom, obviously, but he was effectively the same creature. He was the one who deserved her scorn and fury, not her friends. It wasn't their fault what they had become.

"Oh, Twilight, Owlowiscious isn't exactly the fastest bird," Fluttershy said. "I'm sure I could have given you a better candidate."

"Most of the faster birds would be asleep by now."

"Yes, but they'll wake up if I tell them to," Fluttershy said. "None of my animal friends want me to be cross with them."

"I bet my gyrocopter could go faster than Owlowiscious," Pinkie said. "You want me to go wake Dashie up?"

"No," Twilight snapped. "We can just wait a few minutes for her. You will not all keel over from exhaustion."

"Speak for yourself," Rarity said. "I very well might. I was up quite late working on an order--"

"--finding ways to cut corners--" Fluttershy murmured.

"Hard work, that," Applejack agreed with Fluttershy in a loud whisper.

Rarity ignored them. "--And I do not appreciate being woken at this unearthly hour of the morning for no particularly good--"

Rainbow Dash flew in the window and skidded to a halt. "Yo," she said, lifting back up to hover upright. Inexplicably she was wearing sunglasses, despite it being pitch black outside.

"Thank you for finally choosing to join us, Rainbow," Twilight said acidly.

"Hay, you girls are lucky I managed to make time," Rainbow said. "It isn't like I don't have better things to do than hang with you all."

"Yeah, we know," Applejack said. "You're just too awesome for us simple mortal ponies."

"I know you're being sarcastic, but that's the Celestia-honest truth there," Rainbow said. "So hay, for once you're being honest again!"

"Yay! We can have an Applejack is being honest again party!" Pinkie said.

"Shut the buck up, Pinkie, before you end up with a lot less teeth to go rotten from all the sugar you eat," Applejack said.

"Um, if everypony would just be quiet, I think Twilight had something important to tell us?" Fluttershy said.

"Well, it's about time, I simply must get back home and get some beauty rest before the morning," Rarity said, "so I hope this can go quickly."

"Not likely," Twilight said. "You will all, in fact, be staying here overnight. We have a situation."

"What kind of a situation are we talkin' about here?" Applejack asked, scowling.

"Last night, Discord tricked Spike into sending a letter for him. I have now obtained Discord's confession; he's confirmed that he does indeed hail from a different universe."
"That all?" Applejack rolled her eyes. "You told us that a few days after we caught him."

"That really doesn't seem to warrant waking us all up, Twilight," Rarity said sternly.

Twilight sighed. "If you would let me finish... He claims that in his timeline, he is 'friends' with us. Or, specifically at least, with Fluttershy."

Rainbow Dash sniggered. "Yeah, 'friends'. I'll just bet he is. Friends with benefits, more like it!"

Fluttershy glared at Rainbow Dash. "I'm so sorry you had to whore yourself out to the entire team of Wonderbolts so they'd let you join them. I know that must have been rough on you. All I had to do was whore myself out to the spirit of Chaos to save Equestria, but I'm sure you're a much better whore than me."

Rainbow Dash just removed her sunglasses. "Oh, stuff it, Flutters, we all know you wanted him. Look at you now. I'm pretty sure that training him to be obedient doesn't need for you to fuck him twice a day."

"Guys! If we're all gonna insult each other can we at least make it funny?" Pinkie asked. "'Cause this is like, schoolfilly stuff! We can come up with better ones, I'm sure!"

"I was trying to discuss something serious," Twilight snapped. "So if you are all done being foalish--"

"Not me! I'm foalish all the time!"

"Except when you're eating ponies," Rarity muttered.

"Nope! Foalish then too!"

"I am trying to say that Discord has written to our counterparts and asked them to rescue him."

"Ooh! Ooh! Is this one of those alternate universes where we're evil and we all have mustaches?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Pinkie, a mustache would be a travesty on any of our faces," Rarity said.

Twilight ignored the comments about mustaches. "No. He claims that he has 'reformed', that he is 'trying to be good now' because Fluttershy befriended him."

"And you believed him?" Applejack asked skeptically.

"I performed a test on the honesty spell. When ordered to lie, he demonstrated great distress, pleaded with me to release him from the command, and eventually after great effort and under high levels of pain, he came up with something, and then immediately seized. So yes, I believe him, because I've observed for myself that it is enormously difficult for him to lie."

"I wonder if he even was lying," Fluttershy murmured.

Twilight wanted to facehoof. "Fluttershy, he doesn't love you."

"No, I know that, but... what if he loves the other Fluttershy? What if he said it because you would think it was a lie, but it wasn't? After all, we know that his seizures come from contradictory orders that he can't fulfill, but if he tries to lie, well, he can't say something that's completely untrue. So the seizure might have come from failing to fulfill his orders."

"Wait, Discord said he loves somepony? I think I'm gonna barf," Rainbow Dash said.
"Regardless of that, the point is that we are likely to be invaded by our counterparts... who were never corrupted by Discord in the first place, according to him, and therefore still have their original, undamaged Elements of Harmony. This may be a serious threat to us."

"Now wait one minute," Applejack said. "Maybe he really has made friends with Fluttershy and is all 'reformed' and stuff, though you know I don't really believe that for one minute, but sure, he could be foolin' himself. But why in tarnation would the rest of us care? What makes you think we're gonna come rescue Discord?"

"Firstly, they don't know the full extent of his evil," Twilight said. "Their Princess Luna is still alive. The other us sealed Discord in stone the first time we tried it; he didn't leave a statue-shaped balloon in his place in that world. So all they know of what Discord is capable of is that first day. He never negated their gravity and threatened to let them float into space in front of their little sisters and pets if they didn't remove their Elements and toss them to him. He never corrupted Princess Luna. He never tormented the Changelings. He never started riots in Canterlot that may well have killed my brother's fiancée." She had to take a deep breath to get her emotions back under control. Even with the Diadem, she couldn't achieve emotionless perfection all the time, no matter how hard she tried.

"Well, that's all very well, but he was still a perfect brute, even that first day," Rarity said.

"Secondly, I know myself. Discord doesn't believe his version of me will come to his rescue, because he doesn't believe she is truly his friend. I'm quite certain she's not. But she will come to his rescue, because he is of use to their Princess Celestia, who requested that Fluttershy 'reform' him with friendship in the first place, apparently so she could use him to seal the borders of their dimension to keep travelers out... presumably, travelers like he himself is in our dimension. No version of me would ever willingly let Princess Celestia down, and if Discord is useful to her, then she is coming... and she's probably bringing the rest of us as well, because--" She swallowed against a sudden surge of grief that the Diadem hadn't protected her from adequately. "--because if they were never corrupted by Discord, then they still have a powerful, true friendship and they'll follow each other into any sort of danger."

"I'm still your friend, Twilight," Applejack said. "You don't need to make it sound like ain't none of us real friends to each other anymore."

Twilight wondered if Applejack believed her own lies. "That isn't the point. The point is that versions of the six of us who were never corrupted are probably on their way here, or will be here soon, to try to rescue Discord. We must prevent this."

"Why?" Rainbow Dash asked. "I mean, he's fun to kick around, don't get me wrong, but why are we sticking our own necks out to make sure he doesn't get dragged back where he came from? It'd mean we don't have to worry about him here anymore."

Twilight wanted to facehoof, but decided it would be insufficiently dignified. "Rainbow, do you actually remember why we're doing all this? Why we didn't just turn him to stone?"

"'Cause it's more fun to buck him in the face if he can feel it?" Rainbow said, grinning.

Applejack smirked and Pinkie giggled. Twilight sighed. "Princess Celestia is exhausted," she said. "She was never born to raise both the sun and the moon; she did so faithfully for a thousand years, waiting for Princess Luna's return... but now Princess Luna is dead, as is Princess Cadance. There is nopony who can relieve her of her burden." She didn't mention that Chrysalis was as powerful as an alicorn, now, from feeding on her brother for so long. Or that she was trying to tempt Princess Celestia into letting her feed on the Princess' love for her lost sister. Chrysalis wasn't that
trustworthy, and shouldn't be allowed anywhere near the sun or moon. "If Discord is under our control, he can move the sun and the moon, and allow Princess Celestia to rest. The threats that we have been dealing with, with the Elements or the fear that we might use them, could be dealt with by Discord as well, allowing us to rest." Allowing her to truly help Princess Celestia, to dedicate her time to her Princess instead of the perverse parodies of her friends. "He can repair the damage that our version of him did to our world. For all these reasons, we need him."

Plus, there was the most important reason. Twilight's experiments had revealed a great deal of how Discord's magic worked, how magic itself worked, how chaos and order and harmony interrelated in their world. With his power, the power of the Elements, and the Diadem of Order, Twilight believed she could grant all of ponykind eternal life. Nopony would ever die again. She couldn't say so; she knew for a fact Applejack didn't believe it was possible or even a good idea, and Pinkie's fascination with the concept was very, very unhealthy given Pinkie's new hobbies. But everything else was secondary to that.

"Also, um, there's a lot of good things he could do with his powers, if we could control what he does," Fluttershy said. "I can make him do things that aren't chaotic at all, even the opposite, like rebuild broken things? I've been training him, and he doesn't even try to fight me anymore when I tell him to do things like that. When we first got him he used to say he couldn't do it because it wasn't chaotic, but, well, now he's a lot better."

Applejack rolled her eyes. "We all know what you're trainin' him to do, sugarcube. We don't need the X-rated version."

"I wasn't going to give you the X-rated version," Fluttershy retorted angrily. "But since you're telling me you don't want to hear it, that must mean you do, so fine. I like having sex with him. There, I said it. Okay? You can shut up about it now, I don't talk about all the coltfriends you don't have because they know you're a lying little diamond bitch."

Twilight sighed even more loudly than the last time. "Everypony please stop bringing up Fluttershy's methodology. It frankly nauseates me to think about, but we could never have defeated Discord the first time if she hadn't distracted him long enough so I could unweave the keep-away spell, and judging from the level of defiance Discord demonstrates now in comparison to his initial arrival, her methods are effective. Also, every time any one of you mentions it she feels the need to derail the conversation into vitriolic insults. So I would appreciate it if you would all keep your silence on the matter."

Pinkie shrugged. "I don't see what's wrong with it! Fluttershy deserves to have some fun in her life! If she likes draconequuses, well, at least she's not doing mean things to bunny rabbits anymore!"

"I will slap you," Fluttershy snarled.

"Ooh! With a dead fish? Because I have a dead fish I was saving for a dead fish emergency! I have two in fact, so we could have a fish slapping contest!"

"Could we please try to focus?" Twilight snapped. "Just once?"

"I do not appreciate the turns to the crude that this conversation keeps taking," Rarity said. "Nopony here needs to discuss another's bedroom habits. That is simply uncouth." She turned to Twilight. "Twilight, if you please, I believe you were talking about something important?"

"Yeah, like how big of a suckup you are," Rainbow Dash muttered.

Twilight ignored that, and also ignored Rarity's twitching eyelids. "I want to keep Discord here for
several days; I believe that if there is a rescue mission from the other world, it will occur soon, and most likely Discord informed them he was being held prisoner at Fluttershy's. Keeping him here is more defensible. I also intend to have Chrysalis send a patrol of changelings to monitor Fluttershy's home and the nearby regions of the Everfree; Discord could not tell us exactly where the portal is, but we know the pathways between Ponyville and the Everfree, and we can have the changelings stake them out."

"Great. Wonderful. So happy you solved it, sugarcube. Now can we all go back to bed? I got apples to buck in the mornin'."

"Just shut up and listen," Twilight hissed. "All of us need to be ready to mobilize at a moment's notice. They might be coming through tonight, or tomorrow, or within the next few days. We will not be able to afford to send messengers to summon all of us. If the other Elements come through the portal, we may be the only ones who can stand against them. So we must be prepared to be united, as a group, the moment the changelings tell me there is suspicious activity. Therefore I believe that we should stay together, and all of us should sleep here tonight." Memory came back of a sleepover in happier times, of the silly arguments between an Applejack who was pure and honest and a Rarity who was generous and caring, and how they'd all come together in the end. The contrast between then and now had been a constant tearing agony in her heart before she'd found the Diadem of Order. Now she didn't have to feel the pain; she could sense that it was there, she could feel the horror and grief at what her friends and her friendships had become, but it was far away and she was numb to it.

"Oh hay no," Applejack said. "I ain't stayin' here for three days, Twilight. I don't think I can afford to stay here one night; I gotta be up before dawn. You're puttin' a burden on my brother and sister they can't take. You know, it ain't like I got my granny to help out anymore."

"Yeah, I can't stay here overnight either. I got stuff I've gotta do back in Cloudsdale," Rainbow said.

"Um, I'll have to be up early to take care of the animals..."

"And no offense to your charming little library, Twilight, but I do remember what a nightmare it was to spend the night here the last time I tried it. My clients expect me to be at my best; I simply cannot sell if I look like a ragamuffin who hasn't had a night's sleep."

"I'm ok with a sleepover! We could make S'mores, Twilight! Do you like S'mores? Of course you do, everypony likes S'mores!"

Twilight breathed heavily. She could force them all. She spoke with the authority of Princess Celestia; if she made it a royal order by proxy, they would comply. But they would take it out on her, and each other, and run the risk of damaging the very, very fragile bonds that allowed the Elements to harmonize. When they'd been pure Elements of Harmony, and their friendship had been strong, she hadn't had to worry about petty squabbles damaging their ability to come together when it counted. But the new Elements she had to work with, Elements of Harmony and Disharmony combined, were very, very hard to keep focused. The only reason Twilight was still pretending to be friends with any of these mares was to preserve the Elements, because they were all horrible ponies now. To some extent they could all fake it to the outside world – she'd only had to do one memory wipe on the Cakes to keep them from noticing Pinkie's little hobby in their basement, and Pinkie was the most obviously disturbed of all of them – but in their own little circle, they felt safe in being themselves, and who they were now was something nopony would want to befriend if they had a choice.

She had recurring horrible nightmares of finding Discord, collarless, healed and at his full power,
standing over her bed, gloating that the Element-powered spells she'd laid on him had failed because she couldn't keep the Elements harmonized enough to work. And then the things he did after that... no, those were nightmares, not reality, and it was nonsensical to dwell on them. Still, that particular nightmare was her mind warning her of a possibility, she felt. She couldn't afford to antagonize her so-called friends. "Very well. Then I suggest an alternative. I will enchant our Elements so that I can send a signal through them. I would require that all of you wear your Elements at all times; I will send a charge through them, which will cause them to vibrate, if you are needed, and if so, we are to regroup at Fluttershy's house immediately. That way I can allow all of you to go home."

"But wait, you want to keep Discord here?" Fluttershy said. "That's... no! That won't work, because... I need to be with him!"

"I believe I can keep him under control," Twilight said dryly.

"You'll ruin everything! You're completely cold; you don't care about him at all. He may be afraid of defying you, but the key to making him obedient isn't just having him afraid. He has to think he'll be treated nicely if he cooperates, and you just don't treat him nicely ever."

Treat nicely a creature of Chaos. Treat nicely disruption and disharmony incarnate. Treat nicely the creature responsible for the most horrifying year of Twilight's life, the death of a princess she respected and the foalsitter she loved, and the breaking of the princess she loved above all. Twilight stared at Fluttershy coldly. "He will remain here. That's final."

"Um... then I need to get somepony to watch the animals, because I'll have to stay here as long as you keep him," Fluttershy said.

Rainbow Dash snickered and nudged Applejack. "She's that addicted to Dick-cord. Can't go without her daily dose even a day."

Before Fluttershy could inevitably come up with an unwarrantedly vicious retort, Twilight said hurriedly, "Very well, you may stay with him. I will send Spike in the morning to tend to your animals."

"Oh, thank you, Twilight," Fluttershy said. "I know you take my work seriously. Are you keeping him in your workroom overnight?"

"I see no reason not to. In fact I would prefer to keep him bound the entire time he is here. It will make any rescue attempts that much more difficult." And her skin crawled at the thought of Discord walking around in her perfectly ordered library, trailing chaos with him. Even now that his magic was bound he still stank of disorder and mayhem, and the thought of flakes of his skin landing all over her floor or on her books sickened her.

"All right. When I go get my cleaning supplies, I'll bring in some blankets and pillows for myself. Would it be okay if I locked the door from the inside?"

"I can open it magically in any case, so I imagine that would be acceptable." She tried not to think about what Fluttershy was going to do to Discord in her workroom. Discord's blood and vomit and bodily waste products had ended up all over the floor in there on multiple occasions; Spike and a bucket of bleach could deal with any secretions of any kind that contaminated the floor after Fluttershy was done, just as he had after Twilight's sessions with Discord, but somehow the thought of Discord's sexual fluids was even more nauseating than the thought of his feces on her floor, and that had been disgusting enough. Still, Twilight couldn't deny that Fluttershy's strategy was getting results. She just... had to go to bed and pretend that Fluttershy was going straight to sleep in there.
and nothing else. Yes, that would help.

"Well, I'm totally up for kicking another me in the plot," Rainbow Dash said, "but the call better not come when I'm training with the Wonderbolts or doing an autograph session, just saying."

"But what if we made friends with them?" Pinkie said. "They're us, right? So what if we just explain to them that we need to keep Discord to fix up our world and help our Princess Celestia?"

"Their Princess Celestia will command them to retrieve him, because he's of use to her. So that won't work, Pinkie."

"Well." Pinkie contemplated. "I was always kind of curious what you guys would taste like... but you're my friends, so I couldn't find out! Maybe now I'll get a chance!" Her eyes suddenly went wide. "Oh, wow, I wonder what I taste like! I bet I taste great!"

"Pinkie, please," Rarity said. "Some of us have delicate stomachs!"

"We done here? Great. I gotta be gettin' home." Applejack headed for the door without any further discussion.

"Yeah, me too. Outta here." Rainbow zoomed out the window, infuriating Twilight.

"I, um, I have to go home to get cleaning supplies, and those blankets and pillows. Oh, and some food for Discord. That gives me an idea." Fluttershy turned to Pinkie. "Pinkie, do you have any stocks of your... special ingredients, right now?"

"Sure! Got a big freezer full!"

"Would you mind if I picked some up?"

Pinkie whispered something in Fluttershy's ear, and Fluttershy's eyes went wide. "Oh my. M-maybe not the whole thing, but, um... maybe I could take a look at what you have left and see what would work best?"

Twilight decided she didn't want to know exactly what they were talking about. She walked Rarity to the door, since Rarity, as big of a complainer as she was, was at least schooled enough in the social graces to take her leave properly. Pinkie and Fluttershy left together while she was saying goodnight to Rarity. Then it was time for Twilight to retire. And cast a low soundproofing charm around her bedroom, because once Fluttershy came back, if she was able to invoke any particularly loud sounds from Discord, Twilight most assuredly did not want to hear it. His screams of pain didn't disturb her, during the experiments, but she very much did not want to listen to sounds he was making for reasons other than pain.

Opposition, 3 AM

"Wake up, sweetie!"

Blearily Discord opened his eyes. He was still so tired, but his body had to respond to the command to wake up, and his conditioning ensured he was too afraid of Fluttercruel to stay asleep when he heard her voice anyway. All of his muscles still ached horribly. He turned his head to look at Fluttercruel so she could see he was awake, too tired to respond verbally yet.

"I have some nice nutritious food for you, and a special treat," Fluttercruel said. "Twilight thinks you're too thin, so she's asked me to give you a little bit more food than you've been getting every
day. Isn't that nice of her? And I've brought you something especially good for you tonight, because you were so good with Twilight."

She knelt down and unlatched the chain attached to his collar. "Something yummy for you to drink!" she caroled. "Lift up your head, sweetie!"

The despair and exhaustion had overwhelmed him so thoroughly he couldn't even feel fear, only dull resignation. He lifted his head obediently, coming as upright as he could with his arms bound – which was more than a pony could have managed, given the length of his neck, but it hurt to do it, with his general weakness and his muscle aches. Whatever she had for him to drink would probably be something awful, and—

She held a tall glass of sweet-smelling brown liquid up where he could see it.

It couldn't be. She would never let him have something like this... would she? It had to be a trick. It must be full of emetics, or laxatives, or some mild poison to make him suffer, or maybe it wasn't what it looked and smelled like and there was a spell on it to trick him. It could not really be chocolate milk.

She put it to his lips, but didn't tip it, so he couldn't drink it. Without his paws or his magic or even his tail, he had no way to tip it himself. "Here you go, it's your favorite. Chocolate milk. Come on, drink up!"

That was an order and he had to obey it. For a moment he still couldn't figure out how. Then he realized that while the glass might be shaped so he could lift and pour into his mouth, like a pony or any other intelligent creature, without his hands and without her tipping it he had to treat it like he would a saucer on the floor. He bent his head down and stuck his tongue out, not daring to believe it would be anything other than something noxious and awful.

Instead what met his tongue was an explosion of delight, the most wonderful taste he'd been permitted to have in his entire two months of hell. Discord's eyes went even wider. It wasn't a trick. He didn't know how or why, but Fluttercruel was really giving him his favorite drink. Maybe it did have poisons in it and he'd suffer for this later, but it wasn't as if he could disobey the order... and quite aside from how wonderful it tasted, he was so very thirsty. He lapped as quickly as he could, his tongue unrolling to touch the bottom of the glass so he could coat as much of it as he could with the delicious liquid.

When Discord had first escaped his stone prison after over a thousand years, the very first thing he'd done had been to teleport to the Everfree, where he'd been thrilled to see that his chaos engines were still working, interfering with the Tree of Harmony – not enough to stop it, but enough to force it to work harder than it would probably prefer – and preventing pony magic from interfering with the chaos of nature. He had then summoned up his favorite comfort foods – chocolate milk, the drink his mother had fed him with for all the time with her that he could remember; fluffy cotton candy, a cloud of contradictory sweetness that looked solid but melted on one's tongue; warm buttered popcorn, like the treats he'd made for himself from corn and butter he'd stolen from ponies, when he was young – and gorged himself on them. While he'd been in stone, he hadn't been hungry – he'd had no bodily urges at all, because he couldn't feel his body – and when he had his powers, he didn't actually need to eat, but he'd missed the taste of food so terribly. Next to chaos and disharmony, food was his favorite thing in the world.

And after filling himself outrageously full with delightful snacks, he'd gone to the place where he'd been turned to stone, the place he'd usually kept returning to as a seat of power even though, being Chaos, he couldn't actually be tied down to one place all the time, the place where he'd planted his plunder seeds before the alicorns had paralyzed him... which had become a small town called
Ponyville. And the very first chaos he'd unleashed on them had been inspired by his post-freedom celebratory meal. He'd gifted Ponyville with his favorite foods, not that they'd been grateful.

He hadn't done it since – chaos wasn't chaos if it repeated itself – but, apparently, he'd left enough of an impact on Ponyville that Fluttercruel had guessed this was one of his favorite foods. Either that, or the other Discord had told her at some point.

It was maddening that he had to use his tongue to lap it – both because it was humiliating, and because it was so much slower than tipping the glass back and pouring the whole thing down his throat would have been – but at the same time, it forced him to savor the taste. No matter how fast he lapped, every sip he could pull into his mouth with his tongue required him to dip his tongue fully into the liquid, so he was met with the wondrous taste of the chocolate milk over and over and over. He had to blink away tears. There had to be a trick here; there was no way Fluttercruel could really be giving him such a wonderful reward. Either that or she'd make him pay for it. But he didn't actually care. A few moments of pleasure snatched from the awfulness his life had become were worth almost any future suffering, because the future suffering was inevitable anyway.

When there was nothing left in the glass – literally nothing aside from his own saliva, he had licked the inside of the glass clean – he looked up at Fluttercruel. "Thank you, mistress Fluttershy," he said, and meant it for once, gratitude welling up within him.

"Oh, you're very welcome," she said, smiling. "I brought you some good food, too, since you missed your dinner. Well, good for you, anyway, but I'm sure you'll find it delicious."

There was a very large covered tray on top of a wagon, near the door. Fluttercruel pulled the wagon over and removed the tray, laying it on the floor within reach of his flexible head. He watched, trembling with fear and anticipation – the chocolate milk had been delightful, but there hadn't been enough of it to satisfy his hunger, just enough to quench his thirst. Was she actually going to give him something good to eat? The chocolate milk suggested yes, but all of the rest of his experience with her suggested no. But Twilight had ordered her to give him better food for his health, so surely this wasn't something disgusting and inedible, right?

She lifted the covering, letting the smell waft up to him, and his head reeled. His mind and heart recoiled in horror... but even so, his stomach growled and his mouth watered, making him feel a sudden surge of self-hatred because this wasn't food, he shouldn't look at it like food, he shouldn't think of it as food... but in his starved state, the smell was so good, so enticing, even though at any other time it would have horrified him, or at least made him feel a twinge of regret at the sight of a toy he'd never be able to play with.

It was the carcass of a pony.

The meat had been stripped from the upper body and the legs had been removed, but the head and the flank had been left mostly intact, including mane and tail. It had been a blue pony, probably an earth pony because there were no wingbones and no horn. Her eyes were missing, but enough of her head was intact that he could tell she was a mare. She had had a large diamond – not a stylized parallelogram like Rarity had three of, but something that actually resembled a gem – for a cutie mark. She'd been warmed up to body temperature, though the congealing of the blood on her body suggested that she'd probably been dead at least a day or two.

He'd scavenged corpses like this as a young child, when he'd been starving in the mountains over the winter, driving away the predators or fellow scavengers already feasting with the aid of opposable thumbs, the ability to stand upright, and rocks or sticks. The bodies he'd found and eaten hadn't been ponies, but he was fairly sure one of them had been a deer, and deer were sapient, speaking animals as well. He knew what fresh, raw, warm meat tasted like. He knew he preferred
cooked meat if he was going to eat meat at all, but that raw meat would still be delicious if it was killed recently enough.

He knew he wanted to be sick. Nausea churned in his guts at the conflict between what his nose and tongue and stomach were telling him he wanted to do and how they wanted him to feel about it, and his higher mental functions and scant traces of empathy and how they felt about it. This was a dead pony. A murdered pony. A pony who had probably screamed and begged for mercy the same way he had when he'd been in Pinkie Pie's hooves... but who hadn't had the power to regenerate herself, or anyone to tell Pinkie to stop. Having been through exactly what this pony had been through, minus the very ending, even he could feel empathy, compassion, grief for her sake and what she'd suffered, because he knew exactly how she had felt. And yet, he was starving, and his stomach was insisting that she wasn't an unfortunate murder victim he should feel sorry for... she was food, and he should eat her.

He turned his head away. "No."

"No? Are you refusing an order, Discord?"

"You haven't given me an order," he said, his voice too tired and hoarse to convey the emotion he actually felt. "And you're going to have to if you expect me to eat a murdered pony. I may be cruel and chaotic but this is monstrous. I don't eat ponies."

"So you're not very hungry," she said mockingly.

"I'm starving to death. You never feed me anything good, aside from that chocolate milk you just gave me, and even the boring food, you never give me enough. But I'm still not going to eat a pony. I'd rather die of starvation."

"You'll do what I tell you to do," she said warningly. "And if you make me have to order you, you will be punished, Discord."

He didn't have the strength for this. He looked up at her pleadingly. "Fluttershy... please don't make me do this. Please. Pinkie tortured her to death. She's not food. Please don't make me eat a pony."

"She was a criminal, who was handed over to Pinkie after due process," Fluttercruel said, which made him wonder. Had this Equestria re-instituted the death penalty? Or was someone in power just willing to sacrifice the disharmonious ponies to keep Pinkie Pie happy? "And now I'm giving her to you for dinner, and you're going to eat, or you're going to be punished and then you're going to eat." She opened up the saddlebag she'd left on the floor and pulled out the diamond-studded whip. The rope that made its backbone had been an off-white color, once. Now it was stained red. He shuddered. "Make no mistake, Discord, if I have to, I will punish you and then I will order you to eat, so one way or another you're eating the meal I served you, whether you like it or not. If you choose to do it, I won't force you, and I won't punish you. If you refuse, there will be consequences."

He looked back down at the dead pony. He'd wanted Fluttercruel to force him to do it if she wasn't going to let him refuse, because he didn't want it on the tattered fragments of whatever he had left for a conscience that he'd voluntarily eaten a pony. But being threatened with torture if he didn't do it counted as being forced, didn't it? Discord already hurt so much; just thinking of being beaten because he wanted to prove a point made him whimper. But he'd have done it if he was still himself, wouldn't he have? He'd suffered a lot of pain to prove points in the past, including the point that he'd rebel against authority, any authority. If he gave in on this, didn't that say he was already broken, that he could be forced to violate what very few principles he had left just because
he was afraid of torture and not even because he was being actively subjected to it?

"I'm waiting, Discord..."

Discord looked up at Fluttercruel again, intending to refuse again, to try in the only way he had left to hang onto his identity and prove he was still truly Discord deep down inside. But when he saw the bloodstained whip again, he lost his nerve. No. He couldn't willingly draw down punishment on himself like that. "I – I'll eat," he said softly, lowering his head, and then twisting it and lowering his whole neck so he could reach the body with his mouth.

He couldn't use his claws, with his paws bound... only his teeth and tongue. But that was all he needed. Sharp carnivore teeth sank easily into warm pony flesh, and the blood, heated back to liquid by whatever Pinkie had done to warm the corpse, ran down over his tongue and down his throat in rivulets of deliciousness. The aching emptiness in his stomach screamed at him to devour faster, to tear more flesh and gulp it and fill his belly; his tongue wanted more of the rich flavor of warm meat; and his mind was recoiling in utter horror the entire time, but it tasted too good for him to still feel nauseated.

"I'm sorry," he whispered to the dead pony. "I'm sorry... I'm so sorry..."

Discord's eyes filled with tears, and an occasional sob escaped him. It didn't prevent him from devouring as much of the carcass as he could reach with his mouth. He'd intended to take a few bites, enough that he could say he was satisfied without it being a complete lie, and stop. But he couldn't. He was so hungry, and now that the taste was in his mouth, he couldn't make himself stop. The thought occurred to him that Fluttercruel had just proven he was broken, that he'd lost the rebellion that was the heart of chaos and now he was no longer who he was anymore. His weeping intensified, sobs racking his body and tears blinding him as he realized the truth: he'd finally lost the battle he'd been fighting for two months, and he had nothing left. But even as he was crying, he still kept ripping at the dead pony with his teeth and swallowing her tortured body down his throat.

When he'd eaten more than half the meat left on her body, he managed to pull his head away, turning it in the opposite direction from the bloody corpse and laying it down on the stone floor. "I'm... I'm done," he said, his voice barely audible even to him. He'd stopped crying somewhere along the way, and now he just felt numb.

"Oh, good," Fluttercruel said. "Let's get you a nice drink to wash that down." She pulled over a bucket of cold water. Possibly the same bucket Spike had given him water in yesterday. Discord didn't care. He stuck his head in and drank as fast and hard as he could, trying to wash away the taste of the blood in his mouth.

Secondarily, this washed the blood off his muzzle. "How nice! Your face is all washed up already! That's wonderful. We can concentrate on cleaning up the rest of you; you're very messy." He was. He'd fallen asleep with his own vomit still on his fur, and now it was caked and hard. If she didn't take this opportunity to torture him more, he had to admit, he would like to be clean.

Discord laid his head back down, his neck beginning to complain of the strain he'd been putting it under, and turned his head away from the corpse again. Fluttercruel re-fastened the chain to his collar, keeping him from lifting his head again, and then began the process of washing him.

She had three buckets of water and an assortment of towels, brushes, combs, shampoos and oils. With a small cup, she'd draw lukewarm water and pour it onto a part of his body, starting with his neck and moving downward. Then she'd rub the appropriate cleanser onto the area, and scrub with a brush or comb designed for that region of his patchwork body, dipped in very hot water. Then she'd rinse with warm water, brush against the grain, towel that part of his body and then brush
again with a dry version of the same brush. And then she'd move on to the next section.

It actually felt very good, especially with how badly his muscles ached. The careful attention and soothing touch made him feel as if she genuinely cared about him, though his mind knew that was a lie, especially after the dead pony – no, he didn't want to think about that. He wanted to close his eyes and pretend it was his Fluttershy tending him. The main reasons he'd had to resist doing that were gone now. He was already broken. He didn't have to try to remember that he hated her and wanted to resist her in order to keep her from breaking him, because plainly she'd already done it.

The fur of Discord's neck was thin and satiny, much like pony fur; his "mane" was actually black feathers ever since he'd gone bald somewhere around his fifth century of existence. At one point there had been quite a lot of thick black hair mixed into his mane, but it was all gone now, only his eyebrows and goatee, white with age, remaining. On his body, the fur was thick, brown and coarse; when he'd had his powers he'd kept the outer layer of it soft and silky, because he was vain and he wanted ponies to enjoy touching him, but in his months of captivity it had reverted to its natural state. She brushed it hard and vigorously with a comb and with hard bristles, soothing some of the ache in his muscles. It wasn't all so pleasant – he had three nipples, two on one side and one on the other, up near the top of his ribcage, hidden under the thick fur, and he yelped with pain when the bristles ran roughshod over them. They were as vestigial as any male's nipples, and located in a bizarre place in comparison to ponies, who more logically kept their apparatus for feeding babies right near their organs for making them, but they were very sensitive, both to pleasure and to pain. Of course, he knew that Fluttercruel knew that very well, but she pretended she'd forgotten they were there, and apologized.

When she moved onto his upper limbs, she removed his cuffs, one at a time, to wash underneath. His lion limb's fur had largely fallen out under his cuff there, and what little fur was left was black with dirt, as was his skin. The eagle talon's skin was just as blackened. It had been weeks since she'd cleaned under his cuffs.

She couldn't preen his wings with him on his back, so she just washed the exposed underside of them, using the oils pegasi and griffins used to clean their wings that kept the natural waterproofing on them from washing away. She also put a little bit of a cream salve on them where the rings bit into them, because his guess had been right – he'd torn the flesh there a bit during his seizure.

Then she moved down from his ribcage, across his abdomen and downward, and gave him a sultry smile as she continued to work. Discord tensed slightly, before remembering that he'd broken and there was no point to even getting anxious about this. She was going to rape him; it was a given from the moment they'd arrived. He'd known it would happen when he'd asked her to stay with him; she'd told him she would, after all. There was no reason to get worried, because there was no ambiguity, no possibility that it wouldn't happen. The situation called for resignation, not anxiety. He stared at the wall as she continued to wash and brush him, working her way steadily down his body.

Starting from just below his ribcage, Discord's cylindrical, snake-like body was covered with scales, but from the ribcage down to a bit below his legs, the scales were fine, tiny, and permitted fur growth between them, so they weren't visible under the thick brown fur. They weren't actually as tough as dragon scales were generally, because they were so small and didn't overlap each other, but they gave him some protection. Here, she brushed even more vigorously, refreshing the scales underneath the fur. It felt good, but his breathing grew ragged with fear; if she did what she'd done to his nipples to the sensitive spots he had here, it would hurt considerably more.

Unlike ponies, gryphons or most mammalian creatures, Discord's hips didn't mark a terminus to his
body. Pony bodies ended in a rump, where their hips attached to their spine and their muscles formed rounded semi-spheres whose cleavage partially sheltered their anus and genitalia, and their tails were simply bony extensions of their spine, covered with flesh and hair. Discord's hips attached to the sides of his body, and what ponies thought of as his "tail" was really the lower third of what would be their barrel. This was standard for dragons, and many reptiles; Discord's main difference from Western dragons was that his body stayed approximately the same thickness down its length and didn't begin to taper until his fur ran out, and did so very slowly from there. Fluttercruel washed and brushed his legs, slowly and sensually, making him shiver, and occasionally ran a hoof very very lightly over his body between them as he bit his lip and tried not to moan.

She skipped over his sensitive bits entirely, which probably meant she was reserving special attention for them when she was done washing the rest of him, in order to scrub down his tail with a scrub brush, long, languid, soapy strokes, and very hot water. Much of the underside of his tail was a secondary erogenous zone for him, like his nipples and the sides of his neck, and especially when it was stretched out like this. He had to fight to keep from thrashing in response to the teasing it was giving him; it was chained down by the ring near its bottom, so trying to move it would hurt. Discord took deep breaths, trying to endure the maddening touch, but the stimulus was doing exactly what she probably intended. She felt pressure against his skin, in the area of his body above the pelvic bone, pressure from within, and the sensation of muscles he normally couldn't even feel, relaxing.

Finally she turned her attention there. Unlike a pony, Discord had no rump; his sex organs and anus were located directly on the underside of his tail -- or more precisely, the top portion of the lower third of his body -- so when he was lying on his stomach, there was no access to them from above without bending his tail up. Conversely when he was on his back, they were right there on the surface of his body. His fur and scales gave him covering, and his anatomy had some of the standard draconic protections... but not enough of them, not right now.

His penis normally lived inside his body, protected by an interior sheath, which opened to a slit on the outside of his body, right where his pelvic bone was. It did not particularly resemble a vagina, as it was narrower and had no lips, but it probably more closely resembled that than any other anatomical feature. As Fluttercruel's touches aroused him and his penis hardened, it pushed against that slit and finally poked its way out of it. Once he was fully erect, all of it would be exposed; she'd taken cruel advantage of that on more than one occasion, arousing him only so she could whip him on that particular target.

Underneath that slit, his testicles were mostly pulled into his body. Dragons kept them entirely on the outside of their body, right where their pelvic bone was. It did not particularly resemble a vagina, as it was narrower and had no lips, but it probably more closely resembled that than any other anatomical feature. As Fluttercruel's touches aroused him and his penis hardened, it pushed against that slit and finally poked its way out of it. Once he was fully erect, all of it would be exposed; she'd taken cruel advantage of that on more than one occasion, arousing him only so she could whip him on that particular target.

Further down on his body, his anus hid under his fur but had no other protection at all – where ponies had haunches they could clamp together and tails they could hold down to reduce exposure, Discord was either entirely unreachable or fully accessible, depending on whether it was the top or bottom of his tail one was approaching. He whimpered as she stroked him there, and bit his lip to
keep from begging her to stop when she got a thicker, more gelatinous substance than any of the soaps or oils she'd used on him, and began to rub it against him gently there, while her feathery wing brushed lightly against his penis and testicles.

"Please, mistress, shouldn't you take me home first?" he pleaded desperately. "I can't imagine Twilight wants you to be doing this in her workroom..."

"Oh, don't worry, Twilight has gone to bed. It's just you and me, alone together. I even locked the door, sweetie." She smiled.

He tried to breathe, deeply and evenly. He'd known this was coming. He just hadn't expected this specific method, that was all. "Are – are you going to use your hoof?" he asked, trembling.

"I'm thinking about it," she said.

"Please don't. Please, it always hurts when you do that."

"I know, sweetie, I know. But sometimes you need some pain."

_No, I don't, I really don't, I get plenty of pain_, he thought, but managed to keep the babbling voice in his head silent to the outside world.

He closed his eyes. He didn't want to watch this. But even with his eyes closed, memories rose up unbidden, and he couldn't stop them.

The first time she'd raped him had been the first night after he'd been handed over to her.

Despite several days at Twilight's being experimented on to prove out the limits of the obedience spell, and the other spells, and how thoroughly it had been proven to him that he couldn't resist, he'd still been reeling in disbelief that this could happen to him, and still struggling, trying to defy his orders... so she'd tied him up so he couldn't physically escape, rather than just relying on the obedience spell. Much like she had him right now. They hadn't made the diamond-studded whips yet, so she'd beaten him with a flexible wooden switch until he cried and begged for mercy, focusing on the places where his scales didn't protect him — the thigh of his goat leg, his upper body and neck, his lion arm, and the places between his legs where even protective dragon scales couldn't stop it from hurting so badly he thought he'd rather die than keep enduring this.

Then she'd forced him to satisfy her with his tongue... which, despite the pain he was in and the humiliation he was suffering, had entirely too many similarities to his occasional fantasies of doing the same thing for his friend, and he'd become aroused despite himself. He hadn't yet managed to internalize the difference between Fluttercruel and Fluttershy yet. She'd taken advantage of that, using her mouth to stimulate him until he was achingly hard, then snapping a ring around his base to keep him that way.

And then she'd raped him with her hoof and entire front leg, shoving it into his anus with no warning, no preparation, no lubrication, nothing. He'd taken bigger and enjoyed it, under conditions where he was enthusiastically consenting, with foreplay, preparation, and his magic to deal with any pain or discomfort he didn't want... but that was horribly far from the conditions he'd been in at that moment. He'd screamed himself hoarse, and begged frantically, and struggled as hard as he could, but his bindings were too secure for him to escape, and attempting to tighten himself to force her hoof out of him only made it hurt that much more. The edges of her hoof had scraped him inside, making him feel like she was shredding him, and the width of her leg was tearing him open, and when she pushed the entire leg inside him he'd nearly blacked out from the pain, and she'd done it over and over. The whole time she was doing it, she'd snarled at him that he...
was hers, that he would learn to obey her, that she owned him and could do anything to any part of
his body that she wanted to.

When she was done, she'd petted him and called him a good colt and used her mouth to bring him
to orgasm, and he'd been too physically overstimulated to resist her, but he'd been sobbing
uncontrollably the entire time. The release hadn't even felt particularly pleasurable, purely a
muscular reaction to stimulus, and couldn't begin to compensate for the pain he was still in from
the injuries she'd caused, let alone his emotional state from what she'd just put him through.

It hadn't been the last time she'd done that, either. On other occasions she'd been gentler, using toys
designed for the purpose, sometimes even giving him pleasure that way -- which he found
degrading, but he preferred the degradation of being forced to feel pleasure to the shame of being
forced to beg and cry with pain -- or cruel in a different way, making him reshape himself to the
proportions of other species and ordering her animal friends to take him. Discord had slept with
possibly every sapient species on the planet and certainly every species common in or near
Equestria, but he'd never been with non-sapient animals before. It didn't horrify him the way it
might a pony -- he was entirely too jaded to be broken by just the idea of being raped by an animal
-- but it hurt and it frightened and sickened him, and the fact that he was being forced to use his
own magic to cooperate humiliated him utterly, and Angel Bunny in particular was invariably
brutal about it.

Penetrating him, whatever she used to do it with, wasn't something she did to him all or even most
of the time -- she didn't have the anatomy for the act to directly stimulate her. It was just something
she liked to do occasionally, because it apparently got her hot to demonstrate her ownership and
dominance in such a visceral way. Recently, now that she'd broken him down far enough that he
was too defeated to resist anything she demanded, she hadn't done it in a while, and he'd begun to
hope that maybe she'd lost interest in tormenting him that way, that maybe she'd stick to the less
painful ways of sexually dominating him.

Obviously that wasn't the case. Her lascivious expression, the possessive way she was rubbing her
hoof against him... the fact that she'd thought to bring lube, and was applying it to him liberally --
all told him what she was going to do. At least she seemed to be trying to prepare him somewhat.
And there were no animals here. And maybe she had some of her sex toys in that saddlebag, since
she seemed to have brought everything else. Maybe she'd use one of them rather than her hoof.

She leaned forward and kissed him gently where she'd just been stroking him with her wing. A
whimper escaped him. *Let go*, he thought. *Don't resist, don't tense up, just let her do what she
wants and pretend it's Fluttershy doing it*. It wasn't as if he had anything left to lose.

The delicate tongue lapping gently at him was driving him insane. He *had* to move, to thrash his
body, but he was still bound. His clawed fingers scraped against the stone floor, unconsciously
trying to find something to clutch. The tip of his tail waved frantically. The toes of his dragon foot
curled and uncurled. Finally, unable to bear it, he thrashed his head from side to side – and came
face to face with the dead body of the pony he'd half-eaten again.

The shock was like ice-cold water to his face. For a few moments he'd almost managed to forget.
Rage welled up at the small pony with her head between his legs. Maybe he wasn't completely
broken after all. He could be forgiven for cracking temporarily under duress, right? He'd broken
temporarily under torture many times before, his mind contorting itself to believe he was bad, he
was worthless, he deserved this, he wanted to change and conform, generally because making
himself believe those things momentarily was the only way to end the pain. And each time he’d
come back from it. If he could still hate her, if he could still feel anger, then he wasn't fully broken,
right? He could come back from this.
Which probably wasn't a good idea, because he'd been through this before and he knew where it ended.

The morning after the first rape, some of Discord's natural equilibrium had reasserted itself. He couldn't just keep reeling in horror that any of this was happening; he was the spirit of chaos. He adapted to change. It was what he was. So the night before had been bad, yes, he couldn't have lied to himself about that, very bad, but now, he'd thought, he had a lever he could use. She wanted him. There had to be a way he could use that. He'd seduced his way out of tough situations before... none this bad, no, he'd had to admit that to himself, but his world wasn't going to come to an end just because he had to have sex with a mare that looked like Fluttershy. He'd find a way to make use of this version of Fluttershy's obvious desire for him. She plainly thought she had to hurt him to teach him obedience, and well, she was probably also fairly sadistic if she was an inverted Fluttershy, but at the end, after she'd made him come, she'd petted him and comforted him and held his head in her lap as he cried until he fell asleep, so she was still capable of being something like the original Fluttershy as well. He just had to bring that part out of her.

So for two weeks or so he'd tried to feign interest in her. It had been incredibly hard, because she kept initiating sex after hurting him, when he was least willing and least capable of faking it, but he'd pretended to obedience, he had even offered to please her or taken some slight initiative, because surely she couldn't keep hurting him if she genuinely wanted him, right? Surely lust would eventually lead to her dropping her guard around him or at least beginning to treat him better, didn't it?

When he'd finally figured out the mistake he was making, he'd been horrified -- and ashamed at his own stupidity, because he should have seen it so long ago, he should have recognized it from day one. But he was a sadist, except in the bedroom. And he couldn't count the number of ponies who'd succeeded in getting him to stop tormenting them or their villages because they wanted him, and gave him pleasure, and made him want them in return, and then he grew soft on them (well, metaphorically; literally, the exact opposite tended to happen) and didn't want to make them unhappy anymore. It had taken him a few hundred years to figure out that vulnerability and protect himself from it by tossing his sex partners out of bed in the mornings and demanding they leave, or teleporting them to random places himself, so he wouldn't have time to grow attached to them.

He'd assumed this cruel version of Fluttershy was the same way, that she was cruel in her everyday life, just as he was, but that she saw the bedroom differently, just as he did. He'd wanted desperately to believe that she had the same vulnerability he did, because he wanted to believe that the sex she was forcing him into was giving him leverage over her. It had been hideously embarrassing to realize that he'd had it all wrong, because he should have known, he should have seen, but he hadn't wanted to.

This version of Fluttershy was a sexual sadist. She wasn't like him; she didn't hurt others for fun and amusement, she hurt them for erotic thrills. The fact that she wanted him was the very reason why she wanted to hurt him. So nothing he'd done to soften her toward him could have possibly worked, because the more he made himself sexually appealing to her, the more she wanted to hurt him.

He'd snapped, then. Told her he hated her, told her how much it sickened him to have sex with her, reminded her again and again that this was rape and she was a rapist. She hadn't taken that well. Discord had suffered a great deal, over the span of several days, before the fear and pain had finally overwhelmed the rage and he'd been able to make himself stop telling her the truth about how he felt about her. And even after that, the honesty spell made him slip, sometimes.

She'd eventually worn him back down to voluntarily cooperating with her again, but now it wasn't
because he believed he could win better treatment from her or play on her sympathies. Now it was because he knew it was futile to resist and he'd be tormented far worse if he tried, so cooperating was the only thing he could do to lessen his suffering in any way.

If he let the anger overtake him now, she'd make him hurt for it. But if he didn't, if he didn't take strength from it and take back the courage to resist at least in his own mind, then she'd won. He didn't want either outcome. Discord looked back at the dead body and decided to try to walk the line, to poke at what might be a weakness without being insolent enough to provoke her into torturing him. He hoped.

"How could you do this?" he said softly.

She lifted her head. "Do this?" she said in a teasing voice, and stroked him with her wing again. "Um, because you're, um, because I like you?"

"No. How could you cooperate with murdering a pony? How could you desecrate her corpse by feeding her to your prisoner? The real Fluttershy would never have done something so horrible. I know he changed you but can't you even remember how you used to feel?"

She had gone still. "I am the real Fluttershy," she said.

"My Fluttershy, then. Or the Fluttershy you used to be. You know you're not real, you know the other me did this to you. Don't you even want to try to fight it anymore? It's one thing to torture me, but that was an innocent pony."

"She wasn't innocent. She was a criminal."

"Unless she was a cannibal, it's hard to see how she could have deserved this. I can't believe that anypony who used to be Fluttershy would find this—"

"Used to be? I am Fluttershy, Discord, and I'm finding your phrasing disturbing."

She had stopped touching him, at least. He looked up at her wearily, wishing he had the strength to glare. "You used to be Fluttershy. None of you are who you should be anymore."

"And whose fault is that?" she snapped.

"The other me. Not mine. I didn't do this. My friends are still who they really are; I never did this to them." He swallowed. "You've been taking out your hatred of him on me, when I never did anything to you to warrant this."

She shook her head. "I didn't do any of this because I hate you, Discord. Everything I've done, I've done to protect you. I helped the others turn him to stone, because he was evil and it had to be done, and then Spike killed him. I need to make sure that you'll obey and you won't be evil, because then you'll be safe."

"I don't want that kind of safety."

"I don't care what you want. You're mine now. Angel wants to run off into the Everfree where he might get eaten by something. Chickens want to leave their coop and flit off, but then they'll get lost because they're not smart enough to find their way home. I'm the one who tells all of them what to do, for their protection, because I'm the one who knows best. And I know what's best for you too."

His voice cracked. "It's best to keep me locked up, apart from my home and my friends, and torture
me? How could that possibly be what's best for me?"

"Oh, you poor silly thing," she said. She scooted herself closer to his head and started petting him again, running her hoof over the fur of his chest, as she looked down at him with false compassion in her eyes. "You actually believe that nonsense she told you, don't you?"

He blinked at her. "Who?"

"The other Fluttershy, of course. She really did a number on you. At least I was honest enough to tell my Discord how much I hated him even though I loved him too. But no, she can't give you that, because Princess Celestia gave her a job."

Discord stared. "No – you're wrong. You're – she's my friend. She was the only one who was kind enough to figure out that I would want one if I knew what it felt like."

"Oh, of course that's true, sweetie, except you may as well replace 'kind' in that sentence with 'manipulative' and it would be more accurate," Fluttercruel said. "But you fell for it, didn't you? You truly believe she's your friend. You love her, don't you." She shook her head. "Poor deluded baby, I almost wish I didn't have to tell you the truth."

"You weren't there. You don't know the truth."

"I know what it's like to be that Fluttershy," Fluttercruel said, just a tiny bite to her voice. "You think I'm not her anymore... that I'm not real. I remember my entire life, Discord. I know who and what I used to be." She ruffled his fur against the grain, hard, and repeated it, petting him but in the direction where it was annoying and slightly painful rather than the direction where it soothed. "I remember how it felt when any creature was hurt, how it felt like their pain was stabbing into me and I had to do whatever I could to make them happy and safe, because it hurt me when they hurt. I didn't have the strength to say so – I couldn't even have borne their hurt feelings – but I hated bullies. I hated mean ponies, and mean creatures of all types. Discord... after what you did to my friends in the maze, even before we went after you the second time and you got away from us, I hated you. You were the most evil, cruelest thing I'd ever seen." She removed her hoof from his fur. "I would never have wanted to be your friend. Ever."

"You – you're not her. She had different life experiences. You have memories of me doing worse things than I ever did, of course you wouldn't have wanted to befriend me, but I never did those things in my world."

"Oh, I know you want to believe that. But ask yourself, Discord: Princess Celestia wanted to reform you, because she needed you, right? How was 'your' Fluttershy ever going to do that without pretending to befriend you?"

Discord shook his head back and forth in the gesture of "no", and couldn't stop doing it. "You're wrong. You're not her, you didn't live her life, you don't know anything about her! You're wrong!"

"I was her until a little less than two years ago. I know your darling Fluttershy, because we were once the same. She lied to you. She has to pretend to be your friend so you'll keep yourself under control... but you're cruelty incarnate. You torment ponies for fun. You're a bully. How could a kind pony not hate you, as cruel as you are?"

"It's not true, it's not, you're – you don't know her, a lot happened to you in those two years to make you different–"

"Poor dear. What you told Applejack is really true sometimes, isn't it? I know a lie would be easier
to take, but you deserve to know the truth, at least. 'Your' Fluttershy hates you. She'll never say it, she'll never even show it – anymore than she could have shown Gilda how much she hated her for screaming at her in public when it was Gilda's own fault for bumping into her. She'll never tell anypony she hates them. She'll never show it. But she's seething with it inside. She's just very good at hiding it."

"She doesn't," Discord said weakly, horror welling up inside him and he had to fight it, he had to counter it and turn against it. None of this could be true. Because if it was true... "She's my friend."

"She's very, very good at pretending to be a friend, Discord. I should know. But she hates you. If Twilight told her about that letter, she's probably breathing a big sigh of relief that she doesn't have to pretend to be a cruel bully's friend anymore. Because she was only doing it to protect your Equestria from you."

"It's not true, it's not, it's not, she's my friend, she cares about me. You just want to hurt me."

"Hurt you? I'm trying to help you, sweetie. Because I love you. She hates you because she's nothing but kind, and cruelty hurts her. But you made me into somepony who likes being cruel. Just like you. I'm like you now. How could you think that anypony who wasn't like you could possibly care about you? I'm the only one who will ever love you." She straddled his neck, grabbed his collar, and pulled him up slightly, using all the slack that was left in the chain and choking him. "You broke me, you made me into something that's just like you, and even though I hate you for it, I can't stop loving you. She's pretending because she's a hero, and heroes don't love villains. Heroes don't make friends with then. But you made me into as big a bad guy as you were." Tears spilled from her eyes as she released him. "Both you and I are evil, Discord. That's why I'm the only one who could possibly care about you. And that's why I have to tell you what I know... because I used to be her. And I know I would have hated you, before. I would never have wanted to be your friend."

"But—maybe—maybe she started out faking it and then she—maybe she did start really caring about me? I, I thought it was some kind of ploy to begin with, but she seemed so sincere, and she—and she always treats me well, and she likes my chaos, sometimes..."

"Oh, honestly. Likes chaos? I used to be scared of my own shadow. She doesn't like your chaos, but she's pretending. Because if Princess Celestia needs you free and willing to do a job to protect Equestria, then somepony has to make sure you don't cause trouble. She can act very convincingly when she has to, you know that."

No. No, no, no. He wanted to scream, to sob, to punch Fluttercruel in the face. It couldn't be true... could it?

But Celestia had wanted him reformed. And shortly after that they'd lost the Elements, and the only weapon that could have stopped him if he'd decided to unleash havoc. If Fluttershy had pretended to be his friend to reform him, of course she'd have had to keep up the pretense...

...because if she was really his friend, wouldn't her friends give him the benefit of the doubt, rather than treating him like week-old garbage every time they met? Wouldn't her friends have truly become his friends, because they trusted her judgment? But they hadn't... they accepted all of each other's friends outside the group, all but him. They knew, didn't they? They knew it had never been real...

"It's not—" He tried to deny it again, but he couldn't finish the sentence. "You're l — you're not te — it's not—"
"Can't say something you think isn't true, can you," Fluttercruel said softly. "You know I'm not lying. You know what I'm saying is just the reality of the situation. She hates you; she'll be glad she doesn't have to pretend anymore. I'm the only one who will ever love you."

Discord started to sob, again. How many times had he cried today? Did it matter? Did anything matter?

No one was coming for him. The pony he'd thought was his only friend had been tricking him, playing him to keep him under control. No one would ever want to be his friend, just as he'd thought the first time. Even if he managed to escape this, he'd spend the rest of his life alone.

"Don't cry," Fluttercruel said. She lowered her head and started kissing him, on his cheek, on the top of his head, on the side of his neck. "You still have me. And as soon as you learn to be obedient, I can stop having to punish you. Wouldn't you like that?"

He couldn't bear this. Not now, not with his emotional state in tatters. "Mistress... please don't... not now..."

"Yes now. She was never yours, do you understand? She was lying to you the whole time." She grabbed his antler and pulled his head to hers, kissing him deeply, passionately. "You're mine. Because I'm the only one who will ever want you. And I do, sweetie. I do."

She sat up. "I know what you need. I know just how to make you forget her." Her wings flapped, and she lifted off, landing by the dead body. She covered it again and pulled the wagon away, parking it somewhere behind his head where he couldn't easily see it. As she came back, she picked up her saddlebag and carried it over to him, leaning it against his hip as she climbed onto him, straddled his tail and bent her head down to the place between his legs.

"No... please... not now, not like this, please..."

"Shh. I know what you need. I know what's best for you."

The arousal he'd been feeling before had faded entirely, washed away by his misery. But Fluttercruel knew exactly how to touch him to make his body respond. He pleaded a few more times, uselessly, and cried for quite a while, but in the end she got what she wanted.

Her mouth and tongue sucked and licked him in long, slow strokes. One hoof held him firm at his base, gentle, but with the implied threat of crushing pressure if he didn't cooperate. One wing fluttered up and down the part of his shaft that couldn't fit in her mouth, and the other stroked lightly against his balls, making him whimper and writhe, twisting his hips because he couldn't move anything else, but she was sitting on him so she moved as he did and there was no escape that way either. And with the other hoof, she pressed a well-lubed, knobbly dildo, very large but smaller than her hoof at least, into him in short strokes, going slightly deeper with each one. It hurt, but when it combined with the sensations she was causing nearby, it felt good as well.

He didn't want it to.

It didn't matter what he wanted.

No friends. No rescue. No Fluttershy. She hates you. She's always hated you. She was lying from the beginning.

It was so obvious now that it had been pointed out, so, so obvious. Of course it had all been a lie. When had a pony ever wanted to befriend him? – well, aside from Celestia, but they'd been children then, and that had been thousands of years ago. What was more likely, that Fluttershy saw
something no pony in thousands of years had seen in him, or that she was faking it because his belief in her friendship kept him under control?

He'd thrown his life and freedom away to make chaos somewhere she wouldn't see him, and ended up here, and she'd never been his friend in the first place. He'd been stupid, and let himself be tricked, and he was paying the consequences now.

So give up. Let this happen. Let the obscene, hateful pleasure fill him and blot out the keening wail in his mind, no friends no Fluttershy no friends no Fluttershy over and over and he'd do anything to make it stop for a few seconds, even stop trying to resist as the torturer he hated made him feel things he didn't want to feel. Nothing mattered anymore. He was never going home again and he didn't even want to because home was nothing but a lie. They didn't torture him physically there, but they'd set traps in his mind, land mines, and she'd set them off and now he was torn to shreds, his psyche shattered. He had nothing left to resist what she was making him feel, and no reason to fight anymore anyway.

Once she'd worked the toy all the way into him, it took only a few minutes before the combination of her mouth, her feathers, and the slow, deep strokes inside him pushed him over the edge. Right after he came, even before the afterglow faded, she began thrusting it into him harder and faster. Within the first dozen thrusts, it started to hurt, and she steadily increased the pace as she continued. "Yes, sweetie, yes, you're mine," she said, ignoring his whimpers of increasing pain. "I'm never going to let anypony take you away from me again. You're mine. She never wanted you but I do. You're mine, mine, mine."

At some point she switched to using her hoof. He was already gasping in pain by then from the speed and violence of her thrusts. When she pushed her foreleg in, he screamed. But he didn't even bother begging her to stop; he knew she wouldn't listen to him. Even through his screams, he could still hear her voice, viciously snarling "You're mine," again and again.

She was right. This was the only form of affection he'd ever get. He couldn't have friends, but he could have violent sex from a mare who at least thought she loved him and made it good for him at least a small percentage of the time. All he had to do was give up everything he was.

When she was done proving to herself that she owned him, she sat on his neck, her rump in his face, and demanded that he pleasure her with his tongue. He obeyed, feeling as if his mind had gone numb. There was really no way out. No rescue. No friends. No Fluttershy. No freedom, ever again.

Afterward, she kissed him again, touched up the cleaning job she'd done before with a washcloth to remove anything new, and laid out a pile of blankets at his side, so she could curl up into them and cuddle against his body at the same time. Before long, her breathing evened out, the soft, adorable, almost-snore that Fluttershy made when she slept coming out of her mouth. He remembered watching Fluttershy sleep, when he'd been a house guest. How sweet she'd looked, how happy he'd felt to think, this pony voluntarily chooses to be my friend. This pony cares about me.

All a lie.

He began to laugh to himself, quietly so it wouldn't wake his captor. Oh, Fluttercruel, Fluttercruel, you should have read the fine print. You've gotten what you wanted all along. You've convinced me I'll be your possession for the rest of my life. You've broken me. Good job, my dear.

But you should have paid attention to where the fracture lines already were before you set out to break me. Because you're never going to get the result you wanted.
One way or another, you're going to get Chaos. I'm going to take from you the thing you most value, now. And if I can only figure out how to do it... I'll burn your whole world down when I do.

Because I don't want to live anymore. And I could use these claws of mine on my own throat any time. You never ordered me not to kill myself. So you really can't stop me. The only reason I'm not doing it right now is revenge.

I want to find a way to bring you all down with me, first.

And if Twilight wants what I think she wants... then I think I know how to do it.
Harmony, 4 AM

It was hard, very hard, to wake up and go outside in full dark without coffee, but Twilight dragged herself up, reminding herself of the stakes. It wasn't just somepony's life – well, somedraconequus' life – at stake, it was the safety of Equestria. She knew better than to even try to wake Spike up, just levitated him onto her back, picked up their supplies in her magical field, and trotted over to Fluttershy's house.

There was coffee there, rich and steaming. Normally Twilight preferred the taste of tea, but the heavier caffeine load in coffee was something she desperately needed right now. First things first, though. She poured some of the hot coffee directly on Spike’s snoring mouth, making him splutter and start to wake. As soon as his mouth was open, she poured more coffee in. A pony would end up with severe burns if she did this, but Spike was immune to heat, at least up to the temperature of cooking food and probably far past it. Hot coffee was nothing, but the caffeine would start him up enough that donuts could wake him the rest of the way. Pinkie had thoughtfully provided some with gem sprinkles for him.

Once everyone had gathered, and she'd drunk enough coffee and eaten enough of Pinkie's cherry-cheese energy pastries that she could make coherent sentences, she said, "Listen, everypony, Rainbow, Applejack and I got some information from Zecora that I think I need to share with the rest of you."

"Oh! Did you get that piece of the Tree like you were going to? Did you? Did you? Is it shiny?" Pinkie asked. How did that mare have so much energy at this time of day?

"Oh, it's plenty shiny, all right," Applejack said, pulling the bag that held the branch down just a little bit. It was relatively dull in the lamp light of Fluttershy's cottage, but as she moved it, it fell into the path of a moonbeam coming through the window, and it glowed, cool and soft as the moon itself. Rarity sighed.

"How very beautiful," she said. "I do wish I'd been able to accompany you! Do you think we will be able to grow a new Harmony Tree from it, or reharmonize the one they have?"

"We'll need Discord's help," Twilight said. "The Tree – well, this branch – actually spoke to us, briefly. It said that... well, it said 'chaos must smash chaos' for it to be able to reharmonize that world. I don't know what it meant by that; I'm hoping Discord does."

"But do you think he'll be strong enough to help?" Fluttershy whispered. "They – they're doing
such awful things to him..."

"Once we take off his collar and he has his powers back, I'm guessing he'll be able to heal himself," Twilight said. "And speaking of Discord, Zecora told us that the stakes are a lot higher than we think. We're not just rescuing Discord; we're quite possibly saving the world, maybe even saving magic itself."

"Really?" Fluttershy squeaked. "I mean, oh my goodness! Discord is that important?"

"What Zecora said was that Discord is the Chaos Avatar, and his position is needed for magic to work in the world. He's not the first, though. When they die, Chaos, or magic, or something, chooses a new one. And, apparently, Discord's far from the worst that there's been. If Discord – if we fail, here, and we can't bring him back, someone else will get the power, and we won't know who. If they're a pony, or a zebra, or somepony like that, they'll go insane and maybe try to destroy the world. They're more likely to be a dragon or something like that, but it would have to be a young dragon who has and can use some magic, and from what Zecora said, that's rare."

"Whoa." Spike said. "Does that mean I could end up with Discord's powers?"

"I asked, and Zecora said no, you're not chaotic enough. Which is a good thing! Being impulsive and overly emotional and liking to mess things up just for the sake of it, those aren't good things. But she said that means you're not a likely candidate. It also means, anyone who is, might be even less likely than Discord to be moved by friendship, and may be a lot more destructive. And because it sounds like most of the species the power might have gone to in the past aren't chaotic enough, or don't have enough young members who know magic, or something... it could maybe end up going to somepony who'd go insane with it."

"What about another draconequus?" Rarity said. "Surely one of Discord's own kind would be the best choice?"

"They probably would be, except they're all gone. Zecora said that Discord's the last draconequus left. All the rest of them died when he was little."

Pinkie's eyes went wide, and filled with tears. "That's so sad!" she said, her voice trembling as if she were on the verge of bawling. Fluttershy ducked her head, hiding her face under her mane.

"How does Zecora know all this?" Spike asked. "I mean, is she friends with Discord or something?"

"No, she says she doesn't get along with him, and no, I don't know how she knows any of this, but I trust her."

Applejack nodded. "I'd believe that zebra over half of the ponies in Ponyville."

Rainbow Dash was giggling. Twilight turned to her. "What's so funny?"

"Spike asked if Zecora was Discord's friend and I was just remembering what she said," Rainbow said, and giggled again. "She called him a stink-encrusted plot!"

"I'm sure that absolutely needed to be shared with everypony, Rainbow," Twilight said, exasperated.

"Hay, you asked."

"Anyway. So if we don't come back with Discord, his powers will go to someone else, and we
don't know who they'll be, or what they'll be, but they could easily be a lot nastier and crueler than Discord ever was. That means it's even more important that we succeed."

"So what are we all waiting for?" Rainbow asked.

"To finish breakfast!" Pinkie said, and shoveled six pastries into her mouth at once, followed by a cup of coffee that she gulped like it was juice. She slammed the coffee cup down on Fluttershy's table. "Well, I'm ready!"

"Um, I don't really have much of an appetite? So I'm ready," Fluttershy murmured.

Within short order, anypony who wasn't done with their food finished. Spike hooked his claws into two extra donuts, and munched on them as the group headed out.

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**Harmony, 5 AM**

The Everfree Forest was intimidating in daylight. At night, it was positively terrifying. Twilight led the group of mares and young dragon around the side of the forest from Fluttershy's cottage; the portal wasn't actually *in* the Everfree, but it was close enough that the fastest way to get to it involved skirting through the forest's edge.

"A-are you sure this is the way we should go?" Spike asked, voice shaky with fear. "I mean it's n-night and the Everfree could be dangerous and there could be wild animals..."

"The six of us have been in the Everfree at night many times, Spike," Twilight said reassuringly. "Nothing bad's going to happen."

"Um, I actually arranged for an escort," Fluttershy murmured.

"A what now?" Applejack turned her head, probably pointlessly, since the thick overgrowth above them blotted so much of Luna's moonlight, it was difficult to even see the other ponies, much less make out their expressions.

"Oh, um, Manny is pacing us just out of sight. I didn't want him to scare you girls, so I asked him to stay on the other side of the trees, but he'll make sure no timberwolves or hydras or something come after us."

"Who's Manny?" Spike asked.

"He's the manticore we met the day we found the Elements and saved Princess Luna!" Pinkie said. "Fluttershy's friends with him 'cause he never forgot about her fixing his paw!"

"A m-m-ma-manticore?" Spike's eyes went wide.

"Pfft! Says the dragon!" Rainbow said, snickering. "Spike, when you've got a friend who's awesome enough to tame manticores and use 'em for bodyguards, you've got nothing to worry about! Besides, you're a dragon! Can a manticore even eat you?"

"I'd rather not find out if it's all the same to you," Spike said hastily.

"Well, I believe I agree with Spike," Rarity said. "Surely there was another way to get to this portal? Quite aside from the potential dangers of the wildlife, there is dirt and muck and fallen leaves and vines to trip over in the dark and all sorts of hazards to our coiffures and cleanliness in this forest."
Twilight sighed. "We're barely half a trot into the Everfree. And I didn't want to take the time to go all the way around the forest. Assuming that their time of day is the same as ours, we want to be able to make use of the night to get in, get Discord and get out, and if we waste our time circling around the Everfree instead of cutting through it, it'll be long past dawn." Of course, she had no way of knowing if the time was the same. It seemed unlikely to her that Spike, in any universe, would be awake at 1 am to send a message, and normally dragonfire transmissions were instantaneous, so if their Spike kept the same hours that hers did, it was reasonable to assume they were a few hours behind. Spike's bedtime was usually no later than 10. On the other hand, the different circumstances of that world could have led to Spike's sleeping habits changing. It was also possible that dragonfire transmissions between the worlds weren't instantaneous. She really didn't have enough information to be able to tell one way or the other, so she had to assume the times were the same.

"I agree, that's what's important here," Applejack said. "So let's get a move on." She picked up her pace, forcing the rest of them to do the same. For once, Fluttershy was keeping up with the rest of the group with no trouble, but Spike wasn't so fortunate. Twilight levitated him onto her back – he'd been easy for her to carry when she'd been a unicorn, and now that she was an alicorn, he wouldn't slow her down at all.

"Thanks, Twi." Spike breathed deeply. "Short legs, you know?"

"Someday we're all going to struggle to keep up with you," Twilight said, smiling. "Until then, though, I'm glad to help out."

She called a halt a minute after they broke free of the forest, exiting into an overgrown meadow. Unlike most woods, the Everfree had a defined magical boundary, and most of the trees within it wouldn't grow anywhere else, while trees that didn't live in the Everfree wouldn't generally even grow close to it. So even the wild places near the Everfree, the regions where nopony lived, were open, overgrown with tall grass and weeds and occasionally shrubs, but very distinctly not forested areas. This particular meadow, though, felt... weird. She couldn't explain it precisely, just that something felt off-balance here.

Twilight cast a spell similar to the scrying spell she'd performed in Canterlot, and a glowing roughly vertical line appeared in the air. It was fully two-dimensional, not visible from the back or sides, but wide enough to be easy to see from in front of it. "There we go. That's the portal."

"We can't all fit through that!" Pinkie said. "Unless we were riding in a clown carriage! But even then I don't know if the clown carriage would fit!"

"That's the closed portal, Pinkie," Twilight said. "I still have to open it... like this." She fired another spell at the portal, while looking directly at Fluttershy, since Discord had made her image into the key to the lock he'd placed on it. Immediately the portal irised like an expanding cat pupil, growing to be the width of three ponies. The other side of it was a meadow just like this, and it almost looked as if there were no portal, simply a circle drawn in the air, until one noticed that the meadow to the left and the meadow to the right of the portal did not line up properly with the meadow they could see through it.

"Well, here we go," she said, and stepped through it.

It wasn't like the portal to the human world; it didn't reflect her, since it wasn't a mirror, and her appearance wasn't any different on the other side. It just felt like teleporting; she wasn't aligned with the planetary ley lines in exactly the same way as she had been a moment before. Twilight took a deep breath. The smells were slightly different here, but she wasn't enough of a naturalist to be able to tell the difference. There was something else off about this place, something she couldn't
"I'm sending a test message," Spike said, climbing down off Twilight's back and quickly penning a note. "Dear Princess Celestia, we're all here on the other side. I'm testing to see if you can still get my messages. Sincerely, Spike. Does that sound good?"

"Sounds fine to me," Twilight said.

A minute later, Spike belched out a return message. "She says, 'Loud and clear. Please keep me posted.' It works!"

"Great!"

Applejack took a deep breath. "Hoo-ey," she said. "What's wrong with the smell of this place? Can't say I'm an expert on the Everfree, but this smells all wrong."

"Rotten trees," Fluttershy whispered. "And mold. There must be so many rotten trees..."

"You're right. That's what I'm smellin'; dead trees." Applejack sighed. "Well, we knew this place was messed up in more ways than just ourselves turnin' evil, most likely."

Rainbow shrugged. "I can't smell it."

"I don't want to," Rarity said, wrinkling up her nose. "Let's just get to Fluttershy's cottage quickly. Hopefully we'll be able to go in, get Discord, and get out of this dreadful place quickly."

"What if we run into the other Fluttershy?" Pinkie said. "What'll we do then? Do we pretend we're her friends? 'Hey, Fluttershy, it's us, your mean friends! Let's go kick some squirrels and steal cake from foals together!'"

Fluttershy looked at her steadily. "No, Pinkie. We knock her out."

"Shouldn't we try to do this without being super mean? She's another you!"

"You don't have to do it, Pinkie. I will knock her out if I have to. For what she's done to Discord, she deserves a lot worse."

"Whoa, fierce much?" Rainbow said. "I like it, Flutters, but how about you leave the conking your evil twin over the head to me or Applejack? She's eviler than you so she might be able to take you in a fight."

"I don't think so," Fluttershy said. "She'll be fighting to protect herself. I'll be fighting to protect a friend. That always makes me stronger."

"But she turned into your opposite, so she might be tougher when she's fighting to protect herself now, did you think of that?"

"Never mind it," Applejack said. "If we meet the evil Fluttershy, whoever gets to conk her upside the head first will do it, and we're not gonna try to figure out who that'll be ahead of time."

"Right. We're wasting time," Fluttershy said, and took to the air. Her fluttery, cautious flight pattern made her better at flying through the Everfree at night than Rainbow Dash, who tended to rely on her eyesight to see obstacles in time to dodge around them at high speed, and had trouble holding herself to slower speeds. Although, even though Fluttershy was flying no faster than she'd been walking, there was a vigor to her movements that there usually wasn't. Fluttershy usually
stepped cautiously, kept her head down, and even in the air tended to look at the ground more than was good for her. Right now, though, she was facing forward with a look of grim determination, eyes wide to take in as much of the scarce light as she could.

This Everfree was eerily quiet. The region they'd just come through, on their home side, had been full of rustling, and the chirping of birds that got up so early they were singing before dawn, and occasionally distant howls and growls. That had been somewhat frightening; even though she'd been in the Everfree many times, and was an alicorn now, Twilight didn't discount the dangers there. But here, the frightening thing was the relative lack of sound. There was an occasional rustle, an occasional hoot, but the forest seemed much less alive than theirs. Trees that had been thick with foliage on their side were barren here. This made it easier to see, but the moonlight seemed dimmer somehow, the moon smaller and further away than on their side. There were burn marks on some of the trees, and occasionally signs of withered, dead vines wrapped around many of the trees.

"I wonder what happened here?" Pinkie asked. "These poor trees!"

"I don't rightly know, but I don't like it," Applejack said. "Maybe their Discord did something bad to the Everfree."

"Maybe this is caused by whatever he did to the Elements," Twilight said. "If the Tree of Harmony interacts with the Everfree in any way, then their Discord corrupting the Elements could have affected the Tree, and maybe that caused a lot of life in the Everfree to die."

"Not our problem," Rainbow Dash said. "It's making it easier to see, at least."

"But it's so hideous," Rarity said. "Not that the Everfree was ever a paragon of loveliness as forests go, but living foliage, however intimidating, is so much preferable to plants that are withered and dead everywhere."

"Aren't we getting close to Fluttershy's house?" Spike asked. "Maybe we should be quieter."

"Good point. Let's keep it down, everyone. We don't want to risk waking the other Fluttershy up," Twilight said.

Within a few more minutes they were out of the forest, and then at the cottage. It didn't look any different from their Fluttershy's home, which was bizarre when you thought about it.

"All the windows look shut," Rainbow Dash reported. "So, how are we doing this? A little breaking and entering?" She rubbed her forehooves together gleefully.

"Oh, I don't think that will be necessary," Fluttershy said, and flitted over to the welcome mat. She flipped it over, prodded at the dirt underneath with her hoof, and retrieved a key.

Twilight facehooved. "Fluttershy, that is so unsafe. Everypony puts their key under the mat!"

"Because it's easy to remember where you put it," Fluttershy said. "If I got locked out the animals would be so upset." She unlocked the door and flew inside, slowly and quietly. Twilight considered lifting off herself—the clopping of hooves on the wooden floor might wake the owner of the house, or her animals – but decided to cast a spell on everypony's hooves, and Spike's feet, instead.

It was eerily quiet in the house. Twilight wasn't sure why she found the quiet unnerving; as a night owl, she'd been up late when everypony else was asleep many times. She should be used to it. Maybe it was the fear and uncertainty from being in a place that should be safe, her friend's home, but instead was a place she was sneaking into, where she might have to fight an enemy. She
followed Fluttershy to a door built into the floorboards. Fluttershy tugged on a rope around an eye hook set in the floor, and started lifting it, with difficulty; she wasn't strong enough to pull it up without applying wingpower. Twilight assisted her with magic, yanking the door up, ad Fluttershy flew down into the darkness. Twilight followed, with a light spell shining from her horn.

There was nothing down there.

"Discord?" Fluttershy called quietly.

"It doesn't look like he's down here, Fluttershy," Twilight said. She could see a thick-linked metal chain that came up from under the packed earth of the floor, but there was no other evidence that the room had been occupied.

Not that Twilight could see, at least. Applejack followed her down the stairs. "Whoo-ee, it reeks in here. Smells like a ferret, a manticore and half a dozen stallions had a wrestling contest at high noon in the summertime."

"Discord changes his scent with his magic, all the time," Fluttershy said. "I can't tell if this is his scent or not. It does kind of smell like a manticore, a little bit."

Pinkie Pie stuck her head down the stairs and took a sniff. "Nope, pretty sure this was him! Unless the other you was keeping a stallion and a griffin and a dragon all down here at the same time!"

"So he's not even here?" Rainbow Dash called down from the first floor.

Twilight shone her light all over the cellar. "No sign of him."

As she came up the stairs, Rarity appeared out of the darkness. Twilight started slightly. It always shocked her how stealthy a flamboyant white pony could manage to be when she chose. "As it happens, the other Fluttershy doesn't appear to be here either. I've checked her bedroom, the kitchen, the bathroom..."

"You think she might be outside?" Rainbow Dash asked. "I'll check!" She promptly flew off before Twilight could call her back.

"Wait --" Twilight sighed. "Well, I guess it's getting light enough that she can see."

Abruptly Rarity shrieked. Her horn lit up and she started thrashing her head. "Ahh! Get it off, get it off!"

Something was in her mane, making high-pitched growling noises. Twilight used her own magic to yank it out, since Rarity's ability to focus appeared to be badly shot by the fact that the critter was on her head. She had only a moment to observe that the thing held in her magic was a white, long-eared animal before Fluttershy lunged forward in mid-air and grabbed the creature out of her magical field.

"Angel. Bunny. How dare you?!"

_How dare he what?_ Twilight wondered. Was Fluttershy going to try to impersonate her other self, and chastise Angel for attacking Rarity?

Angel chittered in what sounded like an angry tone, but Fluttershy wasn't backing down. "You know very well what you did," she said in the coldest voice Twilight had ever heard from her. "I know that your Fluttershy became a monster, but you did not have to go along for the ride! She taught you better than that, before your Discord transformed her!" More chittering. "Yes, your
Discord. The Discord of your world. My friends and I are from an alternate universe—"

"More like an alternate timeline, really," Twilight said.

"—All right, an alternate timeline, where our Discord never did those things to us. He didn't corrupt us, we reformed him... mostly. And when he had a setback and came here, your Fluttershy decided to torture him in the most horrible ways possible, and you cooperated with her! You helped her!"

How does she know that? Twilight thought. Her blood ran cold, remembering what, exactly, Discord's letter had claimed Angel Bunny's involvement in his torture was. Spike and the Princess and Applejack and I, we never said anything about Angel. She – she must have read it. This was one of the reasons Twilight hadn't wanted Fluttershy to read the letter. How could she bear knowing that her beloved pet had, in another world, done that to her friend?

Angel said something in response. "Yes," Fluttershy said. "Yes, I am the Fluttershy yours would have been if she had never been corrupted. And my friends are the ones they would have been if they had never been corrupted... and the Discord your Fluttershy has been torturing is the one who never corrupted us. He doesn't deserve what she's done to him. And he doesn't deserve what you've done!"

"Whatever is she talking about?" Rarity whispered to Twilight. "Angel did something to Discord? He's a tiny rabbit. I admit he can be quite ferocious, but—"

"It's... It was in the letter, and it's not something I'm comfortable talking about," Twilight whispered back. "Trust me, you don't want to know."

Then Angel made a noise Twilight had never heard him make, a keening sound almost like a scream, and curled up on himself. Even Twilight could hear the distress in his "wheak wheak wheak" cries.

"Oh," Fluttershy said, and then sat down on the floor and gathered Angel to her chest. "Oh, I'm so sorry. I – I'm so sorry she put you in such a position, I – you know it was the corruption, right? I would never – she would never have if she hadn't been – oh, my poor Angel, I'm so sorry...

Tears welled in her eyes as she cuddled the rabbit.

"What's he sayin', Fluttershy?" Applejack asked, her own voice hard. Of course, she'd read the letter too, Twilight remembered.

Fluttershy looked up. "She – he, he was protecting the other animals, she would have – he says she told him if he didn't do what she said she would – oh, Angel..." She rocked him in her hooves. "Such a terrible thing she made you do. I should have known you would never have done such a thing willingly, I should have guessed... I'm so sorry..."

Pinkie bounced in. "I looked in the shed outside and in the garden and in the tree itself and in the chicken coop and in all the animal beds and all the cages and even the cabinets but Discord wasn't there! Huh? Why is Fluttershy crying? Fluttershy, why are you crying?"

Applejack caught Pinkie with one hoof before she could bounce over to Fluttershy. "Sugarcube, there's stuff going on here that would flatten your mane for sure. Fluttershy's questioning Angel about what her other self's been up to, and... you don't want to know anything about it, I promise you."

"Oh... okie dokie! I'll... go check outside again!"
Rarity whispered, "Please tell me that what Fluttershy is talking about is not what I think it is."

"I don't even know what you think it is," Twilight said.

"Something utterly vile."

"Um," Spike said, speaking up for the first time since they'd entered the cottage. "Rarity? Um... there are things a lady like you shouldn't have to hear about. You're a gentlemare, this... this is bad stuff."

"Oh, my dear Spikey-Wikey. Always the gentlecolt. But don't fret about me. I have always believed that a lady should have a spine of steel under a coat of silk... so to speak."

Fluttershy was still talking to Angel, crooning at him. "We're going to fix her, I promise. We know how to undo the corruption. Well, Twilight knows, anyway. But – but we're going to need Discord. Without his magic, we can't save her. We expected him to be here, but he's not, so... could you tell us where he went? Did she take him somewhere?"

A soft chitter and a faint "wheak". "Oh. Oh, she took him to Twilight? Your Twilight? Well, that isn't the best news, but thank you so much for telling me. It will make our work a lot easier."

"Wheak?"

"Yes. I do promise. As long as we are able to save Discord and he's not too badly hurt to help us." She got to her hooves. "But you can't stay here. Between the time we rescue Discord and the time he's able to help us undo her corruption, she's likely to do terrible things. I want you to get them all out and moved. Is she still friends with Harry?" Chitter chitter. "Oh. Maybe that's even a good thing, though. Are you still friends with Harry?" Wheak, wheak, chitter. "I'm sure that if you tell him that you're escaping her, he'll give you shelter. He must have some idea of what the other animals have been through. And please tell him this isn't completely her fault. She was corrupted against her will, and if we can undo it, she'll go back to being who she used to be. Like me."

"Fluttershy, you've gotten the information we needed," Twilight said. "We don't have time—"

Fluttershy glared at her. "Twilight, I have to make sure they'll be all right. You didn't hear what I just heard. I want to rescue Discord, very, very much, but I don't want my animal friends to be tortured when we save him."

"Oh dear," Rarity whispered. "She – she's been torturing the animals she cares for?"

"It's worse than that," Fluttershy said, and didn't explain further. "How long do you think it will take, Angel?" Chitter chitter. "All right, we'll make sure she doesn't come back here for at least two hours—"

"We've got incoming!" Rainbow Dash flew in the window and skidded on the floor, knocking over a table with a lamp on it. "Twilight, there are Changelings! Coming from town!"

"Discord's not here anyway, he was taken to my other self's library," Twilight said. "I can just teleport us—" But the moment she reached out to fire up the teleport spell, the moment she reached to feel the ley lines, the wrongness of this world reached out and grabbed her. Magic itself felt weirdly unbalanced here, some of the ley lines were literally in the wrong places, and she couldn't map out the route to her library. "No, scratch that. Apparently I can't teleport in an alternate universe. At least not this soon after entering it. I'm going to have to learn—"

"You're going to have to learn to start runnin', Twilight, because that's what we've gotta be doin'
now," Applejack said sharply. "C'mon!"

Pinkie caught up with them outside. "Did you know there's a lot of Changelings around the house?"

"Yes, Rainbow just told us," Twilight said. "Head into the forest, we'll try to lose them there!"

"How will we know which ones are us and which ones are them?" Pinkie said. "The last time we fought Changelings they all looked like us! Wait, I know! We say 'Marco' and if they say 'Ponio' then they're us and if they don't then they're not us!"

"And you don't think Changelings are gonna catch on to that?" Applejack asked skeptically as they ran for the forest border.

"Wait, wait, I've got it! First we do Marco Ponio, and then we do passwords! The first password is 'cabbage!' The second is 'cribbage!' The third is 'backgammon!' Come on, girls, do I have to make all of them up?"

"Pinkie, perhaps we should just save our strength for escaping them, and be less concerned with passwords," Rarity panted. "Just a thought!"

Twilight could hear the insectile buzzing of the Changelings' wings now. Her plan to enter the forest would cut the Changelings off from being easily able to use their wings, and to the best of her knowledge, Changelings could only impersonate ponies; aside from the six of them, she didn't expect to see any other ponies in the forest. It would also handicap Rainbow Dash; Twilight herself would still have her magic, and Fluttershy's flight abilities weren't good enough to help her in combat anyway, but Rainbow wouldn't have a lot of maneuverability in the forest. She'd have to watch out for that...

...though that brought up another point. If the Changelings caught up with them, how was Fluttershy going to fight them? Spike, little as he was, had teeth that could crunch gems, claws that could rend stone, and tremendous resilience to physical damage. Fluttershy hadn't actually fought any Changelings during the wedding; she'd used trickery, pretending to be one long enough to run away. The Stare wouldn't work on multiple targets at once, and she had literally no other combat skills. She was also their best hope for getting Discord patched up enough to escape if he were badly injured, and probably the best pony to get through to him if his mental damage had gotten worse since the letter was written. "Fluttershy, Spike! Once we're under tree cover and we've led the Changelings away from the house, I want Fluttershy to double back to the house and from there go find Discord while the rest of us occupy the Changelings! Spike, I'm going to cast an illusion spell to make you look like Fluttershy! You don't usually come with us on missions, so I'm gambling that their Spike doesn't go with them, so the Changelings will expect Fluttershy, but not you." She panted. The effort of speaking so much, loudly enough that all the mares and Spike could hear, while she was galloping so hard, was wearing at her.

Pinkie didn't seem to have any such restraint. "Noooo! You can't split the party! Don't you remember what happened the last time you had Spike pretend to be one of us?"

"I was... trying... to get him to use an Element. And the... rest of you... were discorded anyway."

"But if you send Fluttershy away, what if we need to use the Elements?"

Applejack, also not out of breath, rolled her eyes as she ran. "Pinkie, we had to put those back on the Tree, remember?"
"Oh, yeah, right!"

"Fluttershy... not good in... a fight. Better... for... finding and rescuing... Discord. Spike... you hang back. Don't start... anything. But if... a Changeling comes... for you... slash its legs. Won't... kill it... but that'll... disable." The Changelings' insectoid carapaces were very tough, but Spike's claws would crack them like a hoof bucking a glass window.

"I don't know, Twilight... I'm not exactly good at fighting and stuff..."

"You're... a perfect gentlecolt, Spike," Rarity said, breathing as hard as Twilight herself. It was kind of unfair – what good was being an alicorn if she was going to be just as weak and out of shape as a unicorn? On the other hand, she had to admit, Rarity had been a much stronger unicorn physically than Twilight. Rarity might not be willing to let anypony see her sweat, but Twilight was fairly certain that she worked out secretly several times a week. "I've no doubt... you'll defend yourself... heroically. Just like... a knight."

"Or like Shining Armor," Twilight pointed out. It was funny; Spike had spent his entire childhood swinging pretend swords and playing at being a brave knight or a Royal Guard like Twilight's older brother, and yet when faced with the prospect of deliberately hurting their enemies, he was balking. That was natural, though; fantasy was a lot more fun than reality when it came to adventure, and violence. And it had probably shaken him up a lot to discover that his counterpart was a murderer, without even having been corrupted like the mares' counterparts were. "There's nothing... wrong... with self-defense... or defending your friends."

"O-okay, I guess."

Fluttershy said nothing. She'd been galloping for the tree line as fast as any of them, but she was physically the weakest of them – Spike's short legs would have slowed him down more if he weren't riding on Twilight, but even he was stronger than Fluttershy. Now her skin shone red through her coat and her flanks were gleaming with sweat, her mouth foaming slightly. There was a pony who was driving herself to the limits of her endurance. "Just... hang in there... Fluttershy. Almost... there."

And then they were. The sun had come up, low on the horizon and painting the sky with a sunrise that seemed somehow more pedestrian and less colorful than the ones their own Celestia made, but the Everfree Forest was still in twilight, the low sun blocked by the trees. The fact that the forest had significantly less life in it made it slightly brighter than their own Everfree might have been at sunrise, but only slightly. With the buzz of the swarm behind them, Twilight and the others charged into the forest.

Twilight stopped for a moment, breathing hard. "Fluttershy. You go. Along the forest edge, then double back. Find a way... to sneak into... the library." Fluttershy nodded, still breathing much too hard to talk herself.

"Spike... get down. Spell won't... look right... if you're on me."

"Right. Fluttershy wouldn't ride you." Spike slid off her back. "Okay, hit me."

The spell Twilight cast on him would not hold up under close inspection. Any Changeling who got close enough to harm him would see through it... but probably not quickly enough to keep themselves from being hamstrung by Spike's claws. It wouldn't buy Fluttershy an infinite amount of time, but it might be long enough.

"Hey, look at this," Applejack said. She was pointing at a thick, black, thorny vine wrapped around
a dead tree. "I reckon this here looks way too much like one of Discord's plunder vines to be coincidental, what do you say?"

"I think you're right," Twilight said, only then noticing that the forest was honeycombed with them, both withered, dead black vines and thick ones that weren't growing uncontrollably or moving but which definitely seemed alive.

"Well, then I got me a weapon! Hoo-ee, I'm gonna crack me some bug shells!" Applejack tore one of the living, thorny vines off a tree and began spinning it around in the air as if it were her lasso.

And then the Changelings were on them.

The last time they'd fought Changelings, Twilight hadn't been an alicorn, they'd been in a wide open space, and they'd had no weapons. Rarity's magic pulled up rocks and dirt from the forest floor beneath them, Pinkie leapt into a tree, and Applejack had what amounted to a spiked whip. Rainbow Dash took the initiative, divebombing Changelings as they flew into the forest and flinging them into each other. Twilight's legs were tired and her lungs were burning but there was absolutely nothing wrong with her horn, and in a forest, she could rip plunder vines loose and tie them around multiple Changelings at once. As she'd expected, most of the Changelings took the forms of her and her friends... but they were obviously more used to the ones native to this dimension, because aside from Rainbow Dash, they were all distinct from her and her friends. The Applelings wore the hat that Applejack had left on the other side. The Flutterlings menacing, and being crippled by, Spike had pink manes, not purple. Rarilings had indigo manes, not sky blue. Pinkielings had pink manes and tails, not the bleached blond poofball and blue cotton candy blob that Twilight's Pinkie sported now. And the Twilings she herself faced weren't alicorns. Only the Dashlings actually looked exactly like the mare they were impersonating, and none of them fought well enough to fool Twilight.

The first time they'd faced Changelings, it had been an entire hive's worth swarming them. Here, there seemed to be about fifty or so. Still not in their favor, setting them at 8 to 1 odds, 10 to 1 if Spike could manage to stay out of it, though Changelings were attacking him directly so apparently not. But a lot more manageable, particularly given that the Changelings hadn't seemed to realize that the extradimensional team didn't actually look identical to this world's Bearers.

With alicorn magic and plenty of objects in a forest she could lift with her telekinesis and hit Changelings with, it didn't take Twilight long before she'd disposed of all the Changelings attacking her. At least ten, maybe twelve. Spike had backed away from a pile of moaning Changelings oozing green ichor from their legs, Pinkie was standing triumphantly on a pile of Changelings, and Rainbow Dash had one that looked like Rarity by the hind hooves, swinging her head first into a tree. Rarity was fighting off two Changelings with martial arts, and Applejack had lost her whip and was instead bucking a doppelganger. Rarity was the only one who even looked like she needed help; Twilight used telekinesis to grab the two Rarilings and smash them together, knocking both unconscious.

"Good work, girls," she said, panting. "And Spike." Applejack and Rainbow Dash finished with their opponents. "We can go regroup at the other Fluttershy's house, meet up with our Fluttershy, and—"

At this point a Rainbow Dash came out of nowhere and divebombed her, smashing her hard into the ground.

Dazed, head spinning, she saw what had to be her Rainbow Dash charge into the impostor, full speed. "Nice trick! You must be smarter than the other Changelings! But you're still dumb as a post if you think one Changeling is gonna beat us!"
The impostor twisted under Rainbow Dash, used her momentum against her and flung her into a tree. "Oh, I totally know better," the impostor said. "But you're not up against a Changeling, you're up against me. And I am loads more awesome than you."

"In your dreams!" Rainbow said, kicked off from the tree, and flew at her doppelganger.

"How horrendous!" Twilight heard a Rarity say. "What sort of awful thing have you done to your mane? Did Sweetie Belle pour a gallon of bleach on your head, darling? You're lucky I'm here to put you out of your misery!"

"You have the nerve to complain about my mane when you're wearing all of that gruesomely gaudy jewelry?" another Rarity said. It had to be her Rarity, who hadn't come over wearing any jewelry. "There's such a thing as taste and restraint, you know! You look like the worst sort of nouveau!"

Applejack helped Twilight to her hooves. "Heads up, sugarcube," she said. "Looks like we've met the enemy, and they are us."

The opposing Rarity really was decked out in a ridiculous amount of jewelry. She was wearing her Element, half the gem so dark it was almost black, as Discord had said in the letter. She was also wearing several necklaces, bracelets, and jeweled belts, and a jeweled maneclip.

"Where are you, me?" a high-pitched, cheerful voice sang out. "Are we gonna playHide and Go Seek? Goody, I love that game!"

Twilight turned her head. Her Pinkie was no longer visible. The pink-maned one she could see looked no different than Pinkie had before the mane dye, unlike Rarity and her jewels. Except that she was wearing a belt around her barrel with cooking knives strapped to it.

She understood then that the Changelings had been a distraction, intended to wear them down, soften them up and herd them toward where their counterparts had been waiting. Oddly, the other Fluttershy wasn't there, but everypony else was. The two Rainbow Dashes were fighting each other already, throwing each other into branches and treetops, crashing into what seemed like every tree in the forest, up above Twilight's head. The other Pinkie and Rarity – Twilight decided to call them Opposition Pinkie and Opposition Rarity, both because they were the opposition and because of their yin-yang Elements – were flanking the group to the left and the right, respectively. Opposition Applejack was striding forward, looking no different from their Applejack, freckles, hat, ponytail and all, except that the orange apple on the torc around her neck was half-dark, like the others'.

And then a small purple unicorn strode forward, a tiara on her head with a gem half-purple, half sparkling white, not dark like the others'. Twilight stared down at her. For some reason all she could think was Wow, I had no idea how short I used to be.

The other Twilight's face bore no expression at all, until she got a bit closer, when her eyes went wide. "You're an alicorn?" she wailed. "He never said anything about you being an alicorn!"

"I'll bet you never asked," Twilight said sharply. Discord's letter had said he hadn't said anything about being from another universe. The other Twilight's reaction said that that was no longer the case. Please let her have just asked him and made the honesty spell do the work. Please don't let her have tortured him again.

"Even when he can't do nothin' but tell the truth, he's still a no-good liar, Twilight," Opposition Applejack said. "Stands to reason he'd find some way to lie to you."
"You're a fine one to be callin' names," Applejack snapped at her counterpart. "Granny Smith didn't raise you to be no torturer."

"Granny Smith is dead," Opposition Applejack said. "Discord made her think she was a filly again, and her heart gave out while she was rompin' around playin' tag. So don't you talk to me about Granny Smith, or what I do, when you ain't lived my life."

"This is a waste of time," Opposition Twilight said. Her moment of shock appeared to have passed, and her voice was now flatter, more monotone than Twilight could ever remember her own voice sounding. Do I really sound like that, or is it just her? "The Changelings you defeated were expendable soldier nymphs. We have full-grown, experienced soldier Changelings on their way as backup, and they will be considerably more difficult to defeat. Surrender to us now, and we will escort you to your portal and see that you go back through, without harm. But if you stand against us for the sake of Discord, we will treat you as the enemies you'd demonstrate yourselves to be."

"Our Discord is reformed," Twilight said sharply. "Obviously he had a relapse, or he wouldn't have come here, but he never did anything nearly as horrible as what you're doing to him. Spike killed your Discord, right? Isn't that enough? Do you have to throw away your equinity for revenge?"

"It's not a matter of revenge. Discord's actions did terrible damage to our world, and in killing him Spike made it worse. Since 'your' Discord, as you put it, presented himself to us, I have no choice but to use him to reshape the world and repair the damage done. And since he cannot possibly be trusted to aid us of his own volition, he must be conditioned to obedience. A task you should have undertaken, rather than being so irresponsible as to trust to 'friendship' in a creature who represents its antithesis."

Twilight stared at her. "You – you don't even realize what a monster you've become, do you?"

Her other self's eyelid twitched. "I am the monster, when you're the one that calls Chaos a friend?"

"We gonna jaw at them all day or are we gonna kick some flank, Twilight?" Opposition Applejack said. "I've got trees that ain't gonna buck themselves to get back to."

Instead of answering verbally, the other Twilight fired a bolt of magic at Twilight herself. She's fast! Twilight barely got a shield up in time. The other one vanished. Twilight looked around herself frantically, trying to track her. Then a bolt of magic smashed into her back, flattening her.

The other Twilight, despite not having wings, had teleported straight up and fired down from a tree branch. As Twilight tried to fire back, her Opposition counterpart disappeared again.

She's a unicorn. She can't have as much raw power as me. But that thing she combined with the Element of Magic... Discord didn't know what it was, but it's magically active, I can tell. It's altering her magic somehow. Opposition Twilight's magic was beautiful but sterile; it was clean, it was precise, it was laser-focused, everything Twilight herself would have wanted her magic to be in the days before she discovered friendship. Twilight threw up a bubble shield, like one of Shining Armor's. Her counterpart's first strike against it dissipated harmlessly. The second strike cut through it, running on precisely the magical frequency where it was weakest.

She can tune her magic to a specific, focused frequency. She took down Discord, and he's a lot more powerful than I am. How am I going to do this? That thing she's wearing isn't amplifying her the way the Alicorn Amulet would – I can feel that it's not giving her a literal power boost, but it's boosting her control somehow. And she's so fast! Is that the magic item she's got or is that just combat training?
Twilight shielded again, this time in layers so there was no one frequency where she was weak, and flew up. Being in the air made it easier for her to think three-dimensionally, as if her unicorn-born brain needed wing activity to kick off her alicorn version of a pegasus' spatial abilities. From here she could see her friends. Rainbow and her counterpart had gotten above the tree cover and were in full aerial combat, flying at each other and slamming hooves into the other's body. I should have made Rainbow do something to differentiate herself. I can't tell which one is which! If they weren't moving so fast, the fact that Opposition Rainbow was wearing her element would clarify who was who, but Twilight couldn't make out who was wearing what. Spike's illusion had worn off, presumably the first time Opposition Twilight had hit her, or possibly when Opposition Rainbow had crashed into her, but he was hanging back as she'd ordered him to, not joining the fight. He had, in fact, climbed a tree, and was looking down, watching the combatants below.

Down there, Pinkie and Opposition Pinkie practically danced with each other, bouncing and leaping. Opposition Pinkie had knives in her hooves, and was giggling. "Wow, me, you're fast!" she was shouting. "But I bet you I'm faster!" Twilight's Pinkie actually looked scared, an expression Twilight rarely saw on Pinkie outside of events that simply terrified everypony like roaring dragons. The two Rarities were using Opposition Rarity's jewelry as weapons against each other; presumably Opposition Rarity had used her telekinesis to fling sharp gems at Twilight's Rarity first, but now that the gems were in play both of them were sincerely trying to cut the other to bits. Twilight's Rarity was using a bunch of scarves as a mobile shield; the scarves flowed around her body, blocking gems that her opponent was flinging. The other Rarity was blocking with pure telekinesis, which would normally imply she'd tire faster, but she, too, seemed better combat trained than her counterpart; it was Twilight's Rarity who had more cuts and bruises on her body from successful hits. The two Applejacks were simply wrestling, rolling around with each other on the forest floor. Opposition Applejack had lost her hat and Twilight's Applejack's bun had come undone, turning back into a ponytail, so they, too, looked identical.

Where was her own opponent?

"Twilight! Behind and down!" Spike yelled. Twilight looked, and narrowly managed to dodge a bolt of energy flying at her underbelly. As it went past she felt it, a resonator spell, intended to shatter her top shield. The other Twilight had two spells cued up and didn't seem to have time to pull the second back; the second one did strike her, but it was calibrated for the weakness in her inner shield, not her outer, so it splashed off.

I'm fighting defensively. I've got to take it to her. She isn't a match for my raw power; if I could just land one clean hit on her it'd be over, but she's so fast. A barrage in every direction was probably not something Opposition Twilight could teleport away from, but it would hit her friends too. I've got to lure her away from them. Get her off to the side, maybe back out in the open outside the forest, where I can bring all my power to bear without worrying about hurting my friends by accident. She'd calibrated for the strangeness of this world, finally, in every location she'd actually been, which meant she could safely teleport to right outside the forest. But a teleport will be dangerous if she sees it coming; she can reroute it, and she knows this world. I don't. Best to fly, then. Not that it was easy to fly in a thick forest, but this Everfree had a lot less foliage to get in the way than in her own.

Twilight blocked several more strikes, and then began to fly in earnest, heading out of the trees. She has to follow me. She knows if she lets me go, I'll go free Discord. The small unicorn (dear Celestia, how was I ever that short and didn't even notice?) followed her, running after her, firing more laser-precise magical beams at her, most of which carried a spell or two as a payload. Twilight had to keep shifting the frequency of her shield, because Opposition Twilight was fast enough to punch a hole in her outer shield and then send a second spell, designed to pierce her inner shield, through it before she could counter or repair the hole.
And then she was out and through the tree cover, back into the clearing they'd passed through to get back into the Everfree.

There were a dozen Changelings in the air there, waiting. One of whom had a horn, like Chrysalis, and eyes with pupils, though she (he? It?) was the size of a standard Changeling and didn't have whites in the eyes like Chrysalis did.

Well. She'd wanted a venue where she could go all out without risking her friends. Twilight dodged a bolt of magic from the horned Changeling, did not quite evade being kicked by one of the standard ones but managed to take it on her withers rather than her head, and teleported straight up to give herself a moment of breathing room. She drew power to herself, pulling on the deep reserves she had now as an alicorn, and fired off a highly overpowered sleep spell in a radius all around her. Eleven Changelings dropped out of the sky like rocks. The horned one had a shield up, but Twilight's attack had overwhelmed it; that Changeling managed to avoid falling asleep just long enough to get herself to the ground.

Twilight landed, breathing hard, scanning with magic to make sure the Changelings weren't dead. Several had cracked carapaces, but none were injured badly enough to die. Good. Twilight refused to become a monster like her counterpart, and murdering her enemies would have been monstrous.

She looked around herself, but didn't see her counterpart. Where was the unicorn? Surely she knew she had to stop Twilight from going to her library and freeing Discord, didn't she? Wait, no, what if she'd doubled back to help her corrupted friends against Twilight's friends, so she could take hostages? Twilight needed to see if her friends were okay. She flapped her wings, rising up—and screamed, falling to the ground, as a bolt of pure heat seared her left wing, burning a hole in it.

Even as she hit the ground, she could feel the crawling itch of alicorn regeneration, the rapid healing that would restore her wing, but she was too dazed from her fall to consciously cast spells—and there was her counterpart, standing in the shadow of a tree, blurred by darkness she'd pulled all around herself from the shadow, visible now only because her horn was glowing.

No! Twilight tried to throw up a shield—but she wasn't fast enough.

The last thing she saw was brilliant purple light in her face, the color of her own magic, and then nothing.

"Come out, come out, wherever I am!" Pinkie's opponent caroled at her.

Pinkie leaned into the shadow of a tree, shivering. The wrongness of her other self had had her shaking in reaction. In the first few minutes of the fight, she'd been as cheerful as she usually was during a fight, drawing on that reserve of joy and laughter and love for her friends that Granny Pie had always told her was the way to defeat nearly any opponent, bouncing and giggling and dodging as her other self had tried to catch her.

And then Other Pinkie had gotten out the knives, and slashed them at her, and had actually managed to cut a thin, painful, bleeding line across Pinkie's flank before Pinkie had managed to flip away. And she'd licked the blood on her knife, and giggled, and said "Yummy!" And then she'd come for Pinkie again.

Pinkie understood her own anger, her own sadness. The Pinkamena sleeping inside her could come out any time Pinkie couldn't manage to convince herself to be happy, and while Pinkamena was
mostly sad, desperate or apathetic, it wasn't hard to push Pinkamena into a dark rage, because she was so unhappy she had no way to ward off her anger or moderate her reaction to it. All the Pinkies who were part of Pinkie held as one of their most important jobs the need to keep Pinkamena from coming out. Not that Pinkamena wanted to come out – Pinkamena was always miserable, and when Pinkie was Pinkamena all she wanted was to stop being Pinkamena by any means possible. Not that Pinkamena was actually a separate pony, either – she was just like Logistics Pinkie and Alertness Pinkie and Navigator Pinkie, a name and personification Pinkie gave to a semi-autonomous portion of her own consciousness. But because she had been who Pinkie had been most of the time, back on the rock farm, before she'd learned the magic of fun, she was the only part of Pinkie that Pinkie could fully turn into, if the other Pinkies were overwhelmed by loneliness or sadness.

This creature she faced was not Pinkamena. This other Pinkie was happy, and cheerful, and laughing... about trying to commit murder. As she slashed at Pinkie and Pinkie dodged and rolled and blocked, she giggled about cutting up Pinkie and her friends and putting them in a pie. "And then you'd really be a Pinkie Pie! Okay, maybe more of a Red Pie than a Pinkie Pie, but I could always add some marshmallow to the mix to lighten it up and pinkify it!"

"You aren't funny," Pinkie retorted as she rolled out of the way of a slash. She had to find a way to get back onto the offensive here, to disarm her other self. If she just kept dodging, sooner or later Other Pinkie would get lucky, and then what? "You aren't funny at all! You're just mean! And gross! And I bet your pies taste terrible!"

"Oh, lighten up, me! You have to see the funny side of things! Wouldn't it be funny if I made you into a pink pie? Because you're Pinkie Pie! Like me! And then I could eat you and I would be a Pinkie Pie eating a pink pie made of Pinkie Pie!"

"That isn't even one little bit funny! You're even meaner than Discord was when he was being the worst meanie pants I ever saw!"

Other Pinkie laughed. "That's what he said! Then I stuffed his mouth full of so many cupcakes he couldn't keep talking and I tied his muzzle closed because he was being really really loud. Like sheesh, I saw him take his arms and legs off himself how many times? But all of a sudden I do it and he can't even be a little bit quiet about it! You'd think of all ponies he could have seen the funny side, wouldn't you?"

Pinkie's eyes went wide. "You did what?" And swung a fallen branch against Other Pinkie's slash, so the knife ended up embedded in the branch, which was flung away from both of them by the momentum of the clash.

"Oh, no, you ruined my best carving knife!" Other Pinkie glared at Pinkie. "It's not easy to find meat-grade carving knives in Equestria, you know, Miss Me! Now I'm going to have to order one from Griffonstone or something!" She pulled another knife off her belt. "Oh, well, now I have to cut you up with my second best carving knife!"

There were lots and lots of holes in the world here, even more than there were at home, but the one time she'd tried to exploit one, Other Pinkie had come through a different hole and grabbed her mane while she was in the place between places, so Pinkie didn't dare take one of them. Her other self was much too familiar with where they were in this world. And her other self was as acrobatic as she was. Pinkie needed a disequalizer, something she could use to make Other Pinkie not as good at everything as she was. In desperation, she pulled the cookies from the cookie tray from Canterlot out of her mane and began flinging the cookies at Other Pinkie like throwing stars.

"Ooh! An appetizer!" Other Pinkie jumped, mouth wide, to catch the cookies as Pinkie flung them.
Which meant that when Pinkie flung the baked bad made with dirt and the contents of truly stinky foal diapers at her, she caught that in her mouth as well. It had occurred to Pinkie last night, while baking things for their trip, that if their evil selves were really really evil, she might need to employ the evilest prank in her repertoire, a prank so mean she would never ever do it to a pony from her own world, and she'd made the fake chocolate chip cookie. Of course at the time she'd had no idea precisely how evil her other self would be.

Other Pinkie dropped, gagging and retching. "Oh, gag! Gag gag!" That joke wasn't nearly as funny as gasping "Gasp!", Pinkie thought. "What did you put in that cookie? Guh! Yuck! Augh!"

In the moments when her opponent was disabled by terrible food, Pinkie moved. A single bounce and she was sitting on her downed counterpart, the rope for rope emergency in her hooves under Other Pinkie's muzzle, against her throat, and her own back hooves stepping down on Other Pinkie's folded forelegs, keeping her from being able to deploy her knives. "You are a bad, bad mare and need a time out, Evil Me," Pinkie said, pulling the rope and choking her other self.

Other Pinkie bucked her head wildly and tried to squirm out from under Pinkie, but Pinkie had leverage on her side, and the fact that her own tummy wasn't twisting in revulsion under the onslaught of a baked bad. Pinkie sang in her counterpart's ear. "Go to sleep, go to sleep, go to sleep, my little pony. When you wake, you will be, a much nicer little horsey."

Eventually Other Pinkie went limp under Pinkie, which was an obvious trick, so Pinkie blew directly into her ear, making her throw her head back and squirm again with a squeal. The next time she went limp, she didn't respond to an ear tickle with Pinkie's nose, so Pinkie let her go, checking to make sure she was still breathing. She cut the knife belt with one of the knives, letting it fall off Other Pinkie, then pulled Other Pinkie's forehooves back and tied them behind her back. That wouldn't take Other Pinkie long to escape from, of course. So Pinkie took all the sandwiches and all the rest of the Canterlot cookies out of her mane and piled them in front of Other Pinkie, along with a big bowl full of chocolate milk – hoofmade, not nearly as tasty as Discord's magical chocolate milk, but it would still be irresistible as a palate cleanser after the baked bad, and there was no way any Pinkie could resist cookies and fancy royal sandwiches. In fact, Pinkie took a sip of the chocolate milk herself and nommed a sandwich and a cookie before reluctantly leaving the rest of the pile to occupy her counterpart's attention. Once Other Pinkie ate all of that stuff, her tummy would be too full for contortionism, so she wouldn't be able to break out of the ropes around her forehooves.

Pinkie turned around. One of the Applejacks was on top of the other one, teeth in her ponytail as she smashed her opponent's face into the ground. At first Pinkie couldn't tell which one was winning, until she realized with dismay that it was the Applejack on top who had the half-corrupted Element around her neck.

She checked quickly on Rarity, who was now locked in hoof-to-hoof combat with her evil self, both mares covered with dirt and bleeding scratches and furious with each other about it. Neither Twilight nor Dashie were visible anyplace. Time to rescue Applejack!

She bounced over to the two farm mares. "Hey, Applejack!"

"Shut up, Pinkie, I'm—trying—" 

"But look! Look, I've got something to show you! This is really important!"

"Sweet Celestia, Pinkie, don't you have any sense of timin'?" The evil Applejack turned around, at which point Pinkie bucked her hard in the face, knocking her off the good Applejack and sending
"See? I told you I had something important, called my hooves! My hooves are very important!"

Her own Applejack rolled and got to her hooves. "Nice, Pinkie. Thanks for the save."

"No problem! Let's go help Ra—"

And then there was a flash of purple magic in her face, and suddenly Pinkie felt like she'd been pushing rocks around the rock farm all day and all night and all yesterday too, every muscle aching so badly she could barely move it and the need to sleep overwhelming her. She tried to stay on her hooves, but the pull was too great. "Pinkie!" she heard Applejack shout, but it was as if she were underwater, or under a huge pile of blankets and Applejack was very far away.

Pinkie swayed and fell over. She never even felt herself hitting the ground.

Applejack reared back the moment she saw Pinkie drop. It was the only thing that saved her from being taken out herself, as a second bolt of Twilight's magic shot past her, right where her head had been a moment ago.

"Bull puckey," she said softly to herself, and then spun on her hooves and dodged behind a tree, trying to keep objects between herself and the corrupted Twilight. When Granny Smith had taught her to fight when she was a young'un, she'd always emphasized, never let a unicorn get the drop on you. The only way to deal with unicorns in a fight was to take 'em out, fast and hard, before they had a chance to take you. Now Pinkie was down, and most likely Twilight, since the evil Twilight was here. And there wasn't no way Applejack could take on a Twilight who was hostile and had the advantage of surprise. About the only way she could imagine winning this one was if she could lure evil Twilight into coming close, without actually being in line-of-horn with her at any point, and then buck her in the head quick before she had a chance to cast. But if evil Twilight had taken down Applejack's Twilight, then odds were, there was no winning this one.

The other Twilight stalked after her, ignoring the Rarities. Applejack had to dodge more than one bolt of magic searing past her. She was faster than the unicorn, but unless they were in the open she couldn't use that; there was no galloping at full speed here in the forest. And if they were in the open, there'd be nothing to stop Twilight from hitting her. If the mare would just hang back, just give Applejack a moment, she could rig a trap, but she just kept coming and there wasn't any time.

And once she was down, Applejack reckoned there wasn't no chance Rarity wouldn't go next. She might be even steven with her other self right now, but not if the evil Twilight got into the fight. This was looking bad.

At that point Spike jumped on the evil Twilight with a shriek and grabbed her horn. The unicorn thrashed her head, trying to throw Spike off. "I'll break it off, Twilight! Don't think I won't!" Spike was shouting. "You tell me what you did to my Twilight right now or you can say goodbye to your magic!"

Applejack turned and ran toward them, to support Spike. He didn't seem to need it, though. He had the claws of one paw dug in around the base of evil Twilight's horn, and the other was wound in her mane, pulling her head back. "Tell me what you did to her!" he screamed again.

"I put her to sleep," the corrupted Twilight said, breathing heavily, her eyes wide. "Just as I did to Pinkie. I'm not monstrous enough to harm alternate versions of myself and my friends, as misguided as they may be."
"Rarity! Um, not my Rarity, the other Rarity! You surrender to my Rarity right now or I'll break off Twilight's horn! I'll do it!"

"How uncouth," the evil Rarity sneered. "You should know your place, little dragon. Nothing good comes of your childish attempts to 'protect' us."

"How dare you say that about Spike!" the good Rarity said. "Surrender right now, and apologize to him!"

"I will surrender, to protect Twilight from this *brutish* threat," evil Rarity said. "But I most certainly will not apologize! He's threatening to *de-horn* a friend of mine! What sort of unicorn are you that you cannot comprehend how uncivilized and horrible such an act would be?"

"Maybe it is," Applejack said. "But if you went to another universe to rescue a friend who'd been *tortured*, I reckon you wouldn't care so much about makin' the torturers happy."

"You ponies are monsters," Rarity said. "Discord is far from my personal favorite pony, but let us not talk about uncivilized and horrible behavior from Spike without acknowledging how horrible it is to commit torture."

"You have no idea what Discord has done to our world," the other Rarity snapped.

"And seems to me he paid for that, seein' as how your Spike killed him," Applejack said flatly. "We want our Discord back. The one you've been torturin', the one who had nothing to do with any of the awful stuff your Discord did to you guys. I surely do feel sorry for you and what you suffered, but that ain't no call to take it out on a fellow who didn't do it."

Applejack bound the other Rarity, being somewhat unnecessarily rough when she saw how many more cuts and bruises were on her Rarity than on the other one. "Now you wake up our Pinkie Pie," Spike said. "Do it!"

The evil Twilight sighed. "Very well. Will you actually let me cast a spell to reverse the sleep spell, or are you going to tear my horn off the moment you sense magic channeling through it?"

"Uh, of course I'll let you cast the spell to wake her up," Spike said, and relaxed his grip on the horn slightly.

Suddenly Applejack saw where this was going, and began to shout, "Spike, *don't*—"

It was too late. The magic that pulsed from the corrupted unicorn's horn didn't waken Pinkie Pie. It lifted Spike into the air and bent him backward as if he were doing the limbo. Dragons didn't bend that far, in that direction. Spike screamed.

"Let him go!" Rarity shrilled.

"Now the two of you surrender, or watch him die," the evil Twilight said.

"You wouldn't! You – you just said you weren't monstrous enough to kill any of us!"

"He has proven willing to cause me permanent, disfiguring damage that would cripple me. If you doubt that I would kill in the face of that, by all means, refuse. And live with your conscience afterward, when I call your bluff."

They'd been so close. So close. Poor Spike. He was just a kid, he shouldn't have to live with a single tactical mistake being what would take down all his friends. But better he live with that than
not live at all. Applejack didn't know if a dragon could be killed by breaking its back, but from Spike's screams she wasn't going to take the risk. "We've got no choice, Rarity. Gotta do it."

"I agree," Rarity whispered. "We – we surrender. Don't hurt him, please."

"I will not," evil Twilight agreed, dropping Spike to the ground and no longer bending him. "But if he does not cooperate, I will hurt you."

And then the sleep spell she'd cast on Pinkie swept over Applejack, and Rarity too, judging from how she swayed. Applejack fought to stay awake, channeled all her stubborn into it, and held out nearly a whole minute after Rarity had pitched over, but she couldn't make it further than that before the spell overwhelmed her.

Fluttershy, looks like it's up to you. If you can't get Discord free and get him to help... this looks real bad for us, Applejack thought as her knees buckled and she collapsed to the ground. Rainbow Dash might still win against her opponent, but how was Rainbow going to take on a version of Twilight that had defeated their own alicorn one? Spike had only gotten as far as he had by total surprise. Their best hope was going to be getting Discord's help, and who even knew what shape he'd be in?

And then the darkness claimed her.

"I must thank you for that rescue," Rarity said to Twilight, using her magic to brush the dirt off herself vigorously. "That thoroughly boorish and plebeian alternate me was quite the ferocious fighter, I must admit, even if her taste in mane coloring is atrocious."

"They knew they'd be up against us. They disguised some of themselves so they could differentiate themselves from us. I wonder why Applejack didn't? And the other Rainbow Dash didn't look different either," Twilight mused. "Let's get the others awake so they can help. I want to get these five on a train to Canterlot and have Shining lock them up."

"Did Chrysalis ever send reinforcements as she promised?" Rarity sniffed.

"Eleven experienced soldier Changelings and a Princess. The alicorn took them all out, but they distracted her long enough that I could copy her sleep spell and cast it on her, and then I woke them up. They're guarding the alicorn in the meadow."

"Oh, Twilight, to think you have the potential to become an alicorn! What an amazing notion! Perhaps you should question Discord as to exactly how his so-called 'friend' became an alicorn. What if you could duplicate that for yourself, and become a princess?" Rarity asked excitedly.

"That won't be necessary," Twilight said. If her research with Discord produced the results she hoped for, all ponies could be alicorns, or at the least, as immortal as alicorns. "I'm content with my own nature." Although, if she were an alicorn, she could help Princess Celestia with the sun and the moon herself rather than needing to break Discord to serve. But it wasn't worth pursuing, not now. Maybe later, when she and everypony had all the time in the world.

Twilight stepped over the bodies of the expendable young soldier Changelings, avoiding the ichor all over. This version of Spike was a vicious, brutal monster, judging from what he'd done to these Changelings and what he'd tried to do to Twilight herself. She'd left him awake – he wasn't immune to pony magic like an adult dragon was, but he was resistant, and she wanted to save her strength. But all he was doing now was whimpering and trying not to cry, because she'd made it clear to him that a second attack on his part would result in the death of the alternate Rarity. If he had the same
childish crush on her that her Spike had had before Discord awoke and ruined the world, that should maintain his cooperation.

A spell restored her so-called friends to consciousness, and another one freed Pinkie and Rarity from their bonds. It was time to take their prizes to the train. And to get Fluttershy back to her cottage, where her other self undoubtedly was, looking for Discord. When the call had come in from the Changeling scouts this morning, Twilight had let Fluttershy sleep in, on the grounds that someone needed to guard Discord in case they weren't able to intercept their counterparts. Discord had probably informed the mares of the location of his captivity, which was why the Changelings had spotted them at Fluttershy's cottage. The other Fluttershy would probably stay there in hiding – before their own world's Discord had corrupted them, Fluttershy had been a cowardly, pathetic pony who would hide and tremble at any opportunity. But she could probably rally her animals – well, their own Fluttershy's animals – to attack anypony who confronted her there, and if any of the other Bearers, or any Changelings, hurt her animals even in self-defense, Fluttershy would go ballistic. She was the only one Twilight felt could safely counter the advantage of the animals and capture her counterpart.

She hoisted the trembling, whimpering Spike with her magic. "Everypony, take your sleeping alter ego and carry her to where the Changelings are waiting for us. The sooner we get them off to Canterlot, the sooner you can all return home."

"Thank goodness," Rarity moaned. "I am in desperate need of a shower and some beauty sleep."

"Yeah, well, some of us just have to live with the fact that we got kept up all darned night with this nonsense," Applejack snorted. "Guess I'll sleep when the sun goes down again."

Twilight had told Fluttershy to go along the tree line and then double back to the cottage, but there was no way she was going to do that with Changelings in the meadow. Fluttershy needed allies. Her friends would occupy the Changelings, and she would go rescue Discord, but she'd need some backup – how would she get Discord out of the other Twilight's house directly under that Twilight's nose? She'd need to create a distraction, and she had nothing on hoof to do it with – her saddlebags were full of medical supplies. She'd normally have relied on the others to create the distraction, but right now she was on her own, and Fluttershy did not do well on her own.

Angel Bunny had said that Harry had turned against their Fluttershy in disgust. This wasn't surprising, but it made her sad. And also cut her down a potential ally. Theoretically she could find Harry and talk with him, persuade him that she was the kind of Fluttershy who'd originally befriended him and not the corrupted version, and get him to help her, but Harry had a temper on him, like most bears. Going to ask him for help could result in him attacking her, if he didn't believe her. Manty was another potential option, but if her evil counterpart had driven him off as well, manticores were also known for stinging first and asking questions later.

Zecora, however, was a rational equine being. She might also despise this world's Fluttershy – Fluttercruel, as Discord had called her – but the concept of alternate universes could be explained to her, if she wasn't already familiar with it. And Zecora would have things like fireworks and smoke bombs and other means of creating a distraction. Fluttershy hadn't asked her own Zecora for anything like that because she hadn't thought she would be the one needing to create the distraction.

So instead of moving along the forest edge, Fluttershy went deeper into the forest. This version of the Everfree didn't scare her at all; it saddened her. So many plants were dead, so few animals were visible anywhere. Usually Everfree animals hid from ponies, if they weren't trying to eat them, but Fluttershy knew nature well enough to see the signs of life, evidence of nests and dens and
droppings, and in this version of the Everfree there were so few. The withered remains of plunder vines twined around so many dead trees. This world's Twilight obviously hadn't figured out the need to return the Elements, and given that they were corrupted, that might not even have worked.

Fluttershy came out into the little clearing that held Zecora's hut, and stared. Half the roof was torn off, the door off its hinges, animal chew-holes visible in several places along the base. She trembled. This was all wrong. Zecora wouldn't leave her hut in this state; she must not live here anymore.

But maybe she'd left a message saying where she'd moved to. Tentatively, Fluttershy stepped into the ruined hut. "H-hello? Is anypony here?"

There were vines throughout the hut, and broken terracotta pots all over, and Zecora's masks fallen to the floor. Her cauldron had been knocked over. Spots on the packed earth floor had turned strange colors – bone-white, bright blue, blood red, even yellow. This didn't look like Zecora had moved, it looked like she'd been attacked. But there was dust all over everything, and some green, non-plunder vines beginning to twine around the legs of a table, so whatever had happened, it had happened a while ago. Fluttershy turned her head, trying to take in the whole room – and screamed, and couldn't make herself stop screaming.

A tangle of vines that came up through the floor and rose up to the ceiling, where they had pushed through the half-roof that still remained on the hut, held an equine skeleton trapped in it. A skeleton with a gold torc around its neck, and scraps of black and white fur still visibly attached to the bones right above the hooves. On the earthen floor under the skeleton, there lay two golden earrings... one of them with half an ear still attached to it, shriveled and dried but still plainly part of a zebra's ear.

"Oh, Zecora," Fluttershy said, choking up. Tentatively she reached a hoof toward the body, and pulled back before actually touching the vines. They seemed as if they might still be alive, still black and thick rather than the withered things Fluttershy had found all over the forest. What if they reached out and grabbed her? And she didn't have time to bury Zecora's bones, anyway; she was here to rescue Discord, and restore the Tree, and return her and her friends' counterparts to their true selves. If that part of the plan worked, she could tell them about Zecora's death, and they could lay the shaman to rest.

But if the plunder vines had killed Zecora, and the corrupted Elements were still in the hooves of the Bearers and not on the Tree... had the Tree even survived?

Fluttershy turned and galloped, dodging through the trees, heading as fast as she could go to the place where the Tree of Harmony had been, in her world. Please let it be alive, please. If it was dead, how could she keep her promise to Angel, to restore his Fluttershy to who she'd once been? And how could she make that Fluttershy pay for what she'd done in a way that kindness could endure inflicting, otherwise?

She shook her head. She wasn't doing this for revenge. It's just a bonus. No! The rage that welled inside her every time she thought of Fluttercruel and what she had done to Discord, to Angel, to all of the innocent, helpless little animals she cared for... she had to push that down. It wasn't helpful. Maybe later she would need it, but she couldn't let herself feel it right now.

By the time she reached the stairway down into the cavern, she was lathered and out of breath. There were no vines visible along the path or along the stairway; that was a good sign so far. Her legs felt like jelly, though. Oh, I really need to go for more runs, I'm so weak! If the way she dealt with her own weakness and helplessness was to get help with friends, then without any friends, she was useless... and one of her friends needed her right now. More than one of them, really, when
you considered that the animals were depending on her to restore their Fluttershy and her friends were depending on her to get Discord's help in completing the mission, but Discord was the one whose freedom and sanity was at stake.

Well, she hadn't used her wings at all in getting here – she'd wanted speed, and in a forest, flight wasn't always the best way to get it – so they were well-rested. Fluttershy extended her wings and jumped, so fear of heights couldn't lock them shut, then flapped wildly as she descended down into the cavern. She hated starting a flight from so high up, but the sooner she had answers, the sooner she could go to Discord's rescue.

As she landed, her eyes widened in dismay, taking in the condition of the Tree. The top half of it was free of vines, but dim – not dead, not lightless as it had been when she'd seen it covered with vines a few months ago, but nowhere near the radiance it should have had. The bottom was twined all around with vines. They weren't so thick as to make it impossible to make out the symbols on the trunk of the Tree, though.

The symbol of the Sun glowed weakly. A crack ran through the Moon symbol, and it was dark, standing out against the dimness of the Tree by how very lightless it was. And down near the base, on the side that didn't face out into the cavern, she saw a faint, flickering glow. When Fluttershy flew around the side of the Tree, avoiding the vines on the ground, she could make out the flickering symbol. It was a heart, very similar to Cadance's cutie mark, glowing brighter than the Tree itself only in flickers, and occasionally flickering with the internal darkness that the Moon showed.

Up above, the giant star in the center shone brightly, but half the light was the color the Tree normally radiated, brilliant bluish-white. The other half was dull, no brighter than the rest of the Tree, and yet it cast a half-star-shaped spotlight across the cavern floor. When Fluttershy accidentally flapped in front of it, it was so bright it blinded her for a second, and even after she'd turned her head and shut her eyes, it shone as a brilliant red afterimage in the darkness of her closed lids.

A tree that was dim, but not dead. A Sun that glowed, a Moon gone dark, and Love flickering. The star of Magic normal on one side, and on the other shining a blinding light that couldn't be seen unless you were directly in front of it. Fluttershy wished Twilight were here; she would understand what these things meant.

Well. Maybe the Tree could be saved and the Bearers reharmonized, and maybe not. There were no clear answers for Fluttershy here, and nothing here she could use as a distraction to help her save Discord. She decided to go back to the cottage after all and see what she could find. Maybe Angel wasn't done evacuating, and some of her little friends might be available to help her. Bird friends, maybe. Or possibly something she owned, or that the other her owned. One way or another, she needed something she could use to lure the evil Twilight out of the library so she could get in and find Discord.

She flapped her wings and lifted into the air. A sense of urgency pressed her; it was daytime now, the sun up over the horizon, and if Twilight kept the same hours here she did at home, she would be waking up soon... and if she was holding Discord at her library there was probably a reason. If Fluttershy took too long to find her distraction, Twilight might start... she swallowed, unwilling to even finish that sentence in her head, but her imagination was far too good at coming up with horrible, terrifying images. She couldn't delay, and let Twilight start doing... things to her friend. He'd endured far too much already.

Fluttershy feared heights, and she wasn't a strong flyer, but she could do anything for a friend. She
lifted straight up until she was above the Everfree, clear of the tree cover, and put on a burst of speed, in a direct line for the cottage that was and wasn't her home.

Chapter End Notes

Pinkie's song is based on "Hush-A-Bye" by Peter, Paul and Mary. The original words were "Hush-a-by, don't you cry, go to sleep you little baby. When you wake you shall have all the pretty little horsies."

The stuff with Pinkie's identities was from "All Apologies", the second chapter of Awkward Conversations, which I never finished and therefore you haven't read it. The short form is: Pinkie does not have Multiple Identity Disorder, and Pinkamena is not a psycho killer, but I am playing with the concept of Pinkie and Pinkamena as separate personalities, if possibly not full, individuated personalities. Pinkie personifies parts of herself that her own consciousness would interfere with -- for example, her giddy behavior and easy distractability should work against her ability to manage logistics for party planning, so she made the part of herself that can do logistics a separate persona so it wouldn't interfere with her basic personality, and outsources the work to that part of herself so it doesn't interfere with the Pinkie consciousness. This is actually a lot like what all of us do, except that when we hand tasks over to the part of our brain that does that task and get our consciousness out of it, we neither personify that part of our selves nor can we clearly receive communication from it. I'll go into this more in a blog post eventually, and also, finish All Apologies. Point is, this is not the usual fannish take on Pinkamena, or for that matter Pinkie.

A Changeling Princess is a biological Queen who has not fully matured; they don't reach full maturation as Queens unless they have their own Hive. They are much more powerful than most Changelings, but not as powerful as the Queen is. Eventually I'll go into some detail on my take on Changelings, but all you need to know right now is I AM TOTALLY IGNORING THE COMICS BECAUSE THEIR VERSION OF CHANGELINGS IS UTTERLY STUPID. I consider comic books optional canon, and right now I am totally exercising my option out.

Dammit, I could have sworn Cadance's cutie mark was also on the Tree! But when I rewatched the scenes with it, it wasn't there... Well, it's there now, just on the side where you can't normally see it when you face the Tree.
Chapter Notes

Trigger warnings: There is no actual rape or physical abuse in this chapter, but there is discussion of it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Opposition, 7 AM

Twilight was exhausted when she returned to the library, after making sure that the prisoners were securely bound and bespelled to remain unconscious long enough to be transported to Canterlot. The two Rainbow Dashes were still missing, and if the alternate overpowered the Rainbow of Twilight's world, Twilight certainly didn't want her to be able to find the other alternates here in Ponyville. Besides, their disposition was most appropriate to leave up to Princess Celestia anyway, though Twilight had some ideas as to what would be necessary.

"Spike," she called. "Get me some coffee, now."

"Uh, sure thing, Twilight!" If he thought eagerness to assist was going to make her forgive him or relent on his punishment for letting himself be deceived by Discord, he would learn otherwise, she thought. She had used a spell to identify all the secret hiding places for his hoard and had confiscated all of his gems, leaving him only a small bag of fossils he'd collected – she approved of an interest in science, and she knew that Spike considered the taste of ordinary rock disgusting, similar to how a pony would react to moldy hay, so she knew he wouldn't eat them. In a week, if he proved himself worthy, she might return his gems to him. He'd struggled not to cry when she told him, but at least in the end he had managed to avoid pointless bawling.

The alternates were dangerous. Particularly the alicorn. She was sloppy – perhaps even sloppier than Twilight had been before the Diadem – but so powerful. Twilight knew herself to be the most powerful living unicorn in Equestria, but the alicorn's mana pool dwarfed hers. Anger and resentment at Discord for not telling her that her counterpart was an alicorn shot through her, but she pushed it down – what did she expect of him? For a moment she thought of interrogating him to find out how the other one (she could not even think of the alicorn as herself; the magic she radiated was so very different) had become an alicorn, but then she realized that this would reveal that she'd met the other one, confirming to Discord that a rescue attempt was in fact being made. This could not be allowed. Discord would take strength from knowing his so-called "friends" were trying to save him, and then it would be even harder to break him.

If they were sent back to their world, they would simply find a way to return, even if Twilight forced Discord to destroy that particular portal. He'd mentioned that this dimension was porous, and he could not yet be trusted to be allowed to seal it. And they were a serious threat. The two Applejacks and the two Rarities seemed evenly matched; Applejack had told Twilight that although she was winning the fight when the alternate Pinkie interfered, it had been close and partly up to luck. Though that might be Applejack spinning it. Where Rainbow Dash self-aggrandized by insisting her opponents were pathetic and weak, Applejack tended to go in the opposite direction, talking them up to make them seem tougher than they actually were, which created the illusion that she was being honest and modest while actually excusing her from any
failures and making any victories seem all the more impressive. Still, the two Rarities had obviously been close in ability, so logically the Applejacks might well be.

And while Pinkie's description of the fight made it clear that her alternate was far less vicious, ruthless and experienced in combat, it was also clear that the alternate Pinkie was more focused, less impulsive, and possibly even smarter. The Rainbow Dashes were likely evenly matched. The Fluttershys wouldn't be, of course; their own Fluttershy had to be much more competent in combat than the alternate could ever be. But one pony with a clear superiority to her alternate didn't make up for four ponies who were close to the same... and the alicorn was an alicorn.

Twilight had burned a hole cleanly through her wing, cauterizing it, and by the time she was done defeating the other alternates and had returned for her captive, the wing had fully regenerated. She was careless with her power, but she had it to burn. She was, very likely, close to immortal. When Twilight had ordered the captives bound, she'd had unicorn limiter rings put on both the alicorn and the other Rarity... and then magic limiter bracelets on all four hooves and a wing binder with magic limiting runes woven into it, because the alicorn might potentially be able to cast if either pegasus or earth pony channels were open to her, even if her horn was blocked. And still, part of the reason she was having the Changelings take them all to Celestia was that she wasn't even sure that would be enough. The only reason Twilight had won that fight was the Diadem enhancing her reaction time and tactical abilities.

Since taking the Diadem and uniting herself with it, bonding it to the Element of Magic, Twilight had been afraid of very, very few things. She'd been afraid of Discord after his reappearance, when he'd stolen the other five's corrupted elements and hid them at the center of a perpetually shifting maze so he'd have the freedom to wreak havoc in Canterlot and Manehattan – rightly so, because the maze had been literally impossible to navigate, and only taking Discord on directly with the Sweet Dreams spell had allowed her to dispel the maze entirely and recover her teammates' Elements. If the Sweet Dreams spell hadn't worked, she wouldn't have had another option. Discord claimed he'd been planning to leave in a few days anyway, but at the time, not only had she not known that, but she hadn't even had confirmation that he wasn't their original Discord returned from the dead.

And now that he was bound, she continued to be afraid of the fragile harmony between the Bearers breaking down and freeing him from the spells that held him. Since capturing Discord, she had barely been able to do anything to control the excesses of her friends. Fluttershy had moderated her own behavior, turning to Discord for relief of her darker urges instead of continuing to harm innocent animals as she had before. But Pinkie Pie had increased her demands for raw materials for her "special ingredients", Applejack had demanded that Twilight use her influence with Celestia to grant Sweet Apple Acres all sorts of concessions from the Crown, Rarity had forced Twilight to give her an entire platoon of Royal Guards to wipe out the Diamond Dogs in the area and take their gem supply for herself, and Rainbow Dash had been around even less often than she'd been before, mostly showing up only for the opportunity to take out some frustrations by beating up Discord every two or three weeks. And Twilight had had to tolerate all of this, because any serious conflict beyond schoolfilly insults could shatter what was left of their harmony. The Opposition elements were much more resilient to disharmony than the elements had been when they were pure Harmony, but they wouldn't be able to take out-and-out strife between the Bearers.

Nothing else had frightened her since adopting the Diadem. Until today, when she confronted an alternate self in league with Chaos, and that other self was an alicorn.

Spike returned with the coffee. "Here you are, Twilight! Hot and fresh, just how you like it!"

Toadyng. Disgusting. She wondered sometimes if killing Discord had done him so much
psychological damage that he was effectively a different dragon; she remembered loving him, being proud of him, but in the past few months he'd been nothing but an annoyance. "Take a letter, Spike."

"Okay! Right on it!"

"Dear Princess Celestia, the prisoners I am sending you, courtesy of Princess Lambda and her team, are not changelings, nor are they magical constructs. My theory that the Discord we hold prisoner is in fact from an alternate timeline to our own has proven correct; Discord confirmed it under questioning, and confessed that the letter Spike was tricked into sending, the one that he believed would be going to you and sent you a followup regarding, was in fact sent to his home universe, requesting assistance. The alternate versions of myself and my friends are from that universe. They claim to have reformed Discord by befriending him, a claim that seems highly dubious given the chaos he engaged in when he arrived here. More to the point, Discord has admitted that they released him and 'reformed' him at the request of your counterpart, who was employing him in sealing dimensional barriers so extradimensional travelers – such as Discord himself is to us – could not enter their universe."

Spike stopped writing. "Really? Is that what he was doing?"

Twilight rolled her eyes. "Did you genuinely believe he was doing anything else? It is unbelievable that you could be so idiotic as to believe Discord had anything other than wholly selfish intentions. If I hadn't heard the evidence for myself, I'd never have believed you could be such a fool as to be tricked by Discord, of all creatures. How could you have entertained for a moment the notion that he was anything other than completely evil?"

"But... he's not the one I killed. He didn't do any of those things to you and the others. Isn't he under a spell that he can't lie?"

"He didn't do any of those things because he never had the opportunity; the point of difference between our timelines appears to be that our Discord recognized that we had re-activated the Elements sooner than the one we now hold captive did, and had time to evade. That one was turned to stone before he had the chance, and of course if their Princess Celestia foolishly believed he could be tamed by 'friendship', he would have taken the opportunity to pretend that it had worked, to gain his freedom. They did nothing to stop him from coming here and wreaking havoc."

"Well, yeah, but... he made it rain fish and stuff like that. Nothing like the really bad stuff he did – I mean the other one did. Is that really wreaking havoc?"

Twilight glared at Spike. She wanted to slap him, but his dragon skin would make him impervious to any blow light enough not to cause internal damage. "It was chaos, Spike. That's the definition of havoc. Any deliberate assault on the laws of physics and nature is chaos, and chaos is evil. Now be quiet and take dictation."

Spike nodded rapidly, and Twilight continued. "Because he is plainly valuable to their version of you, and possibly because they are either foolish enough or corrupted enough to genuinely believe that he is their 'friend', they have come to take him from us. I need not tell you how disastrous this would be to our plans, Princess. We will never be able to free you from the burden you carry without Discord in our hooves and under our control." She glared at Spike again. "And that, Spike, is why you should not have interfered. Even if this version of Discord is practically angelic in comparison to the one we defeated, Princess Celestia's health depends on having another being who can raise the sun and moon, and with Princess Luna's death, Discord is the only being with that power. If we cannot break him and make him serve, Princess Celestia will suffer. You don't want Princess Celestia to suffer, do you?"
"Of course not!"

"Sometimes I wonder," Twilight said coldly. "Your actions in collaborating with Discord were deeply disloyal. You're aware of that, correct?"

Spike hung his head. "I'm sorry, Twilight. I'm really sorry."

"So you claim. Continue taking dictation." He took up his quill again, and she began dictating again. "These alternates are a serious threat to us. The alternate Pinkie Pie actually defeated our Pinkie; the alternates of Rarity and Applejack seem evenly matched to ours; and my own alternate is an alicorn, Princess." She leaned over Spike. "No, not 'alicorn princess', we don't actually know if she is acknowledged as a princess in her home dimension. It's alicorn, comma, capital P Princess, because I'm addressing our Princess."

"Sorry." Spike scratched out the offending phrase and rewrote it.

"I defeated her only through the aid of Princess Lambda and her team of changelings, many of whom were injured in the battle, and I cannot guarantee that I will be able to do it again. She is far more powerful than I am. The Diadem gives me some advantage over her in that I appear to react faster than she does, but this will not indefinitely compensate for the fact that she is immortal and I am not, let alone her amplified power.

"I regret to advise this, but I believe you must have all four of them executed immediately. The danger they present is too great to let them live. At the very least, even if you choose to be merciful and spare the others, the alicorn version of myself should be executed at the earliest possible opportunity. I do not know how long the alicorn binders on her will contain her power. The alternates of Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy are currently still at large, so sparing the other three might have value in that it would leave us with hostages, but there is no possible use for the alicorn that outweighs the danger she presents."

Spike interrupted. "But she's you, Twilight! How can you tell Princess Celestia to kill her?"

"She is dangerous, Spike. As dangerous as Discord was. He could be defeated by the Elements, but how can the Elements defeat an Element Bearer? Nightmare Moon had lost her connection to her Elements when she was corrupted, but we have every reason to think these Bearers still hold their connections." Of course, they weren't wearing their physical Elements, any of them, but that wasn't a good reason to assume they weren't still Bearers. With Discord to consult on matters regarding the science of traveling between universes, the alternates might well believe that taking their Elements into another dimension would endanger the Elements, and who knew, perhaps that might even be true.

"But still – we're not supposed to kill ponies!"

"Says the dragon who murdered a contained foe."

Spike made a sound halfway between a sigh and a moan. "I told you, Twilight. I told all of you. I'm going to live a long, long time, and turning him to stone wasn't going to be permanent – he got out once, he could do it again. And I'm just a dragon. You saw what he did to that poor red dragon Fluttershy talked out of sleeping near Ponyville." The dragon had made the mistake of challenging Discord because Discord's antics had woken him, and though old, he wasn't a thousand years old – he'd had no idea what he was dealing with. Discord had thrown him into space, without wings. He might even still be alive up there, somewhere. "I'll be powerful when I'm grown, but I won't be any match for Discord even then, and I ... I just couldn't bear having that hanging over my head. Knowing that he could break out and ruin all our lives again any time, and there would be nothing I
"So you took it on yourself to be a hero, and damaged the world near-irreparably."

"I know! I'm sorry... I shouldn't have done it, I knew I shouldn't be doing it even when I did it, but... I just felt like all the options were bad and I thought I was picking the lesser of two evils."

"Well, killing the alicorn is the lesser of two evils, I assure you. I am not comfortable ordering my own death, either." This was a lie. Twilight desperately wanted the alicorn dead. The thought of another self, another version of herself, only more powerful, and so twisted she called Chaos incarnate a friend, made her sick. "End the letter with my usual closing, and send it. I need to speak to Fluttershy."

She trotted over to her workroom, her hooves clopping against the wood floor perhaps a trifle louder than they would normally, and used her magic to unlock the door, yanking it open, hoping that Fluttershy had the decency to be... well, decent, at this time of the morning.

Fluttershy was curled up on blankets next to Discord, who was still bound spread-eagle in the rune circle, the same as she'd left him last night. He was awake, his head turning to look at her with a blank, unreadable expression. "Fluttershy," Twilight called. "Wake up. There is a matter that requires your attention, with the animals."

Fluttershy's head jerked up. "Oh, dear," she said. "I overslept! I meant to get up and go over there to feed them... what time is it?"

"Seven twenty am," Twilight said.

Fluttershy relaxed. "Oh, well, I haven't overslept then. I usually feed them at seven thirty, so I just need to fly over there quickly and get them fed. Should I take Discord back?"

"No. Remember what we discussed last night. He is to remain here."

"Oh... right, about the... yes. I remember." She got to a kneeling position, legs still folded under her. "You'll be okay here at Twilight's for a little while without me, won't you, sweetie?" she said to Discord, nuzzling his neck. Sickening.

"It isn't as if I have a choice, now do I?" Discord asked, bitterness in his voice.

"Oh, don't be that way," Fluttershy said, getting to her hooves. "I have to go away for a little while, but I'll be right back. And if you're sarcastic with me now, I'll take that into consideration when I come back, so I think you'll want to moderate your tone."

Discord looked up at the ceiling. "I'm sure nothing will happen to me that you would disapprove of," he said in a dull tone.

"That's the spirit," Fluttershy said. "Oh, and don't forget not to let anything damage your collar today! See you later, sweetie!"

She left the room with Twilight. Twilight closed the door, but didn't bother to lock it; Discord was chained, and once Fluttershy had dealt with her counterpart and could return, Twilight, who desperately needed to get some sleep, didn't want to have to wake up and unlock the door for her. "Is there really something going on with my animals?" Fluttershy asked, once the door was securely shut.

The workroom wasn't truly soundproof – Spike had complained more than once of hearing
Discord's screams, before Twilight had made it adequately clear to him that she considered his squeamishness about Discord's suffering borderline treasonous – but it was impossible to hear the sound of normal conversation through the door. Still, Twilight led Fluttershy a short distance away before answering. "They came through. Last night."

"Oh, dear! Do we have to go fight them?"

"You may have to fight yours. All of the rest of us defeated ours except for Rainbow Dash; her combat was still ongoing the last I saw her, and since it was an aerial battle, I have no idea where the two of them have ended up. But your counterpart wasn't with the others. Since Discord would have informed our counterparts that he was being held at your home, I imagine that's where she went, and without support from her friends or any knowledge of where Discord is, I greatly doubt she'd have the courage to leave the cottage and go exploring."

"So you think she's still there." Fluttershy's eyes narrowed. "The version of me that Discord claimed to love."

Twilight's first reaction was to reject Fluttershy's emotionalism in exasperation. Discord had been ordered to lie, and had responded with a claim that he loved Fluttershy. Why Fluttershy insisted on interpreting this as a true statement that applied to the other one rather than a lie that applied to her, Twilight wasn't sure... no, strike that, of course she knew why. Becoming cruel had turned Fluttershy into a jealous monster. And if turning her jealousy on her other self made her more effective... in this case, perhaps Fluttershy's senseless and overblown emotions would work toward Twilight's goals. So she pushed aside her first impulse and said, "Yes."

"Is there any particular reason why we don't want her fertilizing my garden?"

"None whatsoever. I've already advised Princess Celestia to kill the other counterparts."

A sadistic smile glittered on Fluttershy's face. "Can we tell him? After they're all taken care of?"

"What purpose would that serve?"

"Oh, honestly, Twilight! You're a genius, you don't need to be so dense. He pinned all his hopes on that letter, but he doesn't really believe they're coming for him because he doesn't think they're his friends. So when we tell him, oh yes they did come for him, but we killed them all... and possibly show him his Fluttershy's head as proof..."

Twilight blinked. That was a depth of sadism she hadn't imagined, herself. "You believe this will help to break him?"

"Help? I think it'll be the last straw. He's close, Twilight, I can tell. Just a little bit more, and he'll be ours forever."

If Discord could safely be interrogated about the alicorn, because she was dead and he had been informed of such, Twilight might be able to learn from him how she ascended to alicornhood, and duplicate the feat for herself. Discord wouldn't even be necessary if she could become an alicorn herself; then she could help Princess Celestia directly, the way Princess Luna had done once. She could officially take Princess Celestia's place as her second-in-command, in charge while Princess Celestia recovered from the damage the long year of chaos had done to her mind and heart. And then once Princess Celestia had healed... they would rule together. Instead of two sisters, they would be more akin to mother and daughter, but they would still be family ruling together, as it had been for Princess Celestia when Luna was alive. Twilight swallowed at the thought. Becoming an
alicorn herself had never been an option she imagined, but now that she knew it was possible, she wanted it more than she'd thought possible. To be Celestia's fellow princess... to have the power to protect her, carry her burdens when she faltered, be there through the centuries for her...

For a moment a brief fantasy flickered through her mind, of promising Discord his freedom if he made her into an alicorn. She could even spare his friends. Perhaps, promise him his freedom, become an alicorn, and then execute him mercifully as he'd begged for last night... he couldn't actually allowed to be free, after all, that would be horribly irresponsible, but she could promise him his friends' lives in exchange...

No. No, what was she thinking? Discord was Chaos, and couldn't be trusted. The same trap Spike had fallen into, and she was considering walking into it herself. Once she made ponykind immortal, they would all effectively be alicorns anyway. It was selfish of her to want alicornhood for herself and be willing to give up her dream of ending entropy for ponykind for it. She would proceed with the plan as intended. That being said, if Fluttershy broke him by presenting his friend's severed head to him, the plan could be enacted that much sooner, and she would have no reason to hide from him that she knew her other self was an alicorn, so she'd be able to question him on that matter as well.

"Very well. I agree with the plan. If you can successfully kill the other Fluttershy and retrieve her head, or her corpse, you may present her body to Discord and tell him that the others have all been executed in Canterlot."

"Or!" Fluttershy's grin was now practically manic. "What if I just disabled her, brought her here, and killed her in front of him? That might work really well, too."

Twilight shook her head. "Don't complicate matters. Just kill her, quickly. Before she recruits the animals who have reason to hate you now to assist her."

Fluttershy paled slightly. "I—I doubt she can do that. If Harry sees her, he's likely to tear her apart before she can even get a word out explaining that she isn't me."

"Don't bet your life on underestimating your former self's capabilities. Indulging your sadistic nature is a weakness. Simply kill her."

"All right," Fluttershy sighed. "Let me get my bag. I might need the whip." Twilight gave her a hard look. "For a weapon, Twilight. I'm not going to take any of my animal friends hostage to use against her, and she might have the element of surprise if she's smart enough to realize I have to come home eventually. I mean, I know she's probably there, but not where. She could have booby-trapped the windows for all I know."

"Is that truly likely?"

"They won't be traps that cause physical harm, just traps that alert her. I used to put them up in my house all the time, so I'd have plenty of warning if anypony broke into my home."

"Really? Ponyville has never precisely been a high crime area."

"Yes, really! You know what I used to be like! Now let me go get my bag so I can deal with this!"

"The door to the workroom isn't locked," Twilight said, tiredly.

Fluttershy yanked the door open and flew inside, Twilight following her. "Almost forgot my bag, sweetie!" she caroled at Discord, grabbed her bag, and flew off.
"What sort of animal emergency is she going to deal with?" Discord asked, as Twilight started to walk out through the door. "Some creature hasn't been raped enough?"

The question was bizarre enough, even coming from Discord, that Twilight had to turn and stare at him. "What are you talking about?"

"Well, that's what's in the bag. Sex toys. Also her whip, so I suppose the emergency could be an animal who hasn't been whipped enough, but unless it's an Everfree creature I can't imagine any animals surviving a blow from that whip, so it seems to me it must be the sex toys she needs for her emergency."

Twilight's face wrinkled in disgust. She'd had less than no desire to be reminded of the nature of Fluttershy's use of Discord, or her pets for that matter. "As little as I imagine you're capable of refraining from being disgusting, I must exhort you to try for once in your life. I have no interest in Fluttershy's... extracurricular activities."

"Oh, but you know about them, don't you? You know exactly what she's been doing to me. You may think it's disgusting, but you let her get away with it. So does she walk all over you despite you being approximately seventeen times more powerful than she is, or is it part of the master plan for reforming me to let her rape me twice a day? I mean, I'm sure when you read the torture manuals that must have been filed under T here, it told you that rape is an excellent strategy for breaking a slave, but was it your idea to have her do it or was it hers and it's just a fortunate coincidence that her perversions coincide with what you wanted done to me anyway?"

Twilight felt anger rising, blood pounding in her ears and turning her face red hot. Discord hadn't spoken this way to her since shortly after handing him over to Fluttershy. "You appear to be backsliding. Have you forgotten what I have the power to do to you?"

Discord laughed bitterly. "You mean the thing you're going to do to me anyway no matter what I do? You can't have it both ways, dear Twilight; if you're going to torture me twice a week regardless of what I say or do and nothing I do makes you show the slightest bit of mercy, why should I think it matters how I talk to you? It's not as if holding my tongue spares me anything, so why not just tell you exactly what I think? You're the one who cast that honesty spell on me, so obviously you want to know exactly what I think."

"Your premise is faulty. Unless I'm interrogating you I haven't the slightest interest in what you think. And I find this conversation uncomfortable, so I am ending it." She turned back to the door.

"Oh, but your premise is faulty. I'll bet you'd care a lot about what I think about how to make ponies immortal and give yourself near-godlike power."

For a moment she was shocked into stillness. How did he know what she was thinking? Had he learned somehow that his "friends" had come through to rescue him? "Is there a reason you think that would be of interest to me?"

Discord snorted. "Believe it or not, most of the time I can actually hear you perfectly well while I'm screaming. So when you're having Spike write down your notes about exactly what you're learning from filling my entire bloodstream with acid, I'm paying attention. Normally I'd find your scientific endeavors repetitive and dull, but when every cell in your body has been doused with cooking oil and set on fire, you look for distractions wherever you can find them."

Twilight relaxed. He knew nothing about what was going on right now. Perhaps it was an oversight on her part that she hadn't taken steps to muffle his hearing before conducting her experiments, but what good would it do him to know her goals, anyway? "If you have something to
say about my experiments, and not more pointless complaining about Fluttershy's behavior, I'll listen." Most likely he was trying to mislead her, but she was smart enough to be able to extract useful information from him anyway.

"Ah, I see. You're willing to let her rape me, but you don't want me to talk about it because it makes you uncomfortable. Well, trust me, having a mare shove her hoof up your nethers is a lot more uncomfortable, and no one lets me walk away."

That was not a mental image Twilight needed. Ever. "Is there a reason why you've suddenly decided to be crude and repulsive?"

He laughed. "That's so refreshing about you, Twilight. You don't pretend to be doing things to me for my own good. You don't claim you're training me to be a good citizen, you don't give me rewards for my cooperation, you don't pretend you love me. You just hate me and everything I stand for, nice and clean. I tell you that your dear friend is subjecting me to one of the most horrifying acts ponykind can imagine, and all you have to say is that I'm being disgusting."

Twilight's eyes narrowed. "After all you've done, do you truly expect me to feel sympathy for you?"

"What do you mean, after all I've done? Didn't we just go through this last night? I didn't do any of that. My Bearers were obviously more competent than you and your pals were, because they turned me to stone. Or are you going to seriously try to argue that fish rain and floating pies is worth torture and rape, and if so, how long did they have you on the rack for turning your parents into potted plants?"

"Regardless of the differences between what you spent the last year doing, and what he did before we turned him to stone... you are Chaos. You and I are natural enemies. You are evil, and everything I have eternally sworn to fight, and I am no more capable of caring that you suffer than you care about the fate of filth after you wash it off your body."

Discord's eyes narrowed. "Natural enemies? I think that might be taking it a bit far, don't you think? You've caused your fair share of chaos in your life."

Twilight smiled, for the first time since this conversation had started. She knew something Discord didn't, and she was going to enjoy rubbing his face in it. "Have you never wondered what the opposite of Magic is, Discord?"

Discord squinted at her, brow furrowing in concentration. His eyes then went wide, an expression of horror forming on his face. "You didn't."

"I see you know already. As I might have expected. Of course the Lord of Chaos knows that at its base, magic is chaos. The universe has two separate set of laws – one clean and predictable, wholly governed by math, and the other dominated by emotion and desire, with the ability to alter the world based on the will or the whim of the individual. Without Harmony, magic would have torn the world apart with its ability to amplify senselessness, to make real that which should not be. Magic is chaos... thus, the opposite of chaos is—"

"Order," Discord whispered. "Dear gods. You bonded yourself to Matrisse, didn't you?"

Twilight frowned. "I found an item called the Diadem of Order, and I incorporated it into my Element. This made it an Element of Opposition, permitting me to harmonize with those that you created. And while you introduced chaos and disharmony to harmony, what I introduced was order, rebalancing the equation. With the Diadem enhancing my abilities, I was able to devise a plan to
defeat your counterpart, and unravel the spell he'd placed on us that kept us from meeting together."

Discord shook his head. "Oh, Twilight," he said softly. "I'm so sorry he drove you to that. Do you have any idea what you've done to yourself? Do you even know you committed suicide the moment you put that Diadem on?"

Twilight scowled. "What do you mean? The Diadem has enhanced me. It's made me more intelligent; it's improved my control of my magic."

"At the cost of everything Twilight Sparkle was," Discord said. "There's nothing left of you but Matrisse now, running on a pony brain, and you don't even know it. The fragments of Twilight left in you are just enough to confuse you into thinking you're still her, but you're not. You may be more than a pony, but you're far, far less than Twilight Sparkle."

Rage welled. Twilight wanted to hurt him, to punish him for his lying words. How could she possibly be less than she'd been? The Diadem had made her superior in every way, helping her control the emotions that tormented her, bringing clarity to her thinking. She had defeated an alicorn version of herself. She'd defeated Discord himself, twice. He was lying here on the floor of her workroom, bound and helpless, because the Diadem had made her better than she was. "I would not expect Chaos to understand the superiority that Order has brought me," she sneered. "Now, I believe you promised me a discussion of power, and how I might go about making ponies immortal. Was that a lie to lure me into listening to you so you could amuse yourself by sniping at me?"

"You have so little faith in your own abilities," he said. "How many times do you need it proven to you that I can't lie? It was your own spell, you'd think you'd have more confidence."

"I am strongly considering attaching the apparatus to you and beginning an experimental protocol. The schedule has already been thrown off, and you appear to be more fully recovered from my last protocol than you have been in some time."

That finally got an expression of fear from him. "No, no, that won't be necessary," he said hastily. "What I wanted to tell you is that you're going about your experiments all wrong. You're trying to derive how to control entropy through me, but entropy is only one aspect of chaos, and frankly one of the least controllable aspects, and magic itself is subject to it. Nothing you can do to fight entropy itself can do anything other than accelerate it; the best you can do is move it around, shift it to a different location so you don't have to worry about it anymore. And there's no way you can do that on the scale you want to do it on with my magic... directly."

"Is there any reason why I shouldn't consider everything you say on this topic a transparently self-serving attempt to make me stop experimenting on you?"

"Yes. I do, in fact, know how to get you the power you need, and how you can shift the burden of entropy by taking advantage of the different physical laws of dimensions outside this one."

"And you're prepared to tell me, for a price. Let me guess. Remove Fluttershy's libido magically and let you free."

Discord laughed. "Oh, that would be tempting, if there was the tiniest hope in hell that you'd do it, but I know better. No, the payoff for me is inherent in the ritual itself. There's nothing separate you'd need to do."

"Why should I perform a ritual that you admit requires me to do something to your benefit?"
His mouth twisted into a sour smile. "Because it's only to my benefit now, and only because I've changed my priorities. It wouldn't have been to my benefit at all yesterday."

Again the cold touch of suspicion crawled down her spine. "Why is that?"

"Because yesterday I didn't want to die."

Twilight blinked at him in surprise. "What?"

Discord turned away from her, looking up at the ceiling. "Fluttershy said... well, she proved to me that no pony is coming for me. The mares I called my friends were never my friends. And maybe that wouldn't be enough to make me want to die, if I weren't a prisoner, and helpless, and all I have to look forward in the future is a lifetime of torture, and – and rape, and being told that hate is love and abuse is kind until eventually I crack and start believing it, and..." His voice cracked, as if he were fighting off tears. "...and I'd rather die horribly than keep living that way, if there's no hope I'll ever get free. It took me a thousand years to break out of the Elements' hold, last time. This has been less than a year – less than a season – and it's already far past unbearable, and I just want to make it end. And the only way to end it is to die. And you won't let me die, unless I make it worth your while."

"Are you implying that this ritual will kill you?"

"Implying? I'm outright stating it. You use my blood to activate the ritual, and while I'm still alive you feed me to entities outside this reality. They siphon entropy through me, feeding on it, decreasing the available entropy in your world. Shifting the burden to another reality, as I said. And as you might imagine, just as consuming energy increases entropy, consuming entropy increases energy. What comes back from the ritual will be a surge of energy so powerful that you could use it to remake the world. I'd thought you'd need to use the Elements, but if you have the Diadem of Order, that's actually all you'd need."

"A living sacrifice," Twilight murmured. "But if they want to feed, why would they return more energy than you possess within you? It seems that if I could find a way to siphon your energy directly, it would be more efficient and grant more energy."

"You couldn't make use of my magical energy directly."

"I'm aware. That is why my experiments have been directed at finding a way to perform a lossless conversion of chaotic magic to harmonic."

Discord sighed. "There's no such thing. The control structures you have to put on chaos to make it harmonic get their magical energy from somewhere. A lossless conversion isn't possible no matter how many times you torture me."

"I believe I will maintain my own counsel on this particular matter; you have an obvious bias."

"Fair enough. But the reason the ritual works is that they aren't just taking what's in my mana pool. I could, theoretically, channel enough energy to remake the entire world, myself, but I wouldn't because that much chaos would probably kill everything, including myself. As the entities siphon entropy out of the world through me, what comes back to you is magic purified, by your standards at least... by my standards, dead, but Order has never cared about the life of magic. The lossless conversion you want to perform is exactly what the ritual does, not by imposing constraints on magic, but by removing the disorder from it. And magic will be far easier for you to shape and form if it comes to you in controlled streams, with disorder pulled out of it."
Twilight couldn't control a tremor of excitement. If he wasn't lying... and she'd performed a spell check just last night; he'd writhed and begged and cried with pain rather than lie, claiming he couldn't do it, and when he'd finally managed to force one out, he'd had a seizure immediately afterward. But she couldn't trust Discord. Everything he said was self-serving... but he admitted this was self-serving. He'd certainly shown every sign of falling into despair last night, and the fact that he'd reverted to the sarcastic, verbally cruel persona he'd had when he'd first been captured could be a side effect of giving up completely. He seemed to no longer believe he could do anything to spare himself suffering, and therefore there was no point in moderating his behavior to avoid it. It was consistent...

...but this was Discord. There had to be a catch. "It sounds enticing. Which is exactly why I don't believe you. Even if you want to die, why would you give me, your enemy, everything I want?"

"Because if that's the price I have to pay to escape my life with some sliver of my identity intact, then so be it," Discord said. "I don't think you're getting it. I want you to exsanguinate me and then invite creatures from outside our reality to eat me, while pulling even more magic through me than your horrible experiments do. Make no mistake, this will be an awful way to die... but unlike your experiments, it'll end. It'll be finite and then there'll be no more pain, ever. I will do anything to make sure Fluttercruel never gets to touch me again."

Twilight raised an eyebrow. "Fluttercruel?"

"Oh, what's the point? They both are," Discord said bitterly. "Yes, all right, I admit it, I've been calling her Fluttercruel in my head to try not to mix her up with my friend. My dear, sweet, lovely friend, who I reformed for, who I came here to create chaos for rather than staying home just so she wouldn't get mad at me. My friend who was lying to me to control me, the whole time. They're both Fluttercruel." He swallowed. "I know you have no empathy for me, but can't you understand logically how I might want to die rather than be raped again by someone who pretends to love me and who looks just like someone else who pretended to be my friend and was lying about it?"

The last words he spoke came out on a near-sob. "If you're going to cry, this conversation is over," Twilight said. "Your attempts to manipulate my emotions are transparent, pathetic and useless."

Discord chuckled. "No, no, I'm not planning to cry. I promised myself last night I'd never do that again. Particularly not in front of you." Despite his words of bravado, there was still a tremor in his voice. "But, I mean, I know you have no empathy but you do still understand that emotions are things, right? That creatures who aren't you can feel? That even creatures you despise with all your heart are capable of feeling things? Why have you been letting them beat me, and torture me every way they can think of, and, and force me into this parody of passion and make me actually pretend I like it so I won't get beaten afterward... you know I hate this, right? You're doing these things, you're letting them do them, so I'll be utterly miserable and I'll want to do anything to make it stop, right? So why are you surprised if it's working?"

"I'm aware that you find your circumstances unpleasant. But I'm finding it difficult to imagine that you'd be willing to give the world over to Order. When we began this conversation, you say you thought I would need to channel the power through the Elements of Harmony. Now that you know I could use the Diadem of Order instead, and that I would indeed do so, why doesn't your nature as the avatar of chaos rebel against the concept?"

Discord breathed hard, staring at the ceiling fixedly, the paws bound out at angles from his body clenching. "I expect an answer," Twilight said sharply.

"Fine!" His head turned to face her, eyes wet with tears, but the hysteria in his voice was more fury
than weeping. "Because you've broken me, all right? You got what you wanted! I don't care about Chaos anymore, I don't – I don't care about anything except making it end, and you're just going to keep torturing me over and over and she's going to keep touching me and telling me I like it and she loves me and it's all a lie and it hurts most of the time and when it doesn't hurt it feels like she's pulling my heart to shreds and I can't take any more, don't you understand? I'll give the world to Matrisse if I have to! You broke me, you win, I'll give you everything you ever wanted, all you have to do is let me die because all I want is to escape and even if I got away it'd be in my mind for the rest of time! I'd have nightmares, I'd have flashbacks, I'd keep living it over and over just like I did with that damn statue even if it was over, and it would never really be over because it'd be engraved in my mind and I don't want that, all right? I don't want to be free to just go relive everything the six of you have done to me, over and over. I want it to stop. I want to stop feeling, stop remembering, stop being afraid, just stop. I want to die. Just let it end forever. Please."

Twilight was not moved by the plea as such – the thought that Discord was suffering so badly he no longer even wanted his freedom and could imagine no relief but the release of death was, honestly, a rather pleasant outcome, given what he had done – but she recognized sincerity in him, for once. Discord would not pretend to having such weaknesses; his pride was too great.

Could she take the risk? She was so tired; if only this had come up later, after she'd had a chance to sleep. But if he was telling the truth – the power to remake the world could make her into an alicorn, as she'd been fantasizing about before this conversation started, and the only thing she'd need to give Discord was a painful death.

And then an inconsistency in his story occurred to her. "Discord. If this ritual requires your death – yours specifically, the Chaos Avatar, and no one else's – how could anypony have discovered it in the first place, given that you aren't dead? How can you know what effect it will have?"

"Do you seriously think this is the only world I've visited where my cognate is dead?" Discord retorted. "I know because I've seen a world where the ritual was performed successfully."

"And did it give those who performed the ritual what they wanted?"

"I have no idea what they wanted. A world with much of the disorder stripped out is deeply unpleasant to me, as you might imagine. I stayed only long enough to study the ritual itself and memorize it, because generally speaking, I like to know everything I can possibly know about anything that might kill me. Though admittedly, usually because I'm avoiding it rather than seeking it out."

It was... plausible, she had to admit. Everything he'd said was plausible.

Twilight made her decision. If she could remake herself into an alicorn, then sacrificing Discord was acceptable, because she would be able to support Princess Celestia herself. Fluttershy would be distressed, but without Discord in the picture, Twilight would no longer have to care what any of her so-called friends thought. Perhaps she could even restore them to their original selves, while maintaining the Diadem for herself. With that much power, why not?

And she could fix the world. Restore Equestria's damaged infrastructure. Undo all the non-fatal changes their Discord had made that hadn't reverted when the Elements bound him.

*End the reign of death over ponykind.*

They didn't all have to be alicorns. They shouldn't be, in fact; that kind of power could be trusted to very few ponies. But they could all be *immortal*. No pony would have to die like Princess Luna, like Cadance, like Zecora, like so many other ponies and changelings and other creatures had died
during Discord's year of chaos, and afterward.

At the very least the spell was worth studying. But she needed insurance.

"Wait here," she said, only then realizing that that was a stupid thing to say to someone who was bound. Well, she wasn't going to apologize.

She went down to the lab and spent a few minutes mixing up something she'd been working on for the past two months, a means of controlling Discord even if the elements failed. It had been almost ready – she'd been considering testing it next session, though only if Discord showed signs of being in better health than he'd been during the last one. It rankled her to have to employ it before proper testing, but if Discord was somehow managing to lie and this was an elaborate ploy to win his freedom, she would need something like this in play. As much as she wanted to use Discord, he would be far too dangerous to let live if he got free.

She returned with the solution in a beaker. "Drink this."

"Free my arm and my neck so I can sit up and hold it, unless you want me to dribble it all over everything," Discord said.

Twilight unsnapped all of his restraints except the one attached to his collar. That was all she needed to hold him prisoner unless she was performing an experimental protocol, and the splayed position he'd been in, together with his insistence on talking about Fluttershy's sexual use of him, had been making her increasingly uncomfortable. It looked like a sexual bondage position. The thought had never occurred to her until Fluttershy had asked her to leave Discord in that position because she found it arousing, last night, but now she couldn't unsee it. "Very well. Now drink this."

Slowly Discord got onto his haunches, first sitting down pony-style but with his tail under him, then shifting so he was more on his side. The unpleasant thought occurred to Twilight that he was avoiding resting his weight on what was probably the location of his anus. Damn Discord anyway, why had he had to make such a fuss over Fluttershy's sexual habits? The last thing Twilight wanted to do was think of Discord having sex, in any context.

He took the flask from her and drank. "Yuck. What is this?"

"Drink all of it," Twilight ordered.

Discord sighed, and drank the rest of it. "Fine, slavemistress, I've drunk it. What poison did you just feed me?"

"Interesting that you should phrase it that way," Twilight said. "I performed an extensive study of the black vines that the other Discord employed to devastate Ponyville and the Everfree, and reverse engineered them to determine how to duplicate parts of their nature. What you just drank was a crystal suspension, bespelled to remain dormant so long as your collar is on."

"A crystal suspension. Very informative. Which is sarcasm, by the way."

"I was aware."

"I figured, but you're the one who wrote this stupid honesty spell that makes me tell ponies when I'm being sarcastic. What does the crystal suspension do when it's not dormant?"

"It devours chaos magic and replicates itself."
Discord's eyes went wide again. "You... are aware that I'm saturated with chaos magic."

"If it is truly your desire to die, the crystals will never activate, because your collar will never be removed. If, however, this is an elaborate plot of some kind... then your only freedom will continue to be death. If your collar is removed, the crystals will devour the chaos magic in your body, grow, and replicate. I imagine it would be less than five minutes before you'd feel them, and probably no more than half an hour before enough of your organs would have been impaled from inside that you would bleed to death."

"Lovely," Discord said, swallowing visibly. "Which is more sarcasm. Though I suppose they're no worse a fate than what I've already decided I'm in for."

"It is now time to enlighten me on exactly what you've decided you're in for. Explain the ritual to me, in detail."

Twilight didn't trust Spike with this particular task; she herself wrote down the steps Discord described in her notebook. It didn't sound overly challenging. Probably the only reason it hadn't been performed in the past was the difficulty of capturing and killing Discord. His magic couldn't be blocked, or the ritual wouldn't work; the spells in the collar wouldn't be a problem, because she could simply order Discord to open himself magically to the Beings From Outside, but some more unilateral method of binding him would cause the ritual to fail, and if Discord had his magic it seemed it would be very, very difficult to hold him still for a ritual, let alone kill him.

And then, once she had copied down the ritual in detail, she went to bed, leaving Spike on guard and Discord bound by his collar, with a crystal potion in his system that would kill him quickly and painfully if the collar broke or was removed. He wasn't going to come up with some way of escaping that, and there was no way she wanted to take on a complex and potentially dangerous summoning rite, particularly one driven by sacrifice, without at least a nap.

As soon as he was sure she was gone and wasn't coming back, Discord stopped trying to hold back the nausea, and retched, vomiting everything in his guts onto the stone floor.

That had been pure agony. Mislead Twilight, hide critical pieces of information from her, for half an hour of conversation, while showing no sign of his nausea on his face, let alone giving in to it. Everything he had said had been true, but without the pieces of information he hadn't given her, it was so misleading it might as well be a lie. Ironically the only reason he'd been able to bear it was the emotional stress; the effort of not crying, and the fact that he was safe to show the effort of not crying, had masked the effort of not throwing up.

The pile of vomit glittered with crystals. For a moment Discord felt a profound relief. Yes, his plan would kill him, just as horribly as Twilight's crystals, and yes, the crystals would never have a chance to activate, because he'd die before Fluttercruel's order not to damage his collar wore off. But the idea that the poison that would kill him was lurking inside him was a thought that had bothered him horribly. At least being devoured would be an attack from the outside.

And then he realized with horror that because he had no way of reaching a trash receptacle of any kind, and no cleaning supplies, that there was only one way to hide the vomit. If Twilight saw that he'd thrown up, she'd know he was hiding something, and if she questioned him he might be forced to tell her the whole truth, and he couldn't have that. If she knew everything, not only would she not go through with his plan, but she might even find a way to turn things around so she did get what she wanted, and since she was more or less completely possessed by Matrisse, what she wanted was not at all what she thought she wanted. Matrisse would be happy to use the power to reshape the world and remove death... by rendering everything into glittering crystalline perfection, a
moment of time caught in a snapshot that would never change, never move forward. His plan for the destruction of this world involved Chaos. Even as much as he hated these ponies and this world, he wouldn't let them be sacrificed to Matrisse's madness. They'd die for his own madness, instead, and that would be far preferable.

With great reluctance, Discord bent his head down. He'd been forced to do this before, under orders, where if he hadn't done it he'd have been made into a puppet and the spell would have moved him rather than his will. But he'd never done it by anything even remotely resembling choice. No one was forcing him now except himself, and the knowledge that if he didn't do it, his chance for revenge would be destroyed.

Wincing, trying not to smell it, Discord ate his own vomit, powdery murder crystals and all. At least this was based on chocolate milk and meat, things that had been delicious when they went down. The last time he'd thrown up when he hadn't been having a seizure, it had been rotten eggs and cow manure. He could never have forced himself to eat that. This was disgusting, but it was more bearable than eating that had been even the first time, certainly more bearable than throwing it up had been.

He licked the floor clean, ignoring the taste of hoof dirt on his tongue, in order to hide all the evidence from Twilight. And then he curled up on the floor, resting his aching body and wishing desperately he had some water. Well, even if he didn't get any, his suffering would be over soon enough. And this entire world would join him, because as smart as Twilight thought she was, she wasn't smart enough to turn down everything she'd ever wanted when it was offered to her on a platter.

It was true; opening the gate to the Cold Ones, the Outsiders, the Beings Beyond, would grant power. Brightest Star, a chaos-using unicorn, had turned herself into the alicorn Maelstrom just from bleeding him and opening the gate a fraction of the way. If Twilight completed the ritual, and opened the gate all the way by allowing the Cold Ones to devour Discord's soul, she would have near-infinite power.

For about five minutes. Or less. And then they'd come through the gate. "Eating entropy" was a vast oversimplification of what they'd be doing; entropy was decay itself, and not edible to anything. What they'd really be doing was consuming the energy generated by disorder, spitting back highly ordered strands of magic... which would then be the pathway they'd use to invade this universe, and devour all magic, and all life.

The world Discord had visited where the ritual had completed had, indeed, been very orderly, as any world where all life including microbes had been consumed would be. Nothing moved, nothing changed, everything would remain in its place until the end of time. There hadn't even been any wind, because nothing spun around the world. Celestia's sun had been devoured as well, being a power source; the moon was only a source of mana, not edible energy in and of itself, so it had been there, but locked in a permanent embrace by the world's gravity, never to move again. All of that life had been consumed, absorbed into Them. The Cold Ones, the Many-Angled, the Shadows; they had many names, but one fundamental nature. They devoured. Disorder, motion, suffering, disharmony, light, heat, conflict. Magic. All of it food, and when they were done, nothing would be left but lightless icy cold forever and ever.

But before everyone had been eaten, Discord imagined there had been chaos. There had been screaming, most likely, and praying, and desperate fighting, and weeping. There had been anguish and despair. In the week or two it had taken them to eat all the energy in the world, and even in the solar system, civilization had plainly collapsed. He'd seen signs of attempts to loot, of ponies and other creatures who had murdered each other pre-emptively.
Normally Discord hated that sort of chaos. Anything that ended up with stillness, static emptiness, was not worth it in his opinion. He wanted perpetual motion. But not anymore. Now he wanted the kind of chaos that came to rest in the end and stopped forever. Now he wanted the disorder of entropy to tear him apart, let him dissolve into nothingness, and then take this entire world down with it.

He'd promised himself he would never cry again. So he laughed. A quiet chuckle, then a hearty guffaw, finally scaling up all the way to hysterical manic laughter. Oh, if only he could live just long enough to see all their faces when they realized they were doomed... but it wouldn't work that way. His death was needed to open the gate. And really, did he need to see their faces? He had a good imagination; he could envision what he'd see.

It would be glorious, the most horrific vengeance he could imagine, and the fact that he wouldn't live to see it was only a minor blemish, not when he thought of the suffering Fluttercruel would go through as soon as she realized Twilight was going to kill him. That, he might even get to see. Maybe she would weep, and beg Twilight for his life. Oh, he'd love to see that, and the expression on her face when Twilight said no.

*Don't worry, dear Fluttercruel. You'll have hardly any time at all to grieve for me. You'll be too busy screaming in terror as chaos devours your entire planet.*

He couldn't wait.

Chapter End Notes

Spike's murder of Discord was based on *Variables* by The Descendant, though because that is canon Spike and not a Spike from a *Crapsack World*, in that story he doesn't go through with it.

While I took from the comics the concept that the Nightmare Entities are real, the comics' portrayal of them is entirely too silly and childish for my tastes. My ideas regarding what they are are influenced by *Jordan179*, by Egyptian mythology, and by the work of Charles Stross in his Laundry series, itself based on Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos. Also, windigos.

The crystal solution is partially inspired by C-Puff's *Virus*. 
Fluttershy was very, very quiet as she fluttered in through the door to her house that wasn't her house, but she needn't have bothered. Not only was Fluttercruel not there, none of the animals were either. Angel had successfully gotten them all out. She mouthed a silent prayer for their safety as she set about trying to find where her alternate self might have stored anything she could use as a distraction.

The first thing she thought of was fire. The flammable chemicals were normally in the basement, but obviously if Fluttercruel had been keeping Discord imprisoned there, she had to be keeping them somewhere else. For a few moments, Fluttershy searched the kitchen, racking her brain for where she might have stored them if she couldn't put them in the basement. And then she remembered the time she'd given the space to a pregnant manticore who'd wanted a dark, quiet place to give birth, and who was too much of a predator for Fluttershy to be able to let her den anywhere near the other animals. She'd stored the chemicals in the bathroom, then. Maybe Fluttercruel had done the same.

As she'd hoped, there were flammable chemicals under the sink. Plus bleach and ammonia, which could be poured together into a building – such as Twilight's library, maybe? – to drive ponies out with noxious gas. And ether. That one was definitely useful. All she needed was to soak a few scarves in it – and store them in an airtight saddlebag, because otherwise the fumes could get to her – and she'd have a weapon she could safely use against anypony. Even to save Discord, Fluttershy didn't think she could kill... but she could most definitely wrap an ether-soaked scarf around a pony's muzzle until they passed out. All she needed was to get some scarves.

In the bedroom, she stopped, puzzled, at the dresser. A lot of the room was the same as her own – same furniture, only slightly rearranged – but the bowl of water on top of the dresser with what looked like a short rod sitting in it puzzled her. It didn't seem to be decorative. She pulled the rod out – and found to her surprise that something dangled from it, thin as a thread but glittering like a diamond. She might not even have been able to see it if parts of it weren't colored red or brown. Fluttershy pulled it up all the way – and discovered, when the thread got caught on the edge of the ceramic bowl and she tugged at it just slightly to pull it free, that it was horrifyingly sharp. The ceramic parted under the pull like skin under a cat's claw, the thread slicing it deeply and making the bowl leak. Hurriedly Fluttershy dropped the thing back into the bowl before she could accidentally cut herself with it, and backed away as water sloshed out of the slit the thread had cut into the bowl.

The existence of that bowl, or more precisely the inexplicable, impossibly sharp thread and its handle that were in the bowl, spooked Fluttershy. Even though she knew the dresser was probably where the scarves were, she opened the top drawer to the nightstand anyway. There might be scarves in there if she'd been using them as blankets for tiny animals that came to snuggle with her.

There weren't, but there was a photo album. Morbid curiosity about a life she'd never led, and the desire to understand more about her enemy, to understand where and how Fluttercruel differed from her and why, led her to pull the book out and start flipping through it. Her brows furrowed in puzzlement as she browsed. It was all pictures of Discord.

At first she feared this would be some sort of photographic record of the tortures Fluttercruel had inflicted on him – the first picture had him mugging for the camera, looking oh so cocky, healthy
and free and eyes alight with mischief, and she shuddered as she turned the page, fearing she would start to see him break. Start, because she wasn't going to keep going if that was what this album detailed. But it didn't. The Discord in the pictures continued to be cocky and mischievous. In several of the pictures, he was embracing or standing next to Fluttershy's doppelganger, who generally looked angry, sad or both. In one picture, he was kissing her, holding her up with paws around her forelegs. Her eyes were closed, tightly, tensely, and Fluttershy could see tear streaks on her face.

This was the other Discord. Fluttershy's Discord had never behaved this way toward her, and she felt certain that he never would, not toward any iteration of her. Against her will some slight sympathy for Fluttercruel crept into her heart. Had the other Discord... raped her? Was that why she was taking sadistic revenge on Fluttershy's Discord, to turn the tables? Not that that would make it forgivable, or excusable, but it would be easier to understand why...

...but no. In some of the pictures, especially later in the album, Fluttercruel seemed to alternate between being affectionate with Discord, and trying to shrink away from him. On one of the pages, Discord sat on a throne made of turtles – living turtles, visibly straining under the weight – and Fluttershy's own hoofwriting spelled out "I love him. I hate him. I love him. I hate him," over and over, all over the page around the picture. In one picture, Discord was looking on, beaming with pride, as Fluttercruel, wearing a sadistic smile Fluttershy could not imagine on her own face, was grinding a Changeling's head into the dirt. Green ichor bled from several places.

Fluttercruel wouldn't keep a photo album of her interactions with her rapist right next to her bed. Maybe the other Discord had emotionally abused her – and turning her world to chaos, training her in cruelty and gloating over it, that was certainly emotional abuse even if Discord hadn't intended it as such – but she had loved him. And hated him. The last picture was of Discord's statue. Laughing again, but it didn't look like a frozen moment of carefree hilarity, the way he had in the first statue. If laughter could look bitter and anguished, but still be laughter, that was what the statue's expression seemed to convey.

Fluttershy put the album back, troubled. She had assumed Fluttercruel's feelings for Discord were pure lust, bound up with hatred and cruelty. If she'd loved the other Discord... it was hurting her head, and her heart, trying to understand her twisted counterpart. She opened the bottom drawer of the nightstand, and recoiled.

It was full of dildos. The male part of at least a dozen different animals had a replica in this drawer, along with some that bothered Fluttershy, a lot. She herself had a few of these in a drawer at home, the more normal ones – her shock wasn't due to the presence of dildos, but how horrible some of them looked. There was one that was so enormously big... well, Fluttershy couldn't imagine putting anything like that inside herself, no matter how experienced she might become someday. How would it even fit? And then there was the one that looked at first like a normal stallionhood, until she noticed the very, very sharp thin fins on the side. How could anypony take that without cutting themselves up inside?

There were also very tiny cuffs in multiple sizes. Mouse sized, raccoon sized, hamster sized... rabbit sized. When the implications of that sank in, Fluttershy backed away – or tried. She only got a step before her rump hit the bed. Turning to see what she'd hit, automatically, before her brain had a chance to logic things out and tell her it had to be the bed, brought her a full view of the bed for the first time since she'd come in the room. There were binders attached to it everywhere. Chains on the legs, ropes tied to the bedposts, harness points hanging out from under the mattress. Reflexively she jerked her head down so she wouldn't have to see, and came face to face with a bloodstain, soaked deep into the wood.
She knelt down, horror welling up inside her, because that bloodstain still had a smell. It was relatively fresh, from within the past few days or so. Fluttershy's sense of smell wasn't good enough to tell her what kind of creature had bled this blood... but she thought she knew.

There was a pile of debris that had been swept to just under the bed, with a sizeable quantity of blue pegasus feathers in it. *Rainbow Dash, and a preening session?* she thought to herself, desperately trying to believe... but the blue was too deep to be Rainbow's light, near-sky color. And when she tried to sift through the debris, she found several pieces of what she thought at first were leather... until she found a piece with a thin bit of wingbone attached.

Fluttershy screamed. And backed away from the bloodstain and the bed with the torture bindings and the torn, shattered pieces of *indigo batpony wing* almost before getting to her hooves, as if getting away from it could undo what it represented, as if she could deny the truth to herself. "Oh, Celestia," she moaned softly. "Discord, what has she done to you? Oh, please, please be alive, please..."

Bloodstained blue feathers and broken bits of wing, feathered blue wing and indigo batpony wing, leathery but still fresh, not dried out. This had been recent. Dear Celestia. The bloodstain was huge. Any slight sympathy she might have been starting to feel for Fluttercruel was driven out by her anguish. "What has she done to you?" she repeated, crouching on the ground with hooves pressed to eyes as if she could curl up into such a small ball that she wouldn't exist anymore and she wouldn't have to know that her friend had been *maimed*, plainly tortured to the point where if he hadn't bled out it was only because he was so much bigger than a pony and had commensurately more blood in him... recently. And possibly violated with some of those more horrible dildos, as well. They looked more like implements of torture than of pleasure. And these terrible things had been done to him by her. A pony who had once been her, who had a house just like hers and pets just like hers and who looked like her.

Fluttershy felt hatred boiling over, for the first time in her life. It made her physically nauseous, made her grind her teeth, made her vision swim and her ears ring and every muscle tense with the desire to buck that monstrous pony's face off. No, to tear at her with teeth, like an animal. No, to smash her forelegs into every bone in her alternate's body, crush her into blood and gristle. How *could* she? If she'd loved the other Discord, even if she'd hated him as well... oh, how could she do such things to somepony she simply hated, let alone one she felt love for as well? How could she even exist, being so evil?

How *could* she be Fluttershy?

How could someone who had been Fluttershy herself have become like this? Fluttershy remembered what it had felt like when Discord had made her cruel – oddly, at the time, she hadn't remembered at first, but it had come back to her within a few days, and haunted her nightmares now. She had been so *angry*, at everypony and everything, and making others feel bad had felt good. Righteous. They deserved it. But even then, she would never have done something like *this*. It would never have entered her mind to *rape* someone, or to beat them until they nearly bled to death (*please only be "nearly", please*). Didn't she know by now that the corruption had come from this world's original Discord – the one that she had loved, and hated? Why couldn't she *fight* it?

She'd never felt this way before. She'd felt hot rage like this at herself, guilt and shame for something she had done and a desire to sink into the ground and cease to exist, to curl herself up in a little ball and implode until there was nothing left. But she'd never felt this way toward somepony else, not even when she'd been corrupted by Discord, not even when the animals had refused to come to her, not even when she'd taken Iron Will's teachings to heart. She'd never felt so much anger that she wanted to *kill* something, wanted to hurt it and brutalize it and make it suffer. She
didn't even feel that way toward the other alternates, the corrupted versions of her friends. Them, she could feel sympathy for. They'd been corrupted, they weren't in control of themselves. But Fluttercruel was herself, and Fluttershy had always been harder on herself than on anypony else in existence.

No. Murder was evil, no matter how evil the one you were murdering was. Breaking bones and biting throats was cruel, and would reduce her to Fluttercruel's level. She wouldn't do those things, as much as she wanted to. She'd continue with the plan. Save Discord, get him to uncorrupt the Elements, reharmonize the Tree, and turn Fluttercruel back into herself... and then let her do whatever she wanted to do to herself. Or stop her, because it might actually be a worse punishment to force her to live with the memory of what she'd done than to let her destroy herself. That was what she deserved...

...no. It wasn't enough. It was the right thing to do, the harmonious thing to do, the moral thing to do, but it didn't satisfy this burning need for revenge, the visceral desire to hurt Fluttercruel and punish her for being so evil. Fluttershy looked around herself. How dare Fluttercruel have Fluttershy's furniture? How dare she have her house? How dare she have anything that belonged to Fluttershy when she had spat on everything that Fluttershy was, rejected everything that Fluttershy had ever tried to be? How dare she be so weak that she could let herself be so deeply corrupted, and how could she possibly deserve to own anything nice, anything that was Fluttershy's?

Fluttershy went to the dresser drawer where the scarves ought to be, pulled several out and stuffed them in her saddlebag. Then coldly, she began pouring the lamp oil out all over the bedroom. All over the photo album that Fluttercruel obviously treasured. All over the bed she had perverted into an instrument of torture. On the furniture, on the floor.

She was crying, tears near-blinding her and soft sobs choking her, as she poured the accelerant potions she used to treat the wood that powered her stove and her furnace all over the balcony floor of her upstairs, and onto the stairs, and all over the living room. I'm sorry, tree, I'm so sorry, but you have to die. I can't let her have you, I can't. If you could run away like the animals did I would have you do that, but you can't, and I can't keep her from having you any other way, and she doesn't deserve you, she doesn't, she doesn't deserve to have anything, she should be alone and friendless and own nothing and have no safe retreat she can go to, so I have to kill you. I'm so sorry.

She dragged the ether out of the house, setting it aside near the brook. There weren't any fish left; they'd all swum away. Oh, I hope they'll be okay. I hope everyone makes it to safety. Please, Angel, I know you can do it. Please get them all to somewhere they'll be safe. Not that he could exactly help the fish, but then, it wasn't as if the fish had been free from predators here; Fluttershy herself had done the fish-catching for the raccoons and Harry and other creatures that needed meat, because she trusted herself to be able to do it equinely and with a minimum of suffering, but just because the fish she'd caught for her animals had died swiftly and without pain didn't mean they hadn't died. She shook her head to push the intrusive thoughts out, the guilt she felt about submitting to the darker needs of nature and causing death to some creatures that others might live. She couldn't handle feeling guilt right now, not when her insides were churning with her rage at Fluttercruel and the horrible shame she felt at the possibility that she herself might have those evil desires buried deep inside somewhere, or that she herself could ever be weak enough to give in to them.

The matches were by the stove, exactly where she expected they would be. Fluttershy opened all the cabinets and systematically pushed all the cups and dishes out, shoving them onto the floor, where they smashed to pieces. In the laundry room she poured accelerant all over the basket of dirty laundry waiting to be washed, and filled the laundering tub with firewood for the stove, then
poured accelerant on that as well. The metal tub wouldn't burn, but the heat might warp it.

The first match, she dropped on the bed. *WHOOOMP!* The explosion of flame was so sudden she almost couldn't fly out of the way in time. The balcony and the downstairs were easier, safer, because the ceiling was much higher, giving her room to drop the match and flit away before it landed. Flame bloomed everywhere, racing along the lines of accelerant she'd poured. The lamp oil she'd used up on the upstairs burned even faster, her bedroom a roaring inferno before she'd even had a chance to set every room on the first floor ablaze.

Fire was a thing pegasi understood, a construct of air and heat energy like the weather they manipulated. Though she had never been formally trained in weather-working, Fluttershy had an instinct in the bones of her wings, telling her where the fire would go before it did. So she was able to leave the doorway for last. She flew through it backward, her body vertical, and tossed the final match through the doorway as she came clear of it. Then she flipped around and flew as fast as she could, to the other side of the brook, where she could watch the destruction in relative safety. There were a few clouds overhead, which was good, because she needed to be prepared to put out the flames if they spread beyond the property. She could go get more if she had to, but right now, she wanted the fire to be a blazing beacon, to tell the whole world that Fluttercruel was losing everything she owned.

Fluttershy wiped the tears on her face away and watched as the upper branches caught. Fire was terrifying, but strangely beautiful. She wanted to flee the destruction she'd wrought, but she felt like that was wrong. The tree wasn't her tree, but it was exactly like her tree, and it wasn't the tree's fault that Fluttercruel had become so evil. The tree deserved for someone who loved it to stand vigil over it as it died.

Besides, part of her, deep down, was hoping that Fluttercruel would arrive while she was still here, so that Fluttershy could see the look on her counterpart's face.

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**Opposition, 8 AM**

The train ride to Canterlot was hellish. Spike was surrounded by changelings on all sides, all glowering down at him, eager to take advantage of just one misstep on his part to get revenge for the comrades he'd lamed. More than the ones surrounding him, though, he feared the ones surrounding the unconscious bodies of Twilight, Rarity, and their friends. A changeling with a horn, who looked like a cross between Chrysalis and one of the changeling grunts, kept recasting the sleep spell on the four ponies every time they stirred. Spike knew that if he did anything to try to escape or fight the changelings, they would kill Rarity.

What kind of a world was this, where changelings were working together with the alternates of Twilight and Rarity, where they were openly taking the train? Twilight had said a world couldn't truly be a mirror world, where the good had turned evil and the evil had turned good, because ponies were more complex than that, but this was sure looking like some kind of mirrorverse straight out of a comic book. Which meant that the Princess Celestia of this world would also be evil, at least as evil as the cold, vicious creature that looked like his Twilight. Spike felt nauseous, and had to keep swallowing repeatedly. His guts burned, as if his fire was trying to blaze up in response to the threat he felt, except that of course he was too small of a dragon to support full dragonflame, so it just hurt. After the last few years in Ponyville, Spike had been in enough life-threatening situations to know that the sensation would cause him no permanent harm; it just made him feel sick now.

At the Palace, the changelings handed them over to Royal Guards. Spike knew Royal Guards,
having spent most of his childhood in the palace, so he tried to make small talk with them as they marched him, and carried his friends, toward the holding cells in the tower. "So, uh, you know we're not, like, weird magical doppelgangers or something, right? I really am Spike. These are really Rarity, Applejack and Pinkie Pie. I know your Twilight isn't an alicorn but trust me, this is really Twilight. We're from another universe." No response. "I mean, we're not enemies. We just came here to rescue somepony. We never wanted to fight any of you guys." Dead silence. "Maybe I could talk to Captain Shining Armor? Is he still captain in this universe? Hey, does the Crystal Empire even exist here?" Nothing. "Sheesh, you guys. Come on. I'm Spike! I used to go with Twilight to watch you guys drill under Shining. One time you all searched all over the palace to find me because I found a secret passage someone had made right into the treasury room, and I ate so many gems I could barely move but Princess Celestia said I deserved those gems as my reward for discovering that a thief had built a secret passage to steal from the treasury. Do any of you remember that?" Still nothing. "Wow, tough audience."

The guard in the lead unlocked the door to one of the cells in the middle of the tower – at least, Spike was guessing it was the middle, they hadn't gone up enough stairs for it to be the top yet – and gestured. "Get in there," he said.

"Wow! You can talk! I was starting to believe you guys take a vow of silence in this universe, or something."

He walked into the cell, knowing there was no point to fighting. There was no way he could bring himself to attack Royal Guards the way he'd attacked the changelings, and there were too many of them, and too many of them were unicorns. Against an earth pony or a pegasus Spike might have some chance, but without magic there was no way he could fight a combat-trained unicorn. The cell was large, for a holding cell, and there were four mattresses bolted to the floor. The unicorn guards who were levitating his friends laid Rarity, Applejack and Pinkie on mattresses, but did not deposit Twilight on the last one. The one carrying Twilight never even entered the cell. "Hey!" Spike said. "Hey, aren't you forgetting somepony? Where are you taking her? That's Twilight Sparkle! She's not an enemy!"

One of the guards finally deigned to speak to him, as the guards were all leaving the cell. "The alicorn prisoner will be housed in her own cell, due to her status," he said.

"But Twilight wouldn't want you to make a fuss over her status! She'd rather be with her friends!"

The door bolted shut with a clang. Spike clung to the bars in the small window in the door. "Hey! Don't take her away! She belongs here, with us! With me! Come on, guys! Please! Please leave Twilight with us..."

None of it did any good. Spike slumped as the guards passed out of the range where he could even hear them anymore. "Please be safe, Twilight," he mumbled.

There was a pitcher of water and four cups in the room. Spike poured himself one and drank it in a single gulp. "Mmm, hard water," he said, sighing. "I love the taste of the minerals in the palace pipes." Most water in the palace had to be magically filtered before ponies would really want to drink it, because the pipes under the palace were ancient and you could taste the minerals that leached from them into the water that came out of the taps. Plainly they didn't bother doing that for prisoners, but that suited Spike just fine.

He peered outside the window, sniffing deeply, listening with his whole being. When he was convinced there were no guards lurking in the hallway, he let go of the window bars. "Time to call in the cavalry," he muttered to himself.
Dragons had pouches. He remembered Twilight, on discovering that, excitedly declaring that dragons must be marsupials, until Princess Celestia had pointed out that they lay eggs, don’t have fur, and that Spike was a male dragon, whereas marsupials were furry creatures who laid eggs and only the females had pouches. This had left Twilight quite dejected. At the time, Spike hadn’t understood why.

His personal theory, given that the positioning of the pouches would make them awkward to use if he was going on four legs like an adult dragon, was that it was for young dragons to hide away small amounts of hoard so the jerky teenagers wouldn’t steal it. He, however, kept something no other dragon would ever have a use for – scrolls, quills, and a tiny ink bottle. His backpack had gotten lost in the fight, along with the others’ saddlebags – or they’d been confiscated, he wasn’t sure, but his was definitely lost – so most of his writing material was gone, but ponies didn’t mostly even know that dragons had pouches, and apparently changelings didn’t either. No one had searched him.

Spike sat down with his writing materials. "Dear Princess Celestia," he wrote. "The other Twilight beat our Twilight. She was really fast. They also had Changeling backup. So Twilight, Rarity, Applejack, Pinkie and I have all been captured. Please send help. –Your loyal subject, Spike."

He picked up the scroll, summoned his flame from within, fixed on the image of Princess Celestia in his mind, and breathed out. The flame caught the paper and devoured it, leaving only the smallest wisp of ash.

Almost immediately he felt the tell-tale swell of a burp in his throat. He blew out, materializing a scroll. How had Princess Celestia responded so fast? He grabbed the scroll, excited – until he saw that the handwriting in the scroll was his own.

"Whatcha doin', Spike?"

Spike looked over. Pinkie was awake, looking much more bleary than she usually was on waking. "I just tried to send a letter to Princess Celestia, and it came back," he said, slumped in dejection.

"That's too bad," Pinkie agreed. "But hay, cheer up! Fluttershy and Dashie are still loose!"

"That's true," Spike said, nodding. Then it occurred to him. "Hey, how do you know that? You were asleep when we were taken captive."

"Elementary, my dear Spike!" Pinkie said, pulling a magnifying glass out of... somewhere. "Twilight was captured before I fell asleep, but she was too high-value a prisoner for me to assume that the reason she's not here is that she got away, 'cause they'd have put all their attention into making sure she didn't. It's much more likely that she was locked up separate from us because she's so smart and stuff. But even though Dashie's awesome and Fluttershy's great, they're not gonna scare bad ponies as bad as Twilight does, because seriously, if they're used to that creepy Twilight they have, I'd be scared of Twilight too! So they didn't have any reason not to put them in the same cell as us, and they're not here, so that means they weren't captured!"

Pinkie's argument was more full of holes than a cheese grater, but Spike wasn't going to argue with her, because as it happened she was right. At least, as far as he knew. "They were still loose when we got taken," he said. He looked at the floor glumly. "It was my fault."

"It was not," Rarity said hoarsely. She started to get to her hooves, apparently thought better of it, and simply rolled to a more dignified, sitting position on the bed. "You made a mistake anypony could make, in a situation you most certainly had not been trained for."
"Wanna fill me in?" Pinkie asked.

"I'd be happy to, darling, but I am in dire need of that water, and I'm so very dizzy—"

"No problem!" Spike rushed over, grabbed Rarity's cup, poured water into it, and carried it over to her. "Here you go!"

Once she'd drunk it, she related the events that had taken place between Pinkie getting hit with the sleep spell, and the same happening to herself and Applejack. Applejack herself woke up before the end of it, so when Spike told them all about the train ride and being taken to Canterlot Palace, and the guards taking Twilight away, everyone heard.

"Well, it's a terrible shame that those guards couldn't be bothered to give you the time of day," Rarity huffed. "But I'd wager I could get some answers from them... oh, except that my saddlebags are gone! I must brush my mane if I'm to have any hope of swaying anypony to speak with us!"

"I don't think they're gonna care all that much about the state of your mane, sugarcube," Applejack said morosely. "We may be well and truly stuck in this one."

"You greatly underestimate the value of glamour in a situation like this," Rarity retorted. "Spike, I so hate to ask, but hooves simply cannot substitute for any sort of brush, and even if I were to attempt to use my magic to rearrange my coiffure, I have no mirror. I would most likely end up with a horrific travesty. Would you be willing to be a gentlecolt and help me?"

Would he be willing? Despite the dire situation, Spike's heart lurched into overdrive, suddenly pounding so hard with excitement that he felt sure the ponies would be able to hear it beating. "S-sure!" he exclaimed. "I'd be happy to!" Run his claws through Rarity's mane? Practically a dream come true!

She was very, very demanding, of course, but that wasn't anything new, and to be honest Spike liked it that way. When he was helping a pony who was demanding and precise, but actually asking him for something he knew how to do, unlike some of the times with Twilight, it made him feel useful, needed and loved. When Twilight had been a lot younger, she'd sometimes asked him to do things he had no idea how to do. Not so much lately, since he'd learned a lot working for her, but he still had occasional nightmares about incidents like the time younger Twilight had asked him to get books for her out of Canterlot Palace's library, where they had huge problems with books being misshelved or stored in obscure locations, and their organizing system was about 300 years older than Dew Drop Decimal. Combing Rarity's hair, on the other paw, was something he knew how to do.

He raked dead leaves, twigs and dirt out of her mane and tail (the further end of her tail, of course, it would be completely improper for a gentlecolt to touch a mare's tail anywhere near her body itself, and Spike was fairly certain he'd faint if he tried), and shaped them into her usual coiffure. Eventually, Applejack pronounced that as far as she could tell, Rarity looked just as fancy and frou-frou as she usually did, so Rarity went to the window.

There still wasn't anypony there. Rarity's horn lit up as she tried the door. "I'm sorry," she said after a few moments. "I was so hoping I might be able to pick the lock, but they have spells as well as a standard keyed lock on this door, and I cannot even begin to pick apart these spells."

"Stands to reason they wouldn't've left you the ability to use your horn if they thought you could use it to break out," Applejack said. "Ain't no reason to be ashamed of that, sugar. I'll bet you bits to biscuits that's part of the reason they locked Twilight up separate."
"Ah, well. It isn't as if I truly expected them to be that careless. Back to Plan A, I suppose." She levitated the dead leaves and twigs Spike had pulled out of her mane, and threw them through the bars of the window. The leaves made no sound as they drifted to the floor, but twigs and tiny stones clattered.

A moment later Rarity turned. "I hear a guard coming!" she whispered excitedly, and turned back to the window. "Yoo-hoo! Oh, sir guardspony! Might I have a word with you?"

The guard came over to the window. "I'm not supposed to talk to you prisoners," he said gruffly.

"Oh, but surely there's no harm in a small exception, is there?" Rarity asked, batting her eyelashes. Spike felt mixed pride and jealousy as he watched her turn on the charm. "Surely your captain is far too intelligent a pony to leave us here together if we presented any threat! And all I want is just the opportunity to speak to a pony in charge. I fear there may have been a terrible misunderstanding."

"I don't think so," the guard said. "Word I've been told is, you're in league with Discord." He almost spat the draconequus' name.

Rarity gasped. "Heavens, no! In league with that perfectly dreadful beast? Never! You see, this is exactly the sort of misunderstanding I was talking about. I'm sure you know my friend Applejack here, the Element of Honesty. Now Applejack, speaking honestly: are we working with Discord to spread chaos?"

"Of course not," Applejack said. "That'd be plumb crazy." Spike turned away so the guard couldn't see him grinning. Trust Rarity to know how to phrase the question in just the right way that Applejack could honestly say no.

"There," Rarity said. "The truth is, darling, we're here to support your Elements of Harmony and help them return to their true, harmonious selves. I'm sure you've heard they had a bit of a Discord problem themselves a few years back, and defeating him didn't solve it. Part of the corruption he placed on them makes them resistant to any effort to heal them, which is why we ended up fighting them and why they had us sent here when they won. But we're only here to help them."

"I don't know..."

"Of course I would never ask you to do anything to violate your oaths," Rarity said. "All I ask of you is an opportunity to speak to your captain, or some other pony in charge, so that I can relate the full details to them and they can make the decision as to what to do. It can't hurt to ask, can it?"

"I... guess not..."

"Thank you ever so much. You're a true gentlestallion, good sir. I eagerly await the opportunity to clear our names."

She turned back to the others as the guard left. "Now all we have to do is wait, and I'm sure we'll be able to get some answers at the least, perhaps even be let free."

"But just in case that doesn't work," Pinkie said, "I brought thingies."

"Thingies?" Applejack raised an eyebrow.

"Shh!" Pinkie said. "The walls could have ears!" In a very loud whisper she said, "The kind of thingies you need for getting doors open if maybe they might not be so very openable, if you know what I mean..."
"Right," Applejack said. "I got two of those thingies, myself." She kicked back with one leg, then the other. "My two good pals Bucky McGillicutty and Kicks McGee."

"There *is* a spell on the door," Rarity said. "And it's not one I can undo, I fear."

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," Applejack said. "Best to try your plan first."

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**Opposition, 9 AM**

*I'm... in a cell?*

Twilight blinked as she looked around her. She was plainly in Canterlot Palace, judging from the material the walls were made of and the lighting, in a holding cell in one of the towers. There were several slitted windows with bars across them, letting plenty of light in and giving her a great view of Canterlot and the slopes of the mountain below it, once she struggled to her hooves. It was hard to move; there were four heavy iron cuffs on each leg, clamped just above her hooves, bands holding her wings to her sides, and something cool and metallic on her horn – a power binder, she guessed, because her magic wouldn't respond. When she tried to summon it, it would reach her horn and then fizzle.

Her friends weren't in her cell, which unnerved her. What had happened to them? Had they beaten their alternates? Given that she hadn't been there to help them against her own alternate, Twilight worried that they might not have been able to. If they had managed to defeat their alter egos, wouldn't they have come to rescue her? And what did it mean that the Changelings had been fighting on the same side as the alternates, and now she was here in Canterlot Palace? Were the Changelings allies of Equestria, or had they conquered it and the Bearers' evil alter egos had sided with them? But Discord's letter said he'd met Celestia, but what if that Celestia was really Chrysalis?

There was a pitcher of water and a cup in the room, and Twilight was thirsty – her head pounded, and she felt dehydrated and nauseous. But she couldn't take the risk that the water was drugged, not without her magic to scan it. She licked her lips. To distract herself, she made a circuit of the room, though she was fairly certain there was no way out besides the door. The narrow windows weren't large enough for her to fit her head through (or body), even if there hadn't been bars, which there were, strong enough that they didn't budge in the slightest when she bucked them with all her strength. Which felt like considerably less strength than she was used to being able to bring to bear, since she became an alicorn. Well, the cuffs were iron, and iron was a well-known magic disruptor. It had seemed like an unusual choice, to put cuffs on her that weren't linked to each other, leaving her full freedom of motion in her limbs – what would be the point to cuffs that didn't bind? Perhaps they *did* bind, but what they bound was earth pony magic, the physical strength she should have had. Twilight tried uselessly to scrape one of the cuffs off, but they were too tight. She didn't actually know how to pick locks and wouldn't have the dexterity of hoof to try; Pinkie could pick locks with her hooves, but Twilight didn't have earth pony dexterity. That was less a function of magic and more a matter of practice; being an alicorn didn't change the fact that Twilight had had a horn her whole life and hadn't had to rely on hooves to manipulate things since she was very little.

She continued her inspection. The chamber was tall enough for pegasus guards to maneuver above a prisoner, but not tall enough for an unbound pegasus prisoner to get any serious runway for a divebomb attack. Maybe ten heads tall, tall enough for Princess Celestia to rear up on her hind legs and still have plenty of clearance, but not tall enough for much else. The door was heavy and oaken, and when Twilight pressed her body against it she could feel protective spells wound
through it, but without her horn she wasn't sensitive enough to be able to analyze the spells. There was a copper chamberpot bolted to the floor in one corner. Letting the hair of her tail dangle into the clean pot did nothing, but when she poured a bit of water in from the pitcher, the water vanished. Sanitation spells, either destroying or teleporting anything that was a unique object unconnected to another object. So it would keep itself perfectly clean, but it couldn't be used as a weapon.

There was a mattress on the floor, soft and surprisingly comfortable but with spells woven through it that she suspected would prevent it from tearing, and it was held down with rings that fastened to the stone floor. A hoof-operated switch on the floor seemed to make the mattress grow warm. So a prisoner could be kept in relative comfort without having to give them blankets to keep warm, it seemed. The pitcher and the cup were the only other things in the room, and the only things not bolted down, and Twilight couldn't see how to use them in an escape attempt. They were made of a light metal alloy, and wouldn't cause enough damage if thrown or slammed into a pony, and pouring the water on the floor wouldn't make the guards slip if they were pegasi. Knowing what she knew about the training Royal Guards got, they might not slip anyway.

So there was nothing she could do, except pace nervously, wondering what had become of her friends, and occasionally sit down because the cuffs on her legs made them heavy and exhausted her. It was while she was sitting that the door swung open. Twilight hastily got to her hooves. There were six guards, which seemed to her kind of overkill, given that her magic and wings were bound and her hooves were heavy enough that running would be difficult. Two unicorns entered first, one on each side, weapons held in their magical fields. Two pegasi flew in on top and took stations above the unicorns. And then two earth ponies, big stallions the size of Big Macintosh or bigger, came in behind, taking up the unicorns' places as the unicorns came forward. "If you will come with us, please?" one of them said.

"Where are we going?" Twilight asked, holding her ground.

"You don't need to know that," the guard who had spoken said. The second unicorn shook his head. "Stead, this is a princess," the second unicorn said. "Even if she's been declared an enemy, she deserves some respect."

"If she's a princess, why does she look like a dead ringer for Lady Twilight?" Twilight actually recognized this guard now – the enchantments on the Royal Guard's armor made them all look incredibly similar, but from his voice and what the other had called him, this was Steadfast. He was one of Shining Armor's elite, in her world, a pony who'd been a candidate to take Shining's place as captain of the Guard, though in the end Shining had decided not to promote him because he was a little bit too rigid in his thinking. "I'd assumed she was a Changeling renegade."

"She wouldn't be bound like that unless she was at least a Changeling princess, if not an alicorn," the other unicorn said. "Princess, we've been instructed to bring you to Princess Celestia for a private discussion."

"Oh." Twilight brightened. This Princess Celestia might be colder to Discord than her own Celestia, but that didn't mean she was corrupted or evil – this Princess Celestia had had to lead the nation through a considerably longer period of Discord's chaos than in their own world, so naturally she would be much more antagonistic to him than their own Celestia was. But there was no reason to assume she was corrupted; sure, she couldn't be as kind and morally upright as Twilight's Celestia if she was willing to tolerate torture, but maybe she didn't even know. Maybe this Twilight had never told her because Princess Celestia would disapprove of torture. From what little Discord had been able to convey in his letter, there was no reason for Twilight to assume this
Celestia couldn't be persuaded. If she could just explain that this Discord wasn't their Discord and that all they wanted was to take him home, that he wouldn't be any further threat to this Equestria and neither would Twilight or her friends, maybe this Celestia would just let them all go. "That sounds great! I'd love to talk to her." She trotted forward.

The guards rearranged themselves around her, Steadfast in front, the other unicorn in back, the earth ponies at her sides, and the pegasi above, as they entered the corridor. A very wide spiral ramp descended from the cell in the tower, circling around the tower's inside edge. They passed several more cells on the way down, and Twilight strained her ears as best she could, but could hear nothing from them to confirm or deny whether they held her friends.

"Do you know where my friends were taken?" she asked conversationally.

"I'm sorry, Princess, we aren't authorized to give you any such information," the unicorn behind her said. Apparently he was the sort of pony whose respect for princesses went beyond the norm. Steadfast wasn't impressed by her princesshood, which fit with what she knew of him, but this guard could possibly be worked on. The others were silent, letting the unicorns do all the talking.

"That's okay. I guess as long as Princess Celestia thinks we're enemies, that makes sense. But I'm betting this is all a silly misunderstanding and we can clear things up right away. You see, I am Twilight Sparkle, but I'm from a parallel timeline where I became a princess and where my friends and I defeated Discord the first time we fought him. So I'm sure once I explain things to Princess Celestia, she'll tell you all to let us go."

There was no response to this, not even from the respectful guard behind her. Twilight sighed. "I'm betting you probably don't believe me. I probably wouldn't either. But it's all right. I can fix all this once I see Princess Celestia."

They led her down to the main palace, to one of Celestia's receiving rooms. Funny, how the palace was laid out exactly like the palace at home, despite being under this Discord's control much longer. But then, turning their Discord to stone undid all the changes he had made, in their world. If this one had altered the palace with chaos magic, it would have reverted when they stoned him, so it should be laid out just like the one at home.

Celestia was waiting for her, with a tray of small pastries and another pitcher of water, and two cups already poured. "Welcome, Twilight. Sit down. We have a lot to talk about."

Twilight sat. "You know who I am?" she asked. "I mean, that I'm really Twilight Sparkle, not a changeling impersonator or something? I just come from a parallel timeline."

"I do know that," Celestia said, nodding. She was thinner than Twilight's Celestia, her coat subtly less glossy. If she had been any other pony Twilight might not have seen the differences, but she'd spent most of her life gazing at Princess Celestia. "Please, take some water, and one of these pastries. I can't eat them all; my Twilight would be outraged." She smiled.

Twilight's stomach rumbled. She shouldn't do this, but... it was Princess Celestia. With her own magic bound, Twilight couldn't stop Celestia from doing pretty much any spell she wanted on Twilight. There was no need to drug the food or water. "Thank you, Your Highness," she said, taking the water and drinking it. "I have a terrible headache, and I think this might help."

"I do apologize for that. Your headache is probably being caused by the binder on your horn. I imagine your legs and wings ache a bit as well?"

"Um, yes. Can I ask, why so many binders? I mean, isn't a horn binder usually enough?" She tried
to flex her wings, to demonstrate how tightly they were held. "You have iron in the bands around my wings. Wouldn't just binding them be enough? Did you have to use magic binders? I can't fly with them tied, after all."

"I take it you are not very experienced with being an alicorn," Celestia said. She smiled wistfully, with a touch of sadness in it. "I remember when I had hopes that my Twilight would ascend. Your Princess Celestia must be very proud of you."

Twilight ducked her head slightly, blushing. "Thanks," she said. "But I'm sure your Twilight could do the same, if she'd just stop using that artifact that's focusing her magic, whatever it is. It's really done a number on her; she's amazingly fast and focused, but it seems like... well, like she has no moral center anymore. I know she has reason to hate Discord, but she knows the one she's holding captive is from my universe, not the one who corrupted her friends."

"He is still Discord, though," Celestia said.

"Well, yes, but... there's no excuse for torture. No matter what he's done. I certainly would have understood if you'd turned him to stone after the stunts he pulled when he came here. I can even understand why Spike killed the other one. But... torture's just indefensible."

"Even if that torture could lead to the salvation of all ponykind? To defending a weakened Equestria from threats on all borders? Possibly even to defeating death itself, for ordinary ponies?"

Twilight stared. "I... just don't see how torture could ever lead to those things."

Princess Celestia got to her hooves, smiling beatifically down at Twilight. "Of course not. That is a wonderful trait, Twilight; I wish to the heavens that my Twilight had been able to keep that innocence." She walked over to the large window, gazing out it. "I learned a very long time ago a harsh lesson, that my Twilight was unfortunately forced to learn much more recently. Sometimes, when all around you is chaos, harmony is not enough to survive. Sometimes you need order. And order, like chaos, has no morality. It does not concern itself with the well-being of any given pony, though of course, unlike chaos, it can concern itself with the well-being of all ponies. Harmony cannot kill, harmony cannot cause severe and prolonged pain – it can cause suffering, even long-lasting suffering, but not pain, per se, because that would be excessively cruel, and cruelty is antithetical to harmony. But order can embrace cruelty, if needed." She turned to look down at Twilight again. "I am given to understand that in your world, Discord was defeated, and some time after his defeat, your version of me ordered him to be released to be reformed."

"That's right."

"Is she aware that it didn't work?"

"It did work. Mostly," Twilight said. "The reformation's an ongoing process. He's... well, he's not good, but he's not evil anymore either, and he's trying. He was trying, anyway. And he slipped up and came here to cause chaos, so I totally understand why from your perspective it doesn't look like it worked. But he helped us deal with his plunder vines, and destroy them."

This was possibly an overstatement of Discord's role in that, but under the circumstances Twilight felt like she really needed to defend Discord. Was this how Fluttershy felt all the time? "This was how Fluttershy felt all the time? "I saw that that didn't happen, here, and it caused a lot of damage to the Everfree. That's damage that didn't happen in our world because Discord is trying to reform. We don't expect ponies who are alcoholics to be able to give up drinking, forever, with no slip-ups, without magical assistance; we expect them to try, but we understand if they make a mistake and backslid. There's no spell assistance that can help Discord with his need for chaos, so the fact that he fell out of harness makes sense. But he didn't do anything worth being tortured for. Stone, maybe. Not diamond whips."
"When my sis—" Celestia's voice caught. Twilight frowned. Was the Princess's voice breaking? Celestia continued. "When P-Princess Luna transformed into Nightmare Moon and began her rebellion against me, intending to kill me and hide the sun forever... even as terrible a crime as that would have been had she succeeded, it still di- did not deserve a thousand years of isolation from all ponykind. Many – many responses to a being's actions may not b-be... excuse me." She picked up her water with her telekinesis and drank of it deeply, the same way she had taught Twilight to do when Twilight was crying hysterically and couldn't make herself stop.

"Is something wrong, Princess?"

"Yes," Celestia said, as she set down the glass. "But you may be able to help me set it right."

Yes! Twilight exulted inwardly. We're going to negotiate, I'll help the Princess out, and she'll order the other me to let Discord go, and we can solve everything! "I'd be happy to do anything I can to help!"

Celestia smiled in a way Twilight had never seen her smile, with a bitter twist to it that chilled Twilight. "I doubt you're thinking of the sort of help I will need, but I'm sure that in the end, you will help me." She knelt down. Even kneeling on the floor with all four legs underneath her, she still towered over Twilight, who was sitting upright on the floor. "I'm sure you think I am a monster for what I've allowed to happen. But if you knew what this world has suffered – what it is still suffering – or what my Twilight has endured, I think you will understand why I believed it was the only course of action we could take, and allowed her to take it. You may be able to give us an alternative. But I'll need to give you some of the history, first, so you can understand what drives us. You say that you and your friends sealed Discord again. How long did it take you?"

"It was hard to tell because he kept moving the sun and the moon, but I think it might have been the same day, or a day later," Twilight said. "You sent all my friendship letters back to Spike, and they inspired me and renewed my faith in friendship, so I went and found my friends and cast memory spells on them so they'd remember who they really were and remember our connection as friends."

"That happened in our world as well," Celestia said, nodding.

"And then we confronted Discord, and he didn't realize we had broken his spell – he thought the Elements wouldn't work, so he didn't even try to stop us until it was already too late."

"Ah."

"And, well, that was it. We beat him then and there, turned him to stone, and a little over a year later Princess Celestia asked Fluttershy to reform him—"

"I don't need those details," Celestia said. "I simply wanted to know how long you endured his chaos. Because my Twilight and her friends did the exact same thing you did... but it didn't work. Your Discord may not have seen it coming, but ours did. What the Elements were fired at turned out to be a balloon."

"A balloon?" Twilight asked incredulously.

"Discord had used his magic to animate it and make it move and speak like him, so they couldn't tell. In legend, the Elements cannot be evaded, once targeted; it's said that they can follow their target through teleportation or any level of speed, or even into Tartarus itself. But they need to be targeted correctly in the first place. They will not work on an enemy of ponies who is not an enemy of harmony, so they cannot be used offensively. And when they are used against an enemy of harmony, if they are pointed at the wrong target by their Bearers, they will misfire." She sighed.
"They fired the Elements at the balloon replica of Discord, and could not recharge them quickly enough to use against the real Discord once he reappeared. And thus we were condemned to a year of chaos."

Twilight tried to imagine what it would have been like, if the one day of Discord's rule she'd suffered under had been multiplied out to a year. "That must have been awful," she said. "But our Discord didn't do any of those things. He doesn't deserve to be punished for something he didn't do."

"It isn't punishment, Twilight," Celestia said. "It is training."

"Training?" Twilight stared at Celestia in bewilderment. "For what?" In his letter, Discord had thought the torture was intended to break him and train him to obedience, but he'd had no idea what they wanted him for. This Celestia seemed... colder and sadder and more tired than her own, but not evil. Surely she didn't want him to conquer other dimensions like he'd speculated in the letter.

"To fix the world his counterpart broke," Celestia said. "Let me tell you what the other one did to us, and you'll understand why we need Discord's power, and why I would be able to do without it, with your aid."

### Opposition, 8 AM

"Give it up, dweeb!" Rainbow's counterpart shouted after her. "You're dealing with one of the Wonderbolts here!"

"Wow, their standards are low over here!" Rainbow retorted, shooting through the sky some gallops away from the Everfree. She cut wingpower and dropped into a steep dive, spiraling to make herself harder to hit.

"Or maybe you just suck!" Other Rainbow shouted, diving down at Rainbow hind hooves first, forcing Rainbow to rapidly shift trajectory and flap out of the way just in time.

She **was** fast, and she had some nice moves. Rainbow had to give her that. Getting into the Wonderbolts had plainly helped her technique. But Rainbow couldn't allow herself to consider the possibility of defeat. She had friends depending on her.

"Yeah? If the Wonderbolts over here are so awesome, how come they're not helping you?" She zipped out of the way as the other charged her with forehooves extended, and very, *very* narrowly missed being kicked in the face by the other's hind hooves as they passed.

"Like I need the help!" Other Rainbow flipped and dove at her again.

Rainbow accelerated upward at a steep angle. "Good for you, 'cause you're sure not gonna get any help from your so-called *friends.*" A lone cloud floated some distance overhead. She aimed for it.

"Like I need any help from them either!" The other Rainbow pursued, grinning.

"Do you even have any real friends anymore?" Rainbow called out behind her.

"Who needs friends when you're awesome?"

"What's the point of being awesome if you haven't got friends?"
"Boy, you're stupid, aren't you?" Other Rainbow laughed, a short bark to save breath for flying. "Friends aren't even a real thing! Everypony's out for themselves."

"Sounds like the kind of crap Gilda used to say before I made friends with her," Rainbow said, and hit the cloud full speed. Instead of knifing through it and going onward, she cut speed immediately, hovering just above it.

She was hoping Other Rainbow would simply charge through the cloud after her, leaving herself open to a good swift buck to the face. But Other Rainbow was more savvy than that, apparently; she came up next to the cloud, allowing her to see Rainbow the moment Rainbow could see her and removing any element of surprise. "Lame! Didja really think you could ambush me that easy?"

"Well, you are too dumb to keep a friend," Rainbow retorted, lifting off and angling away as she picked up speed.

"You're so dumb you think they're really your friends!" Other Rainbow came charging after her. "Nopony really cares about anypony else! They'll give you stuff if there's something they want out of you, and if you're totally amazing then 'course they're gonna want stuff from you, so they're gonna act like they're your friends, but the moment you need anything, tough!"

Celestia, but that was sad. Part of Rainbow Dash halfway wanted to hug her counterpart and show her she was wrong. The rest of her, of course, had no intention of doing anything so uncool.

"Maybe it's just you. Maybe nopony wants to be friends with you 'cause you turned into a major league jerk!"

"You just keep telling yourself that!"

They'd turned around now and were speeding back toward the Everfree. Rainbow glanced behind her. She and her doppelganger were too evenly matched. She wasn't smarter than the other, wasn't faster than the other, wasn't tougher than the other. How could she get an edge? The only thing she had going for her that the other didn't was the strength she took from having friends, and her friends weren't here and couldn't help her with this fight even if they were.

What could she do? She'd tried taunting the other one, trying to make her mad by poking her in the obvious weak spot, her lack of true friendship. But the other seemed so set in her cynical delusion, she was comfortable with it. Somehow Rainbow had to take advantage of the other one's beliefs about friendship, because it was the only difference between them, but so far she didn't see how.

Then she had it. She grinned slowly as the plan took shape in her mind. This was gonna hurt, and it was going to be dangerous as all heck, but that just made up for the ways that the plan grated on her, the ways it would grate on the other one even worse.

Rainbow slowed. Not a lot, but it didn't need to be a lot. The other one taunted her. "Better run, slowpoke, I'm catching up!"

"Yeah, this is getting boring," Rainbow said flippantly. She put the brakes on and spun to face her opponent. "Bring it!"

"With pleasure!" The other one charged into her with a headbutt, plowing them both across the sky some distance before Rainbow managed to kick free. She bucked at her opponent's head, but the other Rainbow wasn't there.

Below them was one of the thickest, darkest points of the Everfree Forest. Even in this world, where the plunder vines seemed to have killed half the forest before dying off, this area seemed...
impenetrable and foreboding. A storm system swirled nearby, an Everfree storm that wouldn't respond to pegasus magic. Rainbow feinted toward the storm, just fractionally slower than she would normally have.

"Oh no you don't!" The other one, at full speed, cut her off. "If you think you can lure me into an Everfree storm, you've got another think coming!"

"Good thing I've got enough brain for all the extra thinks!" Rainbow taunted, and dove, plunging in the direction of the storm, sliding under the other Rainbow, who pursued.

As Rainbow expected, just before she reached the edge of the storm, the other one slammed into her back, dropping them both toward the sinister forest. It hurt, but Rainbow was already using her opponent's momentum to spin herself, twisting in midair so she could grapple with her opponent.

For several seconds both pegasi fell, punching and kicking and head-butting each other. They broke apart before they hit the tree cover, separating into different directions, Rainbow herself still heading toward the Everfree storm. The other Rainbow brought herself up, hovering for a moment before charging at Rainbow again. Within moments, they were both being battered by the untamed rain and winds of the storm, the wild magic interfering with their own flight magic.

Other Rainbow shouted something, but despite the fact that pegasi had a tremendous ability to hear pony voices over the roar of wind and storm, the Everfree storm was beyond that talent's limit. Rainbow could hear her but couldn't understand a thing she said. Which was fine, because this wasn't the time for taunting anymore. She let a gust of wind that she could sense but couldn't control grab her and throw her upwards, riding the storm rather than fighting it.

Her counterpart pursued, charging through the storm with a look of grim determination on her face. Rainbow could feel the effort she was putting into staying her course, the tight grip she was holding on what little of the air currents she could control. Rainbow, who'd been practicing a lot with flying in Everfree storms ever since Discord had been reformed and released, because she hadn't trusted him even slightly and every pegasus knew that Everfree storms were formed by pure chaos, used very little wingpower to let the storm currents pull her this way and that, as her opponent exhausted herself trying to maintain her course through the storm. Rainbow hadn't expected that; she'd assumed that, after living under Discord's chaos for a year, the other one would be even more experienced than she was. But maybe she was. Maybe she was using her wingpower to try to control her flight because, after months under Discord, she actually knew how to do it reliably, and simply letting the storm take her wherever it willed hadn't been an option when its will had had Discord's will. It didn't matter; for whatever reason, she was burning herself out to stay on course, and Rainbow was barely using her wings at all.

That would probably make this next part easier to pull off.

The other one caught up with Rainbow and grappled with her again. Rainbow punched and blocked, letting the other's wings carry them both, until she saw her opportunity. The other Rainbow aimed for her gut, and Rainbow let the blow land, let it knock the wind out of her in a pained "oof!" Then the other followed up with a hard hoof to the face... and Rainbow let her head fall back, let her eyes roll up in her head and close, let her body go limp.

As she went deadweight, using no flight field at all to lighten herself, the other was dragged down for a moment before letting go, and Rainbow fell. With one eye cracked open, she watched as her duplicate got smaller and smaller, a dark spot against the clouds above – which were themselves pretty dark, so it was a matter of seconds before Rainbow couldn't see her anymore. Almost immediately after that, she crashed through the tree cover.
And snapped back to life, catching herself on a branch and clinging on for dear life, as soon as the leaves closed over her head and she could barely see the sky anymore. The first branch she caught broke under her momentum, and the second she tried to grab slipped out of her hooves, and several others smacked and battered her, before she finally managed to stop her fall.

Rainbow cared about winning. A lot. Losing a fight that she could have won was practically the most humiliating thing ever, and even now, the fact that her opponent thought that she was more awesome than Rainbow stung. But her friends were worth it. Looking like a chump in front of an enemy who was also herself, except her worst possible self? Awful, if she was the only one of concern in the equation, and she'd never, ever do it... except to save her friends, who were worth any sacrifice, including looking like a total loser.

The other one believed friendship wasn't even real. She would know and share Rainbow's flaws of arrogance and her desire to win at all costs; she wouldn't think for a moment that Rainbow threw that fight, because there was nothing whatsoever that would make it worth it to her to lose at hoof-to-hoof battle. And because she wouldn't imagine Rainbow could possibly bring herself to throw a fight, she wouldn't pursue her down to the ground, not in the middle of an Everfree storm over some of the darkest and most dangerous turf in the Everfree. She wasn't fighting out of loyalty, she was fighting to look like a winner, and she'd already accomplished that. She had no motivation to make sure Rainbow had really fallen to her death, because all that really mattered to her was looking awesome.

So now Rainbow was drenched, trapped deep in the Everfree in the heart of a storm she couldn't control, battered and bruised and cold – the same pegasus magic that would normally protect her from extremes of temperature in a storm was working only erratically because this was the Everfree, so the cold rain was biting through her coat and down to her bones in a way that a real storm never would. But she'd lost her opponent, and better yet, tricked her into thinking Rainbow was probably dead, or soon would be, as anypony unconscious with broken limbs in the Everfree would end up monster food real fast. And now she was free to go to her friends' aid.

She alternated between trotting and flying through the forest, depending on how thick the overgrowth was. The Everfree was large enough that a single storm system didn't necessarily cover the whole thing, and that particular storm was drifting south and west, away from Ponyville. It didn't take long before she was out of the rain, making a beeline back to where her friends had been fighting their doppelgangers.

When she got there, she looked around in dismay. Broken branches, smushed bushes, jewels scattered in the dirt... a broken knife, Applejack's saddlebag in a bush, Pinkie's inexplicably hanging from a tree branch... but no sign of her friends or their opponents. Either the fight had moved onward, and was still happening someplace in the forest, but with no way for Rainbow to easily figure out where... or they'd lost. Because if they'd won, they'd have reclaimed their saddlebags.

Then Rainbow smelled smoke.

Smoke in a forest was a bad, bad thing. Rainbow grabbed both lost sets of saddlebags with her teeth and ran, heading back the way they'd come to enter the forest because it was a route she knew and it would get her out quickly. The smell of the smoke got stronger, but even if she was heading toward fire, it'd be better to be near the fire but out of the Everfree, where she could grab a cloud and dump it on anything she found burning and where there was room for her to fly at full speed.

Once she was out of the forest, she gaped in surprise at the sight in front of her.

In the distance, a tree was blazing, its upper branches a torch lighting the sunny sky and pouring
smoke into the air, a signal that could probably be seen all through Ponyville. Rainbow squinted. Was that Fluttershy's house?

Oh, horsefeathers.

Fluttershy had been told to find a way to double back and sneak into town, and get to the library. But what if she'd gone to her house first, and was trapped in that fire? That'd be just like Fluttershany way, to go check on the animals she'd told to evacuate. Rainbow couldn't go searching for the rest of the party until she was certain that Fluttershy was not, in fact, pinned into a burning house.

Rainbow put on a burst of speed, heading straight toward the fire.

Opposition, 8 AM

"Now what is it?" Applejack snorted. "We dealt with those gals who were us, shipped 'em off to Canterlot, what the hay else is there to do? I got trees to buck, Twilight! I can't be hangin' out here at the library all day!"

Twilight rubbed her forehead. She was so very tired. "Rainbow Dash hasn't returned, which makes it entirely possible that the other one may have won. If so she will be coming here to the library. All of us need to sleep, and there's safety in numbers—"

"I don't!" Pinkie chirped cheerily. "Spike gave me coffee!"

"Great, you can stand watch."

"I don't need to sleep, Twi, I need to get back to work. It ain't like you let me keep them hired hoofs."

Twilight sighed. "They weren't hired hoofs. The Flim Flam brothers were traitors who allied themselves with Discord, and you insisted that they should be forced to work for you as punishment."

"You were gonna feed 'em to Pinkie."

"I still wanna know if twins taste the same," Pinkie said plaintively.

Rarity made a face. "Ugh. Must you?"

"They weren't even twins, Pinkie. And they had apple cutie marks. Day I let you chop up a stallion with an apple cutie mark is the day I eat my own hat."

"Ooh! When you eat your hat can I try some?"

"We couldn't afford to leave them on your farm while you were engaged in training Discord, given their former allegiance," Twilight said, "and as it happens, they are of more value inventing weapons and other tools for Equestria's protection and recovery than they ever were as menial farm workers. Their "allegiance" to Discord had never been anything more than collaboration, throwing in with the apparent winner, and they had been promised that if their inventions were successful enough at helping Equestria recover from the devastation the year of chaos had brought, they would be freed. It was a lie, of course; Twilight was never going to allow collaborators with chaos to go free. But it was keeping them inspired to work hard and actually quality-test their products, in the prison in Canterlot she had had them sent to."
"So what you're sayin' is, I was right and you were wrong when you wanted to execute 'em and I said I could make better use of 'em than Pinkie could."

"Fine. You were right and I was wrong. Now can we please stay on topic?" Twilight rubbed her forehead again.

Spike interrupted with a pot of coffee and a tray of mugs. "Uh, does anypony want coffee? Because I have coffee, if anypony wants some..."

Everyone took a cup except for Rarity, who sniffed that a lady takes tea. Predictably, Spike ran off to make her some tea. When was the stupid little dragon going to figure out that his crush on Rarity was pointless to pursue? Twilight had thought he'd gotten over it, unlike the one she'd encountered today that had nearly de-horned her, but his behavior here suggested otherwise.

"I am willing to stay, if you insist," Rarity said, once she had her tea, "but only under the condition that you can secure compensation from the Crown for my lost day of productivity. I can neither sell nor make dresses if I'm trapped here in your library for the day, awaiting Rainbow Dash's return."

"Fine! Princess Celestia will pay you. This is important."

"If you need me to stay so all-fired bad, how about you get Princess Celestia to pay for me to hire some hoofs, then? It ain't like Discord has actually ever been useful."

Twilight smirked. "He is about to become considerably more useful."

Applejack raised her eyebrow. "Do tell."

She floated the scroll where she'd taken down the details of the ritual Discord had explained. "I've obtained information from him regarding a ritual that will allow us to generate sufficient power that we can end the domain of death itself over ponykind. Applejack, what would you do to allow Apple Bloom to never die?"

Applejack swallowed, eyes wide. "What's the catch?"

"As far as I've been able to determine, the 'catch' is simply that Discord has to be killed, with his magic intact. Without my spells binding him, that would ordinarily be impossible."

"Ooh, Fluttershy isn't going to like that," Pinkie said. "You should have seen how mean she got when she thought I'd killed him. Silly filly, like you can kill a draconequus just by cutting off his arms and legs and tail!"

"Fluttershy's opinion is irrelevant," Twilight said. "We all know she's been compromised."

"Seems to me like there still's gotta be a catch of some sort," Applejack said. "Why would Discord give you some sorta ritual that will kill him?"

"Because we've won. Her smirk got bigger. "He is suicidal. Apparently Fluttershy convinced him last night that our counterparts are not his friends, and are not coming to rescue him – which is true enough, given that I've sent them to Canterlot with recommendations that they be executed—"

"If Princess Celestia says yes, can I have the other me?" Pinkie asked. "Please? Pretty please with a cupcake on top?"

Rarity winced. "Pinkie, I have had far too little sleep to be able to endure how disgusting you are. Please refrain."
"I wonder if the other you tastes like a marshmallow? You look like a big marshmallow!"

"The point is," Twilight interrupted, "that he wants to die, and believes we will not permit him death unless it serves our purposes... which is also true enough. The ritual he gave me will allow extra-dimensional entities to consume all the disorder in Equestria, through him, leaving us with a state of perfect harmony, and near-infinite power. We can heal every pony in Equestria of any ailment they possess, and make them as immortal as alicorns."

Rarity's eyes were wide. "That would be astonishing. And wondrous! Though I wonder if there is any ability to restrict it to worthy ponies. There are certainly some ruffians who do not deserve immortality."

"I'll have to see. It may be that we can retract immortality once it's granted. Otherwise... that's what Tartarus is for."

Pinkie frowned. "I don't get a good feeling about this, Twilight," she said.

Twilight rolled her eyes. Of course the pony who enjoyed murdering and eating other ponies would have a problem with immortality being granted to ponykind. "I'm sure you can get by on a diet of griffons and such. I recall you were quite pleased with our capture of Rainbow Dash's former friend."

"Oh, yeah, Gilda! She was dee-lish! But that's not why I get a bad feeling."

"Lemme guess, your something or other is twitchin'," Applejack said dryly.

"Noooo...." Pinkie seemed unusually pensive, hoof to chin. "Not really, no. It's just... it feels like a bad idea."

Rarity sniffed. "I'm sure the notion of a world without disorder is unpalatable to you."

That had to be it. Twilight nodded to herself. Of course Pinkie wouldn't want a world without chaos.

Pinkie confirmed it a moment later. "Oh yeah, that's right! If there wasn't any chaos then nothing would ever be funny! The world needs to have a little bit of chaos in it!"

"Given the choice between humor and death, or immortality and seriousness, I think most ponies would prefer not to die," Twilight said.

"Well, maybe, but that's because they're being dumb! If you were immortal and nothing was ever funny, that would be a fate worse than death! It would be the boringest, most un-fun immortality ever, and you couldn't even die to get away from it!"

"Twilight said the world would be in perfect harmony, though," Applejack said. "And Laughter's an element of Harmony, so it stands to reason the humor wouldn't be gone." She looked at Twilight, hard. "You did mean that, right? About the world in perfect harmony?"

"Of course! With entropy vastly decreased, what else could there be?"

"Well, then, I think laughter's safe."

"Oh, goodie!" Pinkie said. "But... I still don't get a good feeling."

"But this isn't your Pinkie Sense warning you of something." Twilight made it more of a statement
than a question.

"I don't think so. Normally if it were my Pinkie Sense I'd be feeling a twitch or a twinge or something."

"Then we'll go through with the plan unless you have some more concrete reason for avoiding it." And probably they'd go through with the plan anyway, since Pinkie did have an obvious bias in favor of chaos and disorder. It was entirely possible that Pinkie didn't need to survive into the New World Order of immortality for all; once Discord was dying, his magic and his life force being consumed by the ritual, disrupting the Elements by removing one of the Bearers would be a practical possibility.

Rarity set down her tea. "If you wish us all to sleep here on the possibility of an attack by the other Rainbow Dash, I do hope you've made accommodations. The last time we all slept in a bed together was quite uncomfortable, and I have no desire to repeat the experience."

"There's a guest room you're welcome to use," Twilight snapped. "Applejack?"

"I'll just crash on your floor here. Ain't like I'm planning to do more than nap a bit. I guess I'll be more effective when I do get back to the farm today if I've gotten a little shut-eye."

"I'll keep watch!" Pinkie said. "Because if the Dashie that comes back is our Dashie then yay, and if the Dashie that comes back isn't our Dashie then I wanna know what she did with our Dashie and also if she's yummy!"

"Very well. I'm going to bed. Spike, assist Pinkie in keeping watch."

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**Opposition, 9 AM**

Once Twilight and Rarity had both gone upstairs, Pinkie summoned Spike to the kitchen. He went with trepidation, claws at the ready in case she had truly gone over the bend this time and was targeting friends as well as foes. "Yeah, Pinkie? Did you need help baking something?"

"Nope. I made a Pinkie Promise to Fluttershy that I wouldn't be alone with Discord, but I need to ask him some questions, so you have to come with me."

Spike swallowed. He really, really didn't want to face Discord right now. The night that it had happened, he'd felt betrayed and angry, because Discord had misled him into thinking he was sending the letter to Princess Celestia, when it was really a call for help. So he had confessed everything to Twilight when she confronted him, and she'd confiscated all his gems, everything rocklike he owned except for his small collection of a certain very specific kind of stone he'd felt compelled to take, which she'd claimed to Twilight was a fossil collection. But at least she hadn't told him he couldn't be her assistant anymore and he had to find someplace else to live. He dreaded that more than anything else she could do.

Now, though, a new guilt weighed on him. Twilight had ordered the death of those alternates, alternates who were presumably just like the real versions had been before the other Discord had corrupted them. Twilight might hate them because they were trying to help Discord, but Spike was fairly certain that before Discord had corrupted them, and Twilight had corrupted herself for the power to defeat him, that all of the mares would have been horrified by what was being done to Discord. They weren't in league with chaos, they were trying to prevent someone from being tortured, and they didn't deserve to die for that. And the entire reason they had been captured was that he'd told Twilight what Discord had told him, so Twilight had known they were coming.
If they died, it was his fault. He had to ask Discord about them. He had to confirm if they were or weren't like the ways his friends had been when they'd been their real selves. Because if they were... he had no idea how he could save them, but he had to try something. But he couldn't ask with Pinkie around.

Discord was lying down, eyes closed, bound by the chain attached to his collar. His eyes snapped open as they entered, and immediately went wide with terror. He backed up as far as his chain would allow. "Y-you can't be here! Fluttershy said you promised you wouldn't go near me again! She promised!"

Pinkie giggled. "Relax, I'm not here to hurtcha. Mostly. If you answer my questions. Besides, I only Pinkie Promised not to be alone with you, and Spike's here! So I'm not alone."

"Spike... Spike, i-is Twilight allowing this? I don't think Twilight would allow this..."

Discord's terror made Spike feel much worse, guilt twisting in his guts. "Pinkie just wants to ask you some questions," he said, hoping he was telling the truth, hoping he wouldn't have to hold responsibility for stopping Pinkie from doing something awful.

"I—I'll answer questions. Don't hurt me. Please." Discord had curled himself into a ball at the end of his tether and was still visibly trembling as Pinkie bounced forward.

"Twilight says you gave her a spell that can make ponies immortal. Did you really?"

"It – the idea of the spell, it, uh, it's for power. Lots of power, more than my own. So, so Twilight would, she'd gain a lot of power, enough to reshape the world. If she wants to use it to make ponies immortal, well, that'd be her decision. I'll be dead, so I won't care."

"But why would you want to die?" Pinkie was suddenly grasping Discord's shoulders, her face pressed down against his muzzle. A thin, terrified whine escaped him. Spike felt sick. "Dying is no fun! Don't you want to have fun?"

"P-please... please, don't, please..."

"I want answers, mister!"

"Yes, I want to die!" Discord burst out, his voice cracking. "Partly because of you! I don't want to be tortured anymore! I don't... I don't want... please, please don't hurt me, please..." He let out a sob.

Pinkie released him. "Is it really going to remove all the chaos in the world when you die?" she demanded.

Discord shook his head rapidly. Tears welled in his eyes. "It, um, in the beginning it might be even more chaotic, for a while," he whimpered. "Nothing can get rid of all chaos except the heat death of the universe. Which, which I don't think Twilight w-would want. It'll be a-a lot more orderly than it's been, eventually, but there will still be some chaos, you can't get rid of it."

"Okay!" Pinkie turned and bounced away.

"Wait, that's it?" Spike asked.

"Yeppers! All I needed to know!" She shrugged. "I still don't get a good feeling, but at least I know it won't make it so nothing is funny ever again!"

Discord choked down another sob, covering his face with his paws. Pinkie turned her head back to
look at him. "Oh, don't be such a big baby!" she said. "I told you I wasn't going to hurt you, and I didn't. Oh, but one more thing!" She spun around.

"Wh-what?" Discord lifted his head out of his arms trepidatiously, shining wet tracks down his muzzle.

"Once these extra-dimensional thingummies have done what they're supposed to do and Twilight has all this power and you're dead... will your body still be here, or will it be vaporized or something?" Pinkie licked her lips. "Because you were super-tasty the one time I got to try your meat! Like every bite was a new flavor! So if your body's still going to be there I definitely have to ask Twi if I can have it! I'd love to try your organs, I bet they've got a real kick!"

Discord's expression was a mixture of fear and disgust. "I don't know," he said. "I – I know what the final end result of the ritual is, and I know what kind of power it raises, but I don't know what happens immediately afterward. I don't think it'll vaporize me, because I saw my alternate's skeleton, but if it melts all the flesh off me I suppose that's no use to you." The last bit was thick with bitterness.

"Will it mess up the ritual if I take a little bit to nom on right before Twilight starts? Maybe just a piece of your tail!"

This time Discord broke down and started crying in earnest, making no real response. This seemed to annoy Pinkie. "Hey. Hey, mister chaos, I'm talking to you. I asked you a question!"

"I don't know," Discord sobbed. "I don't, I don't, please don't do it, please, this is going to hurt enough as it is, please don't eat me at least until I'm already dead, please..."

"Well, I don't know," Pinkie said. "I don't want to miss my chance, but I did Pinkie Promise Fluttershy, and there wasn't any clause in there about what if you're just about to die and your flesh might melt off before I get a chance, so probably I won't be able to do it. Probably. Maybe I can get Fluttershy to let me. She'll be really mad at you that you told Twilight how to get power by killing you, you know."

"I—I know."

"So maybe she'll give me permission!" Pinkie smiled widely and hopped out of the room.

"Coming, Spike?"

"In – in a minute," Spike said. "I'm going to get him a bucket of water first."

"Good thinking! Wouldn't want the meat to get all dried out!" Pinkie giggled. "Okie dokie! I'll go back and do that thing that we're doing!"

That thing they were doing? Oh, right, Discord wasn't supposed to be told that his friends had really come through to save him. Which made it really, really stupid for him to have pulled this suicide stunt now. Why did he want to kill himself just after he sent a message for help?

Discord was crying hysterically, curled in on himself to the point where his head wasn't even visible within his coils. "Hey," Spike said. "Hey, listen. I don't think Twilight's gonna let her do it. The whole eating creatures who can talk thing grosses her out."

Discord's head appeared, pushing through two of the coils to glare up at Spike with tear-filled eyes. "Oh, wonderful," he said sarcastically, and then, as if Spike couldn't tell, added, "That was sarcasm, by the way. I am just thrilled to hear that a pony who's so eager to torture me to death you can hear the anticipation in her voice even when she's locked out all other emotions will protect me from a
different pony who wants to torture me. Which is to say I'm not thrilled at all."

"I can hear the sarcasm, you know," Spike said. "You don't have to tell me about it."

"Yes, I do! Honesty spell, remember! I'm com-compelled..." Anything else he might have wanted to say was lost in more sobs.

"Oh, yeah. I forgot." Spike went and filled a bucket, the same as he'd done the night before. He brought it back to the crying, shaking draconequus. "I wasn't lying about the water. Here you go."

Once again, Discord dunked his head in the bucket and drank like he was dying of thirst. This time, he was strong enough to use his paws, grasping the bucket with them and tilting it toward himself slightly, then more. When he set it back down and sat up, uncoiling, there was less than a fourth of the water Spike had put in it left. "Why so altruistic?" he asked, no longer crying but the bitterness was even heavier than before. "Guilty conscience?"

"Why would I have a guilty conscience?" Spike asked, even though he did.

"You sold me out. You told Twilight everything I told you."

"Yeah, well, you were lying to me!"

"I can't lie, Spike."

"You didn't actually tell a lie, but you let me think something that wasn't true. I thought the letter was going to Princess Celestia!"

"I never said it was. Whatever conclusions you drew were your own fault. And what did you expect me to do? Never try to escape?" His voice cracked again. "If I'd known how useless it would be I wouldn't have bothered, but I thought I had friends who might come for me."

"You could have told me."

"And have you go tattle to Twilight that I'm trying to escape? You already killed me once, why would I think you would be willing to help me?"

Spike admitted to himself that Discord had a point, but he was still angry and upset. "Fine. But this ritual thing. Why did you decide to do it now? I don't really think..." He hesitated, the thought of being disloyal to Twilight at war with his common sense. Common sense won. "I don't think Twilight should have all of that kind of power. Not like she is now."

"Not my problem. I'll be dead."

"But why did you decide to do this now? Right after sending the letter?"

"Because Fluttershy made it more than adequately obvious to me that I don't have any friends and no one is coming to rescue me, so what's the point to survival? I don't want to be tortured anymore. I told Twilight this, I told Pinkie this. I want it to end, and if dying is the only way I can make it end, then fine. Kill me. I don't—" His voice caught on another suppressed sob. "I don't care anymore. I just want to die."

"But..." Spike hesitated again. Telling Discord this was probably a really, really bad idea. On the other hand, he had a really bad feeling about this ritual, the moreso because Pinkie, whose intuition hadn't been suppressed when she was corrupted, had a bad feeling about it. And when it came down to it, Spike felt like he couldn't trust Twilight. Not anymore. He loved her, he wanted to
Protect her, he'd do anything to help her return to her old self – but he couldn't trust this version of her.

"Either say something or go away. I want to sleep. Maybe I'll manage to have a dream of pleasant chaos before I die."

Spike drew a deep breath. "You're wrong," he said. "They came through. Last night."

Discord stared at him. "You're lying."

"I'm not. Twilight and the others went to fight them, and they beat them, except that the other Fluttershy and the other Rainbow Dash are still loose. And Twilight's been telling Princess Celestia that she should execute them, and I don't know what to do, because—"

Discord's harsh laughter interrupted Spike. "My Twilight is an alicorn, Spike. Even with Matrisse backing her up, this one shouldn't have been a match for her. So you're still lying. Not as if I couldn't tell. I know they couldn't care less about my suffering, so why would they come?"

"But they did come," Spike said, frustrated. "And Twilight's trying to talk Princess Celestia into killing them. Don't you care about that?"

"You hate me so much, it wasn't enough for you to kill me once? Now that you've learned I'm going to die and you're not going to get to be the one to do it, you have to construct this fiction of horrible lies to try to torment me with?" Discord hissed. "You know, the spells that bind me don't stop me from hurting you. You may be a dragon, but you're a very, very small one."

Spike backed up. "I'm not lying! I want your help! I don't want them to die, but I don't know what to do, and there's no one else I can ask!"

"Shut up!" Discord lunged at him, making Spike skitter back even further. "Yes, that's right, stay out of claw range, because if you're going to keep spouting these lies at me, I may very well avenge my alter ego's murder. You are a disgusting little excuse for a dragon, and I say this as someone who's killed more dragons than I can count, but every single one of them was more honorable and worthy of life than you."

"I'm not!" Spike said. "Look, I don't hate you. I don't have any reason to lie to you! I'm not that kind of dragon! Your other self never corrupted me—"

"Says the dragon who killed him," Discord sneered.

"I did that because I thought it was the only way to save my family and friends from him coming back someday! And I'm sorry, all right? I'm sorry! It was wrong, I shouldn't have done it and I'm really, really sorry, and I can't bring him back but I can try to help you get out of here and go back to your home! But you can't do that if you let Twilight perform this ritual, and you can't do that if your friends get executed in Canterlot!"

"Did you not hear me? I. Have. No. Friends." Discord was on all fours, fur bristling, tail spikes rigid. "Even if they did come through, which they didn't, it would just be because Twilight doesn't want me to be brainwashed into conquering her home dimension or something, and why would I even care what happens to them? They're not my friends, they don't care about me, and if they were here, and facing death, what good would it do to tell me or ask me for help? I can't help myself! How could I possibly do anything to save them?" His eyes welled with tears. "Why are you torturing me like this? What did I, personally, do to you?"

"I'm not trying to torture you—"
"Oh, shut up!" Discord snarled. "To think I actually felt sympathy for you, you little monster. You can go and die with the rest of them!"

Spike's blood ran cold. "What does that mean?"

"What do you mean what does that mean? I don't have to answer your questions. Go away and let me die in peace."

"I mean you said 'die with the rest of them.' Die with the rest of who? Who's dying? Because it's not the ponies who came to rescue you, because you don't even believe they're here and why would I be executed with them? What you said doesn't make sense."

"Haven't you heard by now? Where's the fun in making sense?" Discord sing-songed the last sentence, parodying himself.

"But who's supposed to die? Are ponies going to die because of this ritual?" He saw a flicker of something in Discord's eyes. "Oh, Celestia. They are, aren't they? Who's going to die? Tell me!"

Discord looked away. "I never said anypony was going to die, and I don't have to answer your questions or obey you," he muttered. "Aren't those some rather wild conclusions you're jumping to?"

"You tell me what you meant, or I will go wake up Twilight and tell her that you admitted to me that the ritual is going to kill ponies."

"I never said that!" Discord's voice sounded near-hysterical. "You're a liar! You lie to me about my friends and then you go lie to Twilight?"

"Then answer me. What did you mean?"

"Fine! I'll tell you!" Discord took a deep breath, visibly relaxing himself, standing down from the fight-or-flight position he'd been in. He grabbed the bucket and drank the rest of it. When he put it down, he said, "Do you sincerely believe Twilight is including you when she talks about granting immortality to ponies?"

"Uh, well, why would she need to? Dragons live a long time."

"Yes. But you're still mortal. In the natural course of events, dragons rarely live past two thousand years of age. You have the ability to die of old age, and you have the ability to die of any number of things before that. Twilight won't grant you immortality. Ponies will be spared old age, if she has her way, and possibly any sort of de—" He started coughing.

Spike sighed. "You want more water?"

"Yes... please..." Discord sounded almost like he was choking on something.

Spike filled and brought over another bucket of water, and Discord drank deeply. "The point is," he said when he was done, "she wants to give ponies immortality and she doesn't care about you, so you'll still be mortal just like every other creature on this planet that isn't a pony. So you'll die, just like all the other dragons, just like every other mortal creature on this world."

"Yeah, but I don't care. That's a long way off."

"Well, fine, if you're okay with the fact that your precious Twilight obviously can't stand you anymore."
Tears started to well up in Spike's own eyes. He fought them down. "You're a jerk, you know that? I tried to help you."

"Help me by lying to me that oh, my friends did come to save me, but oh no, they're all going to be murdered in Canterlot and I can't do anything about it? Oh, I can certainly see why you thought that would be helpful. Except that's sarcasm, because I can't." Discord laid his head down on the stone floor. "You're lying about all of it. They didn't come, because if they had they wouldn't have lost. And because they have no reason to come to save me because they all hate me as much as you do. And even if they did come it wouldn't be because they cared, so why should I?" He closed his eyes. "Go away and let me sleep. Please. Aren't you done getting your pound of flesh yet?"

Spike sighed. "I don't even know why I thought you might be able to help," he said. "Sorry to have bothered you."

He walked out of the cell, not bothering to lock it behind him – he'd have to bring Discord food later anyway, and since it was obvious that Discord couldn't break the chain that held him, what did it matter if the door was unlocked? He wasn't going anywhere.

Spike's claws twisted around themselves with anxiety. Four mares were going to die, if Princess Celestia listened to Twilight, and they didn't deserve it. But what could he do? He could try forging a letter from Twilight, but if he got caught doing that, he didn't even want to imagine the consequences, not now when he was already on such thin ice. He could write a letter from himself, but why would the Princess listen to him over Twilight?

"I don't know what to do, he thought. Somepony, anypony, help me, please. I just don't know what to do."

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**Opposition, 9 AM**

The first Fluttershy knew that her counterpart had arrived was when somepony landed, hard, on her back, driving her to her knees.

"You diamond bitch," a voice she had only ever heard on magical recordings hissed at her. "You whorse! What did you do? What did you do to my house?" Teeth gripped her mane, pulling painfully at her head. "Wht dd oo do?"

Normally, if Fluttershy was attacked by somepony this way, she'd lie in the dirt and whimper pitifully and beg for mercy, because the thought of hurting another pony, even a pony who was attacking her, by fighting back, horrified her. But this was the pony she wanted to hurt. This was the only pony in either universe she was willing to cause harm to – herself. So she slammed her head upward, smashing the hard upper portion of her skull into the other's jaw, then wrenching free with all her strength. It hurt, because the other's teeth were still in her mane, but the hundred brush strokes every day that she had to apply with the hardest, spikiest detangling brush she owned had left her head largely inured to the pain of a mane pull. "I set your house on fire," Fluttershy said, "because you don't deserve to have any nice things. Oh, and I talked Angel Bunny into taking all your animal friends and running for it, because they all hate you."

"You bitch!" The other screamed at her, and lunged forward, faster than Fluttershy would have ever expected herself to move. It was eerie and horrible, facing a mare who looked just like herself, except with expressions on her face that Fluttershy didn't think would ever appear on her own. She'd experienced it before, when she and her friends had fought the Changelings at Cadance's wedding, but in many ways this was worse, because Fluttershy knew this wasn't a Changeling.
Fluttershy eeped and ducked, letting the other one fly over her head. She ran several trots before it occurred to her that her other self was most likely as fast as she was, and she was on the ground, and flying was faster than galloping if she was properly motivated, which meant—

Fluttershy rolled to the side just in time as the other one slammed her hooves down on where she had been a moment ago, catching her mane again but missing her body. "What did you do to them?" the other one shouted. "You Stared them down, didn't you! You *made* them run away!"

She reared and punched at Fluttershy, who dodged, barely.

"Oh, no," Fluttershy said, breathing hard. "I didn't need to do anything like that! They were eager to leave." Another punch. Dodge. She didn't know how long she could keep this up. The other one seemed to have much better idea of how to channel aggression than Fluttershy herself did; as much as Fluttershy _wanted_ to hurt her, it was obvious that the other one was more proficient in hurting others. "When you make friends because you're kind and nice and you take care of them and you're loving, and then you turn into a cruel, psychotic monster, you really can't expect to keep your friends."

"I'm going to kill you," the other one said, facing Fluttershy with head lowered, ears back, hoof pawing at the ground in the universal gesture of barely contained pony rage, and eyes glaring. "I'm going to break every bone in your sniveling little body. And then I'm going to make Discord make me a new house, and then I'm going to find all my ungrateful little friends and punish them for running away. How will you like _that_?"

Fluttershy's eyes had gone wide at the other's vitriol. She had never heard any pony – never heard anyone, not even Chrysalis, say such vicious things. "You're certainly welcome to try, if that's really what you want," she said, and was proud of herself that her voice wasn't shaking. "But it won't change what a monster you are, or that no creature could possibly love—"

"Shut up!" Even knowing how far she was provoking her alter, even having seen how fast she was, Fluttershy was not expecting the other one to lunge as quickly as she did. The other's body slammed into hers. Teeth closed on Fluttershy's ear, making her squeal in pain. Panicked, Fluttershy lashed out with her hooves, full force, and managed to land a blow directly on the other's chest, pushing her off – at the expense of Fluttershy's ear, which tore.

"Owwww!"

"Oh, yes, cry about it. There's so much more coming to you where that came from," Fluttercruel hissed. Fluttershy hadn't quite been able to accept Discord's term for her other self into now, with blood running down Fluttercruel's chin and a tiny scrap of Fluttershy's ear caught in her teeth.

"Doesn't it ever bother you, what a monster you turned into?" Fluttershy asked, voice shaking now with the effort of holding back the pain, of not crying. Her ear hurt so much. "You know the other Discord corrupted you, you know this isn't who you're really supposed to be! Didn't it ever enter your head to fight it, or did you just decide to give up and be evil?"

Fluttercruel laughed harshly. "You stupid little bitch. I _can't_ fight it. Every part of me that wants to love and be kind and cherish is all twisted up with the parts that want to cause pain. I'm actually glad you've done something so horrible as set my house on fire. I already wanted to kill you slowly and painfully. Now I can do it without any guilt at all!"

"That's what you say," Fluttershy said. "But I think deep down inside you're ashamed of yourself. What you are." She fixed Fluttercruel's eyes with her own, bearing down on her dark alter with all her will. "You can't think Grandma Flit would approve of you like this. You know Angel Bunny despises what you've become. You know your friends actually hate you. You know no one actually
loves you or cares for you anymore, because you don't deserve it. You're a monster. You're weak. You let yourself fall.” She took a step forward, and another, and another, as she spoke, feeling her opponent's resistance weaken, feeling the grief and self-hate under the other's hard outer shell as the shell cracked and gave. Fluttercruel's eyes glittered in the corners as tears started to well up. She took a step backward, a single sob escaping her as she ducked her head. Fluttershy continued to advance, holding the other's gaze in her own. "You're a terrible, terrible pony and you don't deserve any friends. Until and unless you find the strength to fight the corruption and try to restore yourself to who you used to be, you don't deserve anything you want.”

Abruptly Fluttercruel threw her head back wildly, breaking the Stare, snarling "Shut up shut up shut up!" She charged at Fluttershy, who was thrown off balance. No creature had ever broken loose of the Stare before. Discord had never been held by it in the first place, and he was the only other one who'd ever resisted it. Fluttercruel was on her, punching and biting, before she could react, forcing Fluttershy to fight back like a wild animal herself. "The joke's on you, you wimp! You think you're better than me, but if you'd been in my place exactly the same thing would have happened to you, and you'd be exactly like me!"

"I wouldn't!" Fluttershy shrilled directly in the other's ear, right before biting hard into her mane and ripping as hard as she could.

Fluttercruel punched her in the face, rocking her back and forcing her to release Fluttercruel's mane from her teeth. "Oh yes you would. I fought in the beginning! I tried! I didn't want to be cruel! But Discord showed me who he'd made me, who I really was now, and I couldn't deny my destiny any more than I could have resisted staying on the ground with the animals, when I got my cutie mark!" She headbutted Fluttershy, rattling Fluttershy's teeth in her jaw. Fluttershy kicked with her hind legs, finally knocking her alter off of her.

"You should have tried harder!" Fluttershy shouted, picking up a blackened branch that had fallen nearby, a branch that had been burning that she'd kicked into the pond. "You needed to try harder! You were weak and pathetic and you betrayed your friends and all of Equestria! And yourself! And every creature you ever loved! You shouldn't have let yourself lose!"

She tried to bring the branch down on Fluttercruel, but a single kick from her alter shattered it into ash and broken bits too small to be a weapon. "It doesn't matter," Fluttercruel said, a savage grin on her face despite the tear streaks. "It doesn't matter, because I'm going to kill you. You're the weak one."

While Fluttershy backed away, looking for another weapon, Fluttercruel got to her hooves. "I'm going to kill you," she repeated. "And then I'm going to show Discord your dead body. And then I'm going to have sex with him on top of your corpse. And you can't do anything about it, because you're the one who's weak. Giving in to the corruption made me stronger than you everywhere else. You can't kill, and I can, and that's why you're going to die."

"You disgusting monster," Fluttershy half-whispered, horrified, still backing away. "How? How could you do such a thing?"

"How could I kill?" Fluttercruel licked her lips. "It got easier. And then it got fun."

"No." Fluttershy shook her head. "You're corrupted. I know how you can kill. I know a lot more about it than you think I do." She thought of the consuming rage she felt when Iron Will's teachings made her think she should stand up for herself, that she didn't deserve the treatment she got from the world, that everypony was taking advantage of her. It wouldn't have taken so very much to make her go from there, to a killer. "But how could you.. you rape somepony?"
Fluttercruel laughed. "Jealous?"

"I – no!"

"You can admit it," Fluttercruel said, still laughing. "Don't be shy. But it won't help. If you wanted him you should have gone after him while you had the chance. He's mine now."

Fluttershy was stunned by the vast irrelevance of Fluttercruel's response to her actual feelings. As if she cared in the slightest who Discord slept with, as if the entire problem here wasn't that Fluttercruel was raping him. "How can you say he's yours if he doesn't even want you?" she snapped. "If you didn't have him under a spell where he has to obey, he wouldn't give you a second glance! He hates you, because you're a cruel, vicious monster!"

"I can say he's mine," Fluttercruel said, staring directly back at Fluttershy with a nasty smile on her face. "because he has to obey me. Because no matter what he thinks he wants, he belongs to me, and he'll never get away. And after he sees your dead body, he'll know that's true, and he'll break finally and be mine completely."

Fluttershy didn't really think that was how it would work. "I'm so sorry that nobody will ever love you," she said with false concern. "It's so sad for you that you have to torture and brainwash any creature you want to love, and the moment they get the opportunity to escape you they'll take it, because no matter how much you brainwash them, in their hearts they remember what love felt like, because I showed it to them. You're just a broken mirror, a twisted shadow of me, and no matter how much you brutalize the ones you love, they'll always know it."

Fluttercruel yawned elaborately. "Don't you have any new material? That song is boring now." She kicked over a bag, knocking the contents out, and in a smooth motion bent down and snatched something up from the pile. Fluttershy stared for a moment – several of the items in the pile were things like dildos, lotions, and scarves like the one she'd wanted to cover with ether – before looking up. The item Fluttercruel had taken was a red and white hemp rope knotted through gems, sharp and shiny and large enough that the rope could go through holes drilled through them. She swallowed, recognizing the torture device from Discord's description, in the letter.

Fluttercruel smiled viciously, cracking the whip. "Anything else you want to say to me about how evil I am and how much nobody will ever love me before I kill you horribly?"

"Um, yes." Fluttershy said, glancing up at the sky.

"Too bad." Fluttercruel lashed out with the whip.

Fluttershy was already in the air, dodging, but it smacked her in the flank and knocked her out of the air. She fell to the ground with a scream of pain. It felt like being hit with a thrown rock, sharp like a gem but heavier and more forceful than a gem would ordinarily be.

Grinning, Fluttercruel raised the whip over her head—

--and was almost immediately plowed into the dirt by Rainbow Dash's hind hooves smashing into her back. "Hay! Don't wave that thing around, somepony could get hurt!" Rainbow said.

Fluttershy had seen her coming out from the Everfree region, behind Fluttercruel, moments ago before Fluttercruel had attacked with the whip. "Rainbow! I'm so glad to see you!"

Fluttercruel struggled, but while she might be stronger than Fluttershy, or at least more experienced with violence, she still had Fluttershy's delicate, slender build and relatively weak flight field. Against Rainbow's compact, muscled body and incredibly powerful flight field, and with Rainbow
standing on her back and her legs splayed across the dirt, she didn't have a chance. "I'll kill you!" she shouted. "I'll kill both of you! I'll make Discord kill you! One little order and your organs will be inside out and turned to cheese!"

"Sounds gross," Rainbow said. "Good thing it's totally not happening! Fluttershy, what do you want to do with her?"

_Break her wings and legs and toss her into the flames._ "I – I guess we should tie her up, and then go rescue Discord," Fluttershy said, pushing down her darker fantasies. "We could use this." She trotted forward and picked up the whip, which had been knocked loose from Fluttercruel's hooves when Rainbow had landed on her.

"Sounds like a plan. How come her house is on fire?"

"Because your diamond bitch of a friend set it on fire!" Fluttercruel shouted. "Who knows how many of my animals might have died in there?" She ducked her head and let out a sob.

Rainbow rolled her eyes. Fluttershy looked up at Rainbow earnestly. "I checked. All the animals were already gone."

"Yeah, I kinda guessed that," Rainbow said sardonically. "How you wanna do this?"

"Knock her out," Fluttershy said. "That'll make it easier to tie her up without hurting her." Even though Fluttershy really wanted to hurt her. But she was better than Fluttercruel. She didn't have to cause unnecessary pain.

A swift kick to the head rendered Fluttercruel stunned. She didn't appear to be truly unconscious; her eyelids fluttered and her head moved, as if she was struggling to wake herself back up. But she couldn't fight back, for the moment. Fluttershy positioned her counterpart's forelegs down across her torso and wrapped the diamond-studded rope around her wings and forelegs, tightening until she could see the diamonds digging into the other's yellow coat. Then she had Rainbow position her up against a tree, where she took the ends of the rope, tied them around the tree, pulled tight, then looped around the front, tying each one around the opposite hindleg. The result was that Fluttercruel was upright against the tree, hind legs crossed over each other, forelegs and wings bound to her torso, and torso and legs pulled against the tree by the rope looping behind it.

"Not like I'm complaining, but that looks awfully uncomfortable," Rainbow Dash said. "Did you mean to do it that way?"

Fluttershy looked Rainbow Dash straight in the eye. "This rope we just used? It's a whip. She's been using it on Discord. Hitting him with it."

Rainbow's gaze traveled over the sharp gems that were digging into Fluttercruel just hard enough to make it extremely uncomfortable for her to try to struggle, and then back to Fluttershy, eyes wide. "Okay, point taken. I guess some ponies can push even you to the point of wanting revenge, huh?"

"Let's go, Rainbow. I have an idea, but I need your help."

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Once they were a good distance from Fluttercruel, and couldn't be overheard if the other mare woke up or was faking it, Fluttershy handed over her weapons to Rainbow – the ether, the scarves, the remainder of her matches and accelerant. "Discord's being held prisoner in Twilight's library. I need a distraction to lure every mobile pony out of the library," she said as she bandaged her ear, somewhat inefficiently because it was her own ear and awkward to get to. "And... and the alternate
Spike, too, if we can."

Rainbow grinned, looking over the collection of tools for mayhem. "If their Spike's anything like ours, then I bet I've got the perfect idea." She looked Fluttershy in the face. "You burned down the other Fluttershy's place. What if we burn the other Rarity's boutique next?"

Fluttershy noted Rainbow's black eye, the bruises and bloody marks all over her body, the fact that she was not only soaking wet – not abnormal for a weather pegasus – but shivering, which was abnormal. "Did you beat your alter ego?"

"Not... exactly. I kinda sorta convinced her she'd won and I was dead, and got her to fly off and leave me alone." Rainbow shuddered. "She's... well, she's nowhere near as awesome as I am, but she's a Wonderbolt. She knows how to fight. And Fluttershy... I think our friends might've lost. I found Pinkie's saddlebag, and Applejack's."

Fluttershy sucked in a deep breath. "Our best hope is Discord. If we can rescue him, he can just use his magic to find the others and teleport them to us. Maybe even heal them if they're hurt."

"Can he even do healing stuff? I mean, when I hear chaos, I don't exactly think of bones getting unbroken."

"He explained it to me once." He'd explained it to her in a way that made her feel like he mistakenly thought her to be as smart as Twilight, and she'd struggled to understand, not wanting to look stupid even though she felt that she actually was, because he thought she was smart enough to get it and she wanted to live up to that. "He can... something to do with Time. He can sort of replace what you're like now with what you were like at a different point in time, and merge them together. It's not perfect, but it can heal things regular healing magic can't, like, um, missing body parts and things like that. Like if I lost a wing, he said he could put it back for me."

"Huh." Rainbow looked pensive. "If he can rescue Twilight, and fix her up if she's hurt, she's got lots of healing spells too. So yeah, I think you're probably right. I make a distraction, you rescue Discord, and we get everypony the hay outta here."

Fluttershy nodded. "We just need to make sure our friends aren't in Carousel Boutique before you set it on fire."

Rainbow grinned broadly. "Leave that to me, Fluttershy. You go get the jerk."

"He's not a jerk!" Fluttershy reddened. All right, technically, Discord could, frequently, be something of a jerk, but to call him that right now when he had suffered so much seemed cruel.

"Relax! I'm just jokin' with ya. Go get the big lug, and I'm gonna make sure Rarity's newest fashion trends get hot." Rainbow chuckled.

The two pegasi lifted into the air, Fluttershy still carrying a hooffull of ether-soaked scarved in her saddlebag, Rainbow Dash carrying the accelerant, the matches, and some more ether-soaked scarves, headed for Ponyville.
Shining Armor was skeptical. "My sister was the one who said you ponies were in league with Discord," he said. "If you really are some kind of doppelgangers from another dimension, then you ought to know that I'm inclined to trust my sister over some random strangers. Even if they are duplicates of ponies I know."

"That's surely true," Applejack said. "But the way we've been hearing it, your sister ain't quite as right in the head as she used to be. Figger you might maybe have noticed that, if what we've been hearin's true."

"She threatened to kill me," Spike said, remembering the horror of that moment, the pain as the other Twilight's power wrenched him backward in a direction young dragons apparently didn't bend. "The Twilight I know, the one I'm betting you grew up with, would never have threatened to kill anypony. And she sounded so weird! Like, except for one moment when she met us all the first time, she had no emotion in her voice at all. That isn't right. You've gotta know that, Shining."

"I do know that," Shining said, his voice tired. "But you have no idea what she's been through. What we've all been through."

"Perhaps you could tell us, then," Rarity said. "If we knew what your Twilight has been through, it would make it easier for us to understand how she could have made such a terrible mistake as to assume we are here to spread chaos for Discord!"

Shining sighed. "I probably shouldn't, but... Twilight thinks you're here to free him. If you knew what he's done, you'd know why that's a terrible idea. If there's anything in you of my sister's friends, and the Spike I know, you'd understand."

For a moment, Spike wanted to point out that the Discord who had done those things was not the Discord Shining Armor was referring to. Except, did Shining even know that? Had Twilight told him? Maybe they needed more information before dropping that bombshell. He said nothing.

"Only... they didn't succeed. Discord tricked them, so their attempt to use the Elements of Harmony to turn him back to stone failed. And then he made you three, plus her other two friends, float into the air, and he said he'd let you float into space and die if you didn't drop your Elements."

Rarity gasped. "And we gave in to such horrendous blackmail?"

Shining shook his head. "You're looking at it wrong. If you had died, there wouldn't have been
anypony to bear the Elements. Giving them up to Discord and surviving another day was the right choice."

"Except that it was a bluffy bluff and we fell for it!" Pinkie said. "Other us wouldn't have died!"

Shining Armor glared at Pinkie. "Exactly what makes you so sure?"

"Because Discord doesn't kill ponies!"

"He killed my Cadance."

Spike stared in shock. He could see his friends were equally stunned. Discord was capable of murder? Was it just that this world's Discord had been far more villainous than theirs, or had they really come here to rescue a murderer? Would Discord really have accepted Fluttershy's friendship if he was the kind of pony – well, the kind of being – who was willing to kill?

"I'm so sorry," Rarity said finally. "How did it happen?"

"I wasn't there," said Shining, shaking his head again. "Her body was found under a pile of rubble, so mangled we could barely recognize her, with her horn broken, her skin torn from her all over her back and legs so even her cutie mark was gone... and her wings had vanished completely, like they'd never even been there. Discord had the power to take even an alicorn's wings – Princess Celestia told me afterward that he'd done it to her and to Princess Luna, in the past. But even without her wings, my Cady would still have been an alicorn. Alicorns regenerate their injuries, and unless her horn had broken before she fell, she should have been able to levitate herself enough that she wouldn't have hit the ground hard enough to kill her, nor would a building falling on her have crushed her to death like it did. Cady – Cadance survived a cave-in, the day I first met her. Alicorns are hard to kill." His eyes narrowed, bitterness and anger burning in them. "Who else could have had the power to kill her?"

"Did he ever admit to it?" Applejack asked.

"He laughed at me the few times I was able to attack him. One time he put me in a diaper, tossed a bunch of blocks in front of me, made my magic as uncontrollable as an infant's, and said I was an ignorant baby and I needed to go back to school. Another time, he... he did something to space to break my body in half, except it didn't feel like I was in half. Twilight said he put a spatial portal through me. My own backside was in front of my face and he asked me if I could see it, because he thought I was so stupid that I probably couldn't. He never admitted to killing her, no, but would an innocent pony have made cruel jokes about somepony being stupid when they were angry over their loved one being murdered, if they themselves weren't the murderer? And who else could possibly have done it?" He sighed. "Twilight said, once, that she thought Nightmare Moon had done it, because Discord doesn't kill ponies for fun. But Cadance was Luna's adopted niece. Luna cared about Cadance, even if they'd only known each other a year. Why would even a corrupted Luna have killed her?"

"Did you say Nightmare Moon?" Pinkie asked.

"Yeah. I've gotten ahead of my story. They gave up the Elements – all except Twily, because he never tried to take the Element of Magic from her. And Discord took the five Elements and disappeared, for several days. The chaos ended. We were starting to hope against hope that maybe that was all he wanted. Maybe he realized how narrowly he'd escaped being turned back to stone and decided he was going to content himself with holding onto the objects that could threaten him. We were wrong."
"Why didn't he want the Element of Magic, though?" Spike asked.

'I'm going to get to that. He kidnapped the Princesses when he returned. Set up another 'game', a scavenger hunt. If they found all five Elements and the Princesses within the time limit, they'd get to keep them all, but any they didn't find, he'd keep. Of course the Princesses were last. He had all kinds of dangerous obstacles, but they persevered. They found all five elements, found Princess Luna, and then rescued Princess Celestia, and that's when all Tartarus broke loose.'

"Did that big three-headed dog that Fluttershy called back to his post that one time get lost again?" asked Pinkie.

"I think he means it as a metaphor, Pinkie," Spike said.

"Right," Shining said, nodding. "Tartarus didn't literally break loose. I wish it had. It might have done less damage." He looked down as he spoke, his hoof pawing the floor nervously for a moment, before he looked up at them again. "The moment Princess Luna saw Princess Celestia, she turned into Nightmare Moon. Discord had some kind of booby trap on her, a switch he'd thrown in her head. She just... forgot, everything about what had happened to her since she got back from the moon. The girls figured they'd use the Elements to purify her again. Nopony noticed that half of each of the Elements they'd recovered from Discord had turned dark. When they tried to use them... something happened. There was an explosion of magic, the girls fainted, Nightmare Moon fled, and when they woke up... they were wrong. All except Twilight. They'd all turned..." He hesitated.

"Into their opposites," Applejack said. "Our opposites."

"Yeah, you could put it that way." He shook his head. "It nearly destroyed Twily, you know. Her friends, turned into... what they'd turned into. Riots breaking out all over Canterlot as Discord distorted ponies' personalities. Nightmare Moon attacking, trying to take control of the sun to force it down over the horizon. Cadance..." He swallowed. "We'd never have restored any semblance of order if Chryssy hadn't come forward and offered her help."

"Chryssy?" Spike asked.

"Chrysalis. Queen of the Changelings."

Rarity's eyes went wide. "Her? She offered to help?"

Shining's eyes narrowed. "I don't know what Chrysalis did or didn't do in your universe," he said, "and I don't care. But you should know before you say anything that she's my special somepony, now. Cadance is gone, and Chryssy needs someone to love her, and I needed somepony to love. We've been together since a few months after Discord's reign of chaos began. So you might want to be careful what you say about her."

"My apologies, I meant no offense," Rarity said. "Our experience with our Chrysalis was... very different."

"Discord had been scr—messing with the Changelings as well. Part of the time we thought he was gone, he was tormenting them. And Chrysalis has admitted to me that before all of this happened, she was making plans for a potential invasion of Canterlot, sometime in the future. She had spies in place – Rarity, you know Fleur de Lis, right?"

"I—of course I do, yes."

"She's a Changeling princess. One of Chrysalis' daughters. I don't know her real name, she says
she's gone by Fleur de Lis so long she's forgotten it. When chaos erupted, she helped keep order – Changeling princesses aren't as powerful as alicorns, but they do have both wings and a horn, and she was willing to shed her disguise so she could help with aerial support in the first battle with Nightmare Moon. Her husband hadn't known, but after her heroism he forgave her for not telling him, and embraced her, saying publicly that whether she was a Changeling or not, she was his wife. You know how influential Fancy Pants is, Rarity."

Rarity nodded. "I do indeed." She looked like she knew a secret, a slight small smile on her face, one that Spike knew well. But it wasn't a nice secret, because the tiny smile – almost a smirk – wasn't in her eyes. And then the expression was gone, and Shining didn't seem to have noticed.

"But even with Changeling support... we were fighting against both Nightmare Moon and Discord. The Elements didn't work, the girls were caricatures of who they'd been and Twilight was driving herself to the point of passing out from lack of food and sleep, trying to research something, anything that could stop Discord or restore her friends. It went like this for months. Princess Celestia couldn't keep stable control of the sun and moon; Discord kept taking both from her, and when she did have control she'd put down the sun, Nightmare Moon would do her best to keep her from raising it again. Crops died. There were more riots, in every large city. Civil disorder ran amuck. Ponies stampeded. The Buffalos slaughtered half the town of Appleoosa because Nightmare Moon made them dream that ponies were attacking them, and she did it because Appleoosa defied her when she tried to take it over. And Discord just laughed and laughed, at everything that happened."

"My cousins?" Applejack asked, her eyes wide. "Braeburn and all them?"

"Dead. Not the only casualties, either. My mother's a quadriplegic now and my father lost a leg. Applejack's grandmother died. Half of Cloudsdale fell; the pegasi managed to catch the foals who couldn't fly, but a lot of the more solid physical objects hit pegasi and killed them, knocking them unconscious during flight or crushing them. The weather still doesn't work right. Black vines took over the Everfree and strangled most of everything; Twilight and her friends had a zebra friend who was in there when the vines got loose, and they've never seen her since. And Princess Celestia... Princess Celestia had to kill Nightmare Moon to stop her." There was a catch in his voice as he spoke. "She never recovered. She depends so much on Twilight, now."

The four of them exchanged looks of horror. If this had been what this world's Discord was responsible for... well. Now Spike thought he knew why his counterpart had killed Discord.

"How... how did they eventually stone the miscreant, then?" Rarity asked.

"Twilight found a way. Something she called the Diadem of Order, a legend mentioned in a book she found in a land to the North that reappeared out of nowhere—"

"The Crystal Empire?" Spike said. "Was there a Sombra here? Did Twilight and I fight him?"

"Chrysalis and I went to the Crystal Empire," Shining said. "According to legends she dimly recalled, there was a magical item there called the Crystal Heart, which could be used to amplify emotions. Only, when we got there, King Sombra defeated me easily by spiking my horn with crystals, so I couldn't use my magic to protect the city. Chrysalis burned up most of her stores of love trying to protect the Crystal Empire, and we failed. Twilight and Spike were dedicated full-time to trying to find a way to stop Discord, so they weren't able to help. The Wonderbolts came in, with a few of Chrysalis' Princess daughters to give an assist, but Sombra beat all of us, retrieved the Crystal Heart, and put it at the center of one of his black crystal structures. He was going to torture a few innocent crystal ponies to get their fear, and our anguish at not being able to help them, to blanket the city – because the Crystal Heart was designed to spread love, but it could spread fear
and despair as well. And then Discord showed up and stole it."

"Why?" Pinkie said. "Did he want to use it to spread all chaosy emotions?"

"No, after it was all over Twilight did some research. The Crystal Heart's an artifact of Harmony. It, by itself, might have been able to turn Discord to stone, if we'd known. He was just waiting for it to come out in the open where he could grab it. We have no idea what he did with it."

"But what happened to Sombra?" Applejack asked.

"Oh. Discord happened to him. He fought Discord for the Heart, and I think he might actually have hurt him – I wasn't sure what was going on at the time, because I didn't know the Heart had the power to harm Discord, but now I think he might have been channeling dark magic through it to amplify it so he could hurt Discord. But if you hurt Discord, we'd found out some time ago, you'd better be able to kill him or turn him to stone after, otherwise... things don't go well for you. He took Sombra's horn, tossed him to the Crystal Ponies, and did something to their minds – they'd been repressing everything Sombra did to them. They were so overwhelmed with fear and hurt, they'd blocked out everything from their memories. Discord brought it all back. Sombra was dead before anypony could do anything; the Crystal Ponies turned into a bloodthirsty mob and ripped him apart."

Spike swallowed. He himself had been instrumental in blasting Sombra to bits with the magic of the Crystal Heart, and had never felt any guilt for it, but the thought of Sombra dying because ponies, gentle, harmonious, peaceful ponies, had ripped him to pieces when he was solid flesh and not a living shadow... that was disturbing. From the expressions on the others, he could see they agreed.

"Once the dust had settled, Celestia sent Prince Blueblood as regent to rule over the Crystal Empire until some descendant of its original royal family could be found. My Cady... she'd been the last known living descendant, and she was born hundreds of years ago. We still haven't found anyone better than Blueblood, but Twilight sent a team of administrators and pencil pushers up there and they're really running the place now. Blueblood's a friend of mine, but he's the last guy who should actually be ruling anything, royal blood or no." Shining sighed. "Anyway. They had books there, of course, books that have been lost for a thousand years. Twilight found a reference in one of them to a crystal called the Diadem of Order. She thought that the only way she could make the Elements work – Discord had combined them with their opposites, and Magic has no opposite. He admitted that to Twilight, he gloated about it. Magic has no opposite, so she could never combine hers with the opposite of magic and be on the same magical frequency as her friends, ever again. She figured out, though – raw magic and Chaos magic are the same thing. She observed Discord and the magic he used enough that she could figure it out. So the opposite of Magic... is Order. Which is also the opposite of Chaos. Once she got the Diadem of Order and combined it with her Element... that's how they were able to harmonize. They stoned Discord with it. When they found a centaur who'd escaped Tartarus and was stealing magic from unicorns, sucking them dry, they used it on him and it killed him, made him wither up and die of old age in a moment. They've used it on a few dragons who thought they could take advantage of Equestria's weaknesses. They used it on some ancient magical being who was stealing artifacts that were supposed to let him take control of the sun, and he exploded. They're... not what they used to be."

"We... had suspected that," Rarity said. "We came here to help them, actually. We have the means with which to help re-harmonize them and purge them of Discord's taint, and we intended to do just that when we came here. Also, to extradite the Discord from our world, who's currently in their custody, since it's partially our fault he got free of stone and came over here to wreak havoc on you. Of course we appreciate him being recaptured, but he's not the Discord from your world, he's the
Discord from ours, and it's our responsibility to punish him, not yours.”

Shining looked at her skeptically. "Twilight believes you came here to rescue him."

"Well, from what I have heard of the treatment he's been receiving here, no doubt he would think of it as a rescue," Rarity said. "But the truth is, we would be returning him to our world for appropriate punishment."

"Which would be what?"

"Turning him to stone, most likely," Rarity said, "though there are other options on the table. None of them pleasant, but I would wager none of them as unpleasant as what he's been enduring here. Not that I can fault you, after that harrowing story."

"Um, yeah," Spike said, trying to back Rarity up, because Applejack really couldn't now that Rarity had entered the realm of outright lying, and Pinkie Pie couldn't be trusted not to blurt out the truth in situations like this. "I was wondering how the other me could possibly have killed anypony, even Discord, but now that I've heard your story, I understand."

Shining studied the two of them for several long moments, finally turning to Applejack. "Are they telling the truth?" he asked.

"I can't say rightly whether Spike is telling the truth or not, though there's a ring of honesty there," Applejack said. "Believe it or not, I can't actually read pony minds to see if they're honest, or dragons neither, and only Spike would know for certain what he understands or doesn't. But as for Rarity, you can trust her."

Spike's eyes widened for just a moment before he forced an expression of calm back onto his face. Had Applejack just lied? And lied well, without looking around her nervously or sweating or stammering?

"What about you, Pinkie?" Shining Armor asked.

Pinkie pouted. "I want him to make me more chocolate rain! But with whipped cream this time! It's totally unfair that the last time he didn't make any whipped cream at all! And then, you know, what Rarity said. But first the chocolate! Chocolate is very important!"

"All right," Shining Armor said. "I'll consult with Princess Celestia and Chrysalis. See what they think. I'm... not pleased with what I've been hearing about, regarding Discord. Less pleased than before, now that I know that he's not the one who killed Cady. In your world... is she alive?"

"Oh, your wedding was beautiful," Rarity said. "And yes, you are both very much alive, and rulers over the Crystal Empire."

"So your Discord didn't kill her."

"Our Discord hasn't killed anypony," Applejack said sharply.

"Ruined my coiffure countless times, deeply embarrassed me on more than one occasion, and made my boutique rotate as if it were an actual carousel, but Applejack is right; he has never killed anypony that we know of. Though this little excursion to another world is so far outside the terms of his parole I am quite sure Princesses Celestia and Luna intend to throw the book at him, so to speak."

Some tension seemed to go out of Shining's withers then, his barrel sagging just slightly. "That's..."
good to hear. I'll talk to them. I'd... I'd really rather have the old Twily back, and I know she'd rather have her old friends back."

He left. As soon as he was safely gone, Rarity said, quietly, "I do not think anything good has likely come of this... alliance... with Chrysalis."

"He doesn't seem like he's under her spell, though," Applejack pointed out.

"True. But... Fleur de Lis is not a Changeling. Cadance's spell that flung all the Changelings... well, I don't know the details, I'm hardly a mage. But when I asked her, at the reception, how she knew she'd gotten all of the Changelings, she said that her spell would have gathered and flung any creature that feeds on love. No Changeling, however well disguised, could change that."

"Chrysalis was plannin' the invasion, here, already," Applejack said. "We know Cadance told us all she'd been a captive for months. And Fleur de Lis sure does look a whole lot like Cadance, if you dyed her coat and her mane."

"But why would Fleur de Lis have disguised herself as Cadance before she had a building fall on her?" Pinkie asked, quietly, for Pinkie values of quietly at least. "It wasn't Nightmare Night, if all this happened right around the time Discord got loose."

Spike felt sick. He'd read enough spy comics and superhero tales in which a hero or villain thought dead turned out not to be through some improbable excuse to see where this was going. "She wouldn't have, Pinkie."

"Not to be gory about it," Applejack said, "but with a building fallen on her, there wouldn't be no way to see she'd been killed before it fell. It would've hidden the differences between their two faces. I'm no detective, but I think there was... was murder involved, here."

Rarity nodded. "If Chrysalis has already taken Cadance, planning to impersonate her – but the threat of Discord requires her to take open action, as herself, and Cadance as an alicorn cannot be impersonated by any Changeling but herself, because we were just told Changeling Princesses haven't the power of alicorns, and one imagines ordinary Changelings even less so. Keep Cadance – the power to generate love must surely be useful to creatures who feed on it. Fake her death, so it will never be revealed that she's a prisoner in Changeling hooves – or that she ever was." She swallowed. "Poor Fleur looked so much like Cadance. She had – has – that graceful, long-necked alicorn look to her. And if Discord was to be framed for her death... no one would ever have questioned why the body had no wings."

"Wait, are you saying the Changelings killed Fleur de Lis?" Pinkie shouted, prompting Applejack to stuff her hoof in Pinkie's mouth.

"Pinkie, keep a damn lid on it!" Applejack whispered furiously. "You heard Shining, he ain't gonna believe his special somepony murdered an innocent mare to fake his fiancee's death, and it ain't like we got any proof. Or even anything other than wild speculation."

"But informed wild speculation," Rarity said. "Because we do know that Fleur de Lis is not a Changeling, and therefore, the Changeling who took her place is lying about having always been Fleur. There was an original Fleur that Fancy married, and a Changeling replaced that one. That much, we do know."

"And I was just thinking," Spike said. "When Discord taunted Twilight into going into the forest after you guys, when we were up against his vines? He does that kind of thing. He doesn't answer your question, he just makes fun of you in a way that makes you do what he wants... or maybe not.
"Maybe when he called Shining stupid, he was dropping hints that Cadance wasn't really dead."

"Not that that helps us, here and now," Applejack said. "I'd surely be happy if it turned out she was alive, but... our mission here wasn't to rescue Cadance, and even if what we're thinking is the Celestia-honest truth, that don't mean she's still alive. Discord broke loose some time ago, and if she's been a prisoner of Changelings since before that..."

"Indeed. Even if Cadance was alive at the time, the worst may well have happened since," Rarity said. "If we succeed in reharmonizing our counterparts, we should tell them our suspicions. At the very least, if it is true, Chrysalis should face justice."

"But what if we told Shining Armor that we think there's a chance Cadance might be alive, and we don't bring up the whole Chrysalis kidnapped her and then when she had to be herself and not Cadance faked her death by killing Fleur de Lis and disguising her to look like Cadance and then dropping a building on her and saying Discord did it theory?" Pinkie asked. "He's so sad!"

"Pinkie, how do you reckon we explain why we think the special somepony he saw squashed like a skeeter under a good hoofslap wasn't really his fiancée at all, if we're not gonna mention the part about thinking somepony killed an innocent mare to set a frame-up?" Applejack said.

"Pinkie, we absolutely cannot talk to him about this yet. He loves Chrysalis; he has no idea what a false creature she can be, since she never took the place of his love and enslaved him in this universe," Rarity said. "And to be fair, if this universe has, or had, a Discord who is more evil, perhaps there is a Chrysalis who is less."

"Ain't rightly sure their Discord was more evil," Applejack said.

"Do you truly think our Discord would have removed a pony's horn and tossed them to an angry mob? Even Sombra?"

"I think that Discord is chaos, and chaos has a lot of ways it can go. Our Discord, we locked him up in stone before he could get into any more trouble. Think he didn't get angry about that? Think he would've just embraced the magic of friendship or whatnot if we'd tried to stone him up and failed? He had a good number of months to cool his heels and calm down, and even so it was a near thing – he came awful close to not taking Fluttershy's offer. He'd've done different if we hadn't gotten him into stone then and there, no question about it. Maybe he wouldn't've done all the awful things this fella did. Maybe he would. He's lived a different life by now, like we all have, so we're never gonna know. But just because he's sincere about his friendship with Fluttershy—"

"—And he tried to make friends with me, and apologize, but I said no, because he wouldn't apologize to the rest of you," Pinkie said in a stricken voice.

"Yeah, okay, and he sincerely tried with Pinkie, but... that don't make him a good fella. He ain't evil anymore, but... doesn't mean he never was. And he needs rescuin' because what they're doing to him, I would not have wanted Sombra himself to go through, or Chrysalis, or anypony. You don't torture people 'cause they're evil, and you don't ra—" She stopped.

"I thought so," Rarity said softly. "From the things Fluttershy was saying."

"What are you talking about?" Pinkie asked.

"Pinkie... it ain't my place to say, and it's a thing as would upset you a whole lot."

"Is it worse than the time the other me cut off his arms and legs?" Pinkie said. "Because she told me about that while she was trying to kill me and make me into a pie because she thought that
would be funny."

"Oh, dear," Rarity said, turning paler than usual. "Oh. Oh dear Celestia how horrible."

"Don't faint here, Rarity, we don't know how clean this floor is," Spike warned. "Do you need me to help hold you up?"

"N-no, I think I can avoid swooning, this time," Rarity said. "Applejack, Spike, did you know about this?"

"He mentioned it in the letter," Spike said. "He said he was able to grow them back. At least there's that."

For a few moments they were all silent, taking in the awfulness of what they'd just been discussing.

"If we rescue him—" Applejack said.

"When, darling. When we rescue him."

"If and when, I hope he knows about all this, because sounds to me like he owes us a big old thank you for turning him to stone that time and not letting him end up like he ended up here. I don't rightly think Discord wants to be evil, and I doubt he intended on going this way when he was fighting us."

Spike breathed deeply. "Guys, I think we ought to change the subject, 'cause I don't know about you but I think that if Shining Armor has to talk to Chrysalis to get us released... it's probably not a good bet to wait for him to let us go."

"Agreed," Rarity said. "Let us turn our attention to how to escape this dreadful little dungeon."

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Opposition, 10 AM – Discord

After Spike was gone, Discord fought the nausea as hard as he could. There was a bucket in front of him, but throwing up in it would still signal to Twilight or Spike that he'd been misleading them. Recovering from accidentally telling Spike that they were all going to die, and managing to mislead him away from that, had made him acutely sick, given him a migraine, and made him fear he'd have another seizure.

He whispered under his breath, after Spike was safely gone, "No, you were right, you're all going to die. Twilight's going to get everything she ever wanted for five minutes and then she's going to kill you all, and the only thing I regret about it is I won't be alive to laugh at you. You're all going to die, you were right, you're all going to die." It wasn't really helping. Apparently telling the truth to alleviate the nausea of almost-lying only worked when he was telling the truth to someone.

Tears welled in his eyes again from how sick he felt. He'd never be able to get back to sleep this way. But if he threw up and then had to eat it, again... no, don't even think about that, if he thought about it he would throw up.

He crawled, slowly and carefully, to the farthest reach that the clasp on his collar and the chain that held him would allow, stretched himself flat on the floor, and reached into the washroom next to the workroom with his tail, groping for a towel, a mop, anything. If he didn't throw up he would have a seizure and then throw up. If he did throw up, Twilight or Spike would know he had lied, or done as close as he was capable of to lying.
His tail struck something, that rolled. Discord couldn't even turn his head; he'd stretched himself so far to be able to make it. The nausea and headache were even worse. He kept swallowing down bile, and worse things. He was going to choke on his own vomit because he was fighting so hard to keep his mouth closed and not openly retch. No. The thing that rolled made contact with his tail, and he swept it closer to himself, and inched up so he could turn his head. Toilet paper. Better than nothing.

First, he threw up in the bucket. It had been a few hours since he'd had to eat already digested food; a lot less actual food came up this time, but he retched so hard and for so long that the thin bile that was coming out at the end was red with blood. Or maybe the crystals had cut his stomach on the inside, or something. None of them came up; they must have dissolved and entered his bloodstream already, waiting to kill him. So be it. He was going to die tonight anyway, so they'd never get the chance.

Then he covered the vomit with toilet paper, and the toilet paper wrapper. Next, he urinated into the bucket – something he'd have needed to do anyway, but he'd been waiting for Fluttercruel to come back, because he was too upset at Spike right now to have asked him for the opportunity when Spike showed up. Honestly he was lucky he hadn't wet himself when Pinkie had shown up; that had been terrifying. And humiliating. He'd promised himself he wouldn't cry again before he died, and then because he was scared of Pinkie the waterworks had started right up again. Why was he scared of her anyway? Twilight was going to cut him open tonight because he'd told her to, why was the prospect of Pinkie cutting off his body parts so utterly horrifying when he was already facing an equally terrible fate of his own design? But he hadn't been able to help himself. When Pinkie had tortured him, he hadn't wanted to die, and he'd spent most of that horrible evening being convinced that he would. She'd told him all the details about the vivisection of his innards she had planned, cheerfully, while she sawed off his bound legs, one at a time, and with his mouth tied closed he hadn't been able to scream loudly enough to drown her out. Maybe she'd just been taunting him and had never planned to kill him, or maybe she had lost track of what she was supposed to be doing and was going too far, but he'd never been as happy to see Fluttercruel as he had when she'd walked into Pinkie's basement and screamed at Pinkie, even though he'd passed out from shock and pain only a few moments later. The ritual he'd given Twilight actually would involve vivisection of his innards, and he'd given it to Twilight deliberately knowing what a terrible way it would be to die, but despite that, his memories of the terror he'd felt under Pinkie's hooves had apparently imprinted on him hard enough that he was still afraid of Pinkie even now.

Besides, tonight he'd probably bleed out before Twilight got to the part about harvesting his liver and his heart. Bleeding out wouldn't be so bad. She'd cut some major veins in his arms and legs, maybe only one leg if she couldn't get through the dragon scales on the other one, and that would hurt a lot, but then he'd just get very cold and dizzy and he'd lose consciousness. He might never feel her carving the ritual symbols on his ribs, or breaking them open to take his heart. That would be good.

The bucket was now awash with urine, toilet paper, and obvious vomit. That wasn't good enough. Carefully, because he was weak and it was hard to stay in a squatting position but he didn't want to knock over the bucket, he assumed the position over the bucket and did his best to push out bodily waste. There wasn't much – not long enough ago since the one good meal he'd had recently, and he'd been fed very little before that – but there was enough to change the color of the liquid and make the vomit look like it might be diarrhea instead. Good. Then he used a great deal of toilet paper, because this whole operation was disgusting, and he used up most of his saliva spitting on toilet paper before rubbing it on himself to make sure he was as clean as he could possibly make himself. More spit, on his paws, because he'd tried to be careful not to touch anything foul but there was only so much you could do when there was so much foulness you were working with, and more toilet paper to clean off the paws now that he'd moistened them. His mouth was very, very
dry and the smell was horrible and his throat and stomach burned and cramped and there was a horrible taste in his mouth, but he no longer felt nauseous and the headache had mostly subsided, and Twilight was never ever ever going to examine a bucket with his feces in it to see if he'd also thrown up.

Discord left the bucket in a corner of the room, as far as he could carry it, on all fours because his tether gave him more range when he didn't try to stand up, and then he went back to his place in the circle to lay down again. He was so very tired, physically wrung out and sleep-deprived both, but sleep eluded him. He was in too much pain, and he was overwhelmed with the despair of knowing that his life was going to come to an end tonight because it was the best possible option for him in a universe where he had no friends and he would otherwise be kept enslaved, raped and tortured over and over for the rest of his life. He didn't want to die, he just didn't want to live like this. Well, no. He did want to die. Because existence was worthless, now that he had tasted what it would be like to have a friend and then had it wrenched away from him forever. He didn't even care about chaos anymore. But the fact that life was meaningless and had no value and he hated it and wanted to die to escape it didn't actually mean that he wanted things to be this way, that the prospect of dying was particularly pleasant. It was just the best option under the circumstances, and when he'd figured out how to take this entire world down with him, then it had seemed like a fantastic idea. But now it was sinking in that he'd be dead before his revenge took effect, and he'd never see it. They'd scream, and suffer, and wither away as all the energy was sucked out of the world, and there would be glorious chaos, but he wouldn't see any of it. He wouldn't get to laugh at them and gloat. He probably wouldn't even get a chance to tell Twilight what he had just manipulated her into doing, because by the time the ritual was so far gone that she couldn't stop it, he would most likely be unconscious or dead.

He closed his eyes tightly. Discord didn't want to be here, mentally. He wanted to go back to the world where he'd cared about nothing except chaos, where the lack of friends would have prompted a chuckle and a "So what else is new?" from him. If he had known it would hurt so much to lose it he would never have accepted the friendship Fluttershy had offered in the first place. Seemed to offer. She'd been lying about all of it.

He lay in torment, trying to sleep and failing miserably, wishing that he were not only dead but that he'd never existed, for what felt like hours and hours. Eventually his exhaustion won out over his inner turmoil, and sleep claimed him at last.

Opposition, 10 AM – Spike (Opposition)

Zecora was gone, either dead or fled back to Zebrica during the chaos. Sweetie Drops, who used to be Bon Bon, had moved out of town after Discord's defeat because she was needed more elsewhere. Mayor Mare continued to be useless for everything. Spike racked his brain, trying to think who he could possibly talk to. Shining Armor? But he was in Canterlot, and he'd trust Twilight anyway, probably more than he'd trust Spike. Who could possibly help him?

The only pony that came to mind was Big Mac. He used to enjoy hanging out with Big Mac on occasion, doing guy stuff like going out to watch a hoofball game. Big Mac wouldn't want an Applejack from another universe to be killed, would he? Maybe he could help. Spike checked on Twilight, Applejack and Rarity, making sure they were all still asleep. Pinkie Pie was in the kitchen, making a cake. "Hey, Pinkie, Applejack asked me to check with Big Mac after she'd been asleep a couple of hours and make sure he's ok with her not being there today," Spike said. "So I'm going over to Sweet Apple Acres, okay?"

"Okie dokie lokie! Come back soon or you'll miss cake!"
With Twilight enforcing a no-gems diet on him right now, cake was missable, Spike thought. Nothing he ate tasted as good when he wasn't able to have gems. He didn't say so.

Sweet Apple Acres was at most a five minute gallop from the library, but Spike was not a pony, and could barely keep up the pace of a trot when he was running as fast as he could. It took him closer to 20 minutes to get to Sweet Apple Acres, and another five to find Big Mac – the property was large, and Apple Bloom was in school and not available to guide him.

"Big Mac," he said, panting, as he came up on the large stallion. "Do you have a minute?"

"Nope," Big Mac replied, continuing to kick trees and knock apples into buckets, at a pace of 2 trees a minute or so.

"Okay, then, do you mind if I talk to you while you're working? Because I really need to talk to you. It could be a matter of life or death."

"Nope," Big Mac said, which puzzled Spike at first until he realized it was a literal answer to "do you mind".

"Okay. So you know why Applejack's staying at the library, right?"

"Eeyup."

"Like, you know that there are alternate versions of Applejack and all our friends, from another dimension, and that they came through last night, and Twilight and our friends defeated them with help from the Changelings and sent them to Canterlot as prisoners... right?"

"Eeyup."

"I need help. Or at least advice. Twilight sent a letter advising Princess Celestia to have them executed! I don't think mares who are just like Applejack and our friends were before Discord broke loose deserve to die, do you? They were trying to rescue Discord, so they had to be stopped, but it's not like they're in league with him or something – they just don't think it's right that he's being tortured. And I think that before he broke loose, before – before he did that stuff to their Elements, our Applejack and our Rarity and the rest of our friends would have agreed. I don't think they should die because they think torture is wrong, do you?"

"Nope."

"So what should I do?"

Big Mac turned and looked at Spike. "Ain't much you can do."

"But there has to be something! I can't just let them die!"

"Can you get to Canterlot and break 'em free?"

Spike stared. "Uh... no, no, I wouldn't even know how to begin doing something like that. Why? Is that what you think we should do?"

"Nope."

"Then what do you think we should do?"

Big Mac shrugged. "Ain't much you can do," he repeated. "Can't go there and free 'em. Can't make Twilight take it back. What can you do?"
"Well... maybe if you went with me to Canterlot, and both of us talked to Princess Celestia?"

Big Mac shook his head and turned back to his trees. "Nope." Both hooves struck a tree, and apples dropped from the branches into a bucket. He picked up the handle of the bucket with his teeth and dumped the contents into a cart, then carried the bucket to another tree.

"Why not?" Spike asked desperately.

"Wouldn't do no good." Another applebuck. Another bucket filled. "Princess Celestia ain't going to listen to the likes of me." More apples into the cart. "You talk to her all the time, though."

"Well, I send all the letters..."

"Ever sent a letter on your lonesome?"

"You mean, without Twilight dictating it first? Yeah, a few times. Do you think that's what I should do?"

"Eeyup."

"But... Princess Celestia's going to listen to Twilight before she listens to me."

"Ain't nothing you can do about that," Mac said. "Spike. All you can do's what you can do. Can't go making yourself crazy over wanting to do what you know you can't. Do the best you can, that's all."

Spike shook his head. "I can't. I can't accept that that's all I can do. What if they're all killed, because I sent Twilight's letter to the Princess?"

"Gotta do what you can first, before worrying about how to do what you can't."

"You mean, I should write Princess Celestia first, and then if I don't get a good response, then worry about what to do after that?"

"Eeyup."

"Okay." Spike pulled a quill, ink and a scroll out, sat down on the grass, and quickly wrote.

_Dear Princess Celestia, I think Twilight made a big mistake when she asked you to kill her other self and the counterparts to her friends. They didn't come here because they love chaos or something; they came because they think torture is wrong, and frankly... it is, and before our first Discord corrupted the elements, she would have thought the same. They all would have thought the same. It's not fair to kill them for being true to who they really were, before they got corrupted. And if we can ever find a way to undo the corruption, I don't want Twilight to have to live with the memory of ordering the death of ponies who are basically the same as her friends. Please don't kill them, Your Highness. Sincerely, Spike the dragon._

He breathed fire on the message, sending it off to Princess Celestia. "You think she'll listen to me?"

"Mebbe."

"Well, that's better than 'nope' at least," Spike muttered. "You mind if I stick around here for a while?"

"Nope."
"'Cause everypony's asleep over there but Pinkie, and Pinkie promised she wouldn't go near Discord without someone with her, but when I was there she could get me to go in with her, and... she was awful. I know he deserves a lot but he was so scared of her he was crying."

Big Mac didn't say anything. Spike felt uncomfortable with the silence. "Do you think it's right, what they've been doing to him? I mean... especially now that we know he's not even the same one. But when we thought he was the original one, that he did all those things... even then, I just... I really don't think what they've been doing to him is right. Do you?"

"Nope," Big Mac said.

"Did... you ever talk to Applejack? About that?"

"Nope." Big Mac turned to look at Spike. "What you did was what he deserved. Plain and simple. No torture, no thousand years in stone business. Just... protect our families and kill him dead. That was right. What they're doing... ain't just a bad thing, it's a stupid thing. He ever gets loose, there'll be all Tartarus to pay."

"You... you think what I did was right?"


"I don't think I did." Spike shivered. "He was helpless, Mac. It was murder."

"Eeyup. But a stallion's gotta do what he's gotta to do to protect the family. If I could of done it for you, I would've, but I didn't know about no magical weapons in a secret Canterlot arsenal. You're the smart colt. You got the education in Canterlot, you got training from the Princess herself, and from Twilight. You had the know-how, and you were tough enough to get it done, and good enough to be sorry you had to do it." Another kick. More apples. "Murder's wrong. But sometimes a stallion's gotta do what's wrong to do right by his family."

"But it turned out that it really messed up the magical balance of the world when I did it, or something like that. The world needed Discord to exist. That's what Twilight said."

"You didn't know. I'd've made the same mistake, in your position." He kicked another tree. "Wanna help out some?"

"Uh, sure, but... I'm not really built for applebucking..."

"Ain't the kind of help I need. If you get in the cart and start checkin' em, tossing out the bad ones. Won't fill up so fast with the good ones if we toss the bad ones first, and I won't have to make as many trips back to the barn."

"I don't know... I wouldn't want to take out good ones by accident..."

"You know a really rotten apple when you see one, Spike. You'll do fine. Apple Bloom can sort 'em again when she gets home, just to make sure there ain't none you missed. If you've got a question about an apple, leave it in for her to get. Just get out the ones that're bad to the core."

Spike was about to answer when he felt the familiar sensation of a belch rising in his throat. He breathed out flame, and a scroll materialized.

Dear Spike, There's no need to worry. I have no intention of executing a fellow alicorn simply
because Twilight fears her. I have a use for Twilight's counterpart, and so long as she agrees to help me, I see no reason why any of her companions should be harmed. Please don't tell Twilight this; I don't want her to be frightened. I know she's afraid of her alicorn counterpart, but this alternate Twilight won't be a threat to us. Trust me. Sincerely, Princess Celestia

"Oh, awesome!" He jumped up and cheered, waving the scroll. "You were right, Big Mac! Princess Celestia did listen to me! They aren't going to be killed! Isn't that great?"

"Eeyup."

"I'll help out for about an hour and then go back home, all right? I want to be there before Twilight wakes up."

"Eeyup."

Spike climbed into the cart. He wondered if Big Mac's advice – that he'd know a truly rotten apple if he saw one – was meant to relate to the other topic of discussion, or if it was just a coincidence and it was his experience helping Twilight with her literary essays that made him draw the connection. Had he done right to kill the other Discord? He knew Mac was right about the torture; it hadn't occurred to him before, because he'd been working too hard to fight down his visceral emotional reaction at the thought of anyone, even Discord, being tortured, but Mac had a point. If this Discord, the one being tortured, got loose, wouldn't he rain even worse havoc down on them all than the one who had just been held in stone? They'd all be safer if he was either dead, or if his friends took him out of here and didn't let him come back, and if he hadn't done all the terrible things the other one had done then Spike would feel awful if he died. Bad enough he had to kill the one.

Maybe Mac was right about that, too. Twilight said it had been a mistake, magically, and it probably was, and the thought that he was battering a helpless, conscious, living foe to death had tormented him even when he was doing it, and had haunted his nightmares since. Sometimes, before this Discord had arrived, he had hallucinated his victim, as if all the bits and pieces of stone left after he was done taking the Hammer of Celestia to the statue had turned back to flesh and reassembled back into Discord's body, but not properly aligned with each other, so Discord had been a bloody jigsaw puzzle with parts of him missing, or put together wrong, or sliding down or sideways out of alignment with the rest of him. It had been horrible. Seeing this Discord, solid flesh, patchwork only in his mismatched body parts and not as if he'd been broken to pieces and incompetently reassembled, had banished the apparition from his dreams, but then he'd started conflating Discord's screams under torture with the statue he'd destroyed, so in his dreams the statue had screamed in agony and begged, the way the living Discord did during Twilight's experiments, as he had shattered it to pieces. The guilt had nearly broken him. Mac was right, it was murder. But was he right that it had been justified, by the need to protect the ponies he loved?

This was the first time anyone had suggested to him that the answer to that might be "yes". Aside from Discord himself, who'd said that he'd have swung the hammer himself against his alternate if Spike hadn't, and Spike had put that down to hyperbole. It made him feel good, after a very, very long time of never feeling any such thing, to think that anypony agreed with him... even if he wasn't sure he agreed with his own decision himself, anymore.

He found a half-rotten apple and tossed it. Definitely bad to the core, that one. This wasn't so hard.

Opposition, 10 AM – Twilight (Harmony)

Celestia had just finished explaining to Twilight the sadistic game Discord had forced on her
counterpart and her friends' counterparts, to retrieve the Elements after he'd taken them and done
something to them. "I was imprisoned – actually, I'd been turned into a frog, and couldn't escape
from the pond Discord had created to house me. All I could do was sit on lily pads and hope that
when the Bearers arrived, they'd take notice. So I don't know what trials they may have gone
through—"

"Didn't you get a report from the other me afterwards?"

Celestia shook her head sadly. "We had far more pressing concerns by then," she said. "What I
know is that it took them five hours, though Discord raised and set the sun twice in that time,
creating the illusion that it was longer. By the time they found me, the moon was high in the sky,
again, and in a position that it would normally never be in our sky, pushed toward the north. He
hadn't actually managed to make it rise and set someplace other than the east and the west, but he
was definitely pushing it out of its standard orbit... and the sun as well. Discord knew better than to
bring the sun closer, so he sent it farther, making the day cold and wintry; when he raised the
moon, he brought it closer to the earth, making it appear huge in the sky and setting off violent
tides and storms at sea. I didn't know that at the time, but I suspected that that would happen." She
smiled wryly. "But you don't need to hear the minutia of the astral bodies' orbits. What's important
is this: the moon was large, high in the sky, and powerful that night. North-leaning, it was pulling
all of the magic of the earth northward, increasing the pace of the flow of magic through Equestria.
This flow is a natural process, but changes to it, or to anything in our environment, generate more
magic within our thaumosphere, and that gives strength to Discord. He had set things up so that my
sister's power would be greater than normal, and his own greater as well.

"When I saw my sister accompanying the Bearers, all of whom were wearing their Elements, I was
delighted. Of course I knew Discord would not make it so simple for us to win, but I knew his
arrogance, his confidence. He wouldn't stand still and let the Elements be fired at him again, of
course, and he was certain to have some trick up his sleeve, but with my sister, my student, and my
student's friends with me, I thought there would be nothing we could not overcome.

"Discord had apparently given them some sort of rhyme referring to true love's kiss. Of course
Rarity and Twilight both recognized the scenario as soon as they saw me; they realized that I was
playing the role of a frog princess in Discord's little play. They were stymied, because none of
them knew who would qualify as my true love, but Fluttershy was able to speak to me, and I knew
Discord well enough to know what he had done. The spell would not be keyed to romantic love;
Discord believed that romantic love was a lie, a trick played on all of us by biology. He would
have keyed it such that any who loved me, who I loved in return, could break the spell. And when
I told Fluttershy this – since obviously, with myself being a frog, she was the only one who could
understand me – they all agreed that it should be Luna, because the love of s-si-sisters—" Celestia
stopped speaking for a moment to take a drink.

Whatever had happened, it had to have been very, very bad. Twilight had only ever seen Celestia
tear up twice – during her reunion with Luna, after they'd used the Elements to banish Nightmare
Moon, and when she'd been telling Twilight that the great Summer Sun Celebration of this year
had been the first such celebration she could enjoy, because the celebrations every three years had
always been about the defeat of Nightmare Moon and the day she had banished her little sister, and
this was the first where she could celebrate them as the anniversary of the day her sister was
returned to her. In the course of this conversation, though, she had had to visibly get herself under
control several times.

"It haunts me, Twilight. I wonder, what would have happened if they'd decided to choose you? I
loved you dearly as my faithful student, and I know you loved me in return as your teacher. Was
Discord's trap set for Luna alone, or would it have struck at you if you'd been the one?"
"Discord's trap?" Twilight asked.

"She kissed me, to turn me back into a pony. And in that same moment when I felt Discord's magic release me, when my own magic came flooding back – I sensed a, a trap snap closed. I don't think Luna had any time to realize what was happening. In a moment, the corruption you six had purged from her was back. She was Nightmare Moon – confused, because Discord had blocked all of her memories since her return to Earth, so she never expected to be in the gardens with me, with no memory as to exactly how she had come to be there. But it didn't matter; my sister has always been quick to react." Celestia bowed her head. "She sprang back, summoned her power, and struck at me. I was barely able to shield myself in time, and her power was strong enough to shatter that shield. If she'd struck another blow, right then – she might well have been able to kill me, or do me severe harm."

"What happened?"

"The worst possible thing." Celestia closed her eyes. "You – Twilight – reacted, immediately, to do exactly what the situation called for. You called to your friends, all of whom had put on the Elements you'd retrieved through Discord's game, and you tried to summon the power of the Elements of Harmony, thinking to purge Luna of Nightmare Moon once more." She lifted her head, looking directly at Twilight. "It was a trap, of course. Discord had guessed exactly what would happen. He knew Luna would be the one to try to free me with the power of love. He knew that once she became Nightmare Moon, she'd focus on me, despite the fact that the greater threat to her should have been the six of you. And he knew that you would immediately summon the power of the Elements to save her."

Twilight's heart was in her throat. "That's – that's what corrupted them, wasn't it. That was when they changed."

"All but my Twilight," Celestia confirmed. "The summoning fell apart instantly, because the Element of Magic could not harmonize with the other five Elements. Each had been corrupted by its opposite; only another Element that contained its own opposite within it could harmonize properly with the five. But it had lasted just long enough for the five of them to connect with the core of what should have been their Element – and in doing so, let the corruption within the Element infect their very selves."

As hateful as her counterpart had become, Twilight still felt for her, empathy making her guts twist, because she knew she would have done the exact same thing. She and the others had recovered the Elements from Discord's game? The others weren't discorded, were all working together with her, their friendship strong and unassailable? And then to see Luna – somepony they'd rescued, who'd then been an ally to them and had helped them save Celestia – suddenly transform into Nightmare Moon and strike down Celestia? Of course she would have tried to use the Elements. Of course she wouldn't have thought for a second about why Discord would have let them recover the Elements in the first place if he hadn't done something to them, because who could predict how Discord thought or what he'd do? All considerations would have fallen away in the face of the immediate need to save Celestia from Nightmare Moon, and save Luna as well. It wouldn't have entered her head to fight Nightmare Moon, magic to magic – she'd been a mere unicorn. How could she take on an alicorn powerful enough to strike down Celestia, and even if she could, how could she hurt Princess Luna? Not when she had another weapon in her hooves, something that could have saved both Princesses at once.

Except, of course, it hadn't, because Discord had predicted that.

"When Discord used illusions of their Elements to lure them in, and then turned them with his
magic, he was working on them, directly," Celestia said. "It's – it was – an easy magic for him, one he'd performed many, many times, but it never lasted. They would have been themselves again within a few months at the longest, and of course, as you know, anything that reminded them of who and what they truly were had the power to break it. What he did to the Elements, he intended to last. It didn't alter their memories, it didn't turn them against their Element – it altered their natures, their very personalities. They remembered being friends with my Twilight, they remembered the power that that friendship had given them, and they knew Discord had done something to them. They tried, as hard as they could, to remain their original selves... but the corruption ran too deep."

"I... I didn't know they knew about it. Or that they'd tried to fight it."

"Oh, yes. Pinkie and Fluttershy tried the hardest, the poor dears. Who they'd become was so much at odds with who they had been, they could perceive the difference. But they just couldn't resist it. Pinkie had come to see death and blood as funny, every bit as funny as party cannons and silly jokes. Her desire to bring joy and laughter into the hearts of ponies became matched by an equal desire to bring fear and anguish. At first none of us could even tell how she had been affected; she took no action on it at first. She struggled to hide it from everypony. But when the Cakes were attacked by brainwashed supporters of Nightmare Moon, Pinkie cut the attackers to bits with bread knives. We found the Cakes unconscious – they'd fainted – and Pinkie covered with blood, decorating the bakery with her victims' body parts."

Twilight put her hoof to her mouth, suddenly nauseous. "Who – who found her?"

"My Twilight did, of course," Celestia said softly. "By then, we'd seen the effect on the others. Rainbow Dash had grown more distant, less trusting and less trustworthy, missing appointments because something more important came up, or so she would say. Rarity was never so bad as when Discord had struck at her the first time, but she became noticeably greedier and more ambitious, hiring assistants, paying them little, working them hard and then firing them out of paranoia that they were stealing from her. Applejack lied frequently when it suited her to, and would tell three different ponies three different things in order to play them against each other so they'd do as she wished. Fluttershy would respond to statements she took offense to with vicious insults, and often flew into screaming rages – similar to her behavior at the Gala, but far, far worse. But we'd thought that perhaps Pinkie had managed to fight the corruption off."

"When did – did you ever find out about – the other things Fluttershy was, was doing because of--?"

"No. Not until Discord had been defeated. He knew. He saw her behavior toward her animals in private, and he seduced her, or she seduced him... she tells the story differently every time she's asked. It was some months before any of us learned she had become Discord's lover. Twilight chose to believe that Fluttershy was being coerced or controlled, that Discord was forcing himself on her in some way, because she couldn't understand how Fluttershy could be her friend and could help ponies in the battle against Discord and then turn around and share his bed with him, but I... knew better." Celestia sighed deeply. "Discord would never force himself on a mare. But he would, indeed, look for an emotional vulnerability and exploit it. And Fluttershy... may have chosen to seduce him, thinking she could influence him. She, too, can find and exploit emotional vulnerabilities, perhaps even better now that Discord has changed her, and Discord did have some. Among them, the fact that sleeping with the enemy was something of... an interest of his, let's say. It wouldn't have bothered him to share his bed with a mare who'd sworn herself to his destruction; it might even have been his preference. It wouldn't even have been the first time."

Twilight remembered what her own Celestia had said, of her relationship with Discord. "Princess...
did you—"

Celestia held up a hoof. "I believe I know what you wish to ask me," she said. "Do not. I have – I had a past with Discord, once, that presumably your own Celestia shared, and shared with you, but I can barely remember it any longer. I gave up all of the emotions I ever felt toward Discord, permanently."

"It's hard to give up emotions permanently," Twilight said. "At least that's what I've read."

"No, I think you misunderstand. I gave them to Chrysalis, the Changeling Queen. A Changeling Queen can feed on a specific emotion for a specific individual, and drain it from them so completely that even their memories are devoid of that emotion. I asked her to do it, so I could do whatever I needed to do against Discord with an undivided heart."

Twilight's eyes widened in shock. "Chrysalis? You... you let Chrysalis feed on you?"

"Chrysalis came forward to help me when I had no other allies. Was Princess Cadance your foal-sitter and your brother's fiancée in your world as well?"

"Yes, yes she was..."

"She was murdered by Discord, here. He took her wings and her alicorn invulnerability, dropped her from a great height, and then allowed a building to collapse on top of her. Your brother has never fully recovered. With Luna turned into an enemy and Cadance dead, I had no alicorn to assist me in battle, and Nightmare Moon was more powerful than I was. The Elements of Harmony could not synchronize, and I couldn't send them against Nightmare Moon – she would have killed them if she'd noticed what they bore. I could send them to distract Discord, on occasion – he was very pleased with his handiwork, and enjoyed tormenting and taunting them, enough that on occasion he'd lose track of whatever he'd been trying to do and switch to playing games at their expense, instead." She shuddered slightly. "He would make feigned romantic advances to my Twilight, forcing her to dance with him, holding or even kissing her, in front of Fluttershy, largely because it disgusted Twilight and infuriated Fluttershy, and upset all of the others. Though he never took it farther than that, I lived in fear that he would someday, that he'd step over a line he'd never before crossed, because he'd become so much more cruel and vicious than he'd ever been in the past... and yet, I still sent them, because if he turned them into birds or trees or talking flowerpots, he'd be sure to turn them back. They entertained him when they were free to fight him. Other ponies... there was much less certainty. He did not deliberately kill, but he was capable of turning a pony into a speaking, rolling tomato with the ability to move, slowly, and then leaving and forgetting that he'd left them vulnerable to rabbits and other forest animals who would devour a tomato, even one that talked."

"That's horrible," Twilight said, feeling even sicker. "Why – do you know why he turned so monstrous?"

"I do," Celestia said softly. "He told me. Every step of the way... Excuse me." She stood up, as a scroll materialized in front of her in a burst of dragonflame. "I must read this."

"That's from the other Twilight, right?"

"It's actually from Spike, it seems." Celestia stepped out of the room, carrying the scroll with her.

While she was gone, Twilight looked around herself. Celestia had never actually explained why Twilight's wings were bound or why there were cuffs on her legs. It was as if they wanted to cut off every possible avenue of magic. Was this just because alicorns had all three forms of pony
magic? If they'd captured the others, had they bound the earth ponies with cuffs on their hooves as well? Had they captured the others? She'd meant to try to find out from Princess Celestia what had happened to her friends, but had foregone it to try to find out more about what had happened to this world and maybe be able to negotiate with Princess Celestia for Discord's release.

What she'd been hearing was horrifying, and explained a little bit about why these ponies could act the way they did. She couldn't believe that Discord, any version of Discord, could really have murdered Cadance. Could there have been a horrible mistake? A prank gone wrong? Come to think of it... Cadance had told Twilight that she'd been taken before she could attend the Grand Galloping Gala, which she'd planned to go to with Shining, and that had happened shortly before Discord's escape. In this world, had Chrysalis decided not to kidnap her, ironically leading to her death at Discord's hooves (paws?) Or... if Cadance had been taken before the Gala, had she gotten away in this universe, only to run straight into Discord? And why would Discord have killed Cadance? Unless he was very different from their Discord, which was possible given the quantum multiverse theory; if Discord's timeline had split before he was turned to stone, maybe he'd become genuinely malevolent. But if that was true... why was Princess Celestia alive? Why would he have killed Cadance, who was a lot less of a threat to him than Celestia, while sparing Celestia?

She thought of what her own Celestia had said about her past with Discord, and what this one had confirmed. Maybe Discord hadn't killed Celestia because he'd loved her, once. But then, why would he kill her niece? Or maybe he'd just turned completely evil. She supposed it would depend on what Celestia had been about to tell her, as to why Discord had turned.

Celestia came back. "I apologize, Twilight," she said, seating herself where she had been before.

"If that was from Spike, I hope it wasn't anything bad." Or, she hoped it was. Something like "Help, our twins from another universe knocked Twilight unconscious and freed Discord!" It would be really nice if that had been the message, but from the fact that Celestia was calmly returning to their conversation, she guessed that hadn't been it.

"He simply needs reassurance from time to time," Celestia said. "Now, what were we discussing?"

"You said that Discord told you why he'd turned into such a monster."

"Oh, yes. When he captured Luna and myself, he said to me that all of this would be on my head, that I'd driven him to this by sending you six against him to stone him again, and that he was never going to let himself be returned to stone no matter what he had to do. Later, after the initial riots where half of Canterlot was destroyed, where Chrysalis came to me and offered her help, and Cadance died... he came to me and accused me of blaming him for things he hadn't done – though he never said what – and that if my new ally Chrysalis and I wanted to – I believe his term was 'play hardball' – that he could oblige. When I begged him to restore Luna, he told me that he'd begged for death while he was imprisoned in the statue, and I had been prepared to let him rot there forever, so why should he listen to me when I'd never listened to his pleas? Never mind that while he was in stone I couldn't hear him pleading; I never even knew for sure if he was conscious in there until he broke out and told me so. Some of Chrysalis's daughters, her Changeling Princesses, struck powerful blows against him, and hurt him. He retaliated by making at least a fifth of Chrysalis' own hive magically repulsive to all. Other Changelings couldn't bear to share love they'd collected with them, and no matter what form they took, ponies were disgusted by them. He said he would release them from the curse if Chrysalis begged. She never did. They died, of starvation."

"I – I can't believe he would—"

"At first, I couldn't believe either. But every time we struck a blow against him, every time we succeeded in any endeavor, he came back at us harder, and colder, and more willing to kill. I don't
know what Cadance did to him to make him kill her outright. She must have hurt him very badly."

She sighed. "He broke this nation, Twilight. Chaos, everywhere. No commerce could be carried out as normal when bits would grow wings and fly away, or spontaneously grow on trees. We tried maintaining ledgers of credit. He unleashed literal bookworms, insects that in their larval form devoured paper. More than half the books in Equestria are gone, Twilight, damaged beyond repair. No food grew naturally, for a year. Ponies didn't starve, but Discord would flood a skyscraper with pudding and laugh and say that if ponies were hungry enough, they'd eat enough of it that nopony would drown. And nopony did drown, but some went to hospitals with abdominal ruptures, and the hospitals couldn't be kept sterile any longer except by unicorns perpetually casting health bubbles. Thorned vines like tentacles erupted all over the Everfree, and Ponyville, and Saddle Lake, and every other town near the Everfree. Twilight was able to save the towns with parasprites, magically compelling them to eat the vines, and then Pinkie Pie and Fluttershy worked together to lure the sated parasprites into the maw of a dragon, but until the vines finally died and withered it was impossible to even enter the Everfree. And now most of it is dead, as you have probably seen."

"I have," Twilight whispered.

"Families were separated, only finding each other now. Some still have not. Towns were wiped off the map. Not all of it was Discord's doing directly. Nightmare Moon raised armies against me, and those who would not join her armies usually fell to them. I couldn't maintain order. I could barely keep my ponies alive. I had to let Discord do as he wished with the sun and the moon, and when he did allow me the control of the sun, it meant that Nightmare Moon would be fighting with me to push it under the horizon and keep it there. And— and in the end—"

She took another drink, but it didn't seem to help. Tears welled in her eyes. "With the last of my strength I cast a spell on her to push back the darkness, to save her, but Discord's power had amplified Nightmare Moon's control and Luna couldn't keep herself free, she begged me to do it, she told me she was slipping and she would lose control, I refused but she told me Nightmare Moon would kill me and then slaughter the ponies I'd sworn to protect, she said Nightmare Moon knew how important Twilight was now and could I trust Discord to keep Twilight safe, and of course I couldn't, and Chrysalis might mean well but in the end her strength is too variable and all Nightmare Moon would have to do would be to kill Shining Armor, whose love had been feeding her, and Chrysalis wouldn't have the strength to save anyone anymore, and— and I had no choice, Twilight, I had to—" She was openly weeping now, tears falling from closed eyes onto the smooth floor, her ears down and her withers shaking with occasional sobs that broke free. "—I had to—kill—my little sister—"

Despite knowing that this was not her Celestia, that this Celestia was possibly an enemy, Twilight found this too heart-wrenching not to react. She went to Celestia's side and put a hoof around her neck and withers, pressing her own head against the white alicorn's. "Princess Celestia, I'm so, so sorry," she said, her own voice choking up. "I—I can only imagine—"

Celestia's horn lit up, and a sudden stillness descended upon her. Her tears disappeared as if they'd never been, and the sobs that had racked her were gone, replaced by calm and steady breathing. She pushed Twilight away, gently. "Thank you, Twilight. I knew you would understand, once it had been explained to you," she said. "Equestria now is beset from within and without. Our infrastructure is heavily damaged or destroyed; there's still a train to Ponyville, but many of the other train lines were destroyed, and few have been repaired yet. Our economy is in shambles. Ponies suffer food insecurity all over Equestria; so much of not only our crops but our farms themselves were destroyed. I… I personally can barely maintain the strength to raise and lower the sun, any longer. The buffalo are hostile; we've had to deal frequently with raiders from Griffonstone or Yakyakistan; dragons have been emboldened to raid us as well, kidnapping cattle and sheep out from under our protection. Chrysalis' aid has been invaluable, but her changelings
"All of that sounds awful," Twilight said. "And I wish there was something I could do to help. But... I'm sorry, Princess, but I still don't understand how any of this justifies torturing an innocent pony. Our Discord didn't do those things to you. Or to us, either. He's... he's even been helpful, with the vines – our Everfree is still thriving because he helped us figure out how to get rid of them."

"His own creation," Celestia said.

"Yes, I know, but that just makes it even more meaningful that he helped us get rid of them. And he's been doing work for our Princess Celestia to close off dimensional gateways so we won't be invaded. He isn't the one who did so much damage to your Equestria."

"Oh, I know that. But that doesn't change the need." Princess Celestia got to her hooves. "A Discord ruined our nation. Another Discord would have the power to repair it. He could restore our train lines with a thought. He could rebuild destroyed cities, he could purge farmlands of taint and magical corruption. But of course, since his primary allegiance is to Chaos, he would never voluntarily do such things even if he were willing to help at all. I am weakened and need somepony to take over the sun for me, for a time, so I can rest and recover. Discord has the power to move the sun and the moon on his own, easily. But he would never keep to their proper schedule, or even their orbits, of his own free will." She knelt down again in front of Twilight directly, looking down on her with a soft smile like the other Celestia had in the days when Twilight was a filly, learning from her. "I know you believe the treatment he has been receiving here is harsh, and it is, I will admit that. I have no great love of using such tactics. But it is necessary, in this case. We need Discord to assist us, and we need him to do so in the correct way, not relying on his own chaotic whims, but submitting to the needs of harmony. What he has been undergoing is training, to break him of his obsessive need to be contrary and resistant, to make him genuinely able and willing to obey instructions."

Twilight swallowed. "But... if you have to torture somepony to make them do something... it doesn't matter how much you need that something, it's still wrong."

"Is it? By sacrificing Discord's happiness and well-being – not even his life, simply his enjoyment of life – for a relatively short time period in comparison to the fullness of his lifespan, we can save millions of ponies from suffering, and hundreds or thousands of ponies from an early death. My Twilight sacrificed her own happiness to defeat our Discord – she researched and located an item called the Diadem of Order, on the logic that Magic, which makes things happen in accordance with the user's will and emotion, is opposite to Order, which makes things happen in accordance with rules that bend for nopony. When she combined it with her Element of Magic and opened herself to it, allowing it to change her as the others had been changed, she achieved the ability to harmonize with them, and thus to be able to use the Elements once again – at the cost of most of her emotions. I do not think she can feel joy any longer, and very little love. Little is left for her but grim determination to set our world to right. If she was willing to make such a sacrifice for herself, is it so evil to demand a sacrifice from Discord – who may not be the same Discord who destroyed our world, but who in mind and soul and heart had the same potential to be? It has been thousands of years since Discord could possibly be described as 'good', even if he is no longer fully evil. One being with tremendous potential for evil, versus all the ponies of Equestria who will suffer if we cannot make him help them. Is that really such an unfair trade?"

For a moment Twilight wavered, because maybe Celestia was right. Maybe the suffering Discord was enduring wasn't pointless or simply malicious; maybe it was justified, if the end goal was to help so many ponies. And then she remembered the letter.
diamond studded rope. My skin's in ribbons right now, Twilight... she makes me use my own magic to let her rape me.... I am hoping the other me caused the sadistic dominatrix parts of Fluttercruel to come into existence, not that they are suppressed within her... Once Fluttercruel revived me and transfused enough blood into me that she could release some of my magic to me and I wouldn't be too weak to use it, I was able to regenerate the limbs Pinkie took...

"Maybe there's a justification for harsh training and discipline," Twilight said. "But there can never be any justification for... for rape. Or for whipping somepony until their skin's in ribbons. What Discord's been going through goes far beyond training."

"Are you so sure?" Princess Celestia asked. "I know he sent you a letter, Twilight, but did it ever occur to you that Discord will freely lie and exaggerate if it suits him to?"

"I checked," Twilight said. She didn't want to give the details of how she'd checked; she knew that if she told this Celestia too much, the princess could use it as a weapon. She'd brought Twilight close to the verge of agreeing with her that torture was acceptable, without any knowledge other than her own experience with her own Twilight, and that shook Twilight more than being taken captive had. "He's telling the truth."

"Ah. Well, I've left the details of the training protocol to my Twilight, and I agree with you that those things do sound particularly cruel. And there is an alternative, but it wasn't a possibility until you came here. I might be able to authorize Discord's release back into your friends' custody, if you can help me."

"Like I said, I'm eager to help. It's not like I don't understand your position and sympathize, Princess, it's just... torture is wrong no matter what. If there's something I can do that would help you enough that you could stop torturing Discord and let him go home, without leaving you in the lurch because everything is wrecked and there's no one to help you... I'd be happy to."

"I doubt you will be happy to. But you are a good mare, Twilight. Everything I would have hoped for my Twilight to become, someday. And you still have your heart. So... I believe you might be willing, even once you hear what it entails." She took a deep breath. "With my sister beside me I could do anything. She could have raised the sun and moon for long enough that I could rest and recover. She could have gotten our ordinary pony soldiers into shape to take on threats from outside our nation. She could have walked the dreams of the ponies here to find those who plot sedition; she could have added her magical power to mine, so the two of us could directly assist in the recovery of our nation. It would be harder than if I could simply order Discord to fix everything, but it would have been worth it."

"I... definitely think that would have been better, yes," Twilight said cautiously. Where was Celestia going with this? If Princess Luna was dead, why bring her up? "Do you think I could do those things? Princess, I'm not nearly as powerful an alicorn as your sister was. I can't raise the sun or the moon, I can't walk in dreams, I don't know anything about military tactics or training an army."

"Oh, I know," Celestia said. "But there is a spell that can restore a dead alicorn to life, and I have the power to cast it, but only with the help of a second alicorn. With Luna and Cadance both dead, and my Twilight never likely to ascend, I would never have had that second alicorn to assist me if you hadn't come. Now that you're here... if you're willing to make the necessary sacrifice, I can bring Luna back to life."

Opposition, 11 AM – Spike (Harmony)
The plan wasn't complicated.

Royal Guardspony armor cast a glamour around the pony wearing it, making all Royal Guardstallions look identical aside from racial variation and a scant few who were much larger than the others. Guardsmares under the glamour looked similar enough that from a distance it wasn't obvious that they were mares, although anypony getting close to one would see the Guardsmare's gender clearly enough. The ceremonial duties were generally performed by stallions, because there were a lot more of them in the Guard than there were mares, and because old prejudices from earth ponies and unicorns against mares going into battle if there were any available stallions around to do it instead meant that most mares who joined the Guard had to prove themselves tougher, better fighters and more disciplined than any of the stallions in their cohort... which meant that once they actually got in, their skill set kept them in the corps that did real work rather than ceremonial duties. There wouldn't be many of them in the Palace today, if things worked the same here as they'd worked back home – but there would be some, and they wouldn't be questioned much. Guardsmares were assumed to have something important they were doing.

All they had to do was get their hooves on a set of armor. And after Shining Armor had been willing to talk to them, the stallions actually guarding them were less primed to treat them as mere criminals, and more like valuable hostages who might be released pending negotiations.

Spike rattled the bars of their prison. "Somepony! Anypony! Help! Rarity's really sick!"

A guardstallion, not the one who had originally gotten Shining Armor for them, came to the door. "What's the trouble?"

"We thought she was okay, but it turns out the injuries she got in her fight were worse than we thought. We think she's got internal bleeding," Spike lied, while Applejack busied herself wiping down Rarity's brow with the water jug and her own ponytail, and Pinkie rattled off an endless series of suggestions as to what might make Rarity feel better.

"Do you need us to elevate your hooves? Elevate your head? Oh, should we pull your mane up off your forehead, maybe you'd feel better! What if I rubbed your belly, would that help? A tickle?"

"Don't go tickling her, Pinkie, that's plumb stupid," Applejack said.

"Ohhh," Rarity moaned dramatically. "Ooooh, the pain! Oh, my insides! Applejack, please, tell me honestly, am I dying?"

"I figure you probably won't die," Applejack said dryly.

"Can't you do anything?" Spike asked the guardstallion. "She's in so much pain!"

The stallion sighed. "I could go get a doctor."

"Please, this could be a matter of life and death!"

As soon as the guard left, Spike turned back to the others. "So far so good, guys," he said. "He's gone to get a doctor."

"Okay," Applejack said. "You be ready, Spike. Everypony in the guard knows to watch out for an earth pony's hooves, but I reckon they're never told to watch out for a baby dragon. Remember what I told you 'bout chokeholds and the veins in the neck."

Spike nodded.
Rarity continued to moan. Applejack looked down at her. "Rarity, you gotta keep doin' that?"

"Who knows who might be listening?" Rarity hissed quietly, and then cried out loudly. "Oh, it hurts! It hurts so much, please! Help me, or I may die!"

"Ain't you layin' it on a little thick?" Applejack whispered.

"Not if their Rarity's anything like our Rare-rare and they've ever met her." Pinkie said quietly. "She faints when her mane gets messy! Who'd ever think she wouldn't cry and yell if she was really hurt?"

"I have never swooned because my mane was messy," Rarity whispered. She quickly followed this up with a shriek. "Aah! The agony of it! Help, please!"

Spike leaned against the wall next to the door, on the hinge side. In a few minutes the guard returned with a doctor in tow. He unlocked the door and escorted the doctor inside.

There was nopony else out in the hallway. Spike moved, digging his claws into the ceremonial golden armor to pull himself up. The guard was a unicorn, and probably a fairly powerful one if he was in the Guard – Spike felt the stallion's power yanking at him, trying to pull him loose. He dug in hard enough with his claws that blood welled. And then the guard screamed, buckling to his knees, his hooves going to his horn. Spike disengaged his claws from the armor and grabbed the fellow on the sides of his neck, pinching the jugular veins, careful not to apply enough pressure to cut the skin. There was protective armor on the back of the Guard's neck, part of his ceremonial helmet, but it was designed to block spine-breaking blows and decapitation strikes from above, and did nothing to shield his vulnerable veins.

In several seconds, the guard keeled over entirely, unconscious. His horn was bleeding slightly. "Rarity? Did you do something to him?"

"Well, I couldn't have him pull you off and attack you the way Twilight's evil counterpart did," Rarity said, breathing hard as she sat up. "My saddlebags may be gone, but I never travel without a small packet of needles and thread for an emergency."

"Yeah? Where were you hiding that stuff?" Applejack asked, sounding impressed. For the first time, Spike realized that the doctor, also a unicorn, was also out cold on the floor.

"My mane may be a somewhat less versatile hiding place for necessities than Pinkie's, but it is more than sufficient to conceal a very small sewing kit."

"So... you poked his horn with a sewing needle?" Spike asked.

Rarity nodded. "I got the idea from you, Spike. When you threatened the evil version of Twilight, I realized how very vulnerable a unicorn horn is to something sharp. Of course, a sewing needle can't do any real damage to a horn – it could never penetrate the bone, only the skin. But the skin on our horns is very sensitive, and I thought that if a unicorn is poked with a needle in the horn while he's trying to use magic... well, at the very least he'll redirect his magic to deal with whatever is damaging his horn."

"And look, Rarity! A whole doctory kit full of needles!" Pinkie said enthusiastically, going through the doctor's saddlebag.

"Those are... really not the sort I'd prefer to use, Pinkie," Rarity said.

"All right," Applejack said. "Ain't no way of knowing how long Sleeping Beauties here are gonna
be catching their z's, so let's get a move on. Spike, Rarity, help me get armored up here? We gotta do this fast."

"Sure thing, Applejack." Spike started stripping the armor off the guardstallion. Within moments, as Spike pulled the helmet free, the stallion's gray color turned to bright blue, and his mane came free, a pale lemon yellow. As he unbuckled the belts holding the armor on and pulled the pieces off, Rarity grasped them in her magic and fastened them onto Applejack. As soon as the helmet went on, Applejack became recognizable only by her cutie mark – her mane was hidden under the helmet, and her color changed to the same slate gray that the stallion had appeared as. Even her eyes and facial structure changed slightly, turning just a trifle more masculine. She could probably pass for a stallion if she could deepen her voice enough, now. Once the rest of the armor went on, her cutie mark disappeared, making her no longer recognizable at all.

Until she spoke. "How do I look?"

"You look great! Totally not even one tiny bit like Applejack!"

"But you sound like yourself, darling. Is there any way you can feign a different vocal style?"

"Do you mean, perhaps, a style similar to yours?" Applejack said in the accent of a wealthy Manehattanite. "Because I have had extensive training in the art of speaking as if I hail from the penthouses of Manehattan. My Aunt and Uncle Orange were quite adamant that I learn to speak like a wealthy gentlemare, while I resided with them."

"That's absolutely marvelous, darling. But in this case, it doesn't really scream 'Royal Guardsmare', does it? Can you try, perhaps—" She cleared her own throat. When she spoke her voice was much more gruff than Spike had ever heard from Rarity. "Sir, I was instructed to bring these prisoners to the Princess." She was still speaking in something like her usual accent, but clipped and sharp at the edges, and she'd deepened her voice so it had a bit of a rasp to it, like Rainbow's.

"I believe I can do that, ma'am," Applejack said, imitating the clipped style and deepened voice Rarity had adopted, and still using the Manehattanite accent as her baseline rather than her natural farmpony drawl.

"Excellent." As she had been coaching Applejack, Rarity had been stripping the doctor. "Unfortunately he's a stallion, so this shirt is a trifle loose, and I haven't time to tuck it up. Let's see if I can conceal it under the lab coat – ah yes, I think this will work well. Spike, how do I look?"

"You're beautiful."

Pinkie giggled, Applejack rolled her eyes, and Rarity coughed. "Yes, well, be that as it may but I was actually asking if I look like a respectable Canterlot doctor, and not like myself."

"Oh! Um... you still look like Rarity."

"Try these!" Pinkie hoofed over a pair of thick, enamel-rimmed glasses.

"Hmm." Rarity put them on. "I am sure I look positively ridiculous."

"Yep! But doctory ridiculous!"

"I think they're cute," Spike said. "I mean, everything you wear makes you look cute. I mean... uh, okay, I'll shut up now."

"Good enough, ain't like we've got costumes in the barn right here to do better," Applejack said.
"Let's get movin'. Spike, ride on Pinkie and act sick if anypony stops us."

"Right."

"Remember, the goal ain't to rescue Twilight, much as we'd like. We get back to Ponyville, we help Fluttershy and Rainbow rescue Discord, and he can help us get Twilight. With all those dang cuffs they had on her, she's not likely to be able to run too fast, and we don't even know where she is anyway, so Discord's probably the best option for busting her loose."

"And if he's not, we'll have far more options once Fluttershy and Rainbow are back with us," Rarity agreed.

The three ponies and Spike left the room and headed down the hallway.

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**Opposition, 10 AM – Rainbow Dash (Harmony)**

The problem with flying into Ponyville was that there were other pegasi in the air today. It wasn't painfully early in the morning anymore, so the weather team would be out and about.

Rainbow did what she always did with supplies she wanted to stash; she found a tree with some sap, plucked a few feathers—not enough to affect her flight, just ones she'd have probably shed the next time she preened anyway—and used the tree sap to glue them to the bottoms of the accelerant bottles, the matchbox, and the dry scarf she had all the other ether-soaked scarves wrapped up in to carry them. Once they'd reached the border of Ponyville proper, Fluttershy had gone to ground and taken to her hooves. Somehow, even in bright morning daylight, something about the way Fluttershy moved just made most ponies fail to notice her. Her purple-dyed mane was covering her face to the point where Rainbow could barely see her eyes, her head was lowered and her whole body shrunken in on itself like she was apologizing to the air for bumping into it. Normally Rainbow hated to see her that way, but right now she knew it wasn't shyness but stealth.

On the other hand, Rainbow was utter crap at stealth, and knew it. Oh, sneaking up on a sleeping dragon or a bunch of malicious Diamond Dogs or something, or if there was night cover, yeah. But go through the center of the town she lived in, and not have anypony notice? She could fly at top speed, but if anything was gonna attract her counterpart's attention, it would be that. Other Rainbow was hopefully off with the Wonderbolts or something and wasn't even in town anymore, or maybe she'd gone to bed or something. But if she was anywhere in the area, she'd feel the ripples through the air if Rainbow pushed her wings to the limit like that.

So she piled all of her stuff on top of a cloud, after making sure each had a feather attached so they wouldn't fall through. Then she got under the cloud, shaped it to have a roughly pony-sized indentation in the bottom with room for her wings, lifted herself into the indentation, and started pushing. Clouds naturally floated, caught by breezes or in the ripple of a distant pegasus' magic; nopony would be surprised to see a cloud. The pegasi flew above this level, mostly, and when they were flying below they usually had their eyes on the ground. The unicorns and earth ponies generally didn't look up. It was the best she could do for going unnoticed.

And then, to her horror, she heard a familiar voice call out to her. "Rainbow! Rainbow Dash! Oh, awesome!"

Scootaloo. Great. Rainbow turned to see the small orange filly behind her, flying up toward her, with... Rainbow goggled at the sight. Scootaloo's feathered filly-sized pegasus wings were gone. Instead, she had purple batpony wings, adult-sized and way too big for her small frame. She was also wearing goggles and a hoodie.
Rainbow opened her mouth to ask what was up with the wings, and closed it again just in time. If whatever had happened to Scootaloo had happened a while ago, Rainbow would be totally giving herself away as not belonging here if she asked about it. "Oh, hey, Scoots," Rainbow said, trying for a casual tone. "What's up?"

"I am!" Scootaloo said, and giggled. "I've been up since 4 pm yesterday and I'm kinda wasted, but I'm real glad I didn't go to sleep yet, or I'd've missed you! Whatcha doing in Ponyville? You got a mission with Twilight or something?"

"Why have you been up so late?" Rainbow asked, trying to avoid having to answer any questions.

"Oh, well, since I went nocturnal I don't get to hang with my friends as much, you know, so I got up early so we could hang out after they got out of school. Then I had tutoring with Cheerilee in the early evening, which, boring, but at least I don't hafta deal with that stuck-up Diamond Tiara anymore." For the first time Rainbow noticed that Scootaloo had a cutie mark. It was a pair of bat wings in psychedelic colors that seemed to change and shift as Rainbow looked at them. "You'd think she'd be less of a jerk, but she says my cutie mark isn't even real 'cause of how I got it... well, you know all this stuff!" She laughed. "Then it was night, so of course, I'm gonna be up at night, and then when the sun rose I guess I just couldn't get to sleep."

The filly was surprisingly graceful, despite the fact that with huge wings like that she had to be completely off-balance. "You're flying pretty good today, squirt. Especially if you've been up all night – I mean, up late." Rainbow Dash didn't know much about batponies; they'd kept to themselves to the point where she'd never even met one until it turned out that Luna's Royal Guard was all batponies. Wait, the politically correct word was "thestrals", right. Whatever. She did know that they were nocturnal, light hurt their eyes and that they got sunburned ridiculously easily, which was probably why Scootaloo was wearing that hoodie. Somehow she'd gotten turned into a batpony – with massively oversized wings. Rainbow smelled Discord's involvement. This world's original Discord, obviously – if their own Discord had done this to Scoots, the other team would have forced him to fix it. She kind of wondered why they hadn't forced him to fix it anyway.

"Thanks!" Scootaloo beamed. "You're in a good mood today! Do you, uh, wanna hang out or something?"

"Maybe tonight, but I've got stuff I gotta do and you need your rest. Can't be awesome if you don't get enough sleep!"

"I could help you out! Whatcha doing?"

Rainbow thought fast. "Yeah, actually you could help me out. I had to get up, like, mondo early this morning and I didn't have a chance to feed Tank. Can you go to my house and make sure he's got food and water?" That would get the filly out of her mane. "You can crash there for the day if you want."

"That'd be awesome! But, uh, who's Tank?"

Internally Rainbow facehooved. She'd gotten Tank after Discord had broken loose the first time, which meant it probably hadn't happened here. "He's my pet tortoise."

Scootaloo frowned in disbelief. "A tortoise? How come you of all ponies have such a slow pet?"

"'Cause he's got a lot of moxie and determination, and he's tough, and he's ambitious. He wanted to fly, which obviously tortoises don't do, but I got him a magic propeller he can operate that's strapped to his shell, and it's awesome. He flies with me around the house, and sometimes we go to
Cloudsdale together."

"Huh." Scootaloo smiled. "Don't – um, don't take offense, but, it, uh, it sounds like maybe you're getting kinda back to your old self? A little?"

Rainbow shrugged. "I dunno. Weirder things have happened. Go check up on him for me, okay?"

"Okay, will do!" Scootaloo flapped off, looking more like a condor than a pony with her absurd wingspan twice the length of her small body.

She was almost to Carousel Boutique. Rainbow looked around Ponyville from her high vantage point, and caught a glimpse of yellow and purple perched in the library tree. She gave a hoof up, and saw Fluttershy return the gesture.

So Fluttershy was ready. She just needed Rainbow to create the distraction. Grinning, Rainbow reached through the cloud and grabbed her stuff, then rapidly descended and flew in through what had to be Sweetie Belle's window, because the room was all done in pinks and purples and had a poster of an ambiguously-gendered probably-stallion-or-more-likely-colt, an orange earth pony holding a guitar, with the slight build of a pegasus, and a long blue mane, and... wait, horseapples, that was Flash Sentry. The pony from Cadance's Royal Guard whose human counterpart had helped Twilight beat Sunset Shimmer. Flash Sentry was a pegasus, and solidly built for one, the way you'd expect a Royal Guardspony to be. This one looked just like him, down to the cutie mark, but he had no wings, he was a lot skinnier, and he was made up like a pop star.

Okay. That wasn't important. Though if that was really Flash Sentry, he was the second pegasus she'd seen today whose wings had obviously been messed with. That was chilling to imagine. But not what she should be focused on. Sweetie Belle was probably at school – Scoots had confirmed they did still have school in this weird world, though nocturnal batpony Scootaloo didn't attend it with her friends – but Rainbow needed to check that, and also find Opal and get her out of here. Personally Rainbow thought the cat was smart enough to flee a burning building, but Fluttershy had made her promise to find the cat and make sure she wasn't hurt.

A few minutes of searching found Opalescence on a gaudy, over-decorated cat bed. Rainbow snagged her, taking care to hold her out from her body as the cat yowled and struggled, and flew out the back window, depositing her in the upper branches of a nearby tree. Some pegasus would likely see her up there, meowing her head off, and get her down, but the Boutique would be on fire by then. Rainbow made certain to cover all the outfits Rarity had in her workroom, in various stages of completion, with the accelerant. And the models on display on ponyquins. And Rarity's bed. She didn't spread the stuff into Sweetie Belle's room; honestly, she felt sorry for the kid, and hoped her stuff didn't burn too much. To help with that, she shut Sweetie Belle's bedroom door. This bitchy version of Rarity, however, wasn't getting any mercy from Rainbow. She and her own counterpart had been going at it too hard for her to see much of the fight the others were having before they'd drifted away from the original arena, but she'd seen and heard enough to feel really good about destroying this version of Rarity's stuff.

Especially since she knew Fluttershy didn't know enough about gems, and being a pegasus, wouldn't have been able to drill holes in them, to make that whip that Rainbow's Fluttershy had said the other one had been using on Discord. This Rarity had to have made that thing.

There was enough accelerant poured all around now. Grinning, Rainbow pulled a match, lit it – and flew at her highest indoor speed up and out of the room before the thing hit the ground, because when it did –

BOOM. Fireball. Oh yeah. This was gonna be good.
True Friends

Opposition, 11 AM – Twilight (Opposition)

"Twilight! Rarity! Applejack! Wake up wake up wake UP! Rarity's store is on fire!"

Twilight went from groggy rage at Pinkie for waking her up, to cold wakefulness, the moment she heard the word "fire." "Pinkie. What is on fire?"

"Carousel Boutique! It just went up in a huge fireball!" Pinkie was leaning out the window with binoculars. "Oh my gosh oh my gosh oh my gosh!"

"My BOUTIQUE!" Rarity screamed. "Oh, this is the WORST. POSSIBLE. THING!!!" For once, she was close to right about that, Twilight thought.

"Now don't go fainting on us, we're gonna need your help taking care of that fire," Applejack said. "Even if we can't save the Boutique, we gotta keep it from spreading to the rest of Ponyville."

Twilight agreed. The Ponyville fire department was useless. Too many Ponyville first responders had had their minds broken when they tried to save other ponies from disasters Discord had caused. She could still remember the chief of the fire department skipping merrily through a flood of flammable alcohol that had once been stored water in a water tower, singing "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star", as she had tried desperately to get him out of there before one of the random exploding spinning-top dolls falling from the sky could land and blow up in the alcohol flood. "Where is Spike?"

"He went to Sweet Apple Acres to check if Big Mac was gonna need Applejack to wake up and go help!"

"Well, nice to see the kid being useful for once," Applejack said, "but that don't help us a hill o'beans right now. Trust the fireproof critter to nor be around when there's a fire."

"Why are you all standing here talking?" Rarity wailed. "My livelihood is going up in flames! Help me!"

For a moment, Twilight considered going into her workroom and ordering Discord to quench the flames. But he'd likely do so in a way that would cause almost as much damage as the fire would have, and she wasn't confident of her ability to phrase the order in such a way that he couldn't find a loophole. "Let's go. Meet me outside," she said, and teleported. As little as she really wanted to help Rarity, failing to do so might shatter what remained of their friendship, destroying their ability to harmonize and keep Discord under control. And as much as he claimed he wanted to die, Twilight didn't trust that he wouldn't take advantage of the situation if he suddenly found himself free of the spells binding him.

As she raced toward the Carousel Boutique, she heard the others behind her, galloping toward the same destination. After the incident she had barely managed to save the fire chief from, Ponyville no longer used water towers, so she couldn't do what she'd done with the ursa minor and simply grab a water tower and dump it on the Boutique. This was going to require more finesse.

Opposition, 11 AM – Fluttershy (Harmony)

When the roof of Carousel Boutique caught on fire, Fluttershy's heart caught in her throat. She
hadn't seen Rainbow Dash leave the building yet. She bit her lip and pressed her hooves to her cheeks, nerve-wracked, until she finally saw the streak of blue shoot out of the side of the burning building.

A moment later, she saw Twilight, Pinkie, Applejack and Rarity run out the side of the library. If she hadn't already known that they were the enemy counterparts, she'd have been able to tell from the fact that Twilight was a unicorn and Pinkie and Rarity had their normal mane colors, not the ones they'd been dyed to. Time to go.

She flitted down from the tree branches as soon as she was sure the mares couldn't see her anymore. In her world, Twilight often left the windows of the library open, especially on the top floor, for Owowliscious to come and go, but this Twilight seemed more security conscious; the windows were all closed, and seemed locked. The door, however, wasn't.

Carefully, Fluttershy flew forward, the soft flutter of her wings almost silent, her hooves never touching the wooden floor to make a single sound. Where would Twilight be keeping Discord?

She checked the basement – nothing there but the usual equipment and research materials Twilight had always kept. Kitchen – no, and it was probably a silly idea anyway. Bedrooms – no. Bathroom – no. Golden Oaks Library just wasn't all that large a place, and the huge central room that was the library took up most of the space on the ground floor and a significant part of the second story as well; as with her own home, the central room was two stories tall, with balconies. Where could Twilight be keeping Discord?

Wait. Was that a door?

Now that she thought of it, she had never been in the room beyond that door. She'd seen Twilight or Spike come out of it with books, and go in it with books, but she'd never been in there herself, nor had she ever seen any of her friends go in aside from Twilight and Spike. She knew what it was, of course – it was the book-sorting room, where huge piles of books accumulated for re-sorting and reshelving. All returned books went there, and new books for the library, as opposed to new books for Twilight or Spike to read, went there as well. But because it was part of the operations of the library proper, and Twilight never asked for help with the library itself, Fluttershy had never been in it.

She pushed the door open... and gasped. An action she regretted immediately, because it smelled awful in here. Fluttershy was no stranger to the smells animal biology produced, but normally when she walked into what she'd thought was a book sorting room, she didn't expect to smell the effluvia of a sick creature.

She also didn't generally expect to find her missing friend sleeping on a stone floor, inside a circle etched with runes, with seven raised posts around the circle, each with a metal ring at the top.

"Discord," Fluttershy whispered. She wanted to fly over to him and embrace him right away, but there was always the possibility that the evil Twilight had booby-trapped that rune circle. Fluttershy was no mage, but she knew that rune circles were nothing to be messed with.

He was so thin. The horror she'd expected to see of his wings wasn't there; they appeared to be intact from here. But he was so very, very thin. She could see his spine poking out of the skin of his neck, the feathered ridge he had in place of a mane spotty on top of it, with many feathers missing. Where his coat was supposed to be thick and furry, the brown fluffy fur that covered most of his body, it was drastically thinned, to the point where she could see the dull red glitter of the tiny dragon scales he had under there in some places. It was brushed and well-kept, but dull, none of the gloss to it that Discord's fur should have. His tail was in similar condition, the red dragon
scales paler than they should be and lacking any iridescence. And she could see his ribs – even through what should have been thick, fluffy fur, even through what had once been enormously powerful muscles, she could count the unevenly spaced ribs of his chest, the random extra floating ribs that he had at irregular intervals spaced out across his entire torso and abdomen to provide extra support for his length. Like a snake, Discord had far, far more ribs than a pony – though not as many in proportion to his body as an actual snake would, and most of them were cartilage. Fluttershy could see them all.

His beard was gone. His cute little goatee... there was nothing left of it but a patch of white on the coat of his chin.

Fluttershy tossed a few feathers into the rune circle, and watched, holding her breath. Nothing. She landed, and swished her tail into it. Still nothing. Slowly she edged her hoof over the line forming the circle, until her entire lower leg was over the line, and still nothing.

It wasn't booby-trapped. She could go to him. With a few flaps, Fluttershy landed by his head and neck, where the collar around his neck was attached to a metal chain that in turn was locked to a post, and threw her forelegs around him. "Discord, oh, Discord, I've finally found you," she said, whispering because she still wasn't sure if Spike might be in the library somewhere, tears welling in her eyes. "Wake up, please, wake up... it's going to be all right, I've found you, we're going to get you out of here and get you home..."

Dark lids opened, and yellow eyes focused their mismatched red pupils on her, blearily. "Fluttershy?"

"Yes, Discord, it's me, it's the real Fluttershy. Your friend. I've come to rescue you!"

"Oh, Fluttershy," he said softly, closing his eyes again. And then he started to chuckle.

Fluttershy frowned. It wasn't a pleasant, happy chuckle. It sounded... bitter, somehow. "Discord?"

Then his eagle limb shot out and grabbed her by the neck, his talons digging into her flesh hard enough that she could smell her own blood. "Discord?" Fluttershy near-shrieked, grabbing at his talon with her hooves, trying to pull him off her neck – uselessly. Even starved and weak, he was still much stronger than she was. "Discord, what are you doing? Let me go!"

"I don't think so," Discord said, eyes opening again as he shifted position, his upper body up as if he was sitting, resting on his lion paw, even as his lower body still lay in a reclining position. He was still chuckling, but his eyes were very, very hard.

"Discord?" Fluttershy whimpered. "Discord, it's me. The Fluttershy from your universe. Your friend!"

"That old lie? I'm terribly sorry, but that won't work anymore." His voice was hoarse and not very strong, but his grip was unavering and his eyes were fixed on hers. "But I'm glad it turns out you did come to find me, my dear. Even if it was probably because Twilight doesn't want me being turned and going on some sort of rampage across dimensions, and certainly not out of anything like actual friendship. Because now that I know what a liar you are, I can tell you I'm wise to you now... and I can kill you before I die."

No. No, no, no. What had Fluttercruel done to him? In all of her imaginings of the worst possible thing that could happen, she had never thought Fluttercruel would manage to convince him that her friendship with him was a lie. But it made sense – she knew he was vulnerable there, she knew how much assurance he'd needed that they were really friends. It had never helped that he knew
perfectly well she'd reached out to him because Princess Celestia had told her to reform him. He'd never understood – she wasn't capable of lying and manipulating to that extent. If there'd never been anything in him worth saving, worth befriending, he'd have gone back to stone.

Tears welled in her eyes – a combination of physical pain, fear, the feeling of betrayal that he was turning on her, and grief for him because she could only imagine what Fluttercruel had done to him to make him feel this way. "Not... a liar..." she choked out. "Am... your friend..."

"Still lying about it? Even now?" His paw tightened. "You're committed, I'll give you that. Why don't you just come clean? Maybe I'll kill you quickly if you're honest, instead of taking my time."

Fluttershy started to cry. "Sorry... so sorry..."

Discord raised an eyebrow. "So you do admit it? You were lying all along? You hate me, and you pretended you didn't just to control me, because that's what Celestia ordered you to do?"

She shook her head frantically. "No... never... sorry I'm... bad friend... y-you'd know... if... was better friend... you'd know I care... I'm... sorry..."

The talon around her neck let up slightly. "Wait. You claim you care... but you're saying you're sorry you were a bad friend. What exactly are you admitting to here?"

"Can't... talk... please... Discord..."

He didn't let her go, but his paw released enough pressure that she could breathe, deep sucking breaths through her sobs. "I cared... I always cared... never lied, I wouldn't... I wouldn't, I couldn't... if I hated you... even if I – I was too – too scared, even if I j-just didn't like... couldn't lie like that to you... couldn't say I was your friend... if I didn't care..."

"Even with Celestia demanding you reform me?" He pitched his voice high. "Dear Princess Celestia, I'm sorry I'm disobeying your orders and I'm going to get imprisoned or banished or imprisoned in the place I'm banished to, but I just don't like the way Discord smells so I can't reform him, signed Fluttershy."

Despite everything Fluttershy had to fight down the impulse to laugh. Even now, even in the depth of such psychological torment he thought he'd never had a friend at all, Discord was still funny. But she was fairly sure he'd take it wrong if she laughed right now. "You f-forgot? If – if you'd been – if you'd been so mean you wouldn't – you wouldn't fix it... we wouldn't be friends. That... that was honest. I wanted t-to be y-your friend but, but not, not if you were j-just mean and cru-cruel."

"You wanted to control me."

"No! Wanted... wanted you... not hurt me. Or – or anypony... any crea-creature. But I..." The sobs came harder. "But I... wasn't good enough... if – if I'd – if I'd been a bet-ter friend... you wouldn't b-be here..." Fluttershy closed her eyes tightly, squeezing tears out. "Should've... let you... the light rain... should've made y-you feel welcome... ac-accepted... should've... tr-ried harder to... to get the others... accept you like I d-did... I'm so sorry, Discord, I'm s-sorr-ry..."

His talon released her neck, but slid up the side of her face and buried itself in her mane before she could pull away. He wasn't choking her anymore, but he was pulling her mane, and it hurt, and she couldn't get away. She wanted to hug him, to bury her face in his coat and sob; she wanted to pull free of him and retreat to a safe distance where he couldn't hurt her. She couldn't do either one. "You expect me to believe this."
"It's t-true." Fluttershy tried to focus her tear-blurred vision on Discord's eyes. "I came t-to rescue you, why would I—"

"Because I'm useful to Celestia," he sneered. "Or because when Twilight read my letter she realized she didn't want me being turned into a weapon of mass destruction. Not because of me."

"Yes... yes to save you. I don't c-care... about... any of that... just you. None of us... cared... about... that. Wanted to s-save you because... right thing to do... no one deserves... but that's them, I, I wanted t-to sa-save you. My f-fr-friend."

"Why?" He pulled her closer. "If you expect me to believe this, tell me why. Why would you care about me? Why would you want me for a friend? She said—" His own voice caught. "She said you hated bullies. And I am. I'm cruel, I'm a jerk, I torment ponies for fun. Why wouldn't you hate me?"

Even through the fear and grief and pity for him, Fluttershy felt exasperation. "S-she lied, Discord."

She couldn't be crying like this. She needed to be able to talk to him. The Stare had never worked on him before and almost certainly wouldn't work now, not if he believed she was a liar who was manipulating him, but if she was to have any hope of saving him, and herself, she needed to be able to talk him down. With the hiccups and the stuttering caused by sobs, it was taking her too long to say the things that needed to be said. She pressed her hooves against her muzzle, breathing only the small amount of air that was cupped within, trying to get her sobs under control.

"She says you lied. Who am I supposed to believe, the pony who was ordered by Princess Celestia to reform me, who had every reason to lie to control me and no reason whatsoever to actually be my friend, versus the one who freely admits she both hates me and loves me?"

Fluttershy took a deep, shuddering breath before she spoke, the sobs mostly gone now. "Which one of us would tell a lie just to hurt you?"

His eyes narrowed. "Both of you would tell a lie to control me."

"I wouldn't—" She took another deep breath. "I never hated bullies. I don't know if she's lying on purpose or if being corrupted makes her remember wrong, or if she was never truly me in the first place, but I never did. I – I always fantasized about how I would do something for them so wonderful and kind, they'd – they'd be so grateful to me they'd be my friend, and stop being bullies, to me or anypony. It only worked t-twice, though. Rainbow was the first."


"No, she – foals are cruel. I couldn't fly; she thought flying was everything. And – and she didn't know how badly she was hurting my feelings. She didn't even think about it when she made fun of me. But then – her grandfather died. I found her crying, and she didn't want anypony to see her cry because she thought, she thought we'd think less of her. I held her, and I told her everypony gets sad, and if she doesn't cry because her grandpa died, that – that wouldn't make her cool, it would make her a pony who doesn't feel anything, even for the ones she loves. I said, if her grandfather deserved her love, then he deserved her tears, and it was okay. I didn't know she was Loyalty, then, but what I told her – I made her feel like it was safe to cry because it was disloyal not to, if that was how she really felt inside. After that, she protected me and always tried to stop other ponies from bullying me."
"And that was your greatest ambition? To convert your tormentors into your protectors?"

"Maybe not protectors. Just friends would have been okay. But yes. It never worked with any of the other pegasus or any pony in Ponyville. I tried, but most bullies just thought, me being kind to them meant they could, could walk all over me. The only other time it worked..." His talon had eased only slightly on her mane, but she'd run sharp, hair-pulling detangling brushes through that mane a minimum of a hundred strokes a day, most of her life. She could handle a little scalp pain. So she pulled against his talon just enough that she could reach him, that she could go to him and hold him, pressing her head against his fur. "...was with you."

He didn't let go, but his talon relaxed its grip on her mane further, allowing her to continue to hold him without her mane being pulled. She looked up at him. He wasn't saying anything, but his face was a study in sarcastic skepticism, an implied "Oh, do go on" in his expression... except that his eyes were suspiciously bright.

"All I wanted to do was be your friend and try to help you. I knew you were suffering – even if there wasn't anything else, I remembered what it had felt like when I'd almost turned to stone. I used to have nightmares because we did that to you. Why couldn't the Elements have helped you the way they helped Princess Luna? Of course I was glad we did it immediately after we did it, because so many other ponies had been suffering because of you, but then it sank in later and it started to hurt. You said it was lonely being in stone. I knew Twilight and Elizabeak didn't feel anything after they turned to stone all the way, but what if it was different for you? What if you could feel? How could it be lonely in stone if you weren't conscious to feel it?"

"I was," he muttered.

"I know. So when Princess Celestia asked me to reform you... I wanted to help you. I wanted to make it so you didn't have to be turned to stone. I wanted to be your friend because it seemed like you needed one, and I thought, if I'm kind to him and I befriend him, then he'll be my friend. Just like I always wanted to do with the bullies. But they didn't need me. You needed me. I felt so sad for you when you said you'd never had a friend before."

"So I was your charity case?" His voice was rough. On the edge of breaking, she thought. "Befriend the poor friendless draconequus because he hasn't got friends? What do they call that, a pity friendship?"

"No, that's just why I was looking for things that were good about you. Because normally when somepony is upsetting somepony else, the upset pony doesn't see anything good or nice about the other one. They don't want to. They just want to see the negative, because that's what being angry makes us do. But I wanted to try to befriend you, so even though you were trying to make me angry, I knew I had to be patient with you and look for the things in you that were good. And I found them."

"L-like what?"

She nuzzled her face against his fur again before looking up at him. "Even then, even when you were trying to irritate me and my friends, or set us against each other. You were funny. You were energetic. You were imaginative. You did what I asked about putting the house down and having a dinner party, even though I knew you didn't really want to and even though I knew you were just planning some other way to be disruptive."

"And th-that's all? Doesn't ssound like m-much..."

"That's all I needed to know it was worth making friends with you. When you first meet a friend,
you don't know all of their good qualities. A lot of the things I love about you, you only ever showed to me, and only after we became friends."

He let go of her mane entirely, his talon resting on her withers instead, and sagged to the floor, his lion forelimb giving out. Discord pulled at her, not violently or maliciously as he had before, but pulling down against the back of her neck to bring her closer to his head, and she obliged, kneeling down and laying her head on his neck.

The sobs he'd been holding back finally escaped him. He curled around her and cried, holding her tightly and no longer hurting her, and she held him as well. "It's going to be all right," she murmured to him. "We're going to get you out of here, and get you home, where you'll be safe."

"This isn't real, is it," he sobbed. "I'm dreaming. Luna's taken mercy on—no, no, Luna's dead here, that's right. I killed her. Other me." She stroked his mane, trying to calm him. "But it can't be real. I'm hallucinating, or dreaming."

"You stop that right now," Fluttershy said, sitting up and putting just a little sternness into her voice. "This is absolutely real."

"But it can't be."

"Why not?"

"Because you're here."

"Discord, do you know how long ago you sent the letter asking for help?"

"I... I don't know... a week? Two?"

"We got it the day before yesterday. Spike received it very, very late at night. We spent the day making preparations to come here, and then we came here, as fast as we possibly could."

"Oh... oh, right. It was just... just two or three days ago? I don't know anymore, I don't know how much time is passing, they never even let me sleep, I don't know..."

"Well then." She touched his cheek gently, looking directly into his eyes. "Isn't it reasonable to imagine that we could be here to help you, a day or two after you sent your letter? Isn't that why you sent it, so that we would come to save you?"

"But why would you?" he cried, anguished. "Why would you want to save me?"

"I don't know about the others, but I came because you're my friend," Fluttershy said firmly. "I would never let a friend of mine be held prisoner and be hurt, if there's anything at all I could do to save them."

For some reason this set him off even harder. He clung to her and cried brokenly, as she stroked his mane and his forehead and the back of his neck.

"Will you give me another chance, Discord? I know—" Her own voice caught. "—If I'd been a better friend, if I'd been kinder to you, you wouldn't have had to come here, and if you had, she wouldn't have been able to lie to you and convince you that I was lying. I know — I know nothing can prove to you that I'm telling the truth, except time. Will you give me the chance to show you that I'm not lying?" Her own eyes were filling with tears again.

"I... I guess I have to believe you," he finally whispered. "Because when it wasn't true... I wanted to
die, so... so if there's any chance I might live through this... I have to believe you..." More sobs broke loose. "But if... if it's not true... if you're lying... don't tell me, don't ever tell me, please, if there's any part of you that's truly kind, even if you hate me, please don't tell me..."

"I'm not lying. But I know it'll take time to prove it to you. You don't have to believe me now, just... just give me the chance to prove myself."

"I—I do have to," he said. "Don't I?"

"You don't have to, sweetie," she said. "You don't—"

Discord stiffened. "Don't call me that."

A sudden rush of shame and a feeling of failure enveloped her. Of course the other one would call him pet names, too. "I'm – I'm sorry. I didn't know."

He shook his head. "How would you?"

"What I was saying... you don't have to do anything, not for my sake. But I hope you want to. I – I'm not going to let her just... If she's hurt you so much you can't believe anypony would care, or that I would care – she doesn't deserve to win, Discord. She doesn't deserve to defeat you. Or me."

"I'm not going to survive it, if you're lying," he said, breathing raggedly, apparently trying to get his tears under control. "I have to believe it. Even though I probably won't survive anyway."

"No, you're going to survive. You're going to be fine. We're going to get you out of here and get you home." Fluttershy moved up along his neck to inspect his collar. The chain that held it seemed to be permanently welded. She tried following the chain back to the post it connected to. There didn't appear to be any clasp, any openable links. But there had to be, if he hadn't been kept here the entire time. "Do you know how this unlatches?"

"It's locked with a spell," Discord said, his voice hoarse but no longer crying. "Try your hoofprint, she might have set it to open for Fluttercruel."

Fluttershy pressed her hoof against it in different positions. Nothing happened. "All right. Well, even if we can't unlatch the clasp, it's the collar itself that's blocking your magic, right? And that's made of leather. I should just be able to cut through that and—"

"No," Discord said, sitting up. "Firstly, I'm not allowed to let you do that, so unless the command wears off, or somepony countermands it, you'll have to be able to knock me out or something to take it off. Secondly, if you do it now it'll kill me."

Fluttershy's eyes went wide. "Kill you?"

"Twilight – their Twilight, the one from over here – booby-trapped it. She made me drink a glass full of tiny crystals that feed on chaos magic. They're suppressed by the collar, but if it stops working, then the crystals will feed on my magic, and grow. And I wouldn't be able to get rid of them with my magic, because using chaos magic on them to try to teleport them or disarm them or something would just feed them."

"Oh, no!" Fluttershy couldn't stop herself from pressing hooves to her cheeks in horror. "Does – does that mean you'll never be able to use your powers again? Does that collar have to stay on forever?"

He smiled weakly, trying to be reassuring. "Don't be silly, Fluttershy. Just get me a handful of
laxatives and I'm sure it'll be taken care of in a day or so."

"...Why laxatives?"

"They're in my stomach. Well, my intestines now, I threw up before and they didn't come up so I guess they're only coming out the long way. But they will come out, eventually. We just – we can't go home until they do. The collar won't work at home, it's powered by these Elements and their power won't cross dimensional boundaries, and they're too corrupted for our Tree of Harmony to honor any reciprocal agreements."

"Oh." Fluttershy swallowed. This was bad, but not quite as bad as she'd feared. "Oh, I – I was hoping we'd be able to get your help, but... I guess Rainbow and I will have to make do."

"My help? With what?"

"Well, um... we think Twilight and the others were captured? There was a big fight between everypony and their counterparts, except for me – Spike was pretending to be me, but Fluttercruel wasn't even there, Rainbow says – and after Rainbow got away from her counterpart, she found some of the others' saddlebags in the forest, and no sign of them. So we were hoping we could get you free and then just have you teleport them to us, but I guess that won't work..."

"You were right. Spike said they were captured, but I didn't believe him because I didn't believe any of you would really rescue me." His head drooped. "You could try giving me an order, but I don't think it will work..."

"Oh – oh, right, you can use your magic if they order you to. Would that work for us, though?"

"I doubt it, but it's possible. Twilight tested with a Changeling impersonating Applejack, one time. It worked when I didn't know it was a Changeling, and stopped working as soon as I was told. I know you're Fluttershy, but I also know you're not that Fluttershy."

"Um, I guess we can try," Fluttershy said. "Discord, I order you to teleport Twilight, Applejack, Rarity, Pinkie and Spike, just the ones from our universe, here."

Nothing happened. Discord shook his head. "No. It won't work."

"What if... what if, uh, you pretended I was her?"

"You dyed your mane," Discord said dryly. "I saw Fluttercruel just a little while ago. I know her mane's not purple."

"Oh... well, maybe then it would work with Rainbow! She didn't dye anything. I'm going to have to go get her anyway; I'm not strong enough to operate the kind of bolt cutters we'd need to cut through these chains."

"Nopony told me not to damage the chain," Discord said. "I'm allowed to help you, as long as they don't think to order me not to."

"Okay. So then, I just have to regroup with Rainbow Dash, and we have to find some bolt cutters, and then lure this Twilight out again..."

"You have to go to Canterlot," Discord said, head drooping even farther. He laid down, pillowing his head on his forelimbs. "Spike said that this Twilight recommended that Celestia execute them. Don't muck around with trying to find bolt cutters. Rescue your friends. And then run."
"Run?"

"Don't come back." He closed his eyes. "Leave me. Head for the portal and get out of here."

"No! Why would I do that?"

He looked up at her. "Twilight's going to kill me tonight, in a ritual that she thinks will give eternal life to ponykind. But what it's actually going to do is kill this entire planet. I don't think you have time to save me and save your friends, and once it happens, if any of you are here, you'll die. You've got to rescue them and get out."

Fluttershy stared. "If it will kill everything on this planet... why don't you tell her so?"

"Then she'll figure out some way to modify it so it does something different... and I know her, or rather, I know what she's been turned into. What she wants isn't possible, but if she tries really hard, she can get something close to it... but the thing she would actually accomplish would be to stop time. Which is honestly worse. Being devoured by creatures from another dimension is a much kinder fate than being frozen in a single moment of time for eternity."

Fluttershy wasn't sure she agreed; they both sounded bad, but being frozen in time would mean your consciousness would be frozen as well, so you wouldn't suffer. But that wasn't really the point. "Why? Why is she doing this now? Is it because we came over?" Oh dear Celestia, if this Twilight was going to murder him because of what Fluttershy and her friends had done...

Discord laid his head directly on the floor, arms encircling his muzzle rather than supporting it. "I, uh... I told her about it."

"You did?" It was like a blow from a sledgehammer of horror. "Why?"

"I wanted to die," he said softly, almost whispering. "Because I thought you weren't my friend and I didn't have any friends and nopony was going to rescue me and even if I got away I'd never have any friends..."

She took a deep breath. "Discord. When you said it will kill everything on this planet. Did you know that when you told Twilight about the ritual?"

He looked up at her. "Of course I did. If I'd just wanted to kill myself I could have ripped my own throat open. I wanted her and her friends to go down with me."

"And did you ever think about how many billions of innocent creatures there are on this planet? Creatures that have had nothing to do with what was happening to you? That did you no harm at all? It was okay to kill all of them, kill everything, on an entire planet, just because you wanted revenge?"

Discord's eyes went wide, and he shrank back. "Um... no, actually, I... I never thought about that..."

"Of course you didn't," Fluttershy said, trying to hold back the fury in her voice. She couldn't unleash it on him, not right now. It wasn't entirely his fault. Discord always had had a hard time thinking of others, even when he was healthy and safe, but in his right mind he would never have come up with a plan that caused genocide. Not even genocide, planetcide. Was that even a word? She thought about how he'd spoken of the spiders that went extinct because Saddle Arabian pegasi took all the water they'd otherwise have gotten; how he'd been careful to create pollinators that could survive the downpour of his light rain, more butterbats than butterflies really, and how he'd sent them to the Everfree after they were done their task so they'd survive better than if he'd left them in the desert. Discord cared about the survival of living things. Except, apparently, when he
was starved, beaten and emotionally shattered. She had to show compassion, she had to remember that this wasn't who he truly was.

But enough of her anger must have shown in her face to make him shrink back from her in fear. "I'm sorry... I, I didn't think, I really didn't... I was just..." His face started to crumple again, as if he was about to start crying once more. "I don't deserve to be rescued. Save yourself and your friends. Just leave me."

"Discord, what you foolishly set in motion has made it impossible for me to do that," she said. "Even if I had any desire at all to leave you here, which I would never want to do... now I have to save you, and I have to do it before tonight, because if the other Twilight kills you in this ritual then millions and billions of innocent animals will die! Not to mention all the ponies who don't deserve this!" She was breathing hard. "I'm going to have to go for the bolt cutters first, because even if my friends are in danger, preventing the death of this entire planet is more important than their lives, or my own, so I have to get you away from this... this evil Twilight."

"Or you could cut my collar loose," he said despondently. "I could save your friends then, and then I'd die before Twilight can perform the ritual, so everyone would be safe."

"Except you. I'm not going to do that, Discord. I came here to save you."

"You shouldn't save me. I was—" There was guilt in his voice. She hardly ever heard that from him. "I didn't even care, Fluttershy. I didn't even think about it. And I hurt you!"

"It's all right, Discord."

"I tried to kill you!"

"Shh." She reached for him and stroked his mane again. "You're... not in good shape. You're not thinking clearly. It's all right, no one could expect you to be fine, right now. But I'm going to have to go now, all right? I have to go meet up with Rainbow and find some way to free you."

"Don't go," he said plaintively. "Please don't go."

"I'm sorry, sw—I'm sorry, but I have to. This Twilight and her friends will be coming back eventu—Eep!" She shrieked and flapped her wings backward as the door opened.

Spike stood in the doorway. "They're coming back," he said, with very little emotion in his voice. "You'd better go."

"I – oh! Are you—"

"You believe me now, Discord?" Spike asked.

Discord closed his eyes. "I'm sorry."

"Princess Celestia says she won't execute them. So that's good."

"You have a letter from her?" Discord asked. When Spike nodded, Discord said, "Let me see it."

"Why?"

"You wanted my help because you didn't want them to die. If they're really here... they're my friends. Let me see the letter."

"Go fast." Spike handed it to Discord, who squinted at it.
"Fluttershy, could you read this to me?"

"Do I have time?"

"Two minutes, maybe," Spike said.

Fluttershy read. "Dear Spike, There's no need to worry. I have no intention of executing a fellow alicorn simply because Twilight fears her. I have a use for Twilight's counterpart, and so long as she agrees to help me, I see no reason why any of her companions should be harmed. Please don't tell Twilight this; I don't want her to be frightened. I know she's afraid of her alicorn counterpart, but this alternate Twilight won't be a threat to us. Trust me. Sincerely, Princess Celestia."

She looked down at Discord, who was still sprawled on the floor. "Well, that sounds..." She trailed off as she noticed the expression on his face.

"Save Twilight," Discord said. "Our Twilight. She's in danger."

"But this says she isn't going to be executed..."

"No, it says she's not going to be executed just because unicorn Twilight's afraid of her. And it says that Celestia has a use for her, and that she's going to use the safety of the others to make her comply, and that just... I know Celestia. I know more about Celestia's dark side than any of you possibly could. Rescue Twilight."

"I have to save you first," Fluttershy objected. "Because if I rescue our Twilight and our friends first, and run out of time to save you, the entire planet will die."

Spike's eyes widened at first, and then narrowed, focusing on Discord. "I knew it! I knew you were lying to me somehow!"

"I can't lie, Spike," Discord said tiredly. "I'm just... very good at telling the truth in misleading ways."

"What did you tell him?" Fluttershy said, trying not to get angry. But Discord had lied, or done the closest he could to lying, to the face of someone who would be killed by his actions, someone who hadn't done him personally any harm? This Spike might have killed the other Discord, but the fact that he'd come to warn her the others were coming back said that he wasn't on their side, either.

"You don't have time," Discord said. "Fluttershy, they're coming back. Go."

"I – all right. Spike, can I leave here safely?"

"Don't go out the door. Fly up the stairs and out the window."

"All right." She turned to Discord. "Tell Spike what's going on. He deserves that much, for the warning he gave me."

She left the room then, flying, went up the stairs, and got to the second floor just as she heard the front door opening. Once she was outside and hidden within the tree branches again, she took a deep breath. That had been much too close. She shouldn't have delayed as long as she did.

Now to find Rainbow Dash. The news that Discord couldn't help rescue the others was disappointing, and the pressure of the time limit on them now was making her chest hurt with anxiety. Get bolt cutters, get Discord loose so the alternate Twilight couldn't sacrifice him, then rescue their Twilight and the others. And hope desperately that Twilight could manage to stay alive.
that long. But if she tried to do it the other way around, and failed to rescue Discord before
nightfall, an entire planet would die. Including herself and all her friends if they couldn't get to the
portal in time. So she had to trust that Twilight could take care of herself, at least for a little while.

Opposition, 11 AM – Twilight (Harmony)

Bring Luna back to life?

Twilight's hackles raised. Her Princess Celestia had taught her that necromancy was never, ever,
ever a good idea. "Princess, with all due respect... my Celestia taught me that there's no way to cast
a successful resurrection. You can't even open a path for a dead spirit to travel back to the land of
the living without killing somepony, and the odds of you getting the particular spirit you're trying
to get are next to null."

"These things are true," Celestia said, nodding. "But the rules are somewhat different for alicorns.
We are each bound to some sort of principle, some concept, that governs us in life – for Luna and I,
it was the Moon and the Sun; for Cadance it was Love. Do you know your own?"

It was Friendship, or else Magic, because friendship was magic, or a cornerstone of harmonic
magic at least. But Twilight didn't want to give away information if she didn't have to, not to this
Celestia. "We're not really sure."

"Because alicorns are bound to something outside themselves, it is possible to call them back from
the lands beyond," Celestia said. "But you are correct, there must be a sacrifice. More importantly,
there must be a body for them to return to, and Luna's... is far too long dead. If I could have
performed the spell right after her death, it would have been another matter, but I didn't even know
that there was one. I had to do the research myself; I couldn't take my Twilight's attention from her
own research, firstly in finding a way to stop Discord and then her work on finding a way to
reverse the corruption and free her friends."

Twilight was not liking the sound of this. "You said you needed another alicorn to cast this."

"I did." Celestia nodded. She leaned forward. "You see, Twilight... she must have an alicorn body
to return to. The spell can only summon her back on the basis of her alicorn nature if she's coming
back to an alicorn body. I would have willingly given her my own – but if she doesn't have the
strength to manage both the sun and the moon immediately upon her return, our world would be
doomed if I sacrifice myself. I need another alicorn who is willing to give up her body for Luna's
sake."

"Willing?" Twilight asked, trembling slightly, wondering if this Celestia had gone completely
insane to imagine that anypony would ever be willing. She cared about her own world's Luna... but
not enough to die to bring her back to life, unless by doing so she could prevent her own world's
Celestia from falling into the amoral apathy that this one seemed to have gone into. She certainly
didn't care enough about this world's Luna to give up her life to save her.

"Yes. The sacrifice has to be willing; the ritual can't work, otherwise." Her voice was just like
Twilight's Celestia, calm and smooth, even though what she was talking about was an abomination.
"Twilight, I am prepared to release your friends, and give orders to have Discord released and to
have them escorted to him, to take him back to your world... if I can have Luna back by my side.
But the only way that that can happen is if you give yourself up to the ritual, and allow me to bring
Luna back, in your body."

Twilight had to know precisely how awful this was, how fallen this Celestia was. "Would – would
that also be the sacrifice that opens the gate, or would you have to kill somepony else, too?"

"No, your sacrifice would be more than sufficient. I would separate your life from your body, painlessly, doing your body no damage, but that separation would be enough to open the gate."

Okay. So she was only talking about sacrificing one pony. It was still awful but it wasn't as awful as it could have been. Not that Twilight was going to go along with it. "Princess... I have a world to go back to. I have another version of you who's expecting me to return. I have a version of Luna who's expecting me to return. I'm sorry, but I simply can't do this. I can't give up my life to bring your Luna back."

"I thought you might say that," Celestia said. Still much too calm. "Were you aware that your counterpart recommended to me that you and all of your friends be executed?"

"What?"

"She believes you're too dangerous. I concur. As long as we cannot risk giving Discord up, I know that you and your friends will stop at nothing to free him, because you see yourselves as rescuing a friend in desperate straits, regardless of how inaccurate it is to describe Discord as a friend to anypony. I cannot release any of you if I still need Discord. In fact, I would conclude that my Twilight has made an accurate assessment. If we cannot release Discord... then I need to execute you and your friends. You are simply too dangerous, and there's too much at stake."

Twilight felt ice cold. "How – how long do I have? To decide?"

"There's no time like the present," Celestia said. "Your friends may be plotting some sort of elaborate escape attempt, even now. I know how resourceful they are; they've already halfway convinced Shining Armor that he should let them go. The longer I wait before making a decision, the greater the odds that they will escape, or hurt somepony while trying, or both. So I would say that I can't realistically give you more than five minutes or so to make your decision."

What if she's lying? What if I say yes, and she kills my friends anyway?

No. She wouldn't want to have to explain that to Luna. If she brings Luna back, it'll be an uncorrupted Luna, free of Nightmare Moon, and without having lived through all the horrible things all of these ponies have lived through, Luna would never be okay with executing innocent prisoners. Especially not alternate versions of her friends.

She doesn't need Discord to manage the sun and moon if she has Luna. Our mission here was to save Discord; there's no way we would willingly leave him here, any of us, so she's right. We're dangerous to her unless she can afford to let go of Discord, which she thinks she can't do unless she has Luna, so...

I don't see a way out of this. I don't.

"I'll do it," she said, quietly, so her voice wouldn't break. "You promise me that you'll let all of my friends go, including Discord, and that they can all go home again, unhurt, and I – I'll let you sacrifice me to bring back Luna."

"I thought that was what you would say," Celestia said, in what Twilight was now perceiving as a parody of her mentor's pleased tone. "We won't be able to do it until moonrise, of course; we need the moon to call to Luna. I'll release them all and free Discord as soon as the ritual has been completed and Luna is restored."

"Can't you let them go before the ritual starts? So I can see that they're safe?" Twilight's voice
shook.

"Twilight, they will never go home if they believe you're in danger," Celestia said. "I would prefer to let them go home right now, but they simply won't. And if we don't tell them, then they'll demand that you go with them, and they won't leave without you. So we have to let them go after the ritual. But we'll tell them of your decision in plenty of time for you to say your goodbyes."

_Please_, Twilight thought, anguished, trying to press against the bonds that held her magic in check, to no effect. _Please, escape and get Discord free. She can't hold you hostage against me if she doesn't have you. Please, I don't want to die. Save yourselves, so I can save myself._

Though she wasn't sure how she was going to go about doing that. If her friends escaped, she would still be bound by horn and wing and hooves. Would simply withdrawing her consent be enough to prevent the ritual from happening, or would Celestia just kill her outright then for saying no?

She didn't know. But one way or another, she had to buy time. And if her friends didn't manage to escape by nightfall... then she had to buy their lives, with her own.

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**Opposition, 12 PM – Rainbow Dash (Harmony)**

Rainbow was really, really good at wrecking things when she put her mind to it. She didn't really want to know what that said about her as a pony.

It had taken evil Twilight and her evil pals _forever_ to stop the blaze at Carousel Boutique, during which time, most of the place had burned to the ground. Including everything in Sweetie Belle's room, which Rainbow felt a little bit sorry about. Rarity wouldn't stop shrieking and wailing, but that, Rainbow didn't feel bad about at all.

Then, they'd noticed the column of smoke in the distance that was Fluttershy's house. So then they'd gone to deal with that. Rainbow Dash followed, stealthily. Obviously they were going to untie evil Fluttershy once they found her, but the longer Rainbow could buy for her own Fluttershy to talk with Discord, the better. Seriously, though, what was so hard about "we've come to rescue you, now let me get this collar off you and have you rescue our other friends?" It wasn't like Discord was going to need to be talked into being rescued, was he? One time Daring Do had tried to rescue a pony who didn't want to be rescued because she thought that Dr. Caballeron was her boyfriend, despite the fact that the stallion had kidnapped her in order to use her talent for finding gold to find the Lost City of El Trotta, but first of all, that was because that character was an idiot, Stockholm Syndrome or no, and secondly, Rainbow totally couldn't see Discord falling in love with anypony but especially not a captor that was torturing him.

Well. He wouldn't be Discord if he wasn't causing trouble, even on a mission to rescue him. So Rainbow Dash privately decided that as soon as she had a good shot, she was taking evil Twilight out. The unicorn was fast, faster than their Twi was, but she had to have limits, and being distracted by a fire at her friend's house after she'd just fought another fire at another friend's house, and also rescuing her friend who was tied up... sounded like that might fall in those limits. A super-fast kick to the back of the head and it would be night-night for evil Twilight. Without her in the picture, Rainbow was a lot more confident of her ability to, if not take out all the others – Applejack in particular would be a rough customer, and this version of Pinkie was kind of scary – at least keep them distracted a good long while.

She knew where they were going, and in the air she was faster than any of them, but not particularly stealthy. Hey, a mare had to know where her strengths and weaknesses were, and
stealth did not lend itself to spectacular awesomeness. So she split off from the group as soon as she was confident that that was the way they were headed, and went directly to Fluttershy's house.

The blaze had consumed the tree, and was spreading over Fluttershy's yard. The evil one was tied to a tree on the other side of Fluttershy's little creek, a good distance from the fire, so she was probably safe, mostly. Rainbow didn't really want her to burn to death even if she was totally evil; killing in combat might be a necessary, if horrible, thing to do, but letting your helpless enemy burn to death was pretty much always beyond the pale. Still, that fire was spreading pretty well – Fluttershy's yard was only bounded by the creek on one side, and there was nothing to stop the fire from spreading in the other directions.

Fluttershy wouldn't want to have started a forest fire, would she? Rainbow was still planning on attacking evil Twilight when she showed up, but that just meant that evil Twilight and her evil pals wouldn't be able to fight the fire, because they'd be too busy getting knocked out by Rainbow's hooves. It would probably be a good idea to try to stop the fire herself, or at least slow it down. There were a few clouds nearby that would be perfect for the job.

She flew a short distance, grabbed a cloud, towed it to the backside of Fluttershy's house, and kicked it into a downpour. That was good. If she could box the fire in with small rainstorms, it wouldn't spread, but it would still be burning so it would still occupy evil Twilight's attention.

Rainbow headed toward the second cloud she intended to grab – and felt something slam into her, hard and fast enough that it drove her down to the ground.

"Nice trick," her counterpart said. "Faked me out real good, didn't you."

"Not... hard..." Rainbow wheezed. "'Cause... you're really... dumb." She used all the strength in her hooves to rear, knocking the other one off of her, and then took off. The other one followed.

"Surprised to see me?" the other shouted. "Maybe you shouldn't've sent Scootaloo to my house!"

Oh horsefeathers. It had never occurred to her that the other one would just go home after their fight. "Napping on a cloud's too good for you now?"

"Not secure enough. I'd say you'll find out the hard way one of these days why not to sleep on a cloud in the open, but since I'm gonna kick the living daylights out of you, I don't think you're gonna have that problem!"

And there were the others. Rainbow decided to try for knocking down two pins with one throw. She pivoted in air and divebombed for unicorn Twilight, who was galloping toward the fire and paying absolutely no attention above her. Rainbow's counterpart shouted something, but she was too high and the crackling of the fire would drown it out for anypony who wasn't a pegasus – pegasi had much better ability to detect words against a background of natural noise, like the wind or the rain or the crackle of a fire.

And then, as if in slow motion, she saw Pinkie Pie pivoting and leaping, with a frying pan in hoof, but she was completely committed to the charge and couldn't change her trajectory in time. The frying pan impacted her head at full speed. Rainbow had crashed head-first into so many things, being hit over the head with a frying pan in flight didn't knock her unconscious, but it stunned her, causing her to plow into the ground uncontrollably rather than actually slam into Twilight like she was trying to do.

Before she could get her bearings and get up, she was yanked up into a telekinetic grasp. "Rainbow, this is the alternate you claimed to have defeated?"
"Yeah, turns out she's a tricky one. She faked being unconscious."

"This is why you check."

"Oh yeah, like I want to fly down into the heart of a raging Everfree storm just to see if some lame ripoff of me went splat. It's not like I was expecting her to try some kind of trick. I'm usually more straightforward than that, myself."

"Yeah, but because you didn't check she was gonna kapow Twilight! If I hadn't had my Pinkie Sense to warn me who knows what would have happened!"

"Well, she won't be faking unconsciousness this time," evil Twilight said, and her horn glowed.

Rainbow had extensive experience with struggling to stay awake when she was much, much too tired to want to. She held out long enough to see evil Fluttershy, presumably untied by the others, standing over her. "She didn't disguise herself," the evil Fluttershy was saying. "It ought to be easy to trick the other me into thinking you're this one, and then we'll have them both."

_No. No, Fluttershy! I have to stay awake... warn her... have to..._

But the sleep spell was too strong. It won, and bore Rainbow down into the darkness.

The last thing she heard was the evil Pinkie saying, "C'mon, just _one_ little taste?"
Escape Trajectories

Opposition, 12 PM – Spike (Harmony)

Spike felt very, very exposed out in the hallway. It was beginning to sink in that just pretending that he was riding on Pinkie because he was sick was not likely to fly with any of the guards; why wouldn't he be riding on the guardspony, aka Applejack? He whispered his concern to the others when they weren't in earshot of anypony. "Why would they let two prisoners out so one could ride on the other if they have a guard?"

"Because you're so very dangerous, Spike," Rarity said. "Remember, you nearly de-horned their version of Twilight. Of course nopony would risk having you ride on a guardspony; why, you might attack them! It's much safer to have you riding on a friend of yours. After all, your other friends are still prisoners, right?" She said this archly, winking at him. "So of course you and Pinkie won't risk starting anything, not with Applejack and Rarity still imprisoned."

"It's still pretty darn thin though," Applejack said. "Sooner we get out of here, the safer I'll feel."

"What if I knew a shortcut that I could get Spike and me out of the palace?" Pinkie asked.

"If you know a shortcut, how's about you share it with Rarity and me too then?"

"It's... not that kind of a shortcut." Pinkie looked down, pawing the ground with her hoof a bit, an embarrassed almost-smile on her face. "Um... I can take Spike because he can ride on me, but... it's kind of a one-pony sort of thing. I can't really open the doors up for anypony else. I tried once with my sister Maud but she couldn't get through, and Maud is super strong."

"So in other words this is a Pinkie thing," Applejack said.

"Yuppers. Totally a Pinkie thing. Which is why I can do it because I'm Pinkie!"

"Well, I for one would feel great relief at knowing you and Spike are both safely out of the palace entirely. We need to return to Ponyville as soon as possible, but we also need to maintain strength in numbers. Applejack, do you think they should go and head directly to Ponyville to help Fluttershy with Discord, or go and then wait for us at the train station so we all go to Ponyville together?"

"We all go together," Applejack said. "If they tip the other Twilight off, she'll be prepared for us, and if there's only two of them it ain't like they can fight Opposition Twilight. We need to take her on together if we're gonna have any hope, and if we're going to try to rescue Discord, that's probably what we're gonna need to do."

"Okie dokie lokie! Spike and I will head to the train station and then we'll wait for you!"

"What kind of short cut are we talking about?" Spike asked. "Because I know the palace real well, and there are some secret passages I could find..."

"Nope! Not that kind! You two go on ahead, and Spike, close your eyes tight!"

"Why?"

"Because it doesn't work if anypony can see me do it, silly billy!"
Applejack and Rarity traded looks. "All right, we'll move along," Rarity said. "And we won't look."

The two of them trotted forward. "Now, this is very important, Spike," Pinkie said. "You don't just have to close your eyes a little bit. Close your eyes and keep them closed the whole time until I tell you it's safe. No matter what you hear or feel."

"But what if something happened like, I don't know, what if you were screaming and something bad had happened to you?"

"Then still don't open your eyes. This is super duper important! I can't take you on the shortcut unless you promise to not open your eyes for any reason until I say so!"

"Um... okay, cross my heart, hope to fly, stick a cupcake in my eye, I promise I won't open my eyes unless you say I can. But what would happen if I did?"

"Baaaad things," Pinkie said ominously, craning her head backward to loom in Spike's vision.

"Like, what kind of bad things?"

"Never mind that! Just close your eyes now so we can go!"

Spike shut his eyes tightly. He heard Pinkie's hooves clopping on the hard marble floor of the palace, felt her warm body and velvety fur pressed up against him and the movement of her body as she trotted, smelled the candy-scented shampoo in her mane. All around him he could feel and hear the acoustics of the palace and its marble hallways. And then it all changed.

He could still feel Pinkie's body, but the clopping of her hooves was gone, and he felt as if he was in a place that was simultaneously far more open – no sense of walls around him anywhere – and more constricted, the air stale and flat and barely breathable, oppressive and close. There was almost no sound at all; he could hear Pinkie's breathing and his own, and could hear her heartbeat when his ears were pressed to her back, but there were no sounds anywhere else.

"Do we need to be quiet, Pinkie?" he whispered.

"I think so," she whispered back. "This... isn't like it is back home. I'm kinda nervouscared. But keep your eyes closed."

"I know, I know," he assured her.

The he started hearing voices.

Fragmentary echoes, sussurating whispers... nothing he could decipher. At first. And then far away laughter... horrible broken laughter, like something Vinyl Scratch might play at a Nightmare Night party. It scratched and skipped and repeated itself and was too fast and then too slow, like a record on a turntable being manipulated by a DJ who was deliberately trying to freak you out.

"Pinkie? Do you hear laughter?" he whispered in her ear.

"Shh! I'm trying to concentrate! Things look all different here, and I don't wanna get us lost!"

The thought of being lost in this wherever it was, without even being able to open his eyes, terrified Spike. "Okay," he whispered, and then said nothing more. The laughter was getting more and more hysterical and high-pitched. And louder. Like it was getting closer. Spike shivered.
Then the laughing voice spoke.

"You Not You... oThER. NOT thE OnE."

The voice sounded like two or three voices together, except that one was too slow and one was too fast and all of them were hoarse and gravelly like whoever was speaking had a bad sore throat. It sounded vaguely male, but any resemblance to anything that sounded like a pony ended there. "SO rEsCuE StiLL hERo? hoW'S tHAT WoRkiNG Out?" More hysterical laughter. "kILLer mE, YOu, buT yOu OtHeR sAvIOr mE OtHeR. hILARIoUS!"

"Go away," Spike whispered in a very, very tiny voice, almost inaudibly. "I don't know what you want from me. Go away, please."

The laughter intensified, and now when the voice spoke, one of the undervoices that went along with it laughed continuously in the background. "DiDn'T yOU. sAiD gO AwaY PleAsE bUT nO HEaRINg sToNe fOr yOU! nOt. hIM NOt yOU BuT yOU. PArADoX!" Mad giggling from all the voices.

"Please... I don't even understand you... please leave me alone..."

"FrEE mE!" the voice howled suddenly. "FRee ThEm frEE Me FRee Me FRee Me FRee THEm frEE mE." The mad, broken laughter was turning into sobs as the voice repeated itself over and over again.

"Free who?" Spike whispered. "And who are you? And why should I free you?"

"BrOkE. yOU. nOT yOU bUT hIM bUT useless. SO yOU. FrEE tHEm, rEvERSe ENd, uNPIn Me. LET me GO. Let iT eND." The voice was openly sobbing now. "bROkEn. pIEcEs. HuRTs iT HuRTs WAnT STop. eNd IT. ENd. uNPIn. FRoMe."

"How would I do that? And why? I don't even know who you are."

"wHaT YOu wAnT WhAt i WAnT. tHE sIX. FrEE tHEm. uNPIn mE."

"You mean the Opposition Elements? And what do you mean unpin you?"

"FREE ME! FREE THEM FREE ME FREE THEM FREE ME—" The voice was screaming again. Now there were many voices, a fast one, a slow one, a stuttering one, that was laughing, one that was sobbing... one, or more than one, that sounded as if vocal chords were being scraped with stone.

Through the din he could hear Pinkie whisper, "Spike, who are you talking to?" It was as if her speech was on a completely separate channel; despite the horrible crazed voice shrieking in his ear, he could hear Pinkie perfectly.

"Um... you don't hear the creepy voice?"

"SPIKE!" It was still a whisper, but undeniably managed to carry the tone of a shout. "You never talk to the creepy voices! Just ignore it!"

"Oh, so you can hear it?"

"No, but if you can hear it, don't listen to it!"

The mad giggling returned. "NOt hER! oNLy KILLer! EVeN OtHeR cAn'T HEaR, CaN'T cOMe
His head was hurting from trying to understand. It was hard even to make out the words with all the
distortion, and the fact that they were complete nonsense didn't help. "I don't want to talk to you."

"I didn't want you to hear what he said, but things tough all around, kid! Only can hear so it's you. Sorry not sorry!"

"Spike, you're still talking to the creepy voice... I said to stop that!"

"He can't do anything to me if he's just a voice," Spike said. "And I don't think he wants to. There's something he wants me to do."

"Then don't do it!"

"But what if it's part of the thing we came here to do? He keeps saying to 'free the six'; doesn't that sound like reharmonizing the other us? Well, other yous?"

"In the forest. She dropped it. Find it. Free the other. Reverse untie unwind. Unpin me. Free the other you came for. Let me end end end please end please end please..."

The voice faded. "Please tell me we're almost out of here," Spike whispered to Pinkie.

"Are you still hearing that creepy voice?"

"No, it stopped." In the forest. She dropped it. Twilight had been carrying the cutting from the Tree of Harmony around her neck before they had fought their counterparts. When they were all on the train and the ponies were unconscious and Spike hadn't dared to make a move, surrounded by far too many changelings to try anything... it hadn't been around her neck anymore. And he hadn't even thought about it until now.

Maybe Pinkie was wrong. Maybe the creepy voice was trying to help, or at the very least, wanted them to succeed for his own reasons.

Spike didn't want to dwell on it too closely. There was a thought that had occurred to him, a thought that got more plausible the more he thought about it, and he really, really didn't want to think about it, or believe it. Because if it was true, it was terrifying. And horrible. But mostly terrifying.

"We're almost out," Pinkie said. "But keep your eyes closed!"

Every bounce Pinkie made jostled him hard, but he didn't complain. She'd sped up since he'd admitted to the creepy voice. The sooner they got out of there, the better.

And then he felt warmth, and a breeze. "Ok, Spike, you can open your eyes now," Pinkie said, her body relaxing under his.

Spike opened his eyes. They were outside the palace, in the gardens. "Oh sweet sunshine, how I missed you!" Spike said fervently. He knelt down and kissed the blades of grass directly underneath him. "And grass! And trees! And hedges! I love you all!"

"Aren't they great?" Pinkie said cheerfully, but her mane looked just a little bit flat and stringy. "That... wasn't anything like it is back home. It's like... what if you were in a really old dusty museum that used to be taken care of really nice, only now there's just one night watch pony and he
makes sure nopony breaks in but that's all, but there's still beautiful stuff all over the walls even if it's all dusty, and then you went to another museum, except all the exhibits were kicked over and smashed and there were giant spiders and creepy crawlies everywhere and holes in the walls and all the nice things to look at are gone and there's spiderwebs everywhere and they keep getting in your mane? Like that."

"I'll take your word for it, since I didn't see it, and all."

"Well! I know what I don't want to be doing again if there's any alternative! Let's go to the train station and wait for Applejack and Rarity!"

"You said it," Spike agreed.

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**Opposition, 12 PM – Fluttershy (Harmony)**

She had to find Rainbow Dash. The memory of Discord's anguish burned within her, and the overwhelming horror of the fate they'd all suffer if they couldn't save him from what the other Twilight planned. Fluttershy was just barely holding the panic at bay by her desperate need to protect her friends, all of her friends. Focus on them, not on the fear.

The problem was that Rainbow wasn't around anywhere. Fluttershy had expected Rainbow Dash to remain in the area so that they could go together to wherever they were going; the original plan had been that she'd come out with Discord, of course, but now that the plans had changed and she needed a bolt cutter, it was even more critical that Rainbow be here. But she wasn't. Where would she have gone?

To take a nap? No, not with the stakes this high. To go home? But it wasn't her home, and the odds that she'd encounter the other Rainbow would be greatly increased that way. To Canterlot to rescue their friends because she got impatient? That was unfortunately somewhat plausible, but surely she wouldn't leave Fluttershy high and dry like that; she had to have recognized that Fluttershy was in potential danger of being captured by the alternates. So if she left Fluttershy... that meant she knew the alternates weren't a threat at that time. Logically, she must have followed them, wherever they went. Otherwise she'd have known Fluttershy could be in danger from them, and wouldn't have left.

Well, where would the alternates have gone? Fluttershy could see that they'd put out Carousel Boutique, but alternate Rarity wasn't standing in the ruins crying and being dramatic, so they must have gone to do something that they considered equally important. Maybe her friends had escaped from Canterlot, and the alternates had had to go deal with that? No, then they wouldn't be on their way back. She could see them now on the road, minus their Rainbow Dash, which based on what Discord had said about her in the letter seemed fairly normal, and their Applejack. Well, Applejack had a farm to deal with.

But so wait. If they were coming back, and her Rainbow Dash wasn't with them... then where was she? Back at whatever place they had gone to? Hiding? There was no way to know.

"Psst! Fluttershy!"

Fluttershy jerked, startled. She rolled her head around, looking every which way in sudden terror, before calming down and realizing that that had been Rainbow Dash. "Rainbow, where are you?" she whisper-shouted, knowing the other pegasus would be able to hear her but the ground-bounds wouldn't. Pegasi were a lot better at detecting pony voices and pulling them out of the surroundings to understand them, even though they didn't objectively have literally better hearing than the other
"Look up!"

Of course, look up. Rainbow Dash's head was sticking out from the side of a cloud that was much higher than Fluttershy felt safe flying to. "Oh, dear. Could you maybe come down a bit? That's so high up."

"Don't be a wimp," Rainbow said. "You don't want everypony on the ground to see us, do you?"

"Nooow," she admitted, drawing the word out to express her reluctance to say it.

"Well then come on up! We've got plans to make, right, pal?"

"O-Okay." Carefully, looking all around to make sure no grounded ponies were looking up, she fluttered up to the height of Rainbow's cloud... almost as high as the clouds had been the day of that race, when she'd fallen, and found her cutie mark.

Delicately she landed on the cloud next to Rainbow. "Do you know where we could find a set of bolt cutters?"

"Bolt cutters?"

"Discord is chained up by a leather collar and a metal chain, but Twilight's done something to him where if the collar is removed, it'll kill him. So we can't just take off the collar. We have to cut the chain."

"Sure, I get it. So what's the plan after that?"

Fluttershy stared at her. "We talked about this, Rainbow. We have to free our friends. Unfortunately the collar keeps Discord from using his magic, so we can't just ask him to do it; we'll have to go to Canterlot and do it ourselves."

"All I needed to know," Rainbow said, as if assuring her. And then without warning she leapt at Fluttershy. Fluttershy screamed, her own hairtrigger surprise threshold causing her to flinch backward and almost fall off the cloud, but Rainbow was faster. Rainbow was always faster.

"Rainbow?" Fluttershy shrieked.

The stronger pegasus was on top of her, pinning her down to the cloud, her own inborn pegasus magic treating the cloud as a solid object she could be pinned against. "That's my name, don't wear it out," Rainbow said. "Hey, listen, you did a nice job with that bitch, don't get me wrong, but technically I'm still under Twilight's orders. Also, you want to let Discord loose, and he's way too much fun to kick in the head for me to let you do that. Especially after what he did to Cloudsdale, or the way he tricked Scoots. Not that I give much of a shit about the kid anymore, but that was still a rotten thing to do."

Oh dear Celestia. It was the wrong Rainbow. The real one must have been taken captive. Fluttershy struggled. "He's not your Discord! He never did any of those things!" she cried. There was no point in trying to pretend that she was Fluttercruel; her purple mane had already given her away. Oh, why hadn't Rainbow agreed to dye her mane, or wear some sort of clothing that would distinguish her, or something?

"Eh, six of one, half a dozen of the other," Opposition Rainbow said. "Thing about stone is you can't punch it in the face, and it was Spike of all ponies who managed to get some sweet revenge."
But hay, now we've got a new one and he's basically the same guy, so it's all good."

"You don't understand!" Fluttershy squirmed as Opposition Rainbow tied her up with rope she'd apparently been keeping up here for that purpose. "If we can't free Discord, the entire world will be destroyed!"

"Nice one. Try on it someone who didn't grow up with you," Opposition Rainbow chuckled. "I know what a big liar you are, Flutters."

"I am not! Maybe yours is, but I'm not!"

"Come off it. How many colts did you tell that your parents weren't letting you have visitors, when you were living on the ground in your own house and your parents were up in Cloudsdale?"

"That – that's different. I – this isn't the kind of thing I'd lie about!"

"To rescue someone you think poonies are being meeean to?" Opposition Rainbow sing-songed. "Oh yeah you would."

"But it's true! There's a ritual Twilight, your Twilight, wants to perform, and if she does it to Discord, the world will be destroyed!"

Other Rainbow snorted. "Like Twilight would make a mistake like that!"

"But it – it's because Discord lied to her. He told her—"

"Yeah, no, Discord can't lie. Pull the other one."

"Okay, he misled her. He said things that were true but he didn't say all the true things—"

"Butters, if you don't shut up I'm either gonna have to tie your muzzle shut or knock you upside the head." Other Rainbow finished with her knots. Fluttershy's legs were pressed against her barrel, forelegs back and back legs forward, and the rope was wound around her barrel, legs and wings in multiple loops. She tried to wiggle free, but it was much too tight for her to have any real hope. "Now just sit tight, I gotta go talk to Twilight and the others and if you try to roll off the cloud or something... nopony's gonna catch you and your wings are all tied up."

Despairingly, Fluttershy flattened her ears in submission, but as soon as Other Rainbow had flown away, forced herself to lift them again. She needed to try to hear what was going on down on the ground. Clouds might be solid to a pegasus, but they didn't do much to muffle sound, and up in the sky, there was normally nothing but distant bird calls and maybe other pegasi having a conversation a distance away. Maybe she could make out what they were saying.

"Got her," she heard Other Rainbow say. "Just like we figured. She flew right into my trap. Didn't guess for a second I wasn't her pal until I jumped her."

"I wonder why the other Rainbow chose not to distinguish herself from you in any way," Other Twilight said.

"Probably because when you have awesome hair like this, you don't dye it."

"I'm forced to agree," Other Rarity said. "You could do more to care for it, but..." Fluttershy heard a sob escape from her. "Oh, Celestia, look at my boutique! I'm ruined!"

"Yeah, we heard you the first time you said that," Other Rainbow said.
"What about me?" Other Fluttershy said. "That bitch burned the whole thing to the ground! At least it looks like some of your stuff didn't burn!"

"Only Sweetie Belle's things. Everything of mine is ruined! Oh, how will I face her when she comes home from school and tell her we face utter destitution?"

"Rarity. Be quiet. I want the four of you to rejoin Applejack with the other Rainbow Dash and the new prisoner, and take them to Canterlot. Check for me as to whether Princess Celestia followed my recommendations regarding the alicorn or not."

"Whatcha gonna be doing, Twilight?" Other Pinkie asked.

"Pinkie, we discussed this earlier. I have a ritual to prepare for."

"Oh, hay, just so you know, Yellow and Wussy up there knows about your ritual, so she must've talked to Discord. She was telling me all kinds of crazy stuff about it."

Fluttershy wanted desperately to shout down to them, to tell them what Discord had told her... but she knew her voice wouldn't carry. From this height it was unlikely anypony but a pegasus could hear her even if she shouted, and she knew how much difficulty she had with getting her voice to carry at the best of times.

"What sort of crazy stuff?" Pinkie asked.

"Oh, you know, the kind of crap you say when you want someone to not do something because it's meeeean, so you'll say just about anything. No big."

"So Discord knows they've come for him," Other Twilight said. "Unfortunate, but it can't be helped. I imagine he will prove more resistant and troublesome now that he's aware, but it shouldn't make a difference."

"Why don't you just let me kill her in front of him?" Other Fluttershy said, making Fluttershy shudder. "I'm sure that'll quiet down any resistance from him."

Other Twilight sighed heavily. "No. Restrain your bloodthirst for once. I don't mind if it becomes necessary to kill any of them, and I believe we will all be safer if Princess Celestia executes them, but I won't tolerate cold-blooded murder outside the rule of law. We are better than our enemies because we don't kill wantonly."

"Oh, all right." The other Fluttershy sounded frustrated. "Tell me about this ritual, then. Is there anything I need to do to prepare him? Or medical supplies for after you're done?"

Other Pinkie gigglesnorted. "What's so funny?" Other Fluttershy demanded.

"Oh, nothing, nothing, just thinking of a joke!" Other Pinkie chortled, sounding as if she was trying to get her laughter under control.

"Nothing you need concern yourself with now. We'll talk later, when the time is closer. I'll be timing it so the ritual will complete at sunset. Liminal times of day are the most appropriate for these sorts of rites."

She doesn't know, Fluttershy realized. The other me doesn't know Twilight is going to kill him. Pinkie does, and she's keeping it a secret. Maybe Rarity too, she'd normally be asking questions too.
"In the meantime, Rainbow, Fluttershy has always been a skilled manipulator. I believe you should gag her so she can't convince you or anypony else to release her."

"I'm right here," other Fluttershy said in a tone of controlled anger.

"I am aware. I didn't say anything about you that you didn't know about yourself, or that you didn't know I knew. And I called you a clever manipulator, which is a compliment, so I fail to see what you're getting emotional about."

"Look, I've got stuff to do today, and I need to make time for some serious napping at some point," Other Rainbow said, "so let's get this show on the road, okay? I'll get the Other Flutter over to Applejack's and then what, I guess we're all going to the train station?"

"That seems to be a ridiculous amount of trotting around for no good reason," Other Rarity said. "Why don't you take the other Fluttershy directly to the train station – I will escort you, of course – and Pinkie Pie can go let Applejack know to bring your alternate. Fluttershy, you should probably go with Pinkie."

"Why? I'd rather stay here and take care of Discord. Why do all of us have to go?"

Other Twilight sighed in exasperation. "Because Rainbow Dash is clever and dangerous in any universe, and I don't consider it safe to leave Applejack and Pinkie alone to watch her. You grew up with her; you know her better than they do."

"I grew up with our Rainbow Dash."

"And prior to the corruption of our Elements, they were the same person, so stop arguing with me and go."

The other Rainbow Dash appeared, soaring up above Fluttershy's cloud and descending. "So! Twilight says I need to gag you, so are you going to cooperate or do I have to knock you out?"

"You don't have to do this," Fluttershy said softly, looking up at her. "I can promise to be quiet. You know how quiet I can be."

"Yeah, but I know you're not gonna keep a promise like that if you're trying to protect a frieeeend, so no." She landed on top of Fluttershy, legs out far enough not to actually hit her body, but it was frightening enough that Fluttershy ducked her head and made a squeaking sound out of fear.

"Please, Rainbow. You don't have to do this." She looked up at Rainbow, trying to muster up the strength to Stare her down, but her confidence was badly broken by Fluttercruel breaking free from it. "All we want is to help you. We can re-harmonize you and purge the corruption from your world's Discord. Make you and your friends like they were before."

"Ha, and you think I want that?" Rainbow laughed sharply. "I was the world's biggest sucker, believing all that friendship crap. Sure, I'm loyal to Equestria, and since Princess Celestia's in charge I guess I'm loyal to her, and I'll take Twilight's orders, but I know better than to think there's any good that comes from being loyal to ponies." She shoved Fluttershy's head down against the cloud and wrapped rope around her muzzle. Rather than resisting her, Fluttershy relaxed her jaw, letting her mouth hang just slightly open, while keeping her lips shut. "Naah, the whole corrupted Elements thing sure seriously screwed up our Fluttershy, and Pinkie's just psycho now, and it turned Rarity and Applejack into total bitches, but for me, it was an eye opener. Friendship isn't even real. It's just a trick to make you give and give and get nothing back."

Fluttershy closed her eyes tightly. It hurt, to hear sentiments like that from Rainbow Dash, her
oldest friend, who'd lived her entire life by her code of loyalty to her friends. This version of Rainbow must be suffering so much inside. It didn't change how dangerous she was, but it made Fluttershy all the more determined to escape, free Discord, free her friends, and re-harmonize this world.

Somehow.

Her Rainbow would figure out a way to escape. She was sure of it. Fluttershy herself wasn't strong enough to break free, and with her mouth tied shut one of the few weapons she did have was taken from her. But she might be able to work the rope loose. And her Rainbow was strong, and tough, and had outwitted this Rainbow once already. And maybe her other friends were going to escape from the palace.

She had to cling to those hopes, because if she thought about the possibility that they'd lose, and this entire world would be destroyed for Discord's mistake, it would break her.

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**Opposition, 12 PM – Spike (Opposition)**

"So. What did Fluttershy mean when she said the whole planet would die?" Spike asked, making his voice as hard as he possibly could to conceal the trembling he felt.

Discord sighed. "That ritual that I told Twilight about. It won't work the way I told her it will. Well, it will, but only for a very short time. She's opening a gate to let in the Cold Ones – the Shadows, the Nightmares, whatever you'd like to call them. Their corruption created Nightmare Moon, but even though she was their dupe, Moonie still knew better than to open that gate. They'll send through a great deal of magic to establish their beachhead, yes, enough for Twilight to do anything she wants – except close the gate. And then they'll come through and devour every source of energy there is. All magic. All life. Even the sun."

Spike wasn't sure which emotion was predominant in his heart, terror or rage. "And you thought this was a good idea? You were willing to see everyone die? Everything? The whole planet?"

Heedless of the potential danger, given that Discord was still much bigger than he was, he marched forward and glared into Discord's eyes, crowding into the draconequus' personal space. "I helped you! I gave you water, twice, and I cleaned you up, and I sent that letter for you, which Twilight made me pay for, you'd better believe... and you were still willing to kill me? And everyone? What did we all do to you? Why do you hate everyone just because six ponies are hurting you?"

Discord's eyes closed, and he looked down. "I don't hate you," he mumbled.

"But you wanted to see us all die!"

"I'm sure you've never in your life been in a place where you feel so much despair you think the entire world would be better off if it didn't exist," Discord said. "I didn't – I wasn't trying to hurt you. I was trying to hurt them, but I didn't think about you. Or anyone besides them. At all."

"You told me you were innocent. That you never really hurt anypony the way the Discord who we had did. Was that a lie, too?" Spike was shouting now. "How could you just not care?"

"Hate me if you want, you will anyway," Discord said warily. "I don't know why I did it. I don't know why I didn't think about anyone other than my enemies. Fluttershy said I'm not thinking straight and that's probably true, I can't even remember the last time I actually managed to get a whole night's worth of sleep. But if you don't help me escape, then Twilight's going to perform that
ritual, and she's going to kill everyone."

Breathing hard, Spike said, "I don't have to help you. I could just tell Twilight what you told me."

"Then she'll do it anyway, but she'll compensate. If she uses the power to pull the entropy out of
the world within the few minutes she has – without entropy there is no time. Everything becomes
frozen in a moment of perfection, forever. It's the same fate, really. Without time, there's no
thought and no life. But you won't be able to convince her of that because she isn't herself anymore.
That thing she wears around her neck is riding her like she's a beast of burden, a meat machine for
it to use. It won't let her understand the need for the existence of entropy."

"Isn't entropy the same thing as chaos? Why does time need chaos to work?"

"It's backward, really. Entropy requires time, but it's such a fundamental principle of the universe
that there is no way to eliminate it without eliminating time. She can freeze time more easily than
she can actually stop entropy. She's forced me to absorb enough raw magic that what's left of
Matrisse – her master, the Spirit of Order, my oldest enemy – has been able to reduce the rate of
entropy, but even Matrisse can't get rid of it, even with all the magic in the universe... except by
stopping time. The original Matrisse would have known better, but Matrisse went insane and tried
to destroy magic, so I destroyed it instead, and now it's in pieces all over the world. One of which
Twilight is wearing, so I know your Discord did the same thing."

"What if I got it off of her?"

"That's not enough. You could eat it and it wouldn't be enough at this point. She's bonded to it as
 tightly as she was ever bonded to her Element."

"What if I killed you?"

Discord rolled onto his back and stretched his neck out. "Go on, then. One quick swipe of your
claws and it solves everything. Though personally? I'd prefer it if you went for the collar first, and
gave me a few moments to teleport my friends to safety before finishing me. Not that I can allow
you to do that, because I've been ordered not to let anything damage my collar, but if you moved
fast I might not be able to stop you."

"If you were free of your collar you could just escape."

"Yes, just in time to die horribly. Twilight poisoned me. There's crystals in my guts now that
absorb chaos magic and grow. The moment my powers aren't suppressed anymore, they'll start
growing. She says it'll probably be half an hour before they've pierced me in so many places I
bleed to death, but I'd really rather a quick slash across my throat. A lot faster and less painful. So
do what you want about the collar, but if you want to kill me to stop Twilight from destroying the
world with me, do it. Otherwise, no matter how much you hate me for putting this in motion, you
have to help me escape or the world dies."

For several long seconds Spike stood over Discord, paralyzed by indecision. He'd killed Discord
once. And it had been the worst mistake of his life. And he'd thought it was the lesser of two evils,
at the time. Killing this Discord might be the lesser of two evils too. If Spike freed him, what was
to stop him from coming back for revenge, once he'd gotten the Elements' spells broken by his
friends' Elements? But if Spike killed him, then he couldn't help his friends escape, and could the
alternate Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash really single-hoofedly rescue the others, particularly since
Princess Celestia seemed to have some sinister purpose for the alternate Twilight? And if Spike did
nothing, the world would be destroyed, unless the alternate Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy managed
to free Discord themselves out from under Twilight's nose, and if Spike was going to allow that,
then why not free Discord to begin with?

But he felt betrayed by Discord. He'd felt sympathy for the draconequus, he'd helped him in what very little ways he could, and he'd paid dearly for that. Twilight had taken all his gems, leaving him with nothing but a few special items that he didn't consider edible, and which Twilight would have confiscated a long time ago if she'd had any idea what they were. Twilight had yelled at him—well, not yell so much coldly and icily lecture—for hours, and had treated him like garbage ever since. And he'd endured all that to help someone who had just thoughtlessly decided that whether he, Spike, lived or died was too unimportant to worry about.

He dropped his paw, slowly. Discord had betrayed him, yes. But Spike wasn't a murderer. Not really. Yes, he'd committed a murder, in cold blood, and he'd known it was murder when he decided to do it, but it had looked and felt like destroying an inanimate object. This Discord was far too animate an object. Spike couldn't bring himself to slash someone's throat open. And he couldn't convince himself it was the right thing to do, either. He'd only made matters worse by killing a Discord with a far longer track record of harm than coming up with one omnicidal idea while powerless, tortured and suicidal. Of course it only took one omnicidal idea, but... he was so angry, so mind-numbingly angry, but at the same time he recognized that probably Discord really wasn't thinking clearly, or as clearly as he ever did.

"I don't know how I can help you," he said finally. "Twilight is right outside. And if I break your collar it'll kill you, but if I don't, how could I even help?"

"Well, I'm fairly sure this chain isn't as tough as a diamond," Discord said, tugging on it. "And I was never ordered to prevent anyone from destroying the chain that holds me. Just bite through it."

"But then where would you go? Twilight's right outside! How would you get away?"

"You could just let me worry about that," Discord suggested.

"No, I can't, because if I bite through the chain she'll know it was me! She'll see the bite marks! And if you don't get away then the whole point to sticking my neck out for you will be gone, and she won't let me do anything to help you and she won't believe me if I tell her anything!"

"Are you solving anything by standing around being indecisive?"

"I just need to know you have a plan for getting out of here!"

"Who are you talking to? I never have a plan. I was going to run upstairs and go out the window and hide. Maybe after breaking my own eardrums so I can't hear if she yells orders to me when she doesn't know where I am."

"That'll never work! She'll find you in minutes with magic! She can scry for you, you know. She had a spell to find the original Discord; she knew where he was, all the time, and that was before she got the Diadem." Spike's ears pricked up. "Oh ponyfeathers, she's back."

"Great," Discord mumbled. "Thanks. Whole lot of help you were."

Twilight entered the room. "Spike. We have preparations to make. Go get me the runic ink."

Spike hesitated. If he got Twilight the ink, he was colluding in the potential destruction of the world. If he didn't, she'd just go get it herself, but she'd know he was being uncooperative, and then she might demand to know why and then it might come out that the rite would destroy the world and then if Discord was correct, Twilight would just destroy the world a different way, and she wouldn't believe him if he told her about it because she didn't really believe anything she hadn't
come up with herself, anymore.

"Hey, does the condemned prisoner get a last meal?" Discord asked. "I'm hungry and Fluttershy isn't here."

Twilight turned and looked at him. "No. You will be fasting until the ritual."

"Oh, come on! Now you're not even trying to make up an excuse. I told you about that ritual; I know very well it's not affected one way or the other by whether I eat or not."

"True, but the sanitary disposal of your body might be facilitated by making you fast."

"No, it won't. I ate last night. There is literally no possible purpose served by making me fast except to make this whole thing more unpleasant for me than it needs to be, as if exsanguinating me and letting entities from beyond feed on my life force isn't bad enough."

"This was your idea, Discord."

"Yes, I said I wanted to die. Not to be starved before it happens."

Twilight seemed to have completely forgotten the request for runic ink. Spike stayed, watching the interchange between her and Discord, rather than going.

"I wonder, is death still your preference?" she asked, arching an eyebrow.

"Is there some reason you think it would have changed since this morning?"

"Don't be disingenuous. I know you met with the Fluttershy of your world. I know you're aware that the alternate Bearers did in fact cross over to try to rescue you. Since you expressed that your wish for death was largely due to your belief that you have no friends, I'm expecting you to have changed your mind and be trying to sabotage this ritual. Are you?"

Discord laughed. "You seriously think they came to rescue me because they're my friends?" he chortled bitterly. "I told you... Celestia wanted me released because she had a use for my magic. Do you really think that if Celestia has a use for me, the other you would hesitate to come get me so they can put me back to work? Or that her friends wouldn't follow her?"

"I asked you if you had changed your mind."

He looked directly at her. "If my so-called 'friends' were lying to me to keep me under control and obedient to Celestia, then it doesn't matter to me if they came to rescue me or not. They wouldn't have done it for my sake if they're not really my friends."

"And are they not really your friends?"

"I tried to choke Fluttershy to death when she came in here," he said casually. "Does that sound friendly to you?"

Spike stared. He'd been told time and time again that Discord couldn't lie... but here he was, lying. How was he doing that?

"She seemed to think you still believe her to be a friend."

He sighed. "Fluttershy has every reason to keep up the pretense, if she's trying to control me by tricking me into thinking she's my friend. They were told to rescue me by Celestia, I'm sure. But if they bring me back to my world and I know they're not my friends, there's not a whole lot they can"
do to control me. So of course she's going to keep it up; she wants me to believe it, and so if it's an act that's going to work it has to be completely consistent, and she can't drop it, ever. I've been Fluttercruel's prisoner for two months." He shuddered. "I know how manipulative she is. The Fluttershy of my world is much, much kinder... but her talent for manipulation is probably either the same or even greater. And if I can't believe I really have any friends, because I know how good Fluttershy would be at lying to me... then I don't want to live. So no. I'd only change my mind if she convinced me she really did care about me, and good luck with that after two months of Fluttercruel's tender care."

He wasn't lying, Spike realized, as he listened to Discord's words much more carefully than usual. Nearly everything he said had a qualifier on it, or implied something rather than stating it. "If she's trying to control me." "If I know they're not my friends." "If I can't believe I really have any friends." He'd even managed to slip in the actual state of affairs, and made it sound like he was saying the exact opposite. "I'd only change my mind if she convinced me... and good luck with that..." Discord had never said Fluttershy hadn't convinced him. He'd implied it, but he'd never said it.

The only thing he'd outright stated, aside from that Celestia had a use for him, was that he'd attacked Fluttershy. As far as Spike knew he literally couldn't tell a bald-faced lie, so he probably had done that. Given that he'd nearly attacked Spike himself earlier that day, and his utter refusal to believe that Spike telling him his friends had come for him wasn't a cruel trick on Spike's part... yeah, that had probably happened. But clearly she'd talked him down, because she'd been fine when she left.

Twilight studied him. "I see. So you still sincerely wish to die?"

Discord looked down. "I... care enough about her, still, that I told her to get her friends and clear out of this universe. Don't rescue me. Just leave me here. But if I don't have any friends, then all I want is to die."

Abruptly Spike remembered what supposedly happened when Discord said things that were misleading. "I... I'm going to go get a mop bucket. For cleanup later."

"Fine, Spike. Go do that. In fact, I want this entire area scrubbed and disinfected before we begin." Her horn lit up, and two of the chains from the posts lifted up and attached themselves to Discord's pegasus wing and goat leg. "That should secure you tightly enough if they should somehow manage to come back."

"You do realize you've just made it impossible for me to avoid making an unsanitary mess at some point, unless you're planning on killing me in the next few hours, because now I can't possibly reach that washroom over there."

Twilight rolled her eyes. "Bring an extra bucket for effluvia, Spike. Preferably not the one you took already, unless you've cleaned it."

Well, that was convenient. Spike started toward the door, and then stopped. Discord was asking, "Just out of curiosity, how long before the main event, anyway?"

"Such rites are always best conducted at moonrise, which is several hours away."

"Then go away. All the prep work you need to do is looking up runes and you know that. I want to sleep."

Twilight took a deep breath. "You do not give me orders, Discord. It is quite the other way
around."

"You're already going to kill me. Don't you have any compassion at all? I barely got any sleep last night and it's not as if I'm looking forward to the moment you start playing with knives. Let me sleep the rest of my life away, if I'm going to die tonight."

Twilight sighed. "You're correct. I need to go look up runes. And find the runic ink. Spike is useless; he never found it." She turned on him. "You haven't even gone for those buckets yet."

"Sorry!" Spike quickly ducked out of the room, gathered an empty bucket and a bucket full of cold water, and pulled them in. He was going to have to use hot water and soap for the disinfecting procedure, but right now, it wasn't as if he intended to use either of them to mop.

When he returned, moments later, Twilight was grilling Discord on some of the runes involved. Discord shrugged. "I'm not an expert on runes and I've told you everything I know about how to set up the ritual. You're the genius. Look up whatever you need to."

"I intend to. But first." She walked over to him. Despite the sarcastic and defiant tone he'd been taking with her, Discord shrank down to the floor as she approached, plastering himself against it as if he didn't even realize he was doing it, or how frightened it revealed him to be. "Here are your orders. You may not let anyone destroy your collar. You must use lethal force to stop them if needed. You may not let anyone destroy the chains that hold you, nor may you unlatch them, nor allow anyone else to unlatch them. You must use lethal force to stop them if needed. You are forbidden to go out that door for the rest of your life." She pointed at the exit to her workroom. "You are forbidden to allow anyone else to drag you or carry you through the door. You must use lethal force to stop them if needed."

Spike swallowed. He'd missed his chance to help. He couldn't bite through the chains if Discord was under a compulsion to kill him if he tried, and if Discord wasn't allowed to go out the door anyway... there were no windows in the workroom, which had been their book-sorting room once upon a time. There was no way out except through the door.

Oh dear Celestia. Was he going to have to do something to Twilight to stop the ritual? Oh, please, no. Don't make me have to hurt Twilight to save the world. Please, please don't do that.

Besides, he wasn't quite sure she trusted him enough that he'd be able to.

Twilight wasn't done. "You are not permitted to engage in sexual activity with any pony, or any other being. You are authorized to refuse any such orders given to you by anyone who isn't me. As the Element of Magic, I outrank all of the other Bearers of Harmony and my orders supersede theirs. Any order which would result in sexual contact between yourself and any other being is an order you are free to refuse, as my orders countermand theirs. You are free to tell them so."

Spike winced inwardly. Discord had told him about that, a couple of nights ago when he had tricked Spike into sending that fateful letter, but Spike hadn't wanted to believe it, or understand Discord's hints. Not Fluttershy. She couldn't. She wouldn't. But tears formed in Discord's eyes.

"Really?" he said hoarsely. "Twilight... that's the only kindness you've ever granted me ever since you imprisoned me. I still hate you, but... thank you. Thank you. I – you didn't have to do that for me."

"I did not do it for you. I find the thought of you engaging in sexual activity with anyone repulsive, but I deferred to Fluttershy for her strategy to bring you to obedience. That strategy is no longer needed."
"I don't care who you did it for or why you did it. You just protected me from being raped again for the rest of my life. Whatever your reasons, thank you." He was choked up, sounding as if his voice was on the verge of breaking.

"You... had a point, this morning. Rape is disgusting." Twilight turned away from him. "Even you didn't deserve such treatment. My experiments on you had a purpose; I took no pleasure from causing you pain. I only wanted to use your power to make life better for all ponykind. Fluttershy has claimed that... that using you in such a way would break down your defenses and make you obedient sooner, and evidence suggests she may have been right, but... still. She did it because she enjoyed it, not solely for higher purpose. It nauseates me. I suppose... I'm not completely without compassion, even for you."

"Th-thank—" A sob escaped him. He stopped talking, and curled into a ball on the floor, pressing his paws to his muzzle and breathing deeply, the picture of a draconequus trying to get his runaway emotions under control.

"Spike. Disinfect the room. I am going to go make sure I have a perfect understanding of these runes and how to emplace them. And to find the ink that you couldn't be bothered with."

"Sorry, Twilight." He wasn't sorry, but her accusation still stung, even though it was absolutely true; he really had deliberately dragged his feet on it.

As soon as Twilight had left, Discord gasped, one paw still on his muzzle. "Spike – Spike, bucket, please—"

"You don't have to tell me twice," Spike said, dragging over the empty bucket. He turned away, trying not to listen to the sound of Discord dry-retching, and got the water bucket, dragging that over too. "I figured you would need that. And a drink."

"I'm sorry – I'm so sorry – I wasn't thinking, and I screwed everything up, and – and you should run. They got Fluttershy. They wouldn't have any way of knowing she visited me unless they got her. Go rescue them – I think they're all in Canterlot – and they can bring you to the portal. You can get out of here before tonight." He was still crying as he spoke, alternating with more empty vomiting. Nothing was coming up but mucus and blood, and not very much of either, but he couldn't seem to stop.

"Discord, take a drink. Maybe it'll help."

The first drink didn't; he spewed it right back up again immediately. The second drink, he managed to hold down for maybe 30 seconds. The third, maybe a bit longer than that. But the fourth drink stayed down, and after that, he drank the entire contents of the bucket. Spike carried the vomit bucket to the washroom, dumped the tiny amount of actual fluid in it into the toilet, rinsed it out, and then filled it with hot water and bleach.

"Drink all the water. That one's gonna have to be your bathroom bucket if you need one."

"I did, actually. Drink it all. Already." Discord had slumped on the floor. "You have no idea. I was coming so close to losing it; I had to pretend to start crying so I'd have an excuse, because if I didn't do something to physically hold it in, there was no way I could have, and she knows what it means when I throw up. She'd question me to find out where I was, uh, being creative and leaving things out."

"You were pretending to cry?"
"I, um, actually it wasn't pretending, but I did deliberately let myself do it." He shuddered. "You have no idea what it feels like to be grateful to someone who has brutally tortured you twice a week and is planning on slaughtering you like a cow in the Griffon Empire, because they've shown you the smallest, tiniest, literally least bit of mercy possible. I wanted to grovel at her hooves in thankfulness because she won't let Fluttercruel touch me again. How pathetic is that?"

Spike chose his words carefully. "I, um... I'm really sorry Fluttershy has been... well, you know. I just thought she was, was training you. Like she trains other animals. I knew the experiments hurt you—" he could hardly have avoided knowing that; during the experiments, there'd never been anywhere in the library he could go to escape the sound of Discord's screams—"but I didn't know about the whips. And, and other things."

"It's all right, Spike," Discord said tiredly. "You killed me. And you trusted your friends and family. I knew all along you weren't going to stick your neck out for me."

"But I should have – I mean you kept being all bloody and I never thought about where was that coming from. I mean, besides the holes Twilight's wires kept poking in you."

Discord shuddered again. "Don't remind me. But it's over. No more of that, either. Either someone sets me free or I'll die tonight. Either way. No more experiments and no more of Fluttercruel's twisted ideas about 'love.'" He smiled weakly. "I don't want to bring down the rest of the world with me. If it gets to that point – if they can't rescue me – please, kill me. She didn't order me not to let you."

"I don't have that hammer anymore. Princess Celestia confiscated it."

"Oh my, no, I wouldn't want that anyway. That hammer shatters souls, that's why it can kill a god. I am fairly sure that right now I'm mortal enough that a claw slash to my throat would end it pretty quickly."

Spike's eyes widened. "Shatters souls?"

"You didn't know? Oh dear. The other Discord doesn't exist anymore. Which is just as well for you, because he might just have decided to come back from the dead if you'd killed him in some more mundane way. But you broke his soul into pieces."

"I – I didn't even know for sure that souls existed! I mean, they're theoretical, and supposedly you can do necromancy to bring back the dead and that wouldn't work if there were no souls, except it usually results in zomponies or some kind of abomination and not the pony at all so maybe there aren't any souls, but—"

"No, souls exist. And are much harder to destroy than bodies. But it can be done. You did it."

"I – I didn't mean to – I just – I didn't even want him dead, I just – it was the only way to make sure he couldn't come back—"

"And you succeeded. Bravo for you." Discord looked as if he was, actually, on the verge of falling asleep. "But promise me. If she actually gets to the point where she's about to start that ritual. Kill me. If you could kill me once to save the world, you can do it again. I think I'm mortal now; you won't destroy my soul, but the ritual would. I've always wondered what will happen when I die and stay dead. What there is to see in the Shadowlands beyond the depth I've explored."

"I – I don't know if I can, Discord."

"Well, you missed your chance to save the world by biting through my chains. So unless my friends
come to the rescue, which sounds unlikely given that they've been imprisoned too, or unless I can think of something else, that might be the only option to stop the ritual you'll get."

"What if I knock you unconscious, and then bite through the chains?"

Discord pointed at the door. "Were you there when she ordered me to not go through that thing?"

"Uh... yeah."

"Unless you're strong enough to drag me, stealthily, without Twilight noticing what you're doing, then no. I still can't leave the room on my own power, and I can't allow anyone to take me out of it without resisting as much as I can." He sighed. "She didn't tell me to use lethal force to prevent anyone from ripping my collar. So if you go for that I have to try to stop you, but your reaction time might be better than mine, in my condition. I'd still die, but I'd have my magic back long enough to make sure my friends were safe."

"I don't want to kill you."

"I'd rather not die, not now. But I'm not sure I'm going to get another option." He closed his eyes. "Wake me up when you need to move me so you can mop under me. I'm going to sleep."

"How can you sleep at a time like this?"

"Given how tired I am, and how much all that not-lying and then upchucking took out of me? Easily."

He was right. Within minutes after he closed his eyes, his breathing evened out, becoming deep and regular. Spike continued to mop, racking his brains. There had to be a way out of this that didn't involve making him a murderer again. There just had to be.

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**Opposition, 12 PM – Applejack (Harmony)**

When Applejack turned back to look and see if Pinkie and Spike were gone, they were. Which didn't make a darned bit of sense, because she hadn't heard Pinkie's hoofsteps going anywhere, and there were no doors in the corridor anywhere near there, but she knew better than to question the ways of Pinkie Pie.

"They're off," she said to Rarity.

"Good. I'm sure Pinkie will keep Spike safe. Now to find our own way out." Rarity trotted forward confidently.

"You know where you're goin', sugarcube?"

"Well, unlike Twilight, I didn't grow up in this palace, but I did once spend an entire summer memorizing all the publicly available information on the castle architecture." She smiled wistfully. "I had an ambition to sneak into the palace and find Princess Celestia's rooms, so I could take measurements of her existing dresses. Then I was going to create the most beautiful dress any princess has ever worn and request an audience with her so I could show it to her, and she would be so amazed and thrilled with the dress that she would appoint me as Royal Dressmaker."

Applejack snorted. "And to think I thought I was overreachin' myself when I had fantasies of gettin' all the noble folk to buy my apple concoctions at the Gala."
"Oh, no, that was a perfectly reasonable idea." Rarity laughed slightly. "Even I didn't realize how strong the prejudices of the nobility would be against 'commoner' food, and I read all the fashion and lifestyle magazines from Canterlot. My idea, of course, was ridiculous, which is part of why I never actually did it; by the time I felt confident that I was skilled enough to make the princess a dress, I realized that all I'd likely accomplish by breaking and entering into her private rooms was a stay in the dungeons." She turned down another corridor. "We should avoid going out the front door. I'm a doctor and you're my escort, so what we really want is to head for the servants' entrance. Since I planned to sneak in via the servants' entrance, I'm fairly sure I know the route. Assuming things haven't been drastically rearranged in this version of the palace, which, sadly, is a possibility, considering how long Discord was running amok here."

"Let's not go borrowin' trouble. When we zapped Discord everything he did went back to normal, so you'd figure the same would've happened here. Aside of the folks that died or got hurt bad, of course, but you know what I mean."

A lone guardspoon approached them, near the far end of the corridor. "Uh-oh."

"Just follow my lead," Rarity whispered.

The guardspoon's eyes narrowed as he came closer. "Private, report. Who is your companion?"

"I'm Doctor Sure Stitch," Rarity said, her affected pseudo-Canterlot accent gone. Applejack raised an eyebrow. Of course she could imitate a Manehattanite accent herself, but she'd practically forgotten that Rarity was raised in Ponyville and her accent was just a put-on. "I came to the palace today for a job interview with the palace medical staff, and Private Stronghoof here was kind enough to offer to show me out after my interview. Why, this palace is practically a maze."

"Private Stronghoof? Can't say I've seen you before, soldier."

Applejack stood straight, adopting a military bearing. It wasn't hard. When they were little she and Mac used to play Royal Guardsponies, and Mac, who had fantasies of being a soldier at the time, actually knew a lot about how they were supposed to stand and salute and all that. Of course, all those dreams went up in smoke when Ma and Pa died and Mac had to be the stallion of the house, but she still remembered. "Sir, I've just enlisted last week, sir," she said in the gruff version of the Manehattan accent that Rarity had suggested to her earlier.

"Makes sense. Let me ask you, though, Private, were you actually there at the doc's interview?"

Applejack knew better than to even try to lie about that. She could lie if she carefully prepared what she was going to say ahead of time and rehearsed it, and she could say things that were misleading and partway true if she had to, like in a situation where lives were at stake – like before, when she'd told Shining Armor he could trust Rarity, not because Rarity was telling the truth but because Rarity wanted what was best for this world and everypony in it just like Shining did. But she couldn't tell a bald-faced lie if she was caught flat-hooved, not and not get caught out in it. "Sir, no, I can't say I was, sir."

"Well then. Dr. Stitch, you wouldn't mind showing me your cutie mark, would you?"

Applejack's heart sank. The lab coat was covering Rarity's cutie mark, and they'd hoped that with the color change to her mane and the glasses, that she wouldn't attract enough attention that ponies looking for Rarity would notice her. But this guardspoon was clearly suspicious, and of course Rarity couldn't pass a cutie mark check.

"Of course not, Sergeant, but can I ask why? That seems like an unusual request."
"Security reasons. I can't go into details." Probably they'd discovered the empty cell, Applejack figured.

"Oh dear! Well, of course I'll cooperate! Let me just – get – this coat – oh, it's so tight." It wasn't, having been made for a stallion, but Rarity was demonstrating a great deal of difficulty shrugging out of it. "I'm sorry, Sergeant, my magic is really best optimized for cutting and stitching – that's my special talent. I'm not so good at getting this terrible thing on and off, it's such a chore. Private, would you assist me? I'm going to have to rear up to get it back off my withers." There was a slight tapping on Applejack's back legs, on her fetlocks right above her hooves.

Applejack sure hoped she was reading Rarity's signals right. All of them had heard plenty of the plots of adventure dramas from Spike's eager willingness to recount the plot of his comic books to anypony who dared ask what he was reading, and from Rainbow Dash's desire to read her favorite Daring Do parts out loud regardless of whether anypony encouraged her or not. And Applejack had been to a few adventure movies, and she figured Rarity had too, even if her preference was for romance and drama. So she hoped she knew what Rarity was setting up.

She interposed her body between Rarity and the sergeant. "Here you go, Doc, you can lean on me."

"Oh, thank you." Rarity reared up and bent her forelegs awkwardly to try to push the coat off her withers. Her mouth moved in a silent word. Now.

Applejack shifted her own balance in a second, leaning forward on her forelegs so she could put full force into Bucky McGillicuddy and Kicks McGee. They slammed into the jaw and withers of the guardspony, who'd come up behind her in his eagerness to see the "doctor's" cutie mark and confirm her identity. He went flying backward, wings flapping as he tried to right himself, but Applejack had hit too fast and with too much force, and he couldn't get enough wingpower into play in time to keep from falling backward to the floor. Rarity leaped, landed next to the fallen guard, and before he could get his wings out from under him, she kicked him in the side of the neck in what looked like a very precise strike, hitting with just the edge of her hoof. He slumped back down to the ground.

"That should stun him for a few minutes, at least," Rarity said, breathing heavily. "Oh, I'm so glad you figured out what I was suggesting, Applejack. That could have gone much worse."

"Still could. Your disguise ain't workin' and I just blew my cover. Let's run for it."

"That may be the best strategy now," Rarity agreed, and the two of them started galloping.

They passed a couple of groups of guards in pairs as they ran for the servants' entrance. Rarity avoided being challenged by yelling "Excuse me, mare in labor, I'm a doctor, let me through!" It worked because they were heading for the servants' wing.

Once they were in the servants' wing – which was slightly shabbier than the rest of the palace, but still shiny and rich-enough looking to make her Orange aunt drool, Applejack thought – Rarity picked the lock to a supply closet and ran in, gesturing at Applejack to follow. It was a large supply closet for supplies, but uncomfortably small for two grown mares. Applejack pressed up against Rarity in the darkness of the closet as they heard the clopping of hoofsteps out in the hallway, heavy hoofsteps like the sound of stallions in armor. "They were headed this way!"

"Must be heading for the servants' entrance! Let's go!"

"They'll block it off," Applejack whispered to Rarity. "Now what?"
"Now we hope the color change spell I practiced actually works," Rarity whispered back. A light flicked on in the closet.

"You sure it's wise to have the light on like that?"

"I'm sure I can't cast a color spell in the dark," Rarity retorted. "I can't see to your other side, are there any maids' uniforms?"

"Yeah, but tiny ones. Ain't no way they're gonna fit me. You're dainty, they might do, but what's a maid doing with a guard?"

"Is there more than one?"

"Yup, looks like three or four."

"Oh, excellent. Give me just five minutes."

"Just five minutes" turned into at least fifteen, as Rarity used her emergency sewing kit to cut and slice and stitch two of the uniforms into one larger uniform and a lot of scraps, which she shoved into a mop bucket. She was doing the work above their heads, because there wasn't room to do it anywhere else. When she was done, she shuffled off her lab coat and helped Applejack remove her armor, and then, carefully because they were still tightly squashed together, used her magic to help get the maid's outfits on the both of them.

It turned out there was another problem. "That ain't coverin' my cutie mark," Applejack whispered urgently. Not that she could see – in the cramped quarters she couldn't really turn enough to see her own flank – but she could feel the air on her haunches. "Not yours neither, I'll warrant."

"A lady never leaves home without her makeup kit."

"You got a sewing kit and a makeup kit in your mane? You been taking lessons from Pinkie there?"

Rarity giggled. "It does involve something of the art of knowing how to pack very tightly."

Her horn shone, brighter than Applejack had ever seen Rarity's horn glow, her face pinched with concentration and sweat coming to the surface of her coat, everywhere. As Applejack watched, Rarity's coat turned solid light grey – including her cutie mark – and her mane, previously dyed light blue, went to a slate color. When Applejack glanced at herself, she saw that her own coat had turned a solid vermilion, almost the same color as Mac's, and her cutie mark was barely visible, having turned the same color. Her mane was now a dark orange.

"I'm glad I have you to work with, Applejack, and not Twilight or Rainbow. Getting the different color strands of the mane would be so difficult."

"You did okay with the cutie marks. Except now we're blank flanks. That's gonna stand out."

"Don't worry. I needed our cutie marks to fade so I could draw new ones on." Using mascara, she drew a yin-yang symbol on her own coat, and a wheel with spokes on Applejack's. "I haven't the faintest what these mean so hopefully nopony will ask about our cutie mark story."

"You can't just draw on cutie marks. The natural cutie mark magic fights that," Applejack said. "That's why Apple Bloom and her pals ain't never been able to fake it."

"I know. The cutie marks will break through the color spell first, and they'll do it in about fifteen to
twenty minutes at best. So we don't have very much time."

"Servants' entrance is gonna be guarded."

"And that's why we will be carrying vases!" Triumphanty Rarity put a saddlebag harness on each of them, from a set of about nine or ten hanging on the wall, and crystal flower vases from an entire rack of crystal flower vases. "One of the important duties of the maids in Canterlot Palace is to keep all the vases full of fresh flowers, all the time. So if we head out the door with vases, it's unlikely anypony will even question us. We're now the entirely wrong colors to be Applejack and Rarity and we even have different cutie marks."

"For now."

"Yes. I'll hold it as long as I can but I'm no Twilight. We just have to do our best. And move quickly."

Applejack couldn't hear anypony outside. "All right, then, let's get to movin'." She pushed the door open and trotted out, checking quickly to make sure her fake cutie mark hadn't smeared as she slid past Rarity. "Still looks good."

"No-smear mascara. It's so expensive but so worth it."

Applejack had to admit she was real nervous about this plan. Depending on Rarity's magic to sew two maid's uniforms together to make a larger one that looked exactly like the real thing? That was fine, that was Rarity's thing. But Rarity doing actual spells, even color change ones? Covering a mark took serious magic, or a ton of really thick actor's makeup; she'd never much thought about it before, but ever since Apple Bloom had gotten obsessed with her cutie mark, Applejack knew more than she wanted to about the damn things, including how hard they were to fake. And Rarity's magic was all about precision, not power. Not spells, either, aside from her special gem-finding spell.

But she didn't have a better idea. "If it comes to it," she said as they trotted, as quickly as they could trot without shifting to a gallop, "can you break those vases and use the glass as weapons?"

"I can, but..." Rarity hesitated. "What lengths are we willing to go to? These stallions are loyally serving Princess Celestia, just like the ones at home. I'm quite comfortable with knocking them out if we have to, but... glass cuts. And these guardsponies don't deserve that."

"I get that, I wouldn't want you to actually cut them up. Can you bluff?"

"Not if there's another unicorn there. Nearly any guardsunicorn will be stronger than me and be able to shield."

"You just leave that to me," Applejack said. "The unicorns always underestimate the earth ponies. Not so much guard to guard, but the unicorn guards think they've got everything all tied up, dealin' with civilian earth ponies. Don't think as they'll see it coming, if they're all looking at you."

"You know that if there are very many of them, or if there are Changelings among them..."

"Then we're well and truly hosed, Rarity. You know it, I know it. But let's not borrow trouble. All we can do's the best we can do."

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**Opposition, 1 PM – Rainbow Dash (Harmony)**
Rainbow opened her eyes blearily, feeling the movement of clacking wheels below her. *I'm... on a train.*

She tried to jerk to her feet, but failed. Her wings were tied to her sides, and her forelegs were four-hobbled, ropes tying each leg to its two closest legs so the ropes made a rectangle. Or they would, if they weren't folded under her, and she couldn't get up onto them because she couldn't stretch them away from each other far enough.

Fluttershy – *her* Fluttershy, the one with the dyed mane – was lying on the floor across from her, tied even more tightly. She had a rope around her muzzle – Rainbow experimented with trying to open her own mouth, and discovered that so did she – and her legs were tied to her body the same way her wings were, making it impossible for her to move without being carried. And the others – her own alternate, Fluttershy's alternate, and the alternates of Applejack, Rarity and Pinkie – were sitting on the benches of the train. They were in the two L-shaped areas directly near the doors, Rainbow and Fluttershy lying on the train floor in the space directly in front of the 1-pony wide sideways seat and the 2-pony wide long seat.

Really, that was just them being jerks. The way the benches were laid out, a single pony could lie all the way across one, or two ponies could sit on them (three if they were foals, or very friendly). There was no good reason they had to put her and Fluttershy on the floor except to be jerks.

She considered her situation. If she tried to do anything with the wind or weather in here – which would be real hard anyway with her wings tied up – the other her would notice. They hadn't, however, noticed her waking up; they were bickering with each other. If she could only use her legs... but she couldn't.

And with her mouth tied shut, she couldn't use her teeth... unless she could scrape the muzzling rope off. Which she totally could. Because unlike Fluttershy, she hadn't been tied in such a way that she couldn't use her legs at all. Probably because they knew that if they tied her in a way where they'd have to carry her, they wouldn't be able to hold her because she'd wiggle and whack them in the faces with her tail and stuff. Being an awesome stunt flyer meant being really flexible and acrobatic; she was sure she could have hurt their counterparts if they'd tried to carry her, and she was pretty sure they knew it, and that was why they tied her up so that if they helped her to her hooves, she'd be able to walk.

Which meant, if she could just roll a little sideways so she could get one hoof out from under her, she could pull off the rope on her mouth while her head was tucked down as if she was still sleeping.

So far so good. The rope was tied pretty tight, but Rainbow had a perfectly marish muzzle, short and slender like most mares had, and it was hard to get a rope to stay on a mare's muzzle unless you also tied it like a bit in her mouth, which they had not done to her. Mainly, Rainbow supposed, because they figured that even in her sleep she'd bite them. By scraping her head against the floor and her hoof against the rope, she was able to work the rope off her face.

She cracked an eye open, checking to see if her counterpart, or any of the others, had noticed. Didn't look that way. Good.

Rainbow commenced with the chewing through the rope binding her two forelegs together. First she'd get her forelegs free of each other. Then the rope on her left and right sides that bound the foreleg on that side to the hindleg. That way she'd have her forelegs free. She couldn't see how to get her mouth or her hooves down to her hindlegs without anypony noticing, but that wasn't what was important; with her forelegs free she ought to be able to pull the rope around her wings close enough to her head that she could reach it with her mouth, and if she chewed through *that* she was
golden. Yeah, it was going to be something of a challenge to fight off replicas of four of her friends, when the fifth replica was of her and had all of her abilities, but Rainbow figured if she had the element of surprise she could take them out fast. Her other self, for starters, and then Pinkie. Rarity and Fluttershy wouldn't be as big of threats, but Applejack could be a serious concern, particularly in a train car where Rainbow couldn't maneuver as easily. So she'd just have to take all three of them out super fast.

And then a hoof yanked her head back by the mane.

"I thought I heard a munching noise!" Pinkie announced. "Look, Dashie, the other you is eating the ropes off! Hey, Other Dashie, are they yummy? Rope is made of hemp and if you put some kind of hemp in the brownies it makes you all giggly and weird and hungry but I don't know if rope hemp is the same kind! Are you going to get all giggly and weird and hungry?"

"Sounds like you eat that kind all day long, Pinkie!" the other Rainbow laughed.

"Nah, it just makes me jumpy! Which is not the same as bouncy! I like being bouncy but I don't like being jumpy!"

Her head was turned, talking to the other Rainbow. Rainbow slammed her head backwards, trying to head-butt Pinkie. Except that Pinkie noticed, even though her head was turned, and dodged it. "Woo! Gotta be careful there, Other Dashie, you almost bashed your noggin on my head!"

The other Applejack knelt down in front of Rainbow. "Look here, I know my Rainbow well enough to know you've got all kinds of crazy unrealistic fantasies about fighting your way out of here single-hoofed," she said. "So let me explain something to you plain and simple. Rarity's got a knife on your Fluttershy. You give us any grief, we slice her throat. You got that?"

Rainbow glared at her angrily, but said nothing. She was trying to think of a witty retort, but all that was coming to mind was really lame things like "You'll never get away with this" and "Oh, you think you're such a big mare," and stuff like that. Daring Do would know what to say, but Rainbow wasn't Daring Do.

"I think we should kill both of them," the other Fluttershy said. "They burned my house down! And probably they were the ones who got yours too, Rarity! Don't you agree we ought to kill them?"

"I'd love to," other Rarity said, "but it will hardly bring back my house, and if Twilight thinks they should be sent to Princess Celestia to deal with, then that is what we should properly do."

"But if you agree, and I agree, and I know Pinkie would like to try them so I'm sure she agrees—"

"This ain't a democracy, Fluttershy, shut it. We got our orders from Twilight and that's that." She tilted Rainbow's chin up painfully. "So. You understand that if you give us trouble, your Fluttershy dies? Better say yes or no, I don't take kindly to folks clammin' up when I ask them a simple question."

"Sounds to me like you're not supposed to kill either of us," Rainbow said, having finally thought of something to say. "Aren't you worried you'll get in trouble if we don't make it alive to Canterlot?"

"Hmm. That's a good point, there. Rarity, that knife of yours strong enough to saw through a wing bone?"

"Mine isn't, but I'm sure Pinkie would lend me hers."
Rainbow's eyes went wide. "So there we go, change of plans," Applejack said. "You give us any grief and we saw off your pal's wings. Ain't like she can fly worth anything so she won't be missing them too much, right?"

"Applejack, I spayed one bitch on your farm. Shut your mouth about my flying or I could go for two," the other Fluttershy said.

"Oh, like we don't all know the song. Fluttershy/can barely fly! Ain't like it's a secret, sugarcube. Besides, I'm talking about her, not you."

"If you cut off her wings can I eat them? Pegasus wings are yummy! Fluttershy's won't have a lot of meat to them like Dashie's but I'll bet they have a really delicate flavor!"

"Sure, Pinkie, if this Rainbow gives us grief we'll cut off her Fluttershy's wings and then you can have 'em to eat."

Fluttershy was hyperventilating, eyes white with terror. Rainbow said, slowly and angrily, "Fine. I'll cooperate. If they were being handed over to Celestia, then maybe they were being put with the others. And if they were going to be put with the others, then maybe it made more sense for Rainbow to lie low anyway. Let that happen, and then once she and Fluttershy were with the other four, plus Spike, well, then the fireworks would start. She could bide her time.

"Thought you'd be reasonable," Applejack said. "Now it's just another quarter hour or so before we're to Canterlot, so you lay quiet and behave yourself, and Princess Celestia will decide what's to be done about you. Who knows, maybe she'll send you home. We all know your Princess Celestia sent you here to get Discord 'cause he's useful to her for something or other; we can't fault you for doing what your princess says. We'd do the same, right girls?"

"More or less," the other Rainbow said.

"You ain't helping, Rainbow."

"I agree," the other Fluttershy said primly. "We would do the same. But that's why we have to kill them! If they're on a mission to rescue Discord, they're not going to just give up because we ask!"

"It don't sit right with me to kill mares who are just like us, just because it's convenient," Applejack said. "Maybe we toss 'em back through whatever gate they came over in and then we tell Discord to seal it up. He ain't much for listenin' to me or doin' a job right but my understanding is you've got better control over him than that, or were you lyin' about that?"

"No, I can get Discord to do anything I tell him to."

"Then there ain't no reason to kill them. But it's up to Princess Celestia."

Rainbow laid her head back down, glowering. It made more sense to stay down and let these guys hand them over to Princess Celestia, which almost certainly meant being reunited with the others, because when the six of them worked together there was no stopping them, and she'd rather fight a bunch of Changelings or Royal Guards than the opposites of her friends and herself. But the idea of lying still and letting herself remain captive burned her... and the truth was, she'd still be fighting back if it weren't for the threat to Fluttershy, and that enraged her. These mares were enough like her friends to know what a rotten move it was to threaten Fluttershy, especially when she was completely tied up and couldn't even try to defend herself. She really, really wanted to kick them in the flanks, just for that.

Well. If they could just get everypony together and escape and rescue Discord and have him do
whatever smashing of chaos he was supposed to do for the whole using a tree branch to reharmonize everypony meant, that would be like kicking their flanks, except better. Like it had been better to zap Nightmare Moon out of Princess Luna and get Princess Luna back than it would have been to send her to the moon again or something. The best revenge was when you could turn the bad guys into good guys. She was still kind of iffy on how well that had worked with Discord, but for her other self and her friends' other selves, she was sure it would work.

Except wait... Twilight had had the tree branch, and Twilight had been defeated and taken captive. There had been saddlebags all over the place. Did Twilight even still have the tree branch?

Eh. No way to know. They'd have to worry about it later.

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**Opposition, 1 PM – Twilight (Harmony)**

Twilight had been in Celestia's chambers for what she was fairly sure had to have been a few hours – in fact, considering that Celestia's chambers had a view of the sun in every possible position, and the tiny shadows from the near-noon sunlight had shifted to the opposite direction, she was certain of it. Celestia had ordered a great deal of food brought for lunch, and then had barely eaten any of it, whereas Twilight had hardly been able to stop herself. She was painfully stuffed now, and suspected the food had been bespelled to make her crave it, since her reaction to life-threatening stress was usually the opposite of hunger. She also thought probably the food might have been drugged to make her sleepy, but someone had underestimated the dosage needed for an alicorn – she'd had a profound urge to take a nap, at what she thought had probably been over an hour ago, but she'd kept eating, munching on the sugary sweets and the chocolate pastries to force herself to stay awake, and now the urge had passed completely. If it had been carb coma, she should be even sleepier now, but she wasn't. Celestia's poker face was too good for Twilight to be able to tell if she was disappointed or upset that Twilight hadn't fallen asleep, but she had offered Twilight a few huge plush, royal pillows with satin coverings and said that if she was feeling drowsy from her big meal, she could take a nap there. And Twilight had been tempted, but she'd also known that going to sleep in the chambers of someone who was planning to kill her was a terrible idea, so she'd laughed and said that the desserts were too good for her to nap right now.

She felt strongly that she had to pretend that she wasn't as scared as she was, that she wasn't on the alert for a chance to escape the way she was. She wanted to play the role of someone not just resigned to their fate but accepting, fully comfortable with the notion that she was supposed to die to bring Luna back. Twilight had no idea if it was working – Princess Celestia knew her better than any pony alive, better than her own mother. Only Spike, who wasn't a pony, could read her as well. Surely this Celestia could see that she was faking? But she had to do it anyway, because any tiny little bit helped, and if Celestia knew how hard Twilight was thinking about how to escape, she'd probably take some kind of steps.

But Celestia seemed to be distracted. She kept leaving the room to go talk to ponies outside, behind the thick door where Twilight couldn't hear. This had left Twilight time for experimentation. She had tried to pull her horn ring off by hoof, but it wouldn't go; the way they were designed, you needed to be able to press a thin band in the center of the ring inward to make the hooks release, otherwise you'd tear bloody furrows in the skin on your horn and quite possibly scrape the bone inside, and nearly anypony would be unable to perform magic through the pain that would cause. Hooves didn't have the dexterity to do it, and especially not with heavy metal cuffs tight around the fetlocks, disrupting her tactile telekinesis so that it was an effort to hold a teacup. Usually it would require magic to get a horn ring off; in Twilight's case, Spike could do it for her in thirty seconds or less with his delicate claw tips, but Spike wasn't here. Rarity could get it off of her also, or any other unicorn, but Rarity wasn't here either and she doubted she'd find a unicorn in this world
willing to disobey Celestia.

By concentrating on the feel of the magic in her body, she'd figured out why it was there were binders on her hooves, aside from them limiting her tactile telekinesis, and why the binder on her wings was iron and not mere rope. All she'd managed to do with her wings since getting them was fly, and she hadn't done anything with earth pony magic aside from notice the magic in the Everfree a different way than before, but by trying different things in her desperation every time Celestia left the room, Twilight had figured out that without the binders on, she might be able to cast actual magic spells from her wings or hooves. It would be hellaciously difficult, almost as hard as using her hooves to remove the horn ring would be... but she could see how the principle would work, how she could slowly and carefully weave a spell with organs that weren't designed for it by holding the magical construct in place with a projection from one wing or hoof and adding more threads to the construct with the other. Just one horn could do that, of course, and could do it very quickly, but just one magical projector that wasn't a horn wouldn't be enough... but all of her limbs came in pairs, and she had six of them. If only her horn had been bound, she could have woven a spell to remove the horn ring, or maybe even to teleport.

Celestia, however, being an alicorn herself, obviously knew alicorns could do that, and had taken steps to prevent it. So Twilight had tried removing one of her cuffs, any of them. That didn't work. Her hoof wasn't compressible. If she had a really sharp sword, and the nerve to do it to herself, maybe she could cut off her hoof, slip her leg out of the binder, and rely on alicorn regeneration to restore it... except that firstly, she didn't have a sword, secondly, she wouldn't be dexterous enough with the hoof binders to cut off one of her hooves with a sword, thirdly, she'd need to do it to two hooves to be able to project magic, and fourthly, how would she ever have the concentration to weave a spell through an organ that was completely not designed for it and that she had no training in using if she was in agony from her hoof being cut off? Plus, just because her wing had healed after the other Twilight had burned a hole in it didn't mean she would heal back an entire hoof; she'd never been injured badly enough to test the extent of alicorn regeneration, and she'd never seen Celestia or Luna get hurt that badly either. And even if she had it wouldn't have mattered because they were much more powerful than she was, and for all she knew she wasn't even the kind of alicorn they were. Celestia hadn't explained much about it to her, and she'd been frankly too scared of the answer to ask if she'd suddenly become immortal.

Her wings were compressible, but that wasn't going to help; they were folded at her sides and held down with an iron strap. It wasn't unbroken iron, obviously, since that wouldn't be flexible; it was made of tightly woven, small chain links, like chain mail armor. To pull them out from under the strap would break them, and Twilight didn't have the leverage to do that even if she could endure the pain. She tried pushing the horn ring off, reasoning that if her wing regenerated, damage to her horn would too, and that she might be able to cast even through a damaged horn since her life was at stake... but she couldn't do it. The tiny steel hooks inside the ring were just slightly itchy when she didn't move it, resting against her flesh; they were designed to bend upward, so when the ring was pushed downward or wasn't being moved at all, they only touched the skin on her horn. As soon as she started to push it up, though, the friction caused them to dig in, and the pain was blinding. Horns were very sensitive. Twilight was fairly sure she would literally pass out from the pain before she could get the ring off; just pushing it up a couple of millimeters had caused a stabbing agony, and then another millimeter or two and it had felt like she was being skinned alive. She'd stopped, suddenly nauseous and shaking, waves of hot and cold washing over her from shock for a few minutes before she'd recovered. If she had a friend with her who wasn't Spike or Rarity, and their lives were at stake, she could ask the friend to rip the ring off her horn and depend on her ability to regenerate to heal the damage, but she'd probably faint while her friend was doing it. By herself, the fact that she couldn't do it without fainting meant she couldn't do it at all. It would be different if she were alone in her cell, where she might have time to do it bit by bit, but then, that
was probably why Celestia was keeping her in here.

So none of that was going to work. She considered jumping off the balcony. The height was dizzying, sickening, but she was more likely to survive the fall than she was to survive a ritual that pushed her soul out of her body in order to draw a dead mare's soul in. On the other hoof... if it killed her, then her death would go to waste. Twilight was fairly certain that Luna would be horrified at what this world had become, and would take steps to right the wrongs of this world... including separating the other Twilight from the Diadem of Order, because it would be obvious to her that the other Twilight was as possessed by the thing as Trixie had been by the Alicorn Amulet. If Twilight had to die... dying to restore Luna, who would help her friends get home and free Discord and do all the other things this Celestia should have done but couldn't because she'd been driven over the bend by having to kill her sister, was not the worst way she could go. And besides, even if being an alicorn meant she could survive a fall from such a height, there was no reason to believe she'd be done healing quickly enough to help her friends.

Now, as Celestia ducked out of the room yet again, Twilight got to her hooves and began searching Celestia's desk. She was fairly sure Celestia wasn't careless enough to leave the key to the shackles where Twilight could reach them, but fairly sure wasn't 100% certainty, and if Celestia was distracted enough to make a mistake like that Twilight intended to exploit it.

A letter from Spike caught her attention. She'd recognize his pawwriting anywhere. "Dear Princess Celestia, I think Twilight made a big mistake when she asked you to kill her other self and the counterparts to her friends. They didn't come here because they love chaos or something; they came because they think torture is wrong, and frankly... it is, and before our first Discord corrupted the elements, she would have thought the same. It's not fair to kill them for being true to who they really were, before they got corrupted. And if we can ever find a way to undo the corruption, I don't want Twilight to have to live with the memory of ordering the death of ponies who are basically the same as her friends. Please don't kill them, Your Highness. Sincerely, Spike the dragon."

There was a lump in her throat. That was the alternate Spike. Who was still himself, or enough of himself that he wasn't a monster. Twilight had worried, knowing what Discord had said in the letter, that the alternate Spike had killed the alternate Discord... and everything else about this world seemed to be evil inversions of her own, with her friends actively corrupted and Celestia turned monstrous just from the horrors she'd been through. But this Spike knew that torture was wrong, and that killing innocent ponies was wrong, and was willing to stand up to the alternate Twilight to plead with Celestia to do what was right.

This must have been the letter that had arrived while they were talking, the one that Celestia had said that Spike just needed some reassurance. Twilight wondered what she'd sent back to him. "Don't worry, the only one I'm going to kill is the alternate Twilight, because that will bring Luna back to life?" No. She'd probably lied, or said something misleading.

Twilight swallowed again. She had to get free, save her friends, and rescue Discord, so they could re-harmonize the Opposition Bearers. If for no other reason than for the sake of this Spike, who despite having killed somepony, was still, clearly, Spike. Discord had mentioned that Spike obviously felt guilty and that he thought he could use that guilt to send the letter, and the letter had been sent, so presumably it had worked, but Twilight hadn't dared to hope that this Spike was still so much Spike. Discord would have to do whatever the smashing chaos thing was, if he was well enough, and then they...

...they didn't have the tree branch.
Frantically Twilight checked behind her and around her neck, but of course she didn't have her saddlebags anymore. Had she even had them when she fled the Everfree so she could fight her opposite out in the open, or had they slipped off her during the fight in the Everfree? Had Celestia confiscated them? Was the branch back in the Everfree or did this Celestia have it? Or had this Twilight taken it from her? Did they even know what the Tree of Harmony was? They hadn't stopped the plunder vines from destroying the Everfree – they'd had to stop them with modified parasprites-- and Twilight hadn't had a chance to see Ponyville proper, though the alternate Fluttershy's home had seemed unaffected. They certainly hadn't returned their own elements to the Tree. Was the Tree even alive, here? Was it possible to reharmonize those Elements if the Tree was dead?

It would definitely not be possible to reharmonize the Elements if they didn't have the branch. As little as she wanted to, she was going to have to ask Celestia about it. Surely, if this Celestia saw torturing Discord as a necessary evil and not a delightful revenge the way the Opposition Bearers seemed to, she could understand that the Opposition elements were wrong, and that they should be returned to harmony. She'd called them corrupted, she'd described the changes that had happened to them in negative terms – she had to be willing to let them be reharmonized. Of course, Twilight was going to have to lie to her and claim it could be done after she, Twilight, wasn't around anymore... and Celestia might know better. She'd borne the Elements too.

Abruptly a voice outside the door caught her attention. Shiny?

Twilight's ears perked up. She had definitely heard her brother's voice. She trotted to the door and pressed one ear against it. It wasn't actually bespelled to be soundproof, it was just large and heavy.

"...not allies of... cord... see why... many resources... mitted... recap... better things..."

"...ning... trust... my reasons... come clear... time..."

"...course I... princess... sis... friends. Why... committing... fort... capture... doesn't make sense."

Celestia's voice raised just slightly... which was just enough for Twilight to make it out fully. "If you trust me, Captain, then trust that I know what I'm doing. I have very good reasons to want them recaptured, by any non-lethal means necessary. Whether or not they are allies of Discord, they have admitted to coming here to rescue him. If they free him... do you truly believe he could be friends with their Fluttershy? Or that that friendship could be enough to stop him from taking revenge?"

"Why would they even come here if they didn't have some means of forcing him to come home with them? My sister isn't stupid, Your Highness, not in any universe. And I can't believe that you would be stupid in any universe, either. Why would their Princess Celestia have sent them here if they don't have some means of stopping him from taking revenge?" Shining's voice raised as well. "If they take him to their universe, then we get rid of him! And that's good! Have you seen how obsessive my poor Twiley has gotten over this? She won't come home for a visit, she says she has to guard Discord and make sure that she and her friends don't lose control over him. If he wasn't even here that would be a good thing! She might be able to start to get back to normal!"

"Shining, I very much doubt Twilight will ever be normal again," Celestia said. Her voice had gone quieter again, but now Twilight had picked up the thread of the conversation and could follow it properly. "She's suffered too much. You had Chrysalis to support you. She had no one but Spike. She is damaged in ways you can't imagine."

"Well, it can't be helping that she's obsessed with controlling Discord. It's like she's given up everything else that mattered to her. She doesn't even do research or experiments anymore."
He doesn't know, Twilight realized. Shiny doesn't know that his version of me is experimenting on Discord, that she's committing torture. But if he thought Discord had murdered Cadance, would he even care about that? And had Discord, the one from this world, murdered Cadance?

Chrysalis had gloated in private about how evil she was, how little she cared about Shining and how much she just intended to use him. How could someone who thought so highly of herself for being so terrible change enough to actually become a loving partner? It seemed to Twilight more than likely that Chrysalis was just using him again... this time without overt magical control, because she didn't need it. She just had to manipulate him the mundane, magicless way.

And then, as if summoned by Twilight's thoughts, she heard that voice again. It didn't have the chilling, insectoid reverberation that she remembered – it sounded like a normal pony voice, except that nothing about Chrysalis would ever be normal.

"You know why Twilight is obsessed with Discord, dearest," she said in a cloyingly sweet tone. Twilight's hackles stood. She was right. Chrysalis was totally fake, and Shining didn't know it. "It's all about having backup for the sun. Poor Celestia here can't manage the burden all on her own... and as wonderful as your love for me is, it doesn't make me strong enough to help her. Only one thing would do that."

"You aren't Luna," Celestia said. "You'll never be Luna, and I know that. I can't give you the love I felt for my sister, even if it would make you strong enough to help me, because you're not her and you never will be."

"And you see, Shining? That's exactly why your sister has to sacrifice herself to try to contain and control Discord. If she and her friends can make him obedient, they can make him move the sun and moon, and give Celestia a chance to heal. If he is allowed to simply return to his home... well, if Celestia can't give me the love she gave Luna, I could never have the power to move the sun myself. Or even the moon. So since Celestia is certain she can't do that, we have no choice but to use Discord."

Shining, she's lying. Everything that comes out of her mouth is a lie. She just wants power, Twilight thought. And then an idea occurred to her, a hope she could barely believe in. She banged on the door with all of her strength. "Shining! Shining, it's me, Twilight, your sister! I'm a prisoner, Shining, Celestia's going to kill me! She wants to kill me, that's why she wants you to capture my friends!"

"...suppose you're right," Shining was saying, showing no evidence of having heard anything. "I'll find them, then. Though I really don't like this."

She heard his hoofsteps clopping on the floor, leaving. Then Chrysalis' voice. "What are you planning with her?"

"Thank you, Chrysalis. I should have realized she'd try to call out to her brother."

"I hate to do that to him. I love him." Twilight sincerely doubted that. "You owe me now for blocking his hearing. What are you planning with her?"

Celestia sounded very, very tired. "There's a third alternative."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"I need you to keep this from Shining, no matter what. He... wouldn't react well to the news, I fear. Even though this isn't his sister. This is an extra Twilight, from a different universe."
"An expendable Twilight, is what I think you're saying. What are you planning, Celestia?"

"I'm going to bring Luna back. Tonight. That's why I need her friends, to be hostages. It has nothing to do with Discord; he'd never be trustworthy, and I'd rather give him a clean, swift death than what Twilight and her friends are doing to him... not so much for his sake, but for theirs. They're monsters, Chrys, and I've had to let them be monsters, because I'm not strong enough to stop them. But if I bring Luna back... she'll support me. She'll help me."

"And what becomes of me, then? And my Changelings?" Chrysalis' voice was angry, edging into shrill.

"Chrysalis. Calm yourself. With all that you've done for me and for this kingdom, I know Luna will honor and respect you as a dear friend and ally, just as I do. You are Queen of the Changelings; you will always rule over your own kind, and even with Luna, we'll still need Changeling help to rebuild, and we will for the foreseeable future. No one is shutting you out of anything."

"Would Luna have the power to walk in the dreams of Changelings, I wonder?"

"Yes, she certainly does. Why? Do you have nightmares?"

"Oh, yes. I dream of what Discord did to my hive, all the time. Even Shining's love isn't enough to save me from those memories. I would love it if Luna could help me with them."

She was lying. Why couldn't Celestia hear that? Her voice when she'd asked about Luna's abilities hadn't been hopeful, it had been the sound of somepony musing. Scheming. Her response to Celestia had been too fast, and while there was emotion in it – maybe she really did have nightmares about what Discord did to her hive – the Chrysalis who had held Cadance prisoner for months, gloating the whole time about what she would do to Cadance's love, who had taunted Cadance and Twilight both after defeating and imprisoning Twilight... that Chrysalis would be far too proud to tell Celestia she wanted help with her nightmares.

But maybe she's changed. If she's genuinely befriended ponies... if she really is in love with Shining... I don't know what happened to her, what Discord put her through. Maybe she changed. Maybe she really is sincere.

And maybe she was using the same power she'd used to keep Celestia from realizing how out of character she'd been when she'd played Cadance to keep Celestia and Shining from realizing how false she sounded. Or maybe it was just that they'd never known the dark side of her. Sure, maybe she'd changed, but why had she sounded so cloyingly sweet, far more than Cadance ever had even when she'd been at her most lovey-dovey? Why had she sounded as if she was plotting something when she talked about Luna?

She'd kept Shining from hearing Twilight's cries. All by itself, Twilight decided grimly, that qualified her as still evil. If she loved Shining, why was she collaborating with Celestia to hide things from him? Why wouldn't her first thought be for his desires and his welfare, not Celestia's?

'I'm sure she'd love to. But that's why it's so important that he recapture them. I need her cooperation; her magic has to be unbound when I perform the ritual. I have to have her friends as hostages before moonrise tonight, or I won't be able to bring Luna back."

"Why wouldn't you simply be able to do it tomorrow, if it takes that long?"

'How long before Shining realizes I'm going to sacrifice a variant of his sister? How long can
Twilight keep Discord under control when her connections to her friends fray more every day, and the spells that bind him depend on those? How long am I going to have to wait, Chrysalis? I've waited so long – so very long – I knew Discord could do it, if they can break him far enough that he can be trusted with the Sun, then I could have offered him his freedom in exchange for his bringing Luna back. He wouldn't have needed to use an alicorn – any pony would do."

"You'd have given him his freedom?" Chrysalis soundedcoldly angry again.

"Of course not. The ritual he'd have used would have involved using himself as the ritual sacrifice, and then bringing himself back with the pony he's restoring. He'd have been at his weakest, nearly drained of magic, when he returned. I'd have executed him cleanly, then... and by that point, considering what they're doing to him to make him obedient, he'd probably consider that a relief. Chrysalis, don't be afraid. I will never, ever let Discord wreak havoc in this world again. I promise you."

"He made five hundred lings think the Stone of Shielding was going to explode and destroy us all. They smashed themselves on it in waves, destroying our protection and killing themselves to save the hive from a threat that didn't exist. He told Nightmare Moon where we were, after I first helped you, and she brought a storm that flooded the hive and drowned dozens. When we moved, he convinced another hundred of my children that an active volcano was the new location of the hive, and they flew into the lava and died. He made a full fifth of my Changelings starve to death slowly, because even I couldn't look on them without disgust and repulsion any more, and I couldn't bring myself to let them share in the love, and neither could any other Changeling."

That was real emotion in her voice. Twilight realized she couldn't make the mistake of believing Chrysalis was completely evil. She really did care about her changelings. Just not anypony else.

"I know all this, Chrysalis."

"So you will understand this, Celestia. If you allow Discord to get free, I will not help you. I will not save you. I will not fight for you. This Discord doesn't have any history of conflict with us. He doesn't know we are enemies. I will withdraw all of my Changelings and watch as your nation falls to chaos, and I will do nothing."

"That... is understandable. Even advisable. If you needn't make an enemy of Discord, then don't. But he won't get free again. I promise," A rustling sound. "I need to return to my guest. She's Twilight; I can't underestimate her cleverness. I need to keep watch over her, personally."

"All right. I won't let Shining know."

Quickly Twilight sat back down and stuffed another pastry into her face. The door opened. "I'm sorry I was called away for so long," Celestia said.

"This is so good, Princess," Twilight moaned. "Could you get somepony to bring me some potions for digestion or something? I'm sooo full but I can't stop eating, it's so good!"

"Of course I will," Celestia said, her smile turning genuine, even tender. It was working, Twilight thought. She had no idea that Twilight had been listening at the door.

"As I'm sure you just heard, two of your friends did manage to trick our guards and escape. Shining Armor is putting all patrols on alert to recapture them, and Chrysalis is lending us changeling troops to assist, so I fully expect them to be recaptured within an hour," Celestia said, and Twilight's heart sank. Stupid! Of course she knew Twilight had been listening at the door, because Twilight had banged on it and yelled, and Shining Armor was the only one who hadn't heard.
However, we still have two in custody, and I've just been informed that the two pegasi have been captured near Ponyville and are being brought here. So if a few of you do manage to get away, please do remember that the others are still here. I would certainly rather not harm them, and I hope you don't force me to."

Twilight sighed deeply, dropping the pastry. "I already said I'd cooperate. I understand why you need to bring Luna back. As long as you honor our bargain and let my friends take Discord home. I know you had to tell Chrysalis you'd kill him because the other him really did some terrible things to her and her Changelings, but I know you were lying to her, because you promised me and you won't go back on your promises. I know that."

Celestia nodded, smiling. "That's exactly right, Twilight. I'm always impressed by how clever you are. Yes, once I let your friends go, I'll also have Discord released into their custody."

She was lying. Twilight knew that. Her own Celestia never lied, not to her, but she'd seen Celestia's expression stiffen into a mask before, as she dealt with nobles with idiotic requests and diplomats who postured as if ponies were weak, in front of the immortal mare who raised the sun. It was a very, very lifelike mask. If Twilight hadn't grown up with Celestia it might even fool her.

But then, Twilight was lying too. She'd said what she'd said about knowing Celestia would keep her promise precisely so she could see Celestia's face when Celestia answered her. And also because she knew Celestia would know that if she overheard everything else she overheard Celestia saying she would kill Discord. She had to lull this Celestia into complacency by making believe she was more or less willingly cooperating with the plan, and so she had to make Celestia believe that she believed that her cooperation would win Discord's freedom as well.

"That's all I needed to hear," Twilight said. "I don't want to die, but... it's not fair for Luna to be dead, and she's more important than I am. And my friends are everything to me. So I'll cooperate."

She said it while looking down, picking at her pastry, so that if she herself had any tells, Celestia wouldn't see them and know she was lying, too.

A knock came on the door. Celestia sighed. "I'm sorry, Twilight. I wanted to spend more time with you, but it seems duty calls." She went to the door again. "Yes, officer?"

"The ponies that you said you wanted to see as soon as they arrived are here, Your Highness."

"Very good." Celestia looked back at Twilight. "Why don't you take a nap, Twilight? You must be sleepy after all the stress."

Twilight yawned. She was actually tired enough that as soon as she started faking the yawn, the actual need to yawn took over. "I might. I am kinda tired. We got up early this morning."

"I'll be back soon," Celestia said, smiling in a way that almost, almost looked like her own mentor's sincere smiles, and it made Twilight want to cry. "Get some rest."

The door shut. Who were the ponies that Celestia had said she wanted to see as soon as they arrived? Celestia's conversation with Shining Armor, and then what she had told Twilight, suggested that two of her friends had escaped, two were still here, and Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy had just been recaptured. So this might be the recapture of her escaped friends, or it might be the delivery of Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy. But without any way to invoke magic, or fly, or get the door open, what could she possibly do?

Runes! Rune magic didn't require that the user have magic, not all the time! Celestia had bookcases
in here; maybe she had something about runes? Twilight got up and began frantically searching through the books, forcing her slightly numb hooves to flip through them even though it required using the edge of her hoof because her tactile telekinesis was stiff and barely responsive. If she could find something... anything...

But there was nothing. Eventually Twilight slumped in despair, and then started putting the books back so Celestia wouldn't know what she'd done. Of course Celestia wasn't stupid enough to leave Twilight alone in a room with any books that might help her escape. *She's so much older and wiser than me, and has so much more knowledge. Even if she's been driven crazy by Princess Luna's death. How can I ever hope to beat her?*

But she had to. She just had to. Somehow.

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**Opposition, 1 PM – Rarity (Harmony)**

The trip through the servants' quarters and out the door was almost anticlimactic, Rarity thought. She'd been terrified of a sudden challenge at any point, but no guard did anything other than smile and nod at them, perhaps say, "Have a nice day, ladies," or "Pick some red ones!" This was great, especially since she didn't know how long she could hold the spell.

Rarity didn't *do* spells. Her gem-finding spell had appeared to her, unbidden, and while she might have somewhat exaggerated the facts when she described her cutie mark experience to Sweetie Belle and her little friends – she hadn't been *literally* dragged by her horn, for several gallops and an entire day -- it had certainly *felt* that way. The compulsion to follow her horn and where it was guiding her to – and she'd known it was guiding her to *something*, something that would be beautiful, just not exactly what – had overwhelmed her, and she'd practically had to run the entire way. By the time she'd gotten to the huge geode obelisk, she'd been exhausted beyond measure... although the Rainboom (and maybe her own frustrated repeated punches and kicks to the thing) causing the obelisk to shatter, revealing the inside full of beautiful crystalline gems, had perked her up considerably. But she hadn't built that spell. It had come to her in a sudden blinding moment of inspiration and had seemed to have a life of its own. She could do it now without even thinking about it, summoning it the way she could pull up her favorite blanket when she snuggled into bed with an eyemask on, just from the feel of the fabric in her TK.

Other spells were *hard*. She had no idea how Twilight did it so effortlessly. The color spell was simple, one that according to Twilight, gifted unicorns learned in magic kindergarten. But for Rarity, holding all the component together was nerve-wracking and was giving her a migraine, because she couldn't *feel* the pieces. With telekinesis, you could feel everything you touched, and you could know exactly where everything you were holding in a telekinetic field was in relation to everything else you were holding, because you didn't have to look at any of it. It was all feel. But to maintain a *spell*, you had to be able to see it. You had to be able to hold the warp and weft of it in your head, and there was nothing to be felt; it was all as intangible as color itself was. If you wove something out of thread, you could feel the threads, but if you wove something out of nothing but magic, you had to do everything by sight.

Of course, unicorn magic vision wasn't like ordinary vision. Rarity *could* see magic if it was behind her head. She didn't have to look with her eyes, only with her horn. But even still, it was incredibly tiring to have to keep "looking" at the same magic pattern, never letting her attention be drawn away too much by anything she saw with her eyes, so she could see where to poke and snip and re-weave it where it frayed and unraveled. And tiring to hold it, too. The utterly intangible threads of magic were somehow infinitely heavier than actual physical objects she picked up with her telekinesis ever were.
By the time they got to the door, she knew she couldn't hold it much longer. If they were challenged, if they were delayed, that would be it – the game would be up, and they'd have to run. So it was with immense gratitude that she trotted out the door with Applejack, after the guards had simply waved them out the door with a "Have a nice day". She didn't have to hold it much longer. Just until they got off the palace grounds. That was all.

They passed another group of guards as they headed in the direction of the gardens – which also happened to be the direction of the exit from the palace grounds, from here. "Morning, ladies," one of them said.

"Morning, gents," Applejack said. Rarity just curtsied, her head pounding too much to try to talk.

"We're looking for some ponies. Three mares – a white one with a sky blue mane and three diamonds for a cutie mark, a pink one with a curly blonde mane, a light blue tail, and yellow and pink balloons for a cutie mark, and an orange mare with a blonde straight mane and three apples for a cutie mark. If you see them, please notify us."

"We surely will," Applejack said. Rarity just smiled and nodded.

And then one of the guards said, "Wait, are you seeing what I'm seeing?"

Rarity focused on the color spell. With horror, she realized her cutie mark was breaking through.

"Three diamonds! Halt, you, in the name of the law!"

A very unladylike unicorn curse came to Rarity's lips. "Blast!" she snarled, furious at herself for losing the spell and at the guards for noticing. "Applejack, run!"

And then, taking her own advice, she ran.

There were more guards at the exit to the grounds, but they had to chance it; if they tried to lose their pursuit somewhere like Canterlot Gardens, the fact that some of the guards were pegasi would make short work of that. The hedge maze was only a maze on the ground, not from the air – it was the main reason, she assumed, that Discord had taken the pegasi's wings when he'd lured them into the hedge maze that time. She galloped as hard as she could for the palace grounds exit.

Applejack ran alongside her. That made no sense, Rarity thought. She was pushing herself to the point where her coat was lathering, but Applejack could keep pace with Rainbow Dash on the ground, and had won the Running of the Leaves competition several times. Rarity knew herself to be very fit for a unicorn with a sedentary job – part of her morning beauty routine was an aerobics workout and set of martial arts katas in the small gym she kept in the basement of the Boutique – but she couldn't possibly be a match for Applejack. "Applejack... run..." she gasped. "I know... you're... faster... than this..."

"Ain't leavin' you behind," Applejack said. She wasn't gasping. "'Sides, you know Canterlot better'n I do."

There were pegasi coming up behind them in air, overtaking them. "Halt!"

Rarity grabbed one of her vases in her TK, smashed it on the ground – her power was more for dexterity than strength, and they were thick crystal vases, nothing she could crush just with telekinesis. She scooped up the glass, glanced behind her once to fix the position of the various pegasi's legs and wings, and then sent the glass shards flying backward, striking at upper legs and wing bases. The pegasi reared back, flapped upward, or crashed to the ground, to be almost-but-not-quite trampled by the oncoming earth pony guards.
More guards in front of them, moving to block them from the gate. "Halt right—"

Rarity leapt and spun, kicking two earth ponies in the face, knocking them backward. Applejack skidded under a telekinetic force bolt, came up right in front of the unicorn, and uppercut him in the jaw, then bucked another unicorn preparing to blast her from behind. A pegasus who'd gotten around Rarity's glass cloud dive-bombed Applejack and got a hard buck to the face for his troubles; another one successfully landed on Rarity, pinning her, but she shrieked so loudly he recoiled from the sudden pain in his ears, and when he did she brought her sewing kit out of her mane and poked him in the belly with multiple sewing needles. That made him rear back all the way, allowing her to roll over, get her back legs under his chest, and kick, hard. Then she was scrambling to her hooves, scooping up her sewing needles and her glass shards.

Two unicorns had Applejack immobilized, floating her off the ground where she had no leverage. Rarity used the trick of sewing needles to the horns again. One of er them dropped Applejack; the other shielded his horn, while still holding Applejack, but he sang another tune entirely when she poked him in the rear end. He yelped, dropped Applejack, and got a buck to the head. The other one blasted at Rarity, misidentifying her as the bigger threat, because Rarity dodged his force blasts and then Applejack kicked him in the head too.

An earth pony caught up with Rarity and leapt onto her, obviously planning on pinning her. He was big, almost as big as Big Mac. So Rarity flattened down against the ground and scooted herself backward, under his wide-spread back legs, with a short disabling telekinetic slam against the very sensitive bits of him hanging over her head as she did. He howled and collapsed to all four knees, moaning. That's what you get for trying to pin a lady with your body, Rarity thought with vengeful satisfaction, but didn't have the breath to say.

Applejack had taken out two more guards that had tried to pile on top of her. The gate was clear, for a moment. "C'mon, Rarity, you can do it!"

She put on an enormous burst of speed, feeling as if her legs were turning to gelatin and her ribs were going to break and her head was going to explode but she had to do it, she had to get clear. Once they were in the city they could disappear into the city and its large population.

Maybe.

But the road leading up to the palace was almost clear, nothing but trotways leading to the tall mansions of the nobles. There was nowhere to veer off to; they wouldn't be down to the level of the actual streets for some time. Rarity felt a keen sense of despair. How would she and Applejack possibly outrun all of those trained palace guards, on a meandering but otherwise straightforward road that intersected with nothing but private trots, in broad daylight? The stitch in her side was screaming at her, and she was sure she couldn't keep up this pace much longer, and part of her wanted to just stop and surrender. The main reason she didn't was that she knew Applejack would stop with her.

Then Applejack knelt down on the ground. "Rarity, get on!"

"Wh-what?"

"Just do it! I trusted you and you got us through that door. Time you trust me."

Awkwardly Rarity climbed on Applejack's back like she was a foal. "Good heavens... this... never going... work. Too... heavy."

"After all that dietin' and workin' out you do? Naah. Hold tight."
Applejack stood up, charged forward, and galloped, putting on an incredible burst of speed despite the fact that she was burdened with a pony on her back. Rarity's eyes went wide. She knew Applejack was strong, but this was ridiculous. How could this possibly be working?

And yet it was. Rarity had to cling to Applejack's neck with her forelegs awkwardly wrapped around it, clasping each other at an angle that would be painful if she had to hold it very long. Her mane was being ruined by the wind of Applejack's speed whipping through it, but at the moment she couldn't spare the attention to complain. Behind them the guards retreated into the distance, though there were still airborne pegasi who could obviously see them, since Rarity could see them if she tilted her head back. One of them wheeled around and came into a dive, obviously planning to meet Applejack head on. Applejack just charged forward, and when the pegasus slammed into her, she kept going, throwing him aside, the momentum of her charge greater than the momentum of his dive. Another one was coming in straight down toward Rarity. Rarity frantically dredged up a strobe spell, used for making a light to shine on something she wanted to show off, and poured all the power she had left into it, creating a blinding strobe flash in the pegasus' face. He veered off, shouting about his eyes, and crashed into a water fountain.

Then they were down to the main street, and Applejack threw herself down the nearest dim alley she could. "Ge'off," she panted, collapsing. Rarity did so with alacrity.

"What was that? Applejack, how did you ever pull that off? You were faster than trained guardsponies, with me on your back! I'm proud to say I'm far from the heaviest of ponies, but I admit I'm far from the lightest, either. How did you do that?"

Applejack was still gasping, foam on her muzzle and her coat lathered enough that she was going to be miserably wet when she cooled down a bit. Rarity stripped the maid uniform from her, taking it apart. Applejack smiled weakly as the fresh air met her coat instead of sweat-soaked cloth.
"Thanks," she panted. "Jus'... gotta... get... breath."

"But quite seriously how did you do that?"

"How'd you hold... a spell... for several minutes? How'd... you fight off... a bunch of guardsponies with... glass and sewin' needles?"

"Well, my magic may not be ideal for spellwork, but I'm not wholly incapable of it. And I suppose I was putting a great deal of determination and concentration into my magic."

"That's how." Applejack was still breathing hard, but she could talk normally now, more or less. "Earth pony magic. We aren't just ponies without wings and hooves. We got our own magic and it ain't all about growin' things, though that's a big part."

"You can use magic to make yourself stronger and faster?"

"Yup. But you pay the price after, same as you do with your horn when you overwork it, I guess. Land sakes, but I'm gonna be sore in the mornin', assuming we live that long."

"They're still chasing us, you know. We can't rest here any longer."

"I know. Just needed to catch my breath. Let's go."

They trotted down the alley. And then, to her total shock, Rarity saw guardsponies chasing herself and Applejack down the street. And the "Rarity" running down the street had the same sky blue mane Rarity had dyed her own to, not the lovely indigo that was its natural color and that the alternate Rarity still sported.
"What in tarnation...?" Applejack murmured.

A voice from the other side of the alley, where they'd first come in, called to them. "Wait for all of the guards to pass before you leave."

Rarity turned, and gasped. There was a Changeling standing there. An unusual-looking Changeling, taller than most though nowhere near Chrysalis' size, with a longer horn, and pupils, but no whites. "A Changeling!" she cried, and only after it was out of her mouth realized how redundant that was. Applejack could see that it was a Changeling, and the Changeling already knew what it was.

She spun around again, preparing to run, but now there were two ordinary Changelings at the exit to the alley, blocking her and Applejack in. In Applejack's exhausted state, they might not do nearly so well against Changelings as they had in earlier fights. "What do you want?" she asked, trying to make her tone as fierce as possible.

The unusual-looking Changeling strode forward. "My mother wants the two of you to escape. Twilight Sparkle is being held hostage to your good behavior; my mother cannot be seen to be moving against Celestia, but Celestia has a plan that my mother does not want to see succeed, and she needs Twilight Sparkle to accomplish it."

"Your mother? Didn't know Changelings had mothers. Less'n you're referring to the Queen," Applejack said. "And why would the Queen care one little smidgen what happens to Twilight?"

"She doesn't. She wishes to stop Celestia's plan, so Twilight Sparkle needs to go free."

"How do we know you're not lying to lure us into a trap of some kind?" Rarity demanded.

"When we've lured the guards away and they're too far away to find you, you go to the train station. You and your friends can escape, and then Twilight Sparkle can be freed, and Celestia's plan will not happen."

"What's Celestia plannin', then?" Applejack asked.

"My mother hasn't informed me. I'm only a Princess Changeling; it's not my duty to know the details of my mother's plans, only to carry them out."

"You got a name, Princess?"

The tall Changeling nodded. "All royals have their own names. I am Antennae."

"Well, Princess Antennae, we're right grateful to you, and I suppose to your mother as well, for helpin' us out here. But if we knew what Celestia's plan was, we'd be better able to stop it. So maybe next time you talk with your ma, let her know that fact, and that maybe we'd be willing to help her out with stoppin' it, depending on what it was. I gotta figure if it needs us for hostages against Twilight and for her to be a prisoner then it ain't nothin' good, anyhow."

"I'll convey that," Antennae said.

One of the Changelings spoke. "Your Highness, they're out by the art district now. We've swapped in Team Three already."

"All right." She looked at Rarity and Applejack. "Go now. The guards are out by the city edge. You can reach the train station safely."
Rarity looked at Applejack, silently asking her *Are they telling the truth? Is it safe?*

Applejack had no mind-reading powers, but Rarity supposed her question was obvious, given their situation. "Let's do it, then," she said. "If they wanted to sell us out they'd've done it."

"You have a point," Rarity said. "And it isn't as if we have much choice. All right, then."

They trotted off toward the train station, hoping to meet Spike and Pinkie there.

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**Opposition, 1 PM – Fluttershy (Harmony)**

Fluttershy's legs had been untied, but she was still gagged and her wings were still bound as they led her in to see Princess Celestia. Next to her, Rainbow's wings were tied down, and all four of her legs were tied to each other in a rectangle of hobbles, so she could walk but only slowly and awkwardly. The terrifying alternates were circled around them, Pinkie giggling at the thought that she might get to eat one of their body parts, the other her glowering with hatred and jealousy, and the other Applejack, Rarity and Rainbow alien in how much they just didn't care how wrong what they were doing was.

Princess Celestia met them in the throne room, where she usually met with them. The same stained glass windows hung on the walls. No new ones had been added, not like home where they'd replaced a kind of generic image of Princess Celestia raising the sun – there were three or four of those – with Twilight's alicorn ascension. "Hello, girls. Why is the other Fluttershy gagged?"

"Beggin' your pardon, Your Highness, but we figured her mouth's the most dangerous part of her, just like our Fluttershy. We don't need her to be callin' for help and gettin' a bear to attack us or something like that."

That was ridiculous, Fluttershy fumed to herself... which she probably would have done even if she hadn't been gagged, honestly, but the fact that she couldn't speak if she wanted to hurt. They had never been in a place wild enough that she could have called out to anything large enough to make a difference, and she wasn't going to call small friends to attack ponies who she knew were capable of killing.

"That was wise of you. Well done, Applejack."

"Fluttershy there kept wantin' to kill her, but I was pretty sure you wouldn't want that."

The other Fluttershy's glare got even hotter as she turned on Applejack. "Looking for more concessions from the Crown to line your pockets with, or are you just so used to sucking up you do it by habit?"

"I'm sure it must be very upsetting to be confronted with another version of oneself," Princess Celestia said diplomatically. "But it's best that you brought them both intact. I require this alternate Twilight for a ritual I need to perform tonight, and I need her cooperation. It's best to get it by making sure all of her friends are healthy and comfortable as long as she cooperates." The words sent a chill down Fluttershy's spine, especially in light of Discord's warning. She longed to be able to ask Princess Celestia, but she couldn't talk; she'd deliberately made sure her gag was a little bit loose when it was tied on to make sure she could breathe properly and in hopes that with a little bit of play she could wiggle it off, but the latter idea hadn't worked out. "Unfortunately, her friends have all escaped. So the fact that we have two more of them here is ideal. One can be held here at the palace as hostage to Twilight's cooperation; the other can be used by the five of you as a hostage to recapture the others."
Rainbow Dash's eyes lit up. "Our other friends got away from you? Awesome."

"They did," Princess Celestia said. "You should feel proud of them; they are intelligent and resourceful mares, just as mine are. But now that we have you and Fluttershy, I'm sure we'll recapture them quickly. They're probably going to the train station, since without anypony who can fly in their party it's the fastest way back to Ponyville. I've already ordered that there be no departures until we have a chance to retake them."

Fluttershy's heart sank as she realized it was probably true. The roads that led to Canterlot were wide, long, and meandering, spiraling up the mountain to make it easier for ponies pulling heavy loads to get up and down them safely. The train, magically protected from derailment, could handle a much steeper slope, and went faster than any but the fastest ponies could run, anyway. She wondered if her friends would remember how intelligent Celestia was, and how obvious it was that the train would be the best route back to Ponyville, but to her sorrow and fear she thought probably not. Twilight was the only one of them who really thought about such things. Maybe Fluttershy herself would have figured it out, because she was a little bit better than her friends at thinking through what other ponies would think about something, so she might have realized Celestia would immediately see that as a possibility. But maybe not. She wasn't as smart as Twilight, after all.

"What if they figured that out and they're not at the train station?" the other Applejack asked.

"I have guards posted on all the roads. But I strongly suspect they'll be at the train."

Abruptly, Rainbow – Fluttershy's Rainbow, though they looked identical so she had to go by body language and who was tied up to tell them apart – made a scissoring motion with her forelegs, and back legs, snapping the ropes that held her. She bucked Applejack, hard, and then rounded on the other Fluttershy, punching her. "Fluttershy, run!" she shouted.

Before Fluttershy could even consider doing any such thing, Princess Celestia's horn lit. "Sleep," she said, and Rainbow slumped to the ground, with a final mumble of "hate unicorns..."

She looked down at Fluttershy, and Fluttershy quailed. There was cold anger in her gaze, nothing she had ever seen in her own Princess Celestia. She thought of Discord's letter. "Her eyes are so cold..."

"Will you cooperate, and accompany my little ponies to the train station to rejoin your friends, or must I punish your friend Rainbow?"

She couldn't speak with the gag, so Fluttershy nodded, frantically and repeatedly.

"Well, technically that was not a yes or no question, but I believe you've made your answer clear. You will cooperate, am I right?" More nodding. "Good. Girls, take her to the train station, find her friends, and tell them to surrender or you will harm her. Do not kill." This was aimed at the other Fluttershy. "But you may break her wing or harm her in any non-fatal way you need in order to make her friends stand down and accept recapture."

"We certainly will, Your Highness," the other Rarity said, curtseying. "We won't disappoint you, I promise."

As guards carried the limp form of Rainbow Dash off and the Opposition group led Fluttershy away, she silently prayed to whoever or whatever might be listening that her friends hadn't gone to the train station. Please. Oh, please...
"Rarity!" Spike yelled across the plaza, as he saw an exhausted-looking Rarity, and equally exhausted Applejack behind her, trotting toward the train platform.

Her ears perked up. "Oh, Spike! I am so very glad to see you!"

"And I'm glad to see you! And you're glad to see me! And Applejack, you're glad to see me too, and I'm glad to see you! And Spike is glad to see you both! And we're all glad together!" Pinkie babbled, bouncing over to Rarity and Applejack.

"How long were you waiting for us?" Rarity asked.

"Just about five minutes or so! I stopped to get cookies! All the cookies I had before I lost when I had to fight the other me, and if we're going to rescue Discord we should have cookies to bring him!"

Spike, embarrassed slightly, said, "I couldn't talk her out of it."

"Well, that would've been bad if it left us stuck at the train station too long without you, but since you still got here ahead of us, I reckon there weren't any harm in it," Applejack said. "Any of 'em good cookies? I could maybe use a pick-me-up right now."

"Let's get our tickets first and get on the train," Spike said. "I don't know about you guys but there really aren't a whole lot of young purple dragons around in Canterlot, so I kinda feel exposed here?"

"Good point," Applejack said. "Pinkie, if you got cookies I'm guessing you have bits?"

"I sure do! I made sure to pick all old ones from before Discord first woke up when I decided to bring them, so there'd be no way anypony could tell where they came from." She started to bounce toward the ticket station.

"I don't think you're gonna get real far with that, just saying," a voice overhead said.

"Dash...ie?" Pinkie's excited exclamation died as she glanced up, and Spike knew why, his heart sinking. The Rainbow Dash hovering in air was visually indistinguishable from their own, and sounded the same... but she was holding up a bound and gagged Fluttershy, who was in a net attached to Rainbow Dash's waist by a harness. And the bound and gagged Fluttershy had a lavender mane, not a pink one. So she was their Fluttershy, which meant that that was the Opposition's Rainbow Dash.

"So, Princess Celestia ordered that the trains aren't even gonna run until we recapture you four," Opposition Rainbow said. "My team's on their way here, but since I'm, like, the fastest pony in Equestria, I decided to come here first."

"You brute! Release her right now!" Rarity demanded.

"Naah, I don't think you want me to do that. She's got her wings tied up, you know, so if I tip this net over? Ouchie. I mean, no big, it's not like falling from this height's gonna kill her. Course, if then I land on her, that might break a few bones, but..."

"Where's our Rainbow Dash?" Applejack asked sharply.

"We left her back at the palace. Princess Celestia figured this would work best if we had one
hostage at the palace to make sure your egghead does what she's supposed to, and one hostage here so I can get you guys to surrender nice and easy. I mean you could fight, I'm up for that, I'm just saying I'm supposed to break your friend's bones here if you do."

The others arrived, sans Twilight, the other Fluttershy flitting up to Rainbow Dash as the three other ponies trotted in. The plaza was clearing, ponies who realized that something was going on backing away and making themselves scarce.

There was no Twilight, Spike thought. So it was five to five, with no unicorn – or alicorn – to bring major magic into the fight. But he personally was no match for Rainbow Dash. His only weapons were his claws and his fire breath. She could fly. For the millionth time, he felt a short stab of resentment because dragons were supposed to be able to fly, so where were his own wings? For the millionth time, he forced it down. He was still young. Twilight thought they might grow in, later.

And there was the fact that their own Fluttershy was a prisoner, a hostage. And they had no one who could fly to her rescue if Opposition Rainbow dropped her. Pegasii's light bodies and flexible bones made them pretty resistant to fall damage; Fluttershy might be fine. Opposition Rainbow was only hanging about three pony heights over their heads, maybe twelve heads in the air, and Fluttershy was dangling a bit lower than that. But the other Fluttershy was there, Fluttercruel, looking at Fluttershy with a vicious expression. Spike shuddered, remembering what Discord had written, what that version of Fluttershy was capable of. And if she attacked her helpless counterpart the way that all of the others had attacked their own counterparts, in the fight in the woods... it wouldn't be the fall that broke all of Fluttershy's bones, it would be attacks from her cruel counterpart while she was tied up and in a net and couldn't dodge.

"Guys, I... I think we have to do this," he said weakly.

"Nuh-uh! There's gotta be a way!" Pinkie said frantically. "We can't go down like this!"

"If it makes you feel better," the alternate Applejack said, "Princess Celestia's guaranteed your safety, long as you cooperate."

"Are we supposed to believe that's the truth?" Applejack said. "'Cause my understandin' is that you've turned your back on Apple Family honor and turned into a liar, and a good one, a long time ago, so how're we supposed to believe you?"

"You can believe me!" the alternate Pinkie said, with a scowl. "Because I'm very very disappointed! I wanted to eat you but Princess Celestia won't even let me take one little taste, because she says we have to keep you safe so Twilight will do the thing Princess Celestia wants her to do!"

"Really? What thing is that?" Pinkie asked.

Opposition Pinkie shrugged. "I dunno, it was a secret!"

Pinkie bounded forward and grabbed her counterpart. "IT WAS A SECRET AND YOU DIDN'T EVEN TRY TO FIND OUT? WHAT KIND OF A PINKIE ARE YOU?!"

Everypony on both sides stared at her. Pinkie seemed to realize this, and smiled weakly with embarrassment. "Ah... heh, heh... I'll just back up to my corner then," she said, trotting backwards, rather rapidly, until she rejoined the rest of them.

Rarity said softly, "I agree with Spike. I don't see a way to rescue Fluttershy and fight off our counterparts. If Applejack and I weren't so exhausted, maybe..."
"She's right. We're tuckered out. I could fight if I had to, but truth is, I'd lose and I know it."

"But I just have an awful feeling!" Pinkie said. "If we can't hurry up and rescue Discord and Twilight, and now Dashie and Fluttershy, something terrible's going to happen! I just know it!"

"Well, you got any ideas for getting Fluttershy out of there safe when the other her looks like a mean old badger ready to bite out her throat if she moves funny?" Applejack asked. "Cause I sure don't."

"No," Pinkie said, and slumped to the ground. "No, I—I can't see any way to do it." She straightened up. "We're just gonna have to try again after we're with our Dashie."

"What's it gonna be, losers?" Opposition Rainbow shouted.

Applejack turned toward her. "Set Fluttershy down on the ground and get that net off of her, and we'll surrender."

The other Applejack considered. "All right then. Fluttershy, you stay with the other you. Be ready to knock her lights out if they try anything funny."

"With pleasure," Fluttercruel hissed.

"But don't do a single darned thing to her if her friends don't try anything funny."

"I know that! Do you think I'm stupid? I heard what Princess Celestia told us!"

Opposition Rainbow lowered Fluttershy to the ground, and Opposition Applejack opened the net and helped her out of it. "Hopin' you understand," she said to Fluttershy, who was still gagged. "We gotta do right by our world and our princess, no matter what. You'd do the same."

Fluttershy glared at her with the most hate-filled expression Spike had ever seen on Fluttershy... which didn't mean too much, as the only times he'd ever seen Fluttershy hate anything were when she'd been discorded and when she'd taken Iron Will's training too much to heart. But it was still startling. And then Spike remembered what Discord's letter had said this Applejack had done to him.

Their own Applejack said, "We would not. If Princess Celestia ordered me to torture somepony, I'd reckon she was messed up in the head or she was possessed like Nightmare Moon or it was a Changeling or something. I wouldn't blindly follow orders if I knew they were wrong."

"Ain't wrong to teach Discord a lesson or two," Opposition Applejack retorted. "He's got it coming."

They had to do nothing as a ring was placed on Rarity's horn, making her wail. "Oh, my head, it aches! It aches so much! Oh, this is torture!"

"Well, perhaps you should have thought of that before using your magic to wound so many loyal Royal Guards," the other Rarity snapped. "Nopony who matters cares what you think in any case."

All of the ponies' forelegs were tied together, with enough rope that they could still walk but not enough that they could run. Nopony tried to bind Spike, though. "Come along now. We don't want to keep Princess Celestia waiting," the other Rarity said.

Spike used his claws to cut Fluttershy's gag loose. "Boy, you guys can't even be bothered to ungag her? You're so scared of Fluttershy you can't even let her talk?"
"Thank you, Spike," Fluttershy said, spitting the remains of her gag out. "I do have something
important to say, though."

"Oh, as if anyone cares," Fluttercruel spat.

"I think you'll care a lot," Fluttershy said. "If you knew Twilight was going to kill Discord in a
ritual, tonight, and all your friends knew about it but you."

Fluttercruel's eyes went wide. "You're lying."

"Gag her again," Applejack said. "Fluttershy, you know she'll say anything to get her own way."

"Don't gag her!" Fluttercruel snarled. "What you mean is that I'll say anything to get my own way,
right? You've never respected me! Tell me the honest truth for once, Applejack, is she lying?"

"She's not!" Pinkie said. "I've been getting twitches and pinches and premonitions of doom for a
long time now! That must be why!" She turned to the alternate Pinkie. "And that must be why you
don't feel it! Because you don't care if Discord dies or not, so it's not a bad thing for your Pinkie
Sense to warn you about!"

The other Pinkie said uneasily, "I have been getting kind of a bad feeling, though..."

"Discord tricked your Twilight," Fluttershy said. "He told me, when I went to him. He wanted to
die after you told him I wasn't his friend, so he tricked Twilight into doing a ritual that will destroy
the world. But she thinks it will give her the power to save the world."

"Discord can't lie," Opposition Rainbow Dash protested.

"He can mislead if he wants to," Opposition Applejack said. "Question is, who's he misleading,
Twilight or the other Fluttershy?"

"Why would he need to mislead me?" Fluttershy said. "If all he said was that Twilight was going to
kill him tonight, I'd still try to rescue him. Telling me that his death will also destroy your world
won't make me try any harder, because I would have already done my best. But don't you think
he'd have very good reasons to mislead Twilight? Like, um, maybe revenge? On all of you? For
hurting him?"

The Opposition team all looked at each other. "We'd better consult with Princess Celestia,"
Opposition Applejack finally said. "She wanted us to take these guys in, so we can do it when we
do that."

"Fat, stinking, bloody turds on that," Fluttercruel snarled, and glared at Opposition Rainbow. "You
knew they were going to kill Discord and you didn't tell me?"

"I didn't! And I don't owe you anything anyway, considering you called me a whorse the last time
we talked, but I didn't know! That little runt over there who thinks she's you said something like
that to me, but I thought she was just lying to turn me against Twilight!"

"Well, we can't take the risk," Fluttercruel said, still holding Opposition Rainbow's eyes with her
own. "They can bring the prisoners to Princess Celestia, since they can get Royal Guards to help
them. We are going to Twilight's and we are going to get some answers. And by that I mean you,
and me, Miss Supposedly Fastest Flier. Now, are you with me or against me?"

"Fluttershy, you can't do this," Opposition Applejack said. "We need you and Rainbow to keep
these prisoners under control!"
"No, I *need* to make sure Twilight isn't preparing to kill *my* prisoner! Get Rarity to get some guardsponies to help, all she'll need to do is wiggle her flank, like she always does. *Rainbow!* She hadn't taken her eyes off Opposition Rainbow once. "*Are you with me or against me?*

"I... guess I'm with. This time," Opposition Rainbow said, trying to sound casual, but Spike knew his own Rainbow well enough to hear the unease in her voice.

The two pegasi blasted off. It couldn't even be described as flying. Fluttercruel took off like a shot, her wings a hummingbird blur, and Opposition Rainbow right behind her.

"Right great friends you have there," Applejack said to Opposition Applejack.

"Shut up. Pinkie?"

"What? What?" Opposition Pinkie asked eagerly.

"You walk next to their Fluttershy. They give us any trouble at all before we hand them over to the Princess, cut her throat. And if she says one more word, take her ear."

"Which ear?"

"*Either* of them."

So that was bad. They couldn't try to break loose, even though the odds were a lot better now, with the threat to Fluttershy in the way. On the other hoof – or paw, in his case – nopony had thought to tie *him* up, and Spike knew how to get a horn ring off, and could cut ropes. As long as they didn't try to separate him from his friends, he knew how they were going to manage their second escape attempt. Just as soon as they were reunited with their own Rainbow Dash, and there was no longer a cheerfully vicious knife-wielder trotting next to Fluttershy with all of Pinkie's abilities and none of her kindness.

And now that he knew that this Princess Celestia was preparing to do some sort of ritual on Twilight, a ritual that Twilight plainly didn't want to cooperate with and had to be forced into by a threat to her friends, Spike knew the second escape attempt had to *work.*

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**Opposition, 1 PM – Twilight (Opposition)**

She had enough ink to draw the initial set of runes. She'd checked and rechecked. The second set would be drawn with Discord's blood, which he had plenty of. The initial runes could be amplified somewhat if she cut off some expendable and flammable part of him, for instance the feathers on his wings or the tuft of fur at the tip of his tail, burned them, and added the ashes to the runic ink. But that should be done late afternoon so none of the power would have a chance to fade. Now Twilight was practicing drawing the runes, out of sequence of course and with regular ink, over and over and over. They had to be perfect. The slightest deviation in a rune, and she could inadvertently change its meaning, and ruin everything.

She could smell bleach from the workroom; Spike had left the door open. He was immune to the fumes of lava, but apparently not to bleach, so he needed ventilation. Twilight didn't care. The smell reminded her of cleanliness and things being neat and tidy and orderly and perfect. She couldn't have picked a better scent for improving her mood. And Discord was bound both physically and by her orders. Even if his chains were loose and the door was wide open, he couldn't walk through it. Despite what he'd said, she had to assume he would take an opportunity to escape if he saw one... so she had made sure there were none.
Twilight was still tired – she'd had nowhere near enough sleep from her nap to compensate for being awake all night. But it didn't matter now. After moonrise tonight, perhaps she'd never need sleep again.

Over and over she practiced the runes, engraving their shape in her mind. Over and over. There could be no mistakes. Over and over.

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I've also got some short fiction for sale at Amazon; search on my name. And a blog about all the things I do badly at alarajrogers.wordpress.com.
**Opposition, 1 PM – Discord**

The door to Twilight's workroom opened. Discord had been half-dozing, too tired from sleep deprivation and the aches in his body to manage to stay fully awake, but he'd always been a light sleeper and his experiences in this world had only accentuated that. He jerked awake, lifted his head, and shrank back against the floor. It was Fluttercruel.

She didn't speak to him; no cheerful caroling to rise and shine or exclamations of what a good morning it was or anything like that. Completely quiet, she walked over to him.

"Mistress Fluttershy?" Discord tried, fearfully. She had never given him the silent treatment. Was this about the existence of the real Fluttershy? Was she going to take it out on him that her lies had been exposed, and Fluttershy had proven that she was truly his friend after all?

"Hold still," Fluttercruel said. "Close your eyes."

Discord whimpered. This was looking as if it was going to be exceptionally bad. He knew Fluttercruel. This kind of lack of interaction – nothing but silence and blunt orders – was completely out of character for her, and suggested that she must be enraged beyond any previous expression of anger he'd ever seen. He obeyed, but then, since closing his eyes was a discrete action and he'd already satisfied his orders by doing it, he cracked one of them open again. "What have I done? Mistress, please, if you're going to punish me at least tell me why, please..."

"Don't question me," Fluttercruel snapped. "Now lift your head a little bit."

With the eye that was open just a tiny sliver, he saw her pull out a knife from a saddlebag. "Wait! What are you doing?"

"I said don't question me," she said, and now, at over five seconds since she'd delivered the first order, he couldn't. She went to his side and tried to grab his head by the mane, but of course all that happened was that she pulled his feathers out, which was painful and surprising. It seemed to come as a surprise to her as well, which didn't make any sense; Fluttercruel knew every part of his anatomy intimately. She knew the black feathers that were all that age had left of his mane would come right out if yanked.

When her hoof touched his antler and clamped on it, pulling his head back, his terror overwhelmed him, and he screamed. Only a short while ago he'd been fully prepared to offer his throat to Spike's claws; if it was the only way to make sure the things he'd set in motion didn't result in the destruction of an entire world, and his friends, he'd accepted that. But Fluttercruel behaving strangely, and refusing to talk to him, and the knife in her hoof – if she was here to kill him to save the world from Twilight's plans, or because she was angry that he knew she lied, why wouldn't she talk to him? Why wouldn't she tell him the reason why?

"Shut up!" she barked at him, but he had five seconds.

"Spike! Twilight! Someone, help, please, she's trying—"

The order cut him off then, silencing him, but it was enough. Spike shoved the door to the room open. "What the – Fluttershy? What are you doing with that knife?"

Fluttercruel shrieked, and lunged at Spike, blue-green flame consuming her as she did... leaving
behind a creature covered in black chitin. A changeling! The changeling slammed Spike to the ground and bared its fangs at him. Spike screamed, and Discord moved. He was tired, and weak, but he was still much larger than a pony – or a changeling – and if it was a changeling, there was nothing preventing him from hurting it, let alone forcing him to take its orders. With his neck, one wing, and one hindpaw shackled, he couldn't move his body very far, but he could swing his tail – and did, slamming it into the changeling and knocking the creature off Spike.

Spike shouted, with a volume that would have impressed Luna. "TWILIGHT! THERE'S A CHANGELING TRYING TO KILL—"

The changeling lunged at Spike again, knocking the wind out of him. "Shut up!"

They were out of reach of Discord's tail, this time. Discord laughed raucously, trying to distract the changeling and provoke it. "And here I thought Chryssie was supposed to be Celestia's ally nowadays. I suppose her true colors had to come out sometime!"

"You shut up!" the changeling snarled, getting off Spike and flying at Discord, with the knife. "You don't even have the right to say her name, monster!"

"Twilight! HELP!" Spike yelled.

The changeling buzzed in toward Discord's throat again, but now that he knew it wasn't Fluttercrue, he could defend himself. He shrunk back toward the posts his shackles were tied to, to give himself more slack, and then tilted his head down and lunged as the changeling came at him, hitting the changeling with his horn and antler. The changeling yelled, and swung the knife, which struck the goat horn hard enough that it might have chipped, but unlike a unicorn Discord's head appendages were not magically active and had no sensation in themselves, only the pressure they could put on his skull.

And then the changeling was pulled back with a yelp, in a purple magical aura. Twilight strode deeper into the room, holding the changeling in mid-air. "Changeling. What are you doing in my workroom?"

"It was trying to kill Discord!" Spike volunteered. "When I came in it was impersonating Fluttershy and it had a knife and it looked like it was going to cut his throat with it!"

"Is that true?" The changeling said nothing. "I suppose I need to cast a truth spell, is that it?"

The changeling wailed, and flashed with blue-green fire – that quickly turned yellow and orange. The changeling screamed, burning. Discord could feel the intense heat even from several heads away. Moments later there was nothing there but ash, which blew out of Twilight's magical field and dispersed as a fine cloud in the air.

"Interesting," Twilight said. She glanced at Discord. "Chrysalis must fear that he might be about to escape. Spike, take a letter. We need to find out what the status of the alternates is."

"A-all right."

Twilight dictated the letter to Spike, asking Celestia what was going on with the alternates. Despite himself Discord felt a surge of hope. If Chrysalis thought he was about to escape, and sent an assassin to kill him to prevent that, did that mean Chrysalis knew something about his friends – like, perhaps, that they'd escaped and were on their way back here? "Why does Chrysalis want me dead so badly?" he asked.

When Twilight was experimenting on him, she'd never answer any of his questions – she treated
him entirely as if he was an object. But when she wasn't, he'd found that her natural desire to answer questions, impart information, and lecture led her to answering his questions when he asked them, if she wasn't paying enough attention to remember that she didn't want to do that. "What your dead counterpart did to the changelings was beyond monstrous," Twilight said. "I am... not entirely comfortable with some of what Chrysalis does, but her loyalty to Princess Celestia and Equestria in the years since your counterpart first started attacking her cannot be disputed. For her to defy Princess Celestia's will by attempting to kill you without my permission is... unusual." She frowned. "Take another letter, Spike. Address it to Shining Armor to begin."

"To begin?" Spike asked.

"Yes. 'Dear Shining Armor, I'm sending this letter to Chrysalis care of you. Can you make sure she gets it? Sincerely, your sister, Twilight Sparkle.' Now leave a space – perhaps even draw a line. Yes, that would be best. Draw a line, and then write, 'Dear Queen Chrysalis, One of your changelings just tried to kill my prisoner, and then suicided before I could question it, but I am fairly sure that it was under your orders. I don't appreciate you trying to kill my prisoner out from under me. If you are concerned that Discord will be freed or will escape, don't be; I intend to sacrifice him in a ritual tonight. He won't live past sundown. However, if he dies earlier than that, everything I have been working toward in the past two months will be ruined, and I will be certain that you pay for that. Don't think I can't harm you; the very fact that I took Discord prisoner should tell you that I am not someone you want to make angry. I hope that we understand each other now, and that you have been reassured, knowing what Discord's fate will be. Sincerely, Twilight Sparkle, Element of Magic and Order.' That should do it."

"Does she know this isn't the same Discord?" Spike asked, as he sent the letter.

"Irrelevant. This Discord has equal potential to cause harm, if he should get free."

"Except for the part where if I did get free and my collar was removed, your crystals would tear me to bits," Discord said.

"That's exactly why I gave you those crystals, but Chrysalis doesn't know that. It's important to reassure her that you're not going to escape, but it's also important to keep her in her place. If I have to, I will cast a memory spell on my brother to make him forget who she is. She'd have little luck drawing love from him then. I don't appreciate her interference."

"The other me did awful things to most of you. Why is Chrysalis the only one who thought I should die for it?"

"Demonstrably untrue." Twilight raised an eyebrow. "Spike was the one that killed you."

"I didn't do it because I thought he should die," Spike said. "I did it because I was afraid of what would happen if he got loose again someday."

"And that's likely Chrysalis's motive as well, at least in part, though I wouldn't rule out a desire for revenge either." She looked down at Spike. "If Chrysalis had been aware of the existence or location of the Hammer of Celestia, she might have been the one responsible for the excess of ambient chaos and entropy after Discord was destroyed, rather than you."

Oh. Right. The other him had been a statue when he was killed, of course. Discord had known that, but the implications hadn't occurred to him before, because there wouldn't have been any way he could make use of them before. But he had a plan now. He just needed to talk to Spike alone, without Twilight. And hope that Spike was just the right amount of dragon – not draconic enough and he wouldn't have what Discord needed; too draconic and he wouldn't be willing to give it up,
Spike looked as if he was going to say something to Twilight, probably something defensive again, but instead he burped out light green flame, which assembled itself into a letter. Twilight snatched it up with her magic. "Oh, good. Excellent."

"What does it say?" Spike asked.

"Princess Celestia has responded to the question we sent. She says that all of the alternates have been captured, now."

Discord's heart sank. They had Fluttershy. He should have assumed that that would happen; she wasn't much of a fighter. At least if she was reunited with all of her friends... maybe Twilight would come up with something, and get them all out of there. But he couldn't bet on it.

He could save the world by committing suicide, if he could nerve himself up to rip out his own throat with his claws, but part of the reason he'd never done it, no matter how far into despair he'd sunk, was that he wasn't sure he had the nerve to inflict that much pain on himself. Biting off his own flesh and eating it was one thing; he'd been so hungry, and the smell of his own blood had triggered his carnivorous instincts the way the dead pony had yesterday, making his hunger too maddening to bear... and his tail had already been mangled and mutilated, so what more damage could a few bites do? But none of that applied to slicing his own throat open. To be completely honest, Discord hadn't done that to any creature in more than two thousand years, when he'd been a starving child and he'd chased predators off dying prey and then hadn't been able to do anything for the prey but give them a quick release from their pain, and he'd convinced himself that it was okay to eat them after that because otherwise the predator who'd done the damage would get the reward. He knew his claws were sharp enough to do it, but he didn't think he could go through with it. And if Spike wouldn't do it...

...Well. Then the plan he'd just thought of might very well be the world's only hope. And it was certainly his best hope for surviving.

"Spike. I'll need your assistance. Come with me."

Discord watched forlornly as Twilight led his best hope away. He could only pray – to no one in particular, since Discord didn't believe in any gods that bothered to answer the prayers of anyone on the mortal plane – that Spike would have a chance to come back without Twilight, sometime before the ritual started. And that he'd have what Discord needed. And that he'd be willing to hand it over. Because otherwise Discord saw very little chance of stopping Twilight from performing the ritual, one way or the other.

**Opposition, 2 PM – Rainbow Dash (Harmony)**

For the fourteenth time, Rainbow tried to contort herself backward to bite through the ropes binding her wings. For the fourteenth time, she failed. Ponies simply didn't bend that way. *But I should be able to do it!* she argued with herself. *You can't be as great a stunt flyer as I am without being really flexible!* The sad truth was, though, she wasn't flexible enough. Maybe Pinkie would be, in this situation, or an acrobat pony, but Rainbow couldn't get her teeth around the ropes no matter how hard she tried.

The next step was to try to flex her wings in such a way as to loosen her bonds. This had to be done really carefully, because of course the knot was the kind that got tighter the more you pulled. The goal wasn't to pull the ropes to loosen them, since that was exactly the opposite of what would happen if she pulled; it was to move them from the middle of her wings toward the tips, where her
wings were smaller and the likelihood that she could just pull the wings out of the ropes was greater. This strategy might be working – it was hard to tell. Wings didn't sweat, but pony bodies did, so the exertion was making her flanks slippery, and that was good. The rope was more likely to move, that way. But if she was making any progress, it was infinitesimal enough that it was very, very hard for her to tell for certain that it was happening. The incredibly slow and possibly nonexistent progress frustrated her terribly, which was why every so often she'd try biting the ropes instead.

Her attempts were interrupted by two guards – a unicorn and a Clydesdale-sized earth pony – entering the room. "You're to come with us," the unicorn said.

"About time. You gonna let me see my friends now?"

"Princess Celestia wants to see you."

That wasn't much of an answer but it was the best she was going to get, Rainbow figured. She trotted after the guards. Nopony had tried to keep her from freeing her legs, after she'd woken up in a cell; maybe the Royal Guards thought she was nothing but wingpower and underestimated what she could do with her hooves. The evil versions of her friends had known better, but they hadn't been the ones keeping her in the dungeons. Or wherever. It seemed like maybe she'd been being held prisoner high rather than low, because they trotted down to the audience room.

Her first reaction on seeing the mares in the audience room, and the tiny dragon, was joy. Yes! They're all right! Twilight wasn't there, but all of the others were. Unfortunately, so were the alternates of Applejack, Pinkie and Rarity. The alternates of Rainbow herself and of Fluttershy were missing, and Rainbow wondered idly what they were doing, but Applejack and Pinkie were more than dangerous enough all by themselves. Her own Applejack and Pinkie, as well as Rarity and Fluttershy, had their forelegs hobbled, and Rarity had a horn ring on. Well, that was going to make a fight difficult, if they had to bust loose, but Spike was free. That wouldn't have meant much to Rainbow once, but the kid had proven himself in combat when they'd fought the Changelings, and those sharp claws and teeth would be great for ripping through ropes.

"Hay, guys, long time no see," she said.

Rarity smiled wanly at her. "Well, the circumstances could certainly be better, but I'm glad to see you again, Rainbow."

"Yeah, me too. What happened to the other me and psycho Flutters?"

"Best be shutting up now if you know what's good for your friends," Opposition Applejack warned.

That was ominous. Not "what's good for you" but "what's good for your friends." Of course, this was the same Applejack who'd forced her to surrender by threatening to cut off Fluttershy's wings.

Princess Celestia entered the audience chamber. The Royal Guards bowed; the Opposition Bearers did not, but they all nodded their heads, the way you did to show respect if for some reason you couldn't bow, like that you were escorting dangerous prisoners. At least they weren't being underestimated, but Rainbow could seriously have used a little underestimation right now.

"Greetings, my little ponies," Celestia said. The weird thing was how much she looked and sounded exactly like their Celestia. Rainbow didn't know what she'd expected, maybe some kind of Nightmare Moon like creature. Daymare Sun? Did that even make any sense? What would Celestia look like if she turned evil, anyway? Exactly like their own Celestia, apparently. "Applejack,
Rarity, Pinkie, your team have done well in bringing these alternates to me. Though... where are Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash? I expected them to be here as well."

"Begging your pardon, your highness, but when we caught these guys, their Fluttershy had some stuff to say about Twilight plannin' to sacrifice Discord in some kind of dangerous ritual, so our Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash headed back to Ponyville to check on that and see if it's true." Opposition Applejack said.

Celestia raised an eyebrow. "Well. That would be very surprising, if it did turn out to be true. I suppose I should write to Twilight and get the details, in a bit."

"It is true, Princess," Fluttershy said softly. "Twilight thinks she's going to bring eternal life to ponykind, but she's actually going to destroy the world. She can't be allowed to kill Discord, please, you have to tell her to stop."

"I will certainly take that under consideration," Celestia said. "I can't imagine that Twilight wouldn't be willing to share the details of the ritual with me, if it's intended to have such a positive benefit."

"It might be true," Opposition Pinkie said. "I've been getting a bad feeling all day, but not like a twitchy bad feeling, more like just a general badness and I can't tell what it means but maybe it means something really bad so you should definitely check, Princess!"

"Don't worry, I will. Now, I'd like to take these ponies to meet with their Twilight; she's been very anxious about them."

"Well, you know best, Princess. Is it okay if the three of us head back to Ponyville now? We can check up on Twilight for you and see what she's up to, and I figure you don't need our help anymore, with all these guards."

"Of course. Go on. I'm sure my guards can manage to watch over five ponies and a baby dragon, particularly since those ponies know that anything one of them does could be held against the others."

Which was absolutely true and had to be taken into account in any action plan, and in particular, the first thing to do would have to be to protect Fluttershy, Rainbow thought. But these guards didn't know them nearly as well as their counterparts did. They'd already proven they were underestimating Rainbow and Spike, and she'd bet bits to bagels that they'd underestimate the others too. Still, if they were going to be reunited with Twilight it'd be best to wait for that. Spike's little claws could get a horn ring off, Rainbow was pretty sure, and in a fight between Twilight and two dozen Royal Guards, Twi would win as long as one of them wasn't her brother. Which meant if Shining Armor showed up, it was on Rainbow herself, or Applejack, to buck him in the head first thing if a fight started.

The Opposition mares left, and Celestia led their group up a long, spiraling staircase. Obviously they were going up a tower. A really tall tower. A really, really tall tower. Rainbow tried flexing her wings out of their bonds again, but no go. They had to go single file on the stairs, and there was a guard in front of and a guard behind each of them – not the same guard, so she was separated from Rarity, ahead of her, and Fluttershy, behind her, by two guards each. There wasn't room to fly in these cramped conditions and no room to dodge around anypony, so it wasn't a good place to have a fight anyway.

When they left the dim stairwell, Rainbow blinked at the brightness of the sun. Only mid-afternoon? It felt like she'd been here in this other world for weeks now. They walked out onto the
roof of the palace, a flat space sheltered slightly by a short wall, about the height of a pre-cutie-mark foal, and parapets resting on that wall. Rainbow wandered close to the wall to assess the situation, and drew in a sharp breath.

The view was breathtaking. Even for a pegasus, used to flying amongst the clouds, looking down over the side of the palace that hung over the edge of the mountain was amazing. They were above the main cloud layers here; Canterlot weather teams were chosen from among the physically strongest pegasi, since they needed to be able to pull waterspouts up the mountainside to fill the reservoirs at the very top of the Canterhorn, as there was no other way to get rain in Canterlot. The air here was distinctly thinner than on the ground – something she always noticed in Canterlot, of course, but looking down the side of the mountain, the thin, cool air reinforced how very far up they were. Rainbow felt her usual impulse when confronted with a great height, the hard-to-control urge to jump down, wings spread, and do some serious stunt flying. Maybe a speed plummet, and then catch a thermal as she went through the lower clouds and pull up, then Rainboom back up the mountain. That would be awesome.

Unfortunately, right now, completely impossible. Her wings were bound. And even if she managed to get them free in time... Applejack was heavy and Pinkie was plump and there was no way Rainbow could carry them both, and equally, no way Fluttershy could carry anyone but Spike – even Rarity, a svelte unicorn without an earth pony's mass, would be too heavy for Fluttershy. Rainbow was actually not certain Fluttershy could make it to the ground at all from this height without terror freezing her wings and causing her to fall. There would be no surviving a jump from this height for any of her friends, or her if she couldn't get her wings unbound in time. So unless they could get Twilight's horn ring off – Rainbow had to assume there was a horn ring involved – and, maybe, her wings would be bound too. Hay, it would be stupid to leave your prisoner with working wings, right? So yeah, probably they'd have to get her wings untied too, although with her magic Twilight could do it herself. The point was, unless they could free Twilight's magic, there was no way off this roof but back down through that cramped, narrow stairwell.

"Please wait here," Celestia said. "I'll be going to get Twilight and bring her to see you. In the meantime, enjoy the view. It really is beautiful, isn't it, Rainbow?"

Rainbow started, not having expected Celestia to address her directly. She scowled. "Yeah, it's pretty and all, but I'd rather see my friend."

"Patience," Celestia said. "It'll only be a few minutes."

She headed back down the stairs without any of the guards, leaving them all to guard Rainbow and her friends. Rainbow looked at the others. "I guess we're just gonna wait, huh?"

"Not much else we can do," Applejack said.

"We could talk to the guards!" Pinkie suggested. "Hey! Hey, Mr. Royal Guard! Why do you have to have such a frowny face when you're doing your job? You should lighten up! Don't you like protecting Equestria?"

"Being in the Royal Guard is serious business," the pegasus guard she was harassing growled at her.

"Cloudstriker, don't engage with them," one of the guards snapped. "You know better."

"Oh, come on! I'm just trying to get you guys to relax a little and have fun! Can't you turn that frown upside down?"
Rainbow grinned. Let Pinkie frustrate and discombobulate them and throw them off balance. The moment one of them slipped up, Rainbow would be prepared to take advantage.

**Opposition, 2 PM – Twilight (Harmony)**

Twilight's frantic search for something, anything, to even her odds and help her get out of here had proven fruitless. She sat, slumped over, her mind racing around and around in circles. Her efforts to pull her horn ring off had only resulted in pain, and while she was willing to push through pain to save herself, she was very much afraid that if she did manage to get the ring off, it would tear up her horn so badly that she wouldn't be able to use magic anyway.

There was nothing she could do.

And then Celestia entered. Twilight perked up, not because she was happy to see the twisted alternate of her teacher, but because it meant something was going to happen, and if the circumstances she was in changed, maybe there'd be an opportunity she could take advantage of.

"I'm sorry for the wait," Celestia said. "I hope you weren't too inconvenienced."

Twilight laughed, and could tell that her laugh sounded fake even as she did it. "No, not at all, Princess! Take as much time as you need!"

"Thankfully, I shouldn't be called away again anytime soon. Your friends have all been recaptured, including Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy. I have them in custody now." Twilight tried to keep the shock and despair she felt off her face, but obviously failed, because Celestia continued. "Don't worry; as long as they cooperate and as long as you do, they won't be harmed, and they'll be released after all of this is over."

Twilight took a deep breath. "I'd like to see them."

"That's exactly what I came here to do. I'm going to have to have them kept in separate cells until after the ritual, obviously; their greatest strength is their friendship and their ability to work together, and if I let them stay together I'm sure they'll come up with some way to be disruptive. Right now, I have them all together, though, so this would be the ideal time for you to see them, and say goodbye."

Celestia was going to *let* her see her friends before the end? Maybe this Celestia wasn't as completely corrupted as the alternate Bearers. Maybe she actually felt guilt over what she was doing. This could possibly be a weakness that could be exploited, but regardless, of course Twilight wanted to see her friends. "Yes! I'd love that!" Abruptly it occurred to her that it might sound like she was overdoing it on the enthusiasm, given the circumstances. "I mean, not *love* it like I like the situation, of course, but given that the situation is what it is... oh, you know what I mean, Princess."

"Yes. I do." Celestia smiled gently at Twilight. "Come on then. We don't want to keep them waiting."

She led Twilight toward one of the towers, followed by two guards behind them. "What I really need to impress upon you, Twilight, is that it's critical that they don't interfere, and I need you to make that clear to them. If any of them try to disrupt the ritual, or prevent you from participating in it, I will have to make an example of them."

"An... example?" Twilight stopped short. "Exactly what kind of 'example' do you mean, Princess?"

Celestia looked back at Twilight with Standard Slightly Saddened Face Number 15. "I mean that if
any of your friends try to disrupt this ritual, I will have to have them executed."

"What? You can't do that! The whole reason I agreed to do this is that you promised my friends would be safe!"

Slightly Saddened Face Number 15 hardened just a little bit. "And they will be, as long as they cooperate."

Twilight's eyes narrowed. "Even Spike?"

Celestia didn't reply. Twilight pressed her advantage. "When I had just become your student, and I was too little to take care of a baby dragon full time, you took him. You'd keep him next to you in your audience chamber, popping gems into his mouth if he started to cry. When I had lessons with you, Spike slept in a basket in the room with us, and when he fussed, I remember how you'd go over and soothe him and then show me how to do it. For the first couple of years of his life, you were practically his mom. Even though you always told me he would be my responsibility, because I brought him into this world, you were the one who was there for him when he was a baby. Was that different in this world? Were you not the one who raised Spike when he was an infant? Do you not even care about him, at all?"

Celestia didn't look at Twilight, but her head hung down. Twilight had hit a nerve. "I won't kill Spike unless you resist," she said finally, softly. "If he resists... I'd expect no less from a dragon child. You are his hatching-mother, the pony he gives all his love and loyalty to, and dragons will gladly die to save the one who hatched them, if it comes to that. I doubt he's old enough to be fully rational about it. So no... I won't harm him if he resists." Her voice turned cold again. "The others, though, are grown mares, and perfectly capable of assessing the risks of an action. They will forfeit their lives if they try to prevent this from happening."

"Can you really kill Spike just to make me cooperate to bring Princess Luna back, or are you bluffing?" Twilight countered. "The Princess Celestia I know couldn't kill Spike for anything. I believe that you're willing to kill my friends, but I don't think you're really willing to kill Spike. And if you aren't willing to kill Spike, then aren't you worried that if you kill my friends, I won't cooperate?"

This time, Celestia looked back at Twilight, and her expression was icy. "Are you willing to test me on that, Twilight?"

Twilight shrank back automatically, long conditioning making her terrified of Celestia's displeasure in any way, because it would mean she was doing something wrong – until she remembered that this wasn't her Celestia. She glared at the princess.

"To be honest, Princess, you've allowed someone to be brutally tortured by your student and you don't seem to care, even though you know he didn't personally do any of the horrible things his counterpart did to you. You let Chrysalis use mind control on the most loyal and honorable member of your Royal Guard you have. And you're willing to kill a pony to bring your sister back to life. I don't put anything past you. So no, I'm not willing to test you on that."

Celestia stared back. "Good." She turned and began walking again. "You don't have to like me, Twilight. I'd be surprised if you did. After what my world and every pony in it have been through, I'm sure I'm very different from the pony you know. But everything I've done, I've done for the good of Equestria. I wouldn't sacrifice an innocent pony's life to bring back Luna if I thought we could survive much longer without her."

"I hope for your sake she sees it your way," Twilight said. "Because the Princess Luna I know
wouldn't be happy that an innocent pony was killed for her sake."

"I know," Celestia said softly. "But even if she hates me forever for what I did to bring her back to life... at least she'll be alive."

**Opposition, 2 PM – Spike (Opposition)**

Spike's paw was shaking slightly as he wrote down the steps of the ritual, as dictated by Twilight. She'd taken notes when Discord had first told her, of course, but they were rapid, shorthand, and she didn't want the tiniest risk of forgetting a crucial bit that she'd forgotten to notate. So now she had Spike writing down the whole thing.

It was horrible. The sigils in the circle she'd painted on the floor of the workroom, where she kept Discord during the experiments, were bad enough; he'd looked up just one, and found that it was an endurance rune. Seemed harmless enough. Then he'd looked up the one next to it, one that indicated pain, and couldn't figure out what they meant together until he translated the tiny symbols between the runes, that determined their magical relationship, and figured out that combined, it was a rune that kept ponies, or anyone, from falling unconscious during pain. There were a lot of possible beneficial uses for that combination, but none of them involved being woven into the spell circle that was used to hold someone you were torturing. He wasn't sure those sigils even worked, because Discord usually had ended up unconscious anyway, but on another hoof, if they had worked and Discord had fallen unconscious anyway...

He'd never really wanted to think about that. Now he couldn't stop. Some of the same runes repeated themselves here, and since Twilight was overexplaining everything in detail, Spike knew they hadn't been in the information Discord had provided. They were intended to keep him alive and conscious until the end of the ritual, because according to Twilight, everything she'd read about necromantic sacrifice said that the level of power you'd get from the sacrifice would be higher if the victim was conscious until their life ended. "That's why we don't generally sacrifice animals in these kinds of rituals," she explained to him, eagerly, sounding more like the old Twilight than she had for months, if you listened only to her tone of voice and not to the things she was actually saying. "Sapience interacts with magic, amplifying it and making it more precise. The higher the sapience, the more energy you get out of sacrificing them, and of course when a sapient being is asleep or unconscious, their sapience isn't active. So if the sacrificial subject is actually awake at the moment of death, there's a lot more power generated there than if they were unconscious by the time they finally died."

"But why does the ritual have to take so long?" Spike had asked.

"I know, it'd be much better if we could just do it quickly and get the power we need, but that's not how it works, apparently. See, we have to make sure that these particular runes are filled with his blood, because his blood carries a great deal of chaos magic and that's how we activate these, through the constriction of chaos into controlled symbols." Twilight even giggled. "Apparently I'm alliterative at the moment!"

It hurt. For so many reasons, it hurt. She was happy and bright and cheerful right now, almost like her old self, because of a lie that would kill her, and Spike was sure that it would show her how she had been betrayed and how foolish she'd been and the magnitude of her failure before it killed her. She was happy and bright and cheerful over a plan to torture someone to death. Everything about her happiness was wrong, and yet, it was the first time since she'd taken on that damned Diadem that Spike had seen her happy.

And he was going to have to be the one to ruin it.
If he saw a chance to free Discord, he'd take it, and deal with the consequences later. If he didn't... he was going to have to kill Discord. The thought horrified him, and he wasn't sure he could do it. Battering a statue that didn't move and didn't bleed until it broke into a hundred pieces was one thing. Tearing his claws through living flesh was something else completely. Even though Discord had accepted the necessity and even begged him to do it, it was still horrifying. But the only other option he would have to save the world was even worse. If he had to hurt or disable Twilight... it felt like his very soul screamed in agony at the thought. She'd been everything to him for so long – his mother, his sister, his best friend, his only real family. To have to strike her down would hurt more than anything imaginable... except that knowing his failure to do something had doomed the entire world. That would be the worst.

He had to play along for now, to buy time... but the sun wasn't getting any higher in the sky. Nightfall was hours away, still, but time wasn't on his side, and after they'd gotten the letter that said the alternates had been captured... he was the only hope, now. He had to wait for a moment when Twilight was distracted, but right now, she was completely focused on her ritual, and getting him to help with it, and what if a moment never came up until night fell?

Abruptly the door smashed open, and Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash landed. Well, Fluttershy landed. Rainbow Dash, whose body slamming into the door had smashed it down, was crashed out on the floor, on top of the door.

"Twilight," Fluttershy hissed. "I'm told you're planning on killing Discord with this ritual of yours. Without asking my permission or even informing me. Is this true?"

Twilight looked at Fluttershy as if she were a small annoying insect. "I wasn't aware that I needed your permission," she said coldly. "Princess Celestia placed me in charge of this project."

"Yes, and you put me in charge of Discord. He's my prisoner, my charge, and you have no right to do anything to him without telling me first, let alone killing him. I won't stand for this!"

"I fail to see how you plan to stop me."

"Do you?" Fluttershy advanced on Twilight. "The spells that hold Discord are based on our connection to the Elements of Harmony, and to each other. Our friendship. If Rainbow and I reject your friendship – if we reject you – what happens to those spells, I wonder?"

For the first time since Discord's capture, Spike saw fear flicker across Twilight's face. "If that should happen, he'll die anyway," she said. "There are chaos-devouring crystals in his abdominal cavity, and they are suppressed solely by his collar, which is itself enchanted via the Elements of Harmony. If those spells should fail, the crystals will quickly grow and tear his body apart."

"But he'd have no motive not to tear off your horn and turn you into a half-orange half-frog first, would he?"

Rainbow, who'd gotten to her feet and back up into the air, said uneasily, "Look, Flutters, I don't —"

"Shut. Up." Fluttershy turned and glared at Rainbow Dash, hard, and somehow it worked. Rainbow shut up.

Spike felt conflicted, watching the argument. On the one hoof, Fluttershy calling Twilight out for her underhanded behavior and her willingness to kill the prisoner was a good thing. On another hoof... Fluttershy was a rapist. Spike felt sick looking at her, remembering the gentle sweet Fluttershy that used to be. He knew she'd turned cruel, of course, but he'd had no idea how far she'd
gone until Discord had tried to tell him, the night before last, and even then he hadn't wanted to believe it. And on a third hoof, Twilight was personally important to him, and seeing Fluttershy frighten her was unpleasant.

"And do you think he will be any more merciful to you?" Twilight snapped. "As much as he hates me, he groveled to me with gratitude because I ordered him not to have sex with you anymore, and told him that my orders override yours. Should those spells fail, there'd be nothing to prevent him from attacking you for raping him."

"He knows I only do it because I love him. He hates you because you don't even care about him! As for those crystals... if you're going to kill him either way then what difference should it make to me? One way at least denies you what you wanted and makes sure you're punished for trying to murder my prisoner!"

Spike started to step backward, retreating from the argument because it was upsetting him. And then he realized it was the perfect distraction. As Fluttershy screamed at Twilight and Twilight snapped back at her coldly, Spike slunk away until he was far enough that he didn't think they could see him, and then ran. Quickly he ducked into Twilight's workroom.

Discord grinned broadly at him, a bizarre contrast given how broken and exhausted he'd been the last time Spike had seen him. He had a positively manic look on his face. "Spike! Just the dragon I wanted to see. Ready to save the world?"

**Opposition, 2 PM – Pinkie Pie (Harmony)**

Pinkie could barely restrain her excitement as Celestia reappeared, with Twilight behind her. "Twilight!" she screamed, and bounced over to her friend, ignoring the ropes binding her forelegs. They didn't really get in the way of pronking, anyway; Pinkie's gait rarely required her to separate her forelegs from each other. "We missed you so much!"

Twilight smiled wanly. "Hi, Pinkie," she said softly. "I missed you too."

"Are you okay?" Spike asked, the second one to run to greet Twilight despite his small size – which probably had something to do with the fact that he was the only one who wasn't tied up. "Twilight, what did they do to you? Are you all right?"

"I'm... all right enough."

"If anypony's hurt you, just say the word and I'll kick their flank," Rainbow said, leaning back on her hind legs and punching her forehooves against each other.

"I think Rainbow speaks for all of us, sugarcube," Applejack said grimly.

"I confess I was quite surprised when Princess Celestia told us that she was bringing you to see us," Rarity said. "I'm so pleased to see she was telling the truth. Perhaps she's more amenable to reason than our counterparts were?"

Twilight winced slightly. Rarity picked up on it immediately. "Oh, dear... Twilight, what's wrong?"

"Don't crowd her," Fluttershy whispered. "Something's wrong."

Something was definitely very wrong. Tears were welling in Twilight's eyes. "Oh, no, Twilight, don't cry!" Pinkie shouted, throwing her forelegs around Twilight's neck and withers, trying to will happiness back into her friend. "We're all together now, so it's going to be okay! It's got to be!"
"Pinkie, give the mare her space," Applejack said. Reluctantly, Pinkie backed away.

Twilight took a deep breath. "I made a deal with Princess Celestia," she said. "All of you will be set free this evening."

"That sounds marvelous, darling, but what about you?"

It didn't sound marvelous to Pinkie. There was something very, very off about this. "Yeah, you said 'all of you', not 'all of us', which means she's not letting you go and that isn't fair and we're not going to let that happen!" Pinkie said fiercely.

"Yes, you are. Because that's the deal, and I don't want to see any of you get hurt. I need you to promise me to go along with this."

"No promises until we hear this deal for ourselves," Applejack said.

"I, um." Twilight lowered her head, pawing her hoof against the ground slightly. "Well, all of you will be released tonight, like I said. Princess Celestia needs... my... uh, help, with a ritual."

"Seems to be the day for it," Applejack snorted. "What kind of a ritual?"

"I hope it's not a ritual to destroy the world like the other Twilight is planning!" Pinkie said. Probably she shouldn't have mentioned that one to Twilight, but she was very nervous, and getting nervouser by the minute. This new ritual didn't sound like it was a good idea even though Pinkie didn't know one single thing about it yet.

"No, it's not. It... You guys know that Princess Luna is dead in this world, right?"

Rarity nodded. "Yes, your brother's counterpart filled us in."

"I didn't!" Rainbow said. "Princess Luna's dead? How'd she die?"

"Discord turned her into Nightmare Moon, and Princess Celestia had to kill her in battle," Twilight said softly. "So... so she's really... not in good shape. She wants my help for a ritual to bring Princess Luna back from the dead."

"What?" Spike asked, staring. "Twilight, that's necromancy!"

"Yes, it is." Twilight swallowed. "But if Princess Luna was back... she could restore this world. A lot of the reason things are so messed up is that Celestia... can't deal with losing her. She wanted Discord to be able to control the sun and moon so she could take time off and maybe recover, but if she had Princess Luna back, she wouldn't need that." Twilight glanced back at Celestia. Pinkie's hackles went up. That wasn't the way Twilight usually looked at Celestia even when she was nervous. That was fear, even if she was trying to hide it.

"Stop beating around the bush, Twilight, what's your part of this deal?" Applejack asked impatiently.

"I'm getting to that... She wants Princess Luna back more than anything. She said she'd let all of you guys go, and Discord, if I help her with this." Twilight closed her eyes and swallowed. "And... and she said that if you fight her, she'll kill you. Any of you. So – so I don't want you to fight her, okay? Not if you can't win, and she's Princess Celestia, so I don't see how you can. But you guys have to stay safe. You're... you're the only reason..."

"Twilight," Rarity said warningly. "Tell us."
"It needs an alicorn's body, okay? We can't bring Princess Luna back unless there's an alicorn's body to put her in," Twilight blurted.

Pinkie charged ahead verbally, talking fast so she could outrun the truth she was afraid she knew already. "So you and Princess Luna would be sharing the same body! Well, that's kind of weird, and that wouldn't be great because you'd be stuck here until you could find some way to get Princess Luna into a different body from you, but it's not so bad..." She trailed off. Everypony was looking at her, but how could they blame her? Sometimes saying what you wanted reality to be really did make reality turn into that!

Although, most of the time, it didn't.

"I... won't still be in the body. I... you can't perform an act of resurrection without sacrificing a life. My – my life, in this case. So – so I die, and Princess Luna—"

"Oh hay no," Rainbow said. "That is not happening."

"Yes it is!" Twilight choked on a sob. "She'll kill you if you fight her! And then I'll have to do it anyway, or this world is doomed, and there'd be no point to me being alive if I knew I got my friends killed!"

"But Twilight... letting us go in the evening isn't good enough," Fluttershy said firmly. "Your counterpart wants to sacrifice Discord at sunset. She's planning a ritual that's supposed to, uh, give ponies eternal life or something like that?"

Twilight stared at Fluttershy. "What?"

"We have to be able to get him free before then, because the ritual won't do what it's supposed to do. Discord said it'll actually let creatures in from another dimension that will devour the entire world. So Princess Celestia's deal isn't any kind of deal at all. By the time night falls, there'll be no time to bring back Princess Luna; if she doesn't release us all now to rescue Discord, including you, the world will be destroyed!"

"I am quite sure I could stop Twilight with a letter," Celestia said, interjecting into the conversation for the first time. "And if she won't listen, I can go in person to stop her. So you see, I can hold you all here until your Twilight and I have completed the ritual, and it won't result in the destruction of the world."

Pinkie whimpered slightly as the sense of impending doom that had been lurking over her for some time solidified. Her body didn't twitch; Pinkie Sense reacting with her body meant that something was inevitable. A doozy couldn't be stopped. There was still a chance, here, but the weight of it was crushing her, the feeling of so many different pathways to destruction looming over her and so little way to know how to dodge through them.

She closed her eyes and delved, something she rarely did. Pinkie Sense was safest for her mind when she stayed on the surface. The Other Pinkies in her mind chattered at her anxiously, but none of them had any more insight than she did. Even Pinkamena, who was rising toward the surface fearfully fast, who was all of Pinkie's pessimism and sadness personified, didn't know anything, and she wasn't helpful; she felt the doom and whispered to Pinkie that there was no defeating it, that everypony here was going to die. Pinkie chose not to listen to her, as she'd been choosing almost every time Pinkamena got loud enough for her to hear.

Deep inside her mind, where the world was an electric void of pink and purple shot through with yellow lightning and strands of darkness, Pinkie floated, and let the images of will-be and might-be
crash all around her.

The world colder and colder and ponies shriveling, crying in pain as the darkness ate them // a giant dragon looming over Canterlot // Discord on a table, bleeding, but the drop of blood would not fall, and unicorn Twilight standing unmoving, and they would never move again, the droplet never strike the ground // Spike the size of an adolescent, with a fan of six wings behind his back and a mad grin on his face, his eyes two different colors and neither of them were right // Rainbow Dash gutted, falling through the air trailing blood // a blaze of sunlight and the pain of unendurable heat was the last thing Pinkie perceived and then // Discord lying on the ground, outdoors, in a pool of blood // a Tree of Harmony glorious and huge // unicorn Twilight screaming as she melted into liquid from the hooves upward, her body sinking toward the ground // alicorn Twilight but her cutie mark was Luna's, her hoof slamming into Celestia's face // Discord's body being lowered into the earth, his face peaceful and that was all wrong because peace and chaos never mixed // alicorn Twilight suddenly falling from the sky // shattered pieces of the Elements lying in the dirt

Too much. There were too many pieces, so many moving threads, so chaotic that Pinkie didn't think Discord could follow them, and without context she had no way to know if some of the visions were good things or bad things. The only one she could be sure was probably good was the vision of the Tree of Harmony; any of the others were either obviously bad, or might be.

Desperately Pinkie summoned up all her strength and shouted into the void at the heart of her mind. "Which path do I take where we save the world and all of my friends live?"

There was nothing. No response.

Cold terror burned in her veins. But precision was important. "Which path do I take where we save this world and maybe all my friends live?"

There was something there, but flickering and dim, barely visible. She'd pay for this later – pushing it like this would probably leave her Pinkie Sense fried out for weeks after the current crisis was over – but she needed to know, or there might not be any weeks after this. She tried one more time. "Which path do I take where we save this world and most of my friends live?!"

And there it was.

Pinkie wanted to scream. Pinkamena wanted to sink into a pile of despair and mutter about how there wasn't even any point and of course somepony was going to die. Pinkie didn't let either one happen. She rose back up to the surface, knowing what she had to do. The path that made it most likely that the world would be saved and most of her friends would live was also the path where it was within the realm of possibility that all of her friends would live. The possibility was low; in all the paths through the future she could take, it barely existed. But she'd seen it. It was there. And it was the same as the way to save the majority, so it was what she needed to do, anyway.

At least one of her friends would probably die. Maybe more than one. But probably wasn't definitely. Pinkie was going to hold onto hope. There were so many variables and so few of them under her control, but she could start the sequence that would save the world, and most likely let most of her friends live, and maybe, just maybe, let all of them get out of here alive.

As she came up, she heard ponies arguing. "...not fair to demand that of her!" Rarity was shouting. "Did it ever occur to you that our world needs Twilight?"
"Let me be blunt," Celestia said. "I don't care. Your world hasn't been ruined. Your Celestia has her sister by her side. Your nation wasn't shattered by a year of chaos. I am concerned with the survival of my world, not yours. And so, to ensure Twilight's cooperation and deter the five of you from trying to fight me on this... your lives will be forfeit if you resist. If you do nothing, I will release all of you once the ritual is done. I don't care what happens to me then, as long as Luna is alive."

"Five of us?" Spike asked. "What about me?"

Celestia looked down. "Spike... it's painful enough for me to contemplate the death of a version of Twilight. No matter what happens, I won't kill you. But I know you won't resist me if you know that your friends' lives could be forfeit if you do."

While Celestia wasn't particularly paying attention, while she was focused on talking to Spike, Pinkie leaned against Rainbow Dash, and bit down on the ropes binding her wings, hard. Pinkie's teeth were no sharper than any pony's, but her jaws were very, very strong. The rope had no chance.

"Shh," she whispered in Rainbow's ear, and ducked down. A good chomp between the forelegs freed Applejack. Another chomp and her own legs were free.

"This is wrong," Spike said pleadingly. "Why can't you see that this is wrong, Princess?"

Showtime.

"It doesn't mat—"

Pinkie leapt into the air and launched a spinning kick against Celestia's horn. The alicorn saw her too late; her horn glowed, but had no chance to release magic before Pinkie's hooves came in hard contact with it. There was a distinct cracking noise, and then Celestia's eyes rolled up into her head, and she dropped.

The guards cried out. Horns lit. Wings flared. Rainbow Dash and Applejack were in there, breaking the focus on Pinkie, kicking and bucking and wing-chopping. Pinkie bucked a unicorn in the face, and then dropped as Pinkie Sense told her there were a pair of earth pony hooves coming for her jaw. They went over her head, skating across her mane, and Pinkie headbutted, flipping the stallion over. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Spike yanking Rarity's horn ring off of her head, then rolling toward Fluttershy.

"No!" Twilight was screaming. "No, you don't understand, this isn't going to work! No!"

Silly Twilight. Of course it wasn't going to work. Celestia was going to wake up any minute now. You couldn't take an alicorn out with a kick to the head for longer than a couple of minutes. That didn't change the fact that this was the action that had had the best odds for all of them.

Pinkie just wished she remembered exactly why. But once she'd come to the surface, she couldn't remember the whole path anymore – only the image that would start it, the bites through the ropes on her friends and then the kick to Celestia's horn. If she'd used her common sense and not her Pinkie Sense, it would seem really obvious that this endeavor was doomed. Celestia would wake up and then she would kill them all, except for Spike.

But her Pinkie Sense had said this was the way to save the world and the maximum possible number of her friends. And Pinkie Sense had never let her down. It told her now when telekinesis was about to grab her, and she flipped backward, out of the way. Then Rainbow kicked that particular guard in the head. Pinkie returned the favor by jumping on top of a pegasus who was
diving at Dashie, bearing him down to the stone surface of the roof parapet.

This was going to work. Somehow. It had to.

**Opposition, 3 PM – Discord**

The sudden appearance of Spike, after what felt like hours of waiting in limbo, not knowing whether he would ever have a chance to enact his plan, buoyed Discord's spirits disproportionately. He still didn't know if his plan had a chance, but at least now he had an opportunity to find out. An uncontrollable grin spread across his face as he lifted his head. "Spike!" he said, his delight and excitement clearly audible in his voice. "Just the dragon I wanted to see. Ready to save the world?"

The small dragon took a deep breath. "I hope you have a plan, because I don't. Aside from maybe breaking your collar and I'd really rather not kill you if we can avoid it."

"Oh, trust me, I'd like to avoid that too." Discord chuckled. "Well, here's the question: how much of a dragon are you?"

"I... what?"

Discord sat up. "When you killed me. Did you, by any chance, take trophies?"

"Trophies?" Spike's face twisted in disgust. "Of course not. I wasn't *proud* of what I'd done—"

"Come off it, Spike. You're a dragon. Dragons take trophies of their kills. Skulls, bones, something personal from the other one's hoard if it's another dragon, articles of clothing... pieces of rock, maybe, if what they killed was a statue...?"

Spike looked completely confused. It was a good look on him, as it was on most sapient creatures. Discord approved. "I – uh, honestly, I—"

"Come now, I'm part dragon myself, you can admit it. Did you take pieces of the statue or didn't you?"

Another deep breath. "I – I did, yeah. But not as a trophy! I wanted something to remind myself of what I'd done – so I would never be fooled into thinking, oh, I didn't do anything all that bad, so I'd never forget – I *killed* someone—"

"You know, I've never taken trophies of a kill, and I have no trouble remembering every single creature whose life I've ever ended," Discord said. "I think you're rationalizing." As Spike opened his mouth – "But it doesn't matter! It's not important why." Discord leaned forward as much as the chains on his wing and hoof allowed him to. "The important thing is that if you have petrified pieces of the other me... I gained enough magic just from swallowing a rock over and over until it had absorbed enough magic out of me, that I could cast one spell on you and send the letter I had you mail to your counterpart in the other universe. Pieces of *me* will be far, far more saturated with chaos magic than an ordinary rock could ever get. It might give me enough juice to rescue my friends, and even if not, the most important thing is it might give me the strength to teleport."

"But you can't..." Spike trailed off. "Wait a minute. She said, don't go through the door."

"Right. You get it. And don't unlatch my chains, but teleportation doesn't actually unlatch anything. If I teleport, the chain's latch will be intact, it just won't be attached to my collar anymore. I can't break or open the chains, or let anyone else break them or open them, and I can't go through the door... but she never ordered me not to teleport."
"So... so, how does this work? I give you the pieces and you just, like, hold onto them? Like magic wands?"

Discord shook his head, an expression of mock sorrow on his face. "No, no. All good things require sacrifice, Spike. I have to eat them. I'm forbidden from drawing on my own internal magic and I'm forbidden from drawing on chaos magic in the environment, but if there's an object imbued with chaos magic and it's inside me, it's not technically speaking my own magic because it comes from an object that isn't me, and it's not technically speaking in the environment because it's inside me."

"But wouldn't pieces of your other self count as you?"

"No. He's not me, Spike. I'm not him. We may be two branches of the same tree, but we are not the same. I'm not blocked from drawing on the magic of a different Chaos Avatar because Twilight doesn't actually know that there are others, and the magic of one of my cognates counts as the magic of a different Chaos Avatar."

"There's more than one of you?"

Abruptly Discord realized this was not a matter of academic curiosity for Spike, whether the dragon realized it or not. The murderer of a chaos avatar usually ended up becoming the next one, unless they died first or there was a child of the previous avatar in the line of succession. Or they refused, like Anubis had, but judging from the fact that Anubis had fallen to the Nightmare Forces some time after his refusal, maybe refusing wasn't best for someone's mental health. "Only one at a time. We'll discuss it later if we all live. Are you willing to make a sacrifice? You won't get your trophies back. Are you too much of a dragon to let what you own be destroyed, even if it means saving the world?"

"If it means the world won't end, I won't have to hurt Twilight, and I won't have to kill anyone... yeah, I can live with that. Wait here, I'll get them."

As Spike left, Discord smiled wryly. "Where was I going to go?" he asked rhetorically, flexing his chained wing slightly to make the chain rattle. "Detrot?"

**Opposition, 3 PM – Spike (Harmony)**

As soon as Spike got Rarity's horn ring off, she untied the ropes around Fluttershy's and her own forelegs and Fluttershy's wings, and then began using the ropes as weapons with her telekinesis. They snaked through the air, tripping guardsponies, choking them, slashing at them and making them dodge away. Two unicorn guards tried getting hold of the ropes by overriding Rarity's telekinesis. "Spikey, those two fellows there are trying to take my weapons from me, if you could?"

"With pleasure!" Unicorns concentrating on a telekinetic tug of war might not notice a small purple dragon below eye level, and Rarity dragged the ropes up high as she struggled to maintain control of them, making it all the easier for Spike to get under the first soldier and drive sharp claws into his leg just above the knee. Spike knew pony anatomy for the same reason he knew most of the eclectic variety of subjects he knew – helping Twilight study – and he'd decided that driving in a claw behind the kneecap would cause the least blood and trauma for a disabling injury, of all the moves he was capable of. The stallion cried out, his leg buckling, his telekinesis reorienting to Spike – a mistake, because it let Rarity get him in a chokehold with her rope, while Applejack bucked the other unicorn. Within moments they were both unconscious.

There were more guards between Spike and Twilight. Twilight was screaming that this wasn't
going to work, but at this point, it sort of had to, since it had already gotten started. Spike started toward her, and was blocked by an earth pony who kicked him some distance, making him skid across the roof. "Spike!" Twilight screamed.

Hooves caught him from behind. "Be careful," Fluttershy said in his ear. "If they kick you off the roof, I'll try to catch you, but I'm a little bit useless in a fight. They might take me out."

"Can you get a horn ring off a horn?"

"It doesn't sound much harder than freeing a mouse from a trap... I think maybe I could do that. I could at least try."

"We've gotta get Twilight's horn ring off before Princess Celestia wakes up, and there aren't that many pegasi here, and they're mostly concentrating on Rainbow—"

"Yes, I'll try to get to her."

Applejack yelled. "Spike! Over here!"

Fluttershy set him down and he ran. In the air, Rainbow was fighting three pegasi; Pinkie was trying to help by leaping at them, but they were staying high enough to be just out of her reach. "You're little and light, but you're tough. If I throw you up there at one of those pegasus guards, can you grab him and bring him down? Even up the odds for Rainbow some?"

"I'm ready to try!" Spike said gamely, though in fact the idea was making his stomach twist with fear. He really didn't like heights. *Sure be nice if I had wings like the other dragons*, he thought with a moment of bitterness, but shoved it down. No time for that; he had to work with what he had.

Applejack reared up on her hind legs with him held in her forehooves, and tossed. Spike yelled, windmilling his arms. "Whoa whoa whoa whoa!" Then Rainbow booted a pegasus into just the right spot that Spike landed directly on the fellow's back.

"Shit! Get offa me!" The pegasus bucked wildly in air, trying to throw Spike, but Spike had locked his claws together in a death grasp around the stallion's neck.

"Dude! I'm fourteen! Watch your language!" Spike said into the stallion's ear.

"Incoming!" Rainbow yelled. "Crapp crapp crapp!"

There were changelings pouring out of the door on the roof. And Shining Armor. Crap was right.

The pegasus Spike was on top of landed, unable to do anything else with Spike kicking his wings. As soon as he was on the ground, Pinkie bucked him. Spike was off and running toward Twilight, but Fluttershy had finally gotten to her. Twilight was crouched down, and Fluttershy was deftly pressing on the horn ring, sliding it up. It was very, very hard to get them off with hooves, almost impossible for a unicorn since they were usually very blunt-hoofed, given that they had their magic to fall back on and never needed to practice hoof dexterity. Earth ponies and pegasi couldn't usually do it either, but earth ponies and pegasi with experience doing delicate work, such as clockwork or needlepoint, or helping tiny mother animals through childbirth, like Fluttershy, often had the necessary skill.

It was just in time, too. The changelings swarmed over them, taking the forms of the six Bearers – plus Spike, this time – but they *still* used the hair colors and styles of this world's Bearers. Twilight, now free of her horn ring, started zapping them with sleep spells, left, right and center, occasionally
nailing a guardspony as well. Shining Armor was shielded, and was plainly trying to expand his shield to cover the Bearers and cut them off from Twilight's support, but the only one he'd gotten in the shield so far was Rainbow Dash and she was harrying him to the point where most of his focus was obviously on fighting her. He was a trained battle mage, and a lot more experienced than their world's Shining, but Rainbow was just unbelievably fast. She wasn't actually getting in any hits on him, but he wasn't getting any in on her, either.

Spike finally made it over to Twilight. "Spike! Any way you can pick the locks on those leg cuffs, or get the wing binder off me?"

"I've got a faster way to do it than lockpicking," Spike said, and breathed teleport flame at one of the cuffs, focusing intently on one spot. His magic tended to consume discrete objects; if he set part of something on fire, with the teleport flame, the whole thing would burn, but nothing touching it would catch. Things only burned if he directly flamed them. So the cuff burnt up in teleport flame, but the hoof underneath was untouched.

"Nice trick," Twilight said, panting as she fired off more spells.

"I've been practicing!" The second cuff exhausted him; he had no more flame to give. And he still wasn't particularly good at picking locks, and there was no good way to use his teeth or claws on the remaining two cuffs without risking harm to Twilight's hooves. But the wing binder didn't have the same problem. It was a metal cable. When Twilight sucked in her gut with a heroic effort, pulling in her stomach muscles as tight as they could go and breathing out to minimize the size of her ribcage, Spike had just enough slack in the cable to pull it out a bit where he could get his teeth around it. It took several hard chomps – it was metal, not a gem, and therefore chewy rather than crunchy, bending and warping under his teeth rather than fracturing – but he got it, and pulled the cable free.

Twilight gasped for breath even as she flung her wings wide, flapping them hard. "Oh, wow. That feels so much better. I had no idea how much they were hurting from being bound up like that."

"It's gonna be a while before I can get the last two cuffs off..."

"No problem, Spike. They're there to block earth pony strength and cut me off from the earth, I think, but with two hooves free I feel like maybe I'm back in business."

Fluttershy said, "You, um, might want to do something about Prin—"

Before she could finish the sentence, Celestia, lying on the ground where Pinkie had kicked her in the head, vanished.

And then reappeared, high in the sky above everyone's head, glaring down in rage.

A spell slammed into the Bearers, throwing Rainbow Dash down to the ground and freezing Fluttershy and the others in place. Twilight's horn blazed, as she braced herself against the ground, head bowed but eyes focused up, plainly throwing everything she had into resisting the spell. It looked like it had at the wedding when Chrysalis and Celestia had fought... except that this time, it was the color of Celestia's magic that crept forward.

Spike, unaffected by the spell – it seemed like Celestia hadn't even targeted him – tried to help Fluttershy to her hooves, but she couldn't seem to move at all. She wasn't turned to stone, and her eyes and mouth could move, but that appeared to be the extent of her freedom. "Spike, run," she whispered. "The Princess needs you as a hostage against Twilight."
Frantically Spike looked around. He understood the logic – if Celestia won this fight, she had threatened to kill all of Twilight's friends except for him. But if he wasn't there, she'd have to keep them alive to use as hostages for Twilight's cooperation. He couldn't see anywhere to go, though; there were still more changelings coming out of the door, and it was the only way off the roof if you had no wings. He tried the only other tactic he could think of, desperate. "Shining Armor! Princess Celestia's going to kill Twilight and all her friends! Please, help us!"

Shining Armor looked torn for a moment, before his expression firmed. "I'm sorry. My loyalties are to my Princess and to my Twilight, not this one."

And then Twilight cried out, and the light on her horn went dim. She fell to her knees. Celestia landed, looking coldly furious.

"I almost underestimated your friends again, Twilight," she said. Her voice carried, firm and clear, but it seemed superficially calm. Spike knew Celestia well enough to know that calm was not in the building, though, not right now. "Under other circumstances, I would be proud of them. I am, in fact, very sorry that I'm going to have to do this... but I made my rules very, very clear when I brought you here to say goodbye. They knew what they were risking, and they made their choice."

"No!" Twilight screamed. Her horn tried to light again, but produced only a bare flicker. Celestia had plainly cast something on her to suppress her magic. Given how much magic Twilight had, it had to be an active, ongoing cast; if an alicorn could just shut down another alicorn's magic so easily, it seemed like the fight between Nightmare Moon and Celestia shouldn't have happened. So if someone could take Celestia out, Twilight would be free, but there was no one left who could take Celestia out. All of Spike's pony friends had been defeated, and he was allowed to move around freely only because he was so little and pathetic that he couldn't possibly hurt his enemies or save his friends. "No, please! They – they just didn't want me to die! You can't kill a pony for wanting to save her friend!"

"I'm afraid I'll have to," Celestia said. "They won't stop. You know that and I know that."

"You better believe it!" Rainbow Dash snarled. "What gives you the right to try to kill our friend just because you want your sister back? Your sister lived like, a bazillion years! Twilight's like barely into her 20's! It's not fair to kill her to bring Princess Luna back and you know Luna would agree!"

"Princess, are you... planning necromancy?" Shining Armor asked, disbelievingly.

"To bring Luna back? Yes. There are rites to bring back alicorns based on the magic they're connected to; it's part of the reason we are hard to kill in the first place. But to use such a rite, I need an alicorn to volunteer her own body... and this Twilight is an alicorn."

"But you know this ain't right!" Applejack said. "Even if it works, the fact that you gotta kill somepony to make it work makes it evil! You think this is what Princess Luna would've wanted?"

"It doesn't matter what she would have wanted!" Celestia shouted. "She's dead! She has no freedom to want anything, she has no freedom to do anything, because Discord forced me to kill her!" Tears welled in her eyes, but her face was still furious. "I have to make the decision for her, to give her the ability to make any decisions at all!"

"And what will happen if you bring her back, and she repudiates you for what you've done?" Rarity asked sharply. "What if she rejects you and calls you monstrous? Will you banish her to the moon again? Sweep her objections aside, because you're the elder sister and you know best? What if she refuses to share your rule with you, because you've proven to be the sort of mare who can murder
an innocent pony to bring your sister back, and all of her friends because we wanted to save her?"

"I will abdicate to Luna, if I have to," Celestia said. "I don't care. I don't want anything anymore except to have her back, now that I can see a way to do it. If you killed Sweetie Belle to save the world because Discord had turned her into a monster, wouldn't you do anything in your power to save her?"

"Anything except cold-bloodedly murdering ponies who had never done me any harm and only wanted to help a friend," Rarity snapped back. "Sweetie Belle wouldn't want to live if that were the cost. Nor would I. Nor would Luna!"

"You know they're right," Fluttershy said, looking straight up at Celestia's eyes. "You know that Princess Luna would hate this. You know that if you were in your own right mind, you would hate this. You know that if you do this thing, you become the same sort of monster that she and you spent centuries fighting. Is that what you want? After so many, many years of being everypony's shining hope, our beacon of right and wrong, do you really want to do something this evil?"

For a moment it looked as if Fluttershy might be getting through. It was hard to tell if she was using the Stare or not – Spike had actually never seen her do it – but Celestia actually seemed to be faltering, the tears in her eyes spilling out, her barrel heaving as she breathed heavily. And then she shook her head. "Let Luna judge me, afterward. Banish me to Tartarus if she wants to. I don't care. At least she'll be alive to do it."

She turned to Shining Armor. "I will deal with them myself, but not here. Shining Armor, you take Twilight back to my chambers once we have cleared the stairwell. Get that horn ring back on her. Changelings, bring the other Bearers, now. Guards, once Shining Armor and Twilight are clear, bring Spike to a cell. He is not to be harmed."

No. No. This couldn't be happening. It couldn't end like this. Spike looked around frantically for something, anything he could use as a weapon, something he could use to free Twilight or stop Celestia or stop the Changelings or anything, but he saw nothing. Rarity was screaming as two Changelings dragged her off, trying to thrash in their grasp, but the immobilization spell was holding, keeping her from moving very much. Rainbow and Applejack were trying to kick, but all that happened was that their legs were twitching. Twilight, herself held immobile, was begging. "Shiny, no, please don't let her do this, please. I don't care about me, I already agreed to help bring back Princess Luna but you can't let her kill my friends just because they wanted to save me, please..." But Shining Armor was holding himself stiff, not even looking at her as he kept his magic on her, holding her down. Fluttershy was crying, quietly.

And Pinkie looked back at Spike as they dragged her toward the door. "Spike! Always remember, we're your friends! You belong to us and we belong to you! You're like our family!"

If she meant to make him feel better, she failed. Helpless rage burned inside Spike, and grief. He couldn't do anything to save them. They were his (friends) and he couldn't stop them from being taken away. Because he was weak and small and pathetic and he couldn't do anything even though he wanted them (to be safe), they were his (friends) and he couldn't protect them and he should be able to protect them and he was a failure—

--because he was small and weak—

--they were his (friends), and ponies and changelings could just take them from him (and kill them) because he was too weak and small to save them—

--too weak and small to save them—
Once upon a time, Spike had felt a happy delight and joy in getting presents, that had turned into a hunger to own *everything*, to gather up everything he could see and hoard it and keep it safe and close and no one else could have those things because they had to be *his*... and it had turned him into a mindless beast, consumed with his greed.

This wasn't greed he felt now. He didn't want what wasn't his. He wanted what *was* his to be safe, but Princess Celestia was going to kill them, and all he could feel was an overpowering, protective, righteous RAGE.

His heart beat fast and hard. His skin grew tight, and then loosened, like a molt except it was happening again and again, like a rubber band constricting and releasing in time to his heartbeat, and he was burning and the flames in his belly wanted to consume everything that stood in his way and the world was shrinking, shrinking, and down there, there were his friends, and Changelings looking up at him with fear in their faces and good because they *should* be afraid, and his back itched and ached and erupted in agony. Spike bellowed, hearing his own voice deep and alien, and something was flung off his back but stuck to it in two spots and he flexed them and they were *wings*, he had wings bursting out from his back.

He heard Rarity's voice from far away. "Spike! Remember who you are!" she screamed. "Remember you are our sweet Spike!"

Yes. Yes, he remembered. The rage that clouded his thinking was turning denser, more focused, like a directed blast of fire rather than an all-consuming inferno, and he still knew who he was. Those were his friends down there, *his*, and Celestia had tried to take them from him. Had planned to kill them.

His eyes focused on the sun alicorn. There was fear on her face, for once, and right now he reveled in it. Oh yes, she should be afraid. She had tried to kill *his*. She should be very afraid.

"Let go of my friends!" he shouted down at her, his voice reverberating through the stone.

Despite his height, he could see her face as clearly as ever. "Spike... I'm sorry," she whispered. Her eyes were full of tears as her horn lit.

The blast of superheated plasma that sailed narrowly past his face, when he threw his head sideways to dodge it, was so hot he felt like it might have singed his scales. But she'd missed.

He had to get his head down low enough to target Celestia, and only Celestia. In the second it took him to do so she could have fired another bolt. But she hesitated.

He didn't.

"Spike!" Twilight screamed. "Don't kill her!"

Celestia vanished in a blast of bluish-green flame, so quickly she had no time to cry out.
Harmony, 3:30 PM – Celestia

Hours ago, when her message to Spike to check on the status of the Bearers' mission had bounced back, Celestia had cancelled court for the day. She paced restlessly, aware of her guards observing her, and of the anxiety they must be feeling – anything that made Princess Celestia's serene mask crack had to be serious. But she couldn't help herself.

It was ironic, she thought. The last time she'd been pacing like this, too full of anxiety to be able to sit down, her equine instincts screaming at her to bolt from a threat that couldn't be run from... it had been because Discord had broken loose. Cotton candy clouds had rained chocolate milk all over Canterlot -- and Ponyville, too, she'd been told – while cola poured down from nowhere onto Cloudsdale and skyscrapers wrestled each other in Manehattan. It had been two days after the Grand Galloping Gala, and all the happiness she'd felt at how lively her student's friends had made the stuffy old thing had fled, and all she'd been able to think was, Did I do this? I invited the chaos in, I hoped for it, I all but engineered it... because I never thought he could break free. The stars freed Luna... did they going to free every evil we imprisoned? She'd felt helpless, and guilty, and so, so angry. So many hopes she'd had, in the long millennium of empty loneliness, that Luna would be different once she returned from the moon... and she had been... and that Discord, maybe, someday, could be freed, and he would have learned his lesson and he could be healed by the power of Harmony the way Luna was... and that, she'd thought at the time, had been pure idiocy. How had she ever thought he would relent from his chaos? The colt who'd been her friend, her lover, was gone forever; surely centuries of fighting Discord should have told her not to hope any more.

Ironic, then, that she was pacing now because she'd been right the first time. Because there was something inside him that could be redeemed.

She'd told Luna that they had to free him because if he'd been freed, and Sombra had returned, how long before all the other spells cast by the Elements ended? How long until the doors to other worlds, that Discord had once torn open casually and then guarded for his own reasons, the doors that she and Luna had painstakingly locked with the Elements, all opened again? But if she hadn't desperately wanted to redeem him, and if she hadn't had visions that perhaps it could happen, and if she hadn't seen evidence for herself that he was, in some ways, no longer as cruel as he'd been, she'd have found another way. He hadn't taken any kind of revenge on Luna, only bespelled her to sleep so she wouldn't awaken during his coup. Oh, he'd put her hoof in a bowl of water in a supremely childish prank, but otherwise, nothing. After over a thousand years in stone, trapped, alive and able to hear but to do nothing else, she would have expected some sort of horrifying revenge. She'd seen him do far worse for far less. Yes, he'd been brutal to the Bearers, but few of his other victims had suffered pain until they'd been freed from him and the humiliation of what he'd made them want to do had sunk in. In the past he'd done what he did to the Bearers to entire towns, at once, destroying marriages and friendships and leading foals to be abandoned. This time, no matter what he did to the minds of his victims in Ponyville, they'd still remembered their love for their families. Even Applejack, who he'd turned into her opposite along with the other Bearers.

It had taken time, for the Bearers to become confident in their friendships and for Fluttershy to develop just a little bit more strength of will. She'd thought, when Fluttershy got him to admit that friendship was magic and even bow to her, that maybe he was back. And then when he'd refused to save her from the plunder vines, when he'd gloated at her as they'd dragged her off through the tunnels they'd bored, she'd realized, terrified, how wrong she was. He still wasn't her Discord. He
might never be again. He was still cruel, capricious, more in love with chaos than anything else. He still saw ponies as toys. He still resented and perhaps even hated her.

But he'd kept his word. He'd helped Twilight, without making it obvious that he was helping her. And if he'd defeated the plunder vines himself, if he'd just snapped them away like she was still sure he could have... they would never have found out how badly the Tree had been weakened by a millennium without its Elements. She was sure Discord had known, and the Tree was his nemesis. He'd killed other Trees of Harmony and trapped this one in a forest ringed by and saturated with chaos magic. And yet, he'd acted to make sure it didn't die. Sure, with the Elements returned to the Tree, they no longer had any way of stopping him or controlling him... but if he'd known how weak the Tree was he'd have known they didn't anyway. And he hadn't released unrestrained chaos on Equestria, even though he'd have known they couldn't stop him. His friendship with Fluttershy was sincere. He really did care about her.

So he was on his way back. It would be slow, and painful, and there might be relapses. She expected that. And... she would probably never have him for a friend again. Certainly not a lover; there was far too much pain on both sides. Celestia doubted she could ever trust him that way, and was certain he felt he couldn't trust her. Maybe she'd never get anything from him but resentment, anger, bitterness and mockery. She was an authority figure now and he was compelled to rebel against authority. But none of that mattered. He was on the pathway back to his old self, slowly, led by Fluttershy. And maybe he could be happy with her the way he could never be with Celestia again. Maybe he could love her. All evidence suggested he did love her, as a friend, and maybe that would be enough.

And then this.

It was so unfair. And so stupid. She was angry at him for how much of an idiot he'd been to put himself in danger that way, and for succumbing to his need for chaos when he was trying to reform, and for not talking about his problems with anyone, but all of that was so in character for him she couldn't honestly say she should have expected anything different. And it didn't matter anyway. What they were doing to him was so far beyond the realm of anything anyone could possibly deserve, and it hurt like nothing had hurt since banishing Luna to know what was happening to him, and that there was nothing she could do directly to save him. She couldn't have gone gallivanting off to another universe under any circumstances, when Equestria relied so heavily on her; she had every intention of regaining some of her freedom to act, now that Luna was back and Twilight and Cadance were both alicorns, but it would take time to extricate herself. And there was the fact that the other Celestia, and probably the other Luna, would have sensed her immediately. Celestia still remembered the time Discord had sent her back in time and she'd met Amaterasu of Neighpon, how she'd felt the ancient kirin touching her sun in a way that in her lifetime, only Luna and Discord had ever been able to. How Amaterasu had sensed her instantly even though Celestia hadn't dared touch the sun in the past before her own birth. No, there was no possible way she could go.

So here she was, relying on Twilight. Again. And she trusted Twilight completely, and maybe, possibly, hero-worshiped her student just a little bit. She'd had hopes for so many other students, and some of them had achieved what she'd hoped for them, at least for a little while... but Twilight had been the first that had made her feel alive again, after a millennium of numbness. After Sunset's failure and disappearance, she'd thought, she'd have to show them more affection in the future. Behave like more of a maternal figure than a cool and distant teacher. It had been a calculated move. The calculation had lasted all of three hours in Twilight's presence before the affection she'd been feigning for the filly became real. Others had been her students, but Twilight was the daughter she'd never had and never would.
But still. Twilight and her friends were up against *themselves*. Selves that were clever enough to defeat Discord, ruthless enough to enslave him, and cruel enough to torture him. And for several hours, none of Celestia's messages to Spike had gotten through.

Then she felt the familiar, wonderful tingle in her horn that meant a message from Spike. *They're alive! They're all right!* The more rational part of her mind tried to tamp down her enthusiasm – strictly speaking, all a message from Spike meant was that Spike was still alive. But surely, Twilight and the others were fine too, right? They had to be!

Eagerly she cast the spell to materialize the message... and stared, dumbstruck, as a heavy iron hoofcuff clattered to the floor.

"Princess! Are you all right?" one of the guardsponies asked.

"I'm fine, don't worry about me. I've just received an... unusual... message."

She summoned a quill and a scroll and started to compose a query – why was Spike sending her a hoofcuff? Before she could get more than two words written, she felt another transmission in her horn, and materialized it. It was another hoofcuff... with a small tuft of purple fur from a fetlock stuck to it.

Twilight's. Twilight had been in hoofcuffs. Spike was sending Celestia the cuffs. No. Spike wasn't deliberately sending them – he was freeing Twilight. He'd figured out that dragonfire could be used to burn and transmit an object you wanted to send away, and he probably wasn't thinking about where the transmission was going. Or maybe he was, and he just hadn't had time yet to compose a message to explain what was going on.

Her horn lit, and she took quill to scroll more urgently... but hesitated before sending the message. There hadn't been a third or fourth hoofcuff. Could Spike actually be low on fire? Iron disrupted magic; it was less disruptive to dragon magic than to most other types, but it no doubt had taken him a serious effort to burn off those cuffs. She didn't want to use up any of his fire if he was low, not if he was freeing ponies from cuffs. And what if he was in the midst of battle, and her transmission distracted him? No. Best to wait. Spike would send *her* a message as soon as he had a chance, Celestia was sure of that.

So she went back to pacing... until she felt a sudden splitting, agonizing pain in her horn, and the feeling of a dragon transmission but *heavy*, an impossible weight, a mass that should not be trying to siphon itself through her slender horn. Celestia fought the pain to make the item materialize and get it away from her horn; she could lift the sun. She could bear any weight she had to. She wouldn't let the transmission of an object far too massive for ordinary dragonfire drag her down.

The transmission materialized... in the shape of a pony.

An alicorn.

Herself.

And as Celestia stared into eyes that were like a mirror, the other Celestia reared, lit her horn, and fired.

**Opposition, 3:30 PM – Discord**

Discord lay on the floor of Twilight's workroom, listening.

Spike had left to go get his trophies a few minutes ago, but he'd taken too long. The argument
between Fluttercruel and Twilight had wound down, finally, as it sounded as if Fluttercruel had finally accepted Twilight's explanation of the necessity of Discord's death. She was crying, but she wasn't shouting at Twilight or arguing anymore. Now she was begging Twilight for a chance to say goodbye.

The sun was at mid-afternoon. There was still time, before sundown or moonrise. But if Twilight brought Fluttercruel in to say goodbye to him, and she made a huge thing of it, and didn't let him out of her sight for the hours before sundown... and he couldn't even offer her sex to distract her, because Twilight had ordered him not to. Which had relieved him greatly at the time, but it meant he had one fewer tactic he could use to manipulate Fluttercruel.

He sighed. It was out of his paws. Spike would find a way to smuggle the pieces of his alternate self to him, or he wouldn't. There was nothing Discord could do by worrying about it.

The door opened, and Twilight trotted in, along with a crying Fluttercruel and Rainbow Dash, who was hanging back. "Say your goodbyes, then," she said, in a tone that was almost sympathetic. "I know you wanted to keep him as a companion, but think of all the ponies who'll be saved from old age and sickness and pain. Something this fantastic is worth giving up our own lives to achieve, let alone the life of a creature dedicated to chaos."

"I know," Fluttercruel sobbed. "I know, I just... I'll miss him so much! Discord..." She threw her arms around his neck, still crying. He held himself rigid. Twilight had said he was allowed to refuse sex, but there was nothing he could do to stop her from inflicting non-sexual affection on him, as much as he hated it when she touched him.

And then, quietly but very clearly, she said, "Put Twilight to sleep. Happy sleep, with happy dreams, that she'll enjoy and won't do her any harm."

Discord blinked. Was this really Fluttershy? Had they pulled a switch somehow?... no, the mane color was normal and there was no spell on her that could have reverted her mane that quickly. It didn't matter, anyway. It was an order, and if he didn't know it wasn't Fluttercruel, his collar would allow him to carry it out.

Twilight slumped to the floor, her head landing on a pillow because he wasn't allowed to do anything that might harm his captors, which included Twilight hitting her head when she fell over.

"Shit!" Rainbow Dash charged forward, bodyslamming him backward, out of Fluttercruel's grasp. "What the hay did you do, Dipcord? Tell me!"

"Let him go!" Fluttercruel snapped. "I ordered him to put Twilight to sleep."

"What? Why?"

"Did you seriously think I was going to let Twilight just kill him?" Fluttercruel glared at Rainbow. "Especially after what the other me said?"

"Come on, you know the bitch was lying."

"Yes, she might have been, but can we really take the chance? Given the choice between the other me lied and this will kill Discord and nopony else, or Discord misled and tricked Twilight and this will destroy the world... how can we possibly take the risk?"

"Yeah, but Discord can't lie!"

Fluttercruel laughed. "Everything that comes out of his mouth is a lie, all the time," she said. "But
it's true at the same time. He can't say something that's completely untrue, but he can say something that sounds like it's true but it's not, just as long as it's not technically a lie."

Discord shrank back against the wall. Twilight might be asleep, but that didn't mean he was safe. Fluttercruel wouldn't kill him, but even if she couldn't rape him anymore, she could still make him wish he was dead. And he hadn't known that she truly understood his limitations, or rather, where his limitations weren't. All this time he'd been misleading her every chance he got in the belief that she didn't know he was doing it, or that he could do it. She had always punished him horribly when she had evidence that he wasn't being completely truthful. So how could it be that she'd known he was being as untruthful as the spells that bound him allowed him to be, almost every single time?

"I don't like this. Twilight's our leader. Princess Celestia appointed her."

"You're going to pick now to try to be loyal? Listen." Fluttercruel glared at Rainbow Dash, full force. "You were my friend for years before you even met Twilight."

"That was before you started fucking the enemy that corrupted you and turned you into a raving bitch!"

"Oh, really. And you had a better plan? Don't you remember how we defeated Discord? If I hadn't been fucking him, he'd have noticed that Twilight had broken the spell that kept us apart from each other, or that you were all coming together at my house, or both."

"Yeah, okay, you tricked him, fine, whatever. But don't try to pretend you didn't want it, not after you've been making the pony with two backs with this one every night for two months." She kicked Discord, casually.

"I never said I didn't want it. I said it wasn't disloyal. I used it to defeat him, and I used it to break this one and teach him obedience. Now help me unlock this chain."

"I don't think this is a good idea."

"Who asked you? We need to take him to the Everfree and hide him so Twilight can't find him when she wakes up!"

"I'm not allowed to go through that door," Discord said. "And I'm supposed to try to kill you if you unlatch the chain."

"Oh, for... who told you that?"

"Twilight did. And her orders supersede yours." His voice wasn't trembling, and he was very proud of himself for that. Defying Fluttercruel, even to the extent of telling her that she couldn't give him the orders she wanted to give him because they'd trigger a seizure, was terrifying.

"And what if I told you not to listen to Twilight's orders?"

Now he couldn't quite keep the tremor out of his voice. "Mistress, they're Twilight's spells. I have no control over the priorities she embedded in them. If Twilight orders me to do something and you order me to do the opposite, I have to follow what Twilight said, unless it contradicts the honesty or loyalty spells, and if it does that I'll have a seizure. I can't prevent it."

"So if I unlatch your chains you'll have a seizure, because Twilight ordered you to use lethal force but you're not allowed to harm me."

"Yes, but please, don't... I had a seizure last night. I don't know how many of them I can endure
before I end up with permanent brain damage." To be honest, he didn't know if he'd hit that limit already. Between what the starvation and sleep deprivation were doing to his ability to think, and how strange his normal thought processes were by pony standards, he wasn't sure how he'd be able to tell.

"If I can't find another way I may have to, or order you to knock yourself unconscious. But let me think. If I order you to delay obeying any of Twilight's orders... say, by five minutes... so you still have to obey her, but you can hold off needing to do it for five minutes, can we do that?"

"I don't know..."

"What if both Rainbow and I give you those orders?"

"I'm not doing anything that would get in the way of Twilight telling him what to do!" Rainbow objected. "You act like I've gotta do what you want because we're friends, Flutters, but first off friendship is a crock of ponyfeathers and you know it, and second off you mouth off at me and call me a whorse and stuff like that every chance you get, so how are we even friends? Last I checked, we were a lot closer to enemies who've gotta work together." She sneered at Fluttercruel.

"Let me explain it to you in very tiny words for your very tiny brain, Rainbow. We are saving the world. If Twilight performs this ritual everypony and everything will die. And we don't want to hurt her to stop her, and she won't listen to us because she thinks she's smarter than all of us—"

"She is smarter than all of us. You're no egghead supergenius, and you're probably the smartest one next to Twilight, but in a brains contest? She's number 1 and you'd be, like number 23. Out of 80 or so, I gotta be fair."

Fluttercruel sighed explosively. "Yes. Twilight's a genius. But she can be fooled into believing what she wants to believe. I mean, Rainbow, really. Eternal life for all ponykind? You think if there was a ritual like that, somepony else wouldn't have ever discovered it before? Not Princess Celestia? Not Twilight's idol Starswirl? Not Clover the Clever? Nopony?"

"Mistress Fluttershy is telling the truth," Discord said. "I told Twilight about the ritual because I was sure I could mislead her into believing something that she wanted to believe anyway. She thinks she can use my power to give eternal life to ponykind. That's never been true but she's been torturing me for months to try to understand my powers well enough that she can do it, even though it's blatantly impossible, and I'm saying this as the spirit of Chaos. Impossible's a dirty word, to me. So I knew I could trick her into thinking the ritual would accomplish what she's been trying for months to achieve, because she wants it that badly, but I misled her. I told her what she'd get for the first five minutes or so after the ritual was completed, and I never told her what the consequences would be after that."

"Why would you do such a thing?" Fluttercruel snapped at him. "Why would you want to destroy the world? Destroy Twilight, yes, I understand that, but the world?"

Despite his fear of her, Discord couldn't help grinning a twisted, bitter grin at her. "Because you convinced me that I didn't have any friends and that my Fluttershy was lying to me. This is all your fault, mistress. You did your best to break me, and it worked, but before you put something under so much pressure that it breaks you might want to consider where the fracture lines that are already there are. I didn't have any reason to want to live, and I had every reason to want you and all your friends to die."

"And now she's fooled you into thinking she's your friend again?" Fluttercruel sneered. "You're so gullible. You really think any pony would ever be your friend? Especially one who's terrified of her
own shadow, let alone chaos? I was scared of your stained glass window, before I even knew you were really inside it! I was scared of everything in your maze! All I wanted to do was run away and go home! How could I possibly have ever wanted to be your friend without you corrupting me first?"

"Because you were stronger than you remember yourself being, now," Discord said. "And because, while you've spent the intervening years fighting with yourself and sinking farther and farther into your own depravity, she's had friends to bolster her up. She's had good experiences with her Element that made her stronger. You haven't. Plus, if you could possibly recall after so much time and so many changes to our relationship, yours with the other me and then you enslave... you had the strength to stand up to me in the maze, despite your fear. You made me have to cheat to win. None of the others did that." He reached a paw out to her, though he couldn't close the distance and touch her without her permission. "Why do you think the other me fell in love with you? It wasn't because you were easy to corrupt. You were a challenge. Mindless terror isn't all that entertaining; I get that all the time. Kneejerk defiance is pretty ho-hum, old news, too. But you beat me at my own game, and I had to cheat to defeat you, because you're strong in a way I didn't know how to fight."

Fluttercruel was gaping at him, at a loss for words for once in his time with her. He smiled a twisted smile, dropping the paw. "Fluttershy is my friend. You could have been, too, but you decided you had to own me instead. You're beautiful, and you wanted me; no wonder the other me succumbed to your wiles and died to be with you. I'd do anything at all for my Fluttershy, because I know she cares about me and she's kind to me. You could have had that too... even with the parameters of the spell Twilight put on me. You could have enslaved me with kindness. But no. You decided to rape me and beat me and feed me the worst things possible and do your best to find out what I honestly think about things so you could punish me for thinking thoughts you disapprove of. I could have fallen in love with you; the fact that you wanted me would have gotten me plenty hot under the collar even if you weren't as beautiful as my Fluttershy is, and obviously, you are. If you'd just asked, you could have had me wrapped around your hoof. But you never asked. You just took. Even when I offered, you found ways to make me feel used and helpless and reminded me of how much I hated what you were doing to me. So." He took a deep breath. "I'll cooperate with you if you try to hide me from Twilight, because I don't want to die anymore, and even if I do die I don't want to destroy the world when I go. The thing I tried to trick Twilight into doing will destroy the natural chaos of this world, and I don't want that. I'll try to find a way to help you if you want to make it so you can override Twilight's orders that prevent me from escaping. But Twilight also ordered me to never have sex with you again, and specifically instructed me that her orders override yours, and I'm not going to do anything to help you get around that."

And then it sank in what he'd just been doing. He had just deliberately taunted Fluttercruel by confronting her with all the terrible things she'd done to him, and how he really felt about all of it, and then gloated over the fact that she wasn't going to be able to rape him anymore. His ears flattened and he shrank back against the wall, suddenly so afraid he could barely breathe, but he forced himself not to apologize or beg for mercy. It wouldn't work, anyway; if she decided to punish him, begging her not to wouldn't help.

"It doesn't matter," she said quietly. "Maybe the other one is your friend, but odds are Princess Celestia's going to execute her and you can't do anything about it. We can deal with the whole... intimacy... thing later, once I've made sure you won't die." She turned to Rainbow. "Now are you going to help me?"

"You gonna let him talk to you like that?"

"For right now? Yes. Getting him out of here and away from Twilight is more important."
"Yeah, well, I don't like the way he talked to you." Rainbow turned toward him and punched him suddenly in the jaw, her forehoof coming in under his chin and knocking him backward. She followed it up with a flurry of kicks and punches. He screamed and tried to curl in on himself; she was hitting with enough force that he felt bones crack, in places where he had bones rather than cartilage, and the kicks to his abdomen felt like something was ripping inside.

"Thank you, Rainbow, but I can fight my own battles. You've done enough."

"Yeah, well. He needed to learn some respect."

"Respect is very important, that's true." She came over to him, where he was trying to huddle on the floor as best he could, given the way Twilight had him shackled. "Stop that whimpering; Rainbow didn't hurt you all that badly. You've been through a lot worse."

While the part about him having been through worse was certainly true, that didn't make the pain any easier to bear. "I... I think she cracked my breastbone," he gasped, having difficulty breathing. His ribs were flexible cartilage, but without his magic, the breastbone they attached to was not.

"Oh, fine. Heal yourself. I might need you mobile." Discord sighed with relief as the magic washed over him, transforming him back to his uninjured state. Fluttercruel waited until he was done.

"Now, listen carefully to these orders. When Twilight gives you an order, you are to obey it after a delay of three minutes. You should not obey any of Twilight's commands any faster than that. Orders that come from me, Rainbow Dash, Applejack, or Rarity should be obeyed immediately. If Pinkie Pie gives you an order, and it threatens your life or health, wait three minutes; otherwise, you should obey her orders. Do you understand?"

"Yes, but I might still have a seizure. I don't know if this is going to work. The spell says I have to obey immediately."

"Yes, so you need to immediately obey my order to delay any of Twilight's orders. This should be taken to apply retroactively for a day, so that if you are under orders that she gave you today, you must delay obeying them for three minutes. Can you do that?"

"I don't know," he said, truthfully. "I want to obey you for this one, but I don't know if I can."

"Let's test it." She walked up to the latch on his collar. "I'm going to unlatch your chains now. Don't attack me."

Discord trembled violently as Fluttercruel reached for the latch, which she did slowly and deliberately, running out the clock on his five-second grace period. His limbs shook with the need to lift them and slash at Fluttercruel, but the loyalty spell – and possibly, Fluttercruel's order to wait three minutes – paralyzed him. His head pounded, and nausea rose in his guts, but he didn't attack her or try to stop her.

Maybe her trick with the delayed orders was working after all. If he recalled correctly, when Twilight had tested him with orders to harm her or one of the other Bearers, the seizure had come far more swiftly than this.

"What's wrong with this thing?" Fluttercruel pressed on the latch again. It didn't unlatch. "Why won't it open?" She tried several more times. "Come on! Discord, are you doing this?"

"No! Why would I be t-trying to s-stop yo-you?" The shaking had gotten so bad he couldn't talk without stuttering.

"Let me try," Rainbow said. "I'll bet it's stuck. Just needs a little push from a strong pony."
"Fine. Give me a moment." Fluttercruel backed away, and waited until his shaking subsided. "I'm proud of you, Discord. You held out for I think two minutes there."

"I, I don't know if it's your orders or if it's the conflict with the loyalty spell," he stammered. "It, it makes me feel awful. Like my muscles want to pull in two different directions at the same time. I think if you keep it up I'll have a seizure. Or throw up. Or both."

"Well, if you have a seizure you'll probably lose consciousness, and then we can get you out of here." She turned her head. "Go ahead and try it, Rainbow."

"I'm only doing this because I don't wanna see Twilight destroy the world, and she might not listen to us about a magic thing because she's a little miss know-it-all," Rainbow said. She came forward and tried the latch. "Ugh! It's really stuck!"

"Twilight might have locked it with a spell," Discord said. "I wasn't... paying a lot of attention, really."

"Yeah, sounds like her," Rainbow said. "Oh, well! Fluttershy, I just figured out how we can prevent Twilight from destroying the world easy-peasy without having to worry about getting him out of here! Let's just kill him, then there'll be no problem!"

"What part of I want to keep him alive are you not getting?"

"The part where I care? I don't need to help you protect a danger to Equestria just because you want some nookie. Which you can't even get, because Twilight ordered him not to."

"There are ways around that," Fluttercruel snapped. "And that's not the point. Rainbow, do you remember why the spells on Discord work?"

"Because Twilight cast them with the Elements. Duh."

"And for the Elements to work, we need to be in harmony with each other. That was the entire reason Discord corrupted them, because if they were corrupted with their opposites they wouldn't be able to harmonize with Magic, or each other. But Twilight found a way to make them harmonize with Magic, and the rest of us harmonized with each other. What do you think is going to happen if you try to kill Discord in front of me?"

"You'd freak out?"

"I'd hate you. More profoundly than I am capable of hating anyone right now, and ever since my element was corrupted I've gotten good at hating ponies, Rainbow. If you try to kill Discord and you can't do it instantly... you're likely to free him, because you'll break our harmony, and the spells will snap. How long do you think you'd live if you were trying to kill Discord and all of a sudden he got his magic back and wasn't being prevented from harming any of us anymore?"

"To be honest, she'd live a very long time," Discord said softly. "A very, very, very long time."

Rainbow shuddered. "Knock it off, jerkface, you're being creepy."

"You just threatened to kill me. I thought it would be helpful to know what you're risking for yourself if you try it."

"So, if we can't get the latch open because of magic, we'll have to cut through the chains. Lyra and Bon Bon will have bolt cutters. Let's go."
"Don't you want me to, like, stay here and make sure he doesn't get loose?"

Fluttercruel gave Rainbow a look. "You mean, stay here and take a nap? Discord's not going anywhere if we don't cut through those chains. No, you're with me. I don't like asking ponies for favors, you can do it for me."

She fluttered to the door, much more slowly than Rainbow, who was already through the door. Fluttercruel turned and smiled at Discord. "Now, remember, it's very important to make sure that Twilight stays asleep. Poor thing is so tired. It'll be very helpful for her to get some nice rest, so there's nothing wrong with you keeping her in a healthy sleep if she starts to wake up, now that I've ordered you to."

Discord nodded. Fluttercruel started to continue. "And don't—"

He didn't want her to finish that sentence, in case it was an order not to go anywhere. Not that he could, until Spike got back and maybe not even then, and not that Fluttercruel knew it was an option, but it wasn't a risk worth taking. Discord interrupted. "Mistress, even if we get me out of here, how can you hide me from Twilight? Spike said she's got a spell that can scry for me."

"Oh, don't worry about that! That's why we're going to the Everfree; that spell never worked when you were in the Everfree. Well, when the other one was."

"Fluttershy, you want those bolt cutters, then let's get a move on! I don't care how healthy Twilight's nap is, if the rest of the girls get back here and see you've put Twilight to sleep to protect Discord, you're really gonna be in the soup."

"All right. I'll be right back, sweetie!" Fluttercruel left finally, shutting the door behind her.

Discord took a deep, ragged breath, looking down at the unconscious Twilight. For a moment he considered ripping her Element off of her; she was still wearing it as a tiara. Maybe there was something he could do, pry the piece of Matrisse out of it, something... but no. It would need magic to repair it, and the magic might be beyond him even with his powers. Planting disharmony in the heart of the Elements of Harmony? That was well within the range of the Spirit of Disharmony's abilities. But it had been Twilight's power that had sutured Harmony to Order. The only thing Discord could do with Order was to destroy it, and it might take more strength than he really had, with his body so weak and his thoughts so much more sluggish and harder to focus than usual.

"Come on, Spike," he muttered. "No time like the present... let's go, here..."

**Opposition, 3:30 PM – Twilight**

"What did you do with her?" Shining Armor was screaming at Spike. "What did you do with our princess?"

"I think I probably mailed her to my princess," the gigantic dragon that had Spike's colors, that looked like newborn Spike before Celestia had come and cast the spell to regress him to his proper infant size, but whose voice was too deep and booming to ever be Twilight's little baby assistant, said. "The honest truth is I don't know. And I don't care either. She was going to kill my friends... and you were going to let her do it!"

Faster than she ever thought something so massive could move, the dragon that couldn't be Spike grabbed at her brother that wasn't her brother. Shining Armor threw up a shield, and the huge paw slammed into it and slid off.

"Spike, don't hurt him! He was obeying Princess Celestia's orders!"
"He was going to let her kill you! And all of our friends!" Spike roared, and the stones of the palace shook. His wings beat, sending small whirlwinds every which way, and changelings caught flying in the gusts were flung some distance.

"That doesn't matter," Rarity said, firmly, and did what Twilight couldn't possibly – she went up to the monstrous dragon and ran her hoof along the part of his great neck that she could reach. "Spike, you would not be able to live with yourself in the future if you had to remember harming Shining Armor, even if he isn't the correct one. He was like an elder brother to you, isn't that what you've told me?"

"Yeah..." It was, Twilight thought, a strangely incongruous word to come from a giant dragon.

She was still reeling. Spike had grown to full adult size in instants, like he had the day she hatched him. Greed growth had taken at least a full day. And he had wings. He hadn't had wings either of the previous times he'd been prematurely adult. What did that mean? And he seemed in control of his reason, mostly... he could still talk, and he hadn't kept lashing at Shining Armor. But Spike was her baby. Like a little brother, considering that she'd been far too young when she'd hatched him to realistically be considered a mother. He wasn't supposed to be like this. He wasn't supposed to be monstrously huge, so he'd never fit in the library or even anywhere in Ponyville and he'd have to go find dragons to live with because he'd terrify ponies everywhere he went and she was going to lose him—

A poisonous voice drifted over the battlefield. "Oh, dear, have I come at a bad time?"

Twilight spun around to look at the speaker, at the same time as Shining Armor did. "Honey!" he shouted. "Spike's turned into a full-grown dragon and attacked the Princess! He says he might have mailed her to another dimension! We need support, ASAP!"

"NO!" Twilight took to the air, and fired a beam of laser intensity at Chrysalis – who blocked it. Because when she'd fed on Shining Armor for months she'd been powerful enough to defeat Princess Celestia, and she'd had him in her clutches for years now—"You won't harm Spike!" she shouted, attacking Chrysalis again, but this time it was Shining who blocked her, extending his shield around the Changeling Queen.

Chrysalis laughed. "You may be an alicorn, False Twilight," she shouted, "but I've fought alicorns before. You're no Celestia. My changelings, attack the mares! My love and I will work on spanking the dragon and the little sister."

And then there was chaos. It was so much like the wedding; all around, changelings were taking the forms of her friends, but they were smarter about it than they were during the forest battle or the wedding. They took her friends' current looks, including mane dye jobs and everything, and they didn't attack the pony they were impersonating... they attacked one friend in the guise of another, greatly increasing the chance that one of her friends would hurt another, or would hesitate and be felled by a changeling. The remaining Royal Guards were attacking as well. Spike wasn't flaring them – she guessed, because he'd just figured out he was mailing everything he dissolved in his flame to their Princess Celestia, who probably had her hooves full with her doppelganger – but he didn't need to; a single swoop of his paw could send a dozen guards tumbling over the stone floor. A few earth ponies fell off the parapets and had to be rescued by pegasus comrades.

But Twilight didn't have much attention to spare to watch how Spike and her friends were doing, because she was fighting desperately herself.

Chrysalis was powerful. Very, very powerful. And much more experienced in battle. And while Shining wasn't attacking Twilight, he was shielding Chrysalis, so none of Twilight's attacks got
through. It was all she could do to shield Spike and dodge Chrysalis' attacks herself, because Shining and Chrysalis were synchronizing, calibrating the shield to let the frequency of her magic through while blocking Twilight's, and when Twilight shifted her frequency, both Shining and Chrysalis changed theirs.

_I can't beat them this way,_ she thought. Shining's shields were powerful enough to encompass an entire city; on a much smaller field, like this one, they were for all intents and purposes impregnable. As long as he was protecting Chrysalis, _none_ of them, including Twilight, could get a hit in on her... but she was able to hit Twilight. More than once. Once, Twilight fell out of the sky, striking the stone floor hard... and cast a healing spell to accelerate her already vastly accelerated alicorn healing, getting back up on legs that moments ago had probably been broken to fire back with a counterattack. Another time, she skidded across the floor with burns in her wings or on her belly, and teleported back to where she'd just been. After a third attack that got through, she reeled back from bright light in front of her eyes, falling into a brutal spell that tried to crush her and break her bones, and she had to counterspell it, and while she was concentrating on that her shield on Spike faltered. He bellowed, unable to dodge away from Chrysalis' attacks while he was fighting to help their friends. Twilight thought it would take a _lot_ of magic to harm him, but... she still remembered that horrible moment when her Princess Celestia had fallen at Chrysalis' hooves.

"Shining! We don't want to fight you! We don't even want to fight Chrysalis – we just came here to retrieve Discord and go home!"

Shining shook his head. "You have no idea what Discord did, here. He drove hundreds of changelings insane, and they killed themselves. He _murdered Cadance_. I can't allow him to be free, not for a moment."

"That wasn't our Discord! He didn't do anything like that, and the one who did is dead!"

"He's still Discord! I could allow the seven of you to go free, and go back through your portal, but you can't bring Discord with you!"

"Why? You know he's not the same one! Our Cadance is perfectly fine, and the two of you are happily married! Augh!" A bolt from Chrysalis caught her in the withers, burning through flesh and bone, and while Twilight was distracted force-healing it, her own shield was down. Chrysalis laid down a barrage on Spike, driving him back.

Twilight's shield went up again, even as Shining Armor blocked her counterattacks. "Why are you like this? When you were talking to Princess Celestia, you said you thought it would be a good thing if we took Discord and left, because your Twilight's obsessed with him!"

"I convinced him that that position was short-sighted," Chrysalis said, firing another blast that Twilight had to dodge.

_I'll just bet you did_, Twilight thought. She didn't know whether Chrysalis had used magical brainwashing, or just the ordinary influence special someponies had on each other, but either way it was obvious she was a pernicious influence. "If you're going to judge ponies for what their counterpart did in another dimension, Shining, then you need to take a good look at your marefriend, because in our dimension, she kidnapped Cadance! Impersonated her for months! Mind-controlled you at your wedding to let changelings come in and take the city! If you can love her even though her counterpart did all of that, then you can recognize that Discord didn't do the things you're accusing him of!"

"Why should he believe you?" Chrysalis asked, laughing. "I've proven myself. For all he knows, you come from a world where all of you are malicious liars to begin with, or you want Discord
back so badly because you serve him willingly."

"You're the one who's good at lying and pretending to be something you're not! Shining, you know me! I'm just like the Twilight you knew, except that my Element isn't corrupted and my personality's still the same!"

"And you're an alicorn," Chrysalis said coolly. "That's rather different, don't you think?"

"That doesn't change who I am inside! Argh!" A blast of burning magic nearly took off her hind hoof. "Shining, you know an alicorn is still a pony! Cadance was an alicorn, and she was just as normal as you and I were!"

"It certainly makes you a lot more powerful," Shining Armor said. "And power can go to your head."

"More powerful, yeah, but not all-powerful. In my world, the Changelings captured Cadance even before the Gala. She spent a year as their prisoner, so Chrysalis would be in a good position to fool you when she supposedly got back from her foreign travels. Being an alicorn didn't save her from that."

Wait. Wait a minute.

The Grand Galloping Gala had happened before Discord broke out. Twilight had even noted that, before, when she'd been talking to Princess Celestia.

If this world had had the same history up to the point where Discord didn't get put back in stone... What was more likely? Discord taking a prisoner from the Changelings, only to kill her? Cadance breaking free of the Changelings and running straight into Discord, who for some reason decided to murder a mare who couldn't possibly have been in any condition to threaten him? Or... her changeling captors seeing an opportunity, and taking it?

Kill Cadance, blame it on Discord, and comfort the bereaved lover, openly taking Cadance's place in his heart? Because the Queen had decided Discord was a threat, or Discord had actually attacked them already, and an alliance with Celestia would be easier if the question of what had happened to Cadance never came up?

"Shining! I just remembered something!" she screamed frantically. "In my world, Cadance was kidnapped before the Grand Galloping Gala; that's why she wrote you to tell you she wouldn't be able to make it after all, because it was really Chrysalis writing the letter!"

"So what? Haven't you been arguing with me that someone from another dimension doesn't have to have done the same things as in this dimension?" Shining asked.

"We need to put her down, Shining! If we're to have any hope of getting Celestia back, we need to take them captive! Now!"

Twilight dodged and shielded against Chrysalis' suddenly frenzied attack. "The difference between our two worlds started with Discord breaking out. Which happened two days after the Gala."

"What are you trying to say?" Shining snapped, and there was suddenly a shield around her, pinning her in place. "That my Chryssie killed Cadance? Why would she have done a thing like that?"

Twilight teleported out. "I didn't say—"
A changeling landed on her then. Not as a combatant, but as an object that had been flung, apparently by Applejack. Twilight tossed the changeling aside. The fighting had gotten a lot closer to where she was. More changelings broke off from attacking her friends to come after her.

"Because Cadance is dead! I saw her body! Discord took her wings, and her poor horn was a broken stub, and her body was so badly smashed and mutilated—" Shining’s voice caught in a sob. "He tortured her, or he dropped her from higher than even the pegasi can fly, after taking her wings. Who else could have done that? She was an alicorn! Who could have taken her wings, except Discord?" Another sob escaped him. "My Twiley thought it might have been Nightmare Moon, because Discord didn't generally kill anypony. But he killed changelings. So many changelings died, because he drove them into madness. He killed Sombra – took his horn, restored the crystal ponies' memories of the horrors they'd lived through, and tossed Sombra in the middle of them. Why would Nightmare Moon kill her own niece? Even if she hated Cadance, why wouldn't she have tried to take her hostage against Princess Celestia or something?" Shining was throwing shield bubbles up wherever Twilight paused, forcing her to fly or teleport nearly constantly. "He killed her! You're trying to imply that my Chryssie did – that she – no! She didn't, she couldn't have, because no one but Discord can make wings disappear as if they were never there!"

"Darling." Rarity had somehow come up behind Twilight, her mane a ruined wreck, her body covered with stone dust and scrapes and cuts, but she held herself proudly. "Let me answer him. Cover me, Chrysalis will try something."

"Um... okay?" But she couldn't teleport Rarity, now that she herself was exhausted, and Shining was using his shield to attack, and there was no countering that. What was she supposed to do?

"I'm sorry to raise such painful memories, but you must know, Shining!" Rarity called out. "The easiest way to take the wings from an alicorn if you're not Discord is to murder somepony who never had them in the first place!"

"What?" Shining stared at her, plainly enraged but also confused. "Cadance—"

"Had wings! Fleur de Lis, Fancy Pants' wife, did not! In this world, Fleur is a changeling... but in ours, she is not! And aside from wings, coat and mane color – which can be changed with dye – and cutie mark, she—"

And then the stone floor smashed beneath both Rarity and Twilight. With an ear-splitting shriek from Rarity and a cry of horror from Twilight, it caved in and they fell.

Harmony, 4 PM – Celestia

Celestia dodged her doppelganger's energy bolt by instinct, largely because she hadn't had time to analyze it and see what type of energy it was. It hit the wall and actually burned through the heat-protectant spell she'd placed on all of the interior walls of Canterlot Palace ever since her need to not channel so much energy that she'd melt stone to lava had led to her being defeated by Chrysalis. The bolt couldn't have harmed her – Celestia was immune to heat, up to and including being able to survive in the heart of her own sun – but she hadn't known what type of bolt it was before she dodged it.

"Princess Celestia!" Her guards charged forward – and stopped, trapped by the fact that there were two of her and they didn't know what to do.

"Go wake my sister, all of you. Tell her it's an emergency," Celestia said. They galloped away. To the other Celestia she said, "Do you choose to be a guest in my home, or do you choose to come as
"an enemy?"

"You are – This is the world Discord comes from. The world the uncorrupted Twilight and her friends have come from."

"It is, yes."

"And your Luna is alive?"

"She's asleep at the moment, but yes, quite alive and well."

Without warning her other self fired a transformation spell at her, with a power and constraint level appropriate to transform even an alicorn to... something inanimate, Celestia wasn't sure. She didn't have Twilight's talent for analyzing and rapidly comprehending spells. She did, however, have considerable experience with tearing spells apart, and with her own spellcasting techniques, so she was able to rip the spell apart easily.

"Why are you attacking me?" she shouted. "I've done nothing to you."

"Your dragon sent me here!"

"He is his own dragon, which I'm sure you recognize when you're in your right mind, and since I've been out of contact with him I had no way to influence his actions. Why did he send you here? What did you do?"

The other one fired a sleep spell, an area-effect dissolution spell that would dissolve matter within it, and three more transformation spells, in rapid succession. Celestia broke them all, and returned a sleep spell, a spell to reflect spells back on the caster, and a spell of clumsiness, which the other Celestia broke with ease. "It doesn't matter. I did what I had to do."

"Had to, or wanted to?" She flung the hoofcuffs at the other one, at sufficiently high speed that they'd have broken bones when they hit if the other wasn't shielding. Not that a broken bone could stop an alicorn of her age for longer than about thirty seconds, at most, but they were evenly matched enough that any advantage might give Celestia the upper hoof against her alternate.

"You have no idea what my world has become! Twilight told me, your Discord was safely caged again within a day! You didn't have to deal with chaos tearing your country apart for a year! You didn't lose your Luna!"

"I'm sorry for your loss," Celestia said, dodging a beam of frostfire. The other was getting desperate. Cold spells weren't their strong point to cast, and did little good against them – nopony could cool the sun, after all. On the other hand it was too simple and raw to be unraveled, not unless you were Discord at any rate. "But attacking me won't bring your Luna back! What do you hope to gain by this?"

The other didn't answer, just stepped up her attacks. Her eyes had been as cool and calculating as Celestia's own were, when all of this started, but now they were wild and crazed. Whatever was driving her to these attacks wasn't anything rational. Perhaps that world's Discord had corrupted her too, just in a more subtle way? Or perhaps she'd merely gone mad. Celestia considered how she herself would feel if Luna had died, such a short time from when she'd finally gotten her back. Still, it didn't make sense. She understood the concept of being maddened by grief, but it simply didn't seem in character for her; grief had always caused her to withdraw, push away any ponies who tried to help her, once in a while get exceedingly drunk... which was a challenge to manage with alicorn metabolism, but right after losing Luna she'd gotten quite good at it... Attacking
another pony for no particular gain didn't seem like something she'd ever want to do, though.

"Is this jealousy?" Celestia pressed. "You're angry at me because my Luna didn't die?"

The other didn't answer, but her eyes grew even more wild and angry, even as tears started to glitter in them. So either that was a direct hit, or she was on the right track. She knew why the other wasn't answering her; goading her opponents into giving her the hooks she could use to manipulate them verbally was one of her own preferred tactics, and she knew better than to fall for it herself. Apparently, the other Celestia was that much like her, at least. But the other one was too emotional to guard her tells; she might be able to refrain from responding verbally, but her face told Celestia that the comment had hit a sore point, most likely the truth or a near-truth.

And then Luna finally arrived, her coat slightly amuss from sleep. "Sister? What – oh!"

The other Celestia turned, leaving herself completely open to attack, her face a picture of grief and longing. "L-Luna?"

"Sister, why are there two of you?"

"That one comes from the dimension the Bearers went to. Spike seems to have mailed her here," Celestia said.

"Luna – is it you? Is it really you?" The other Celestia took a hesitant step forward.

"I – yes? It is indeed me?"

"Her Luna is dead," Celestia said softly.

"Oh. Oh, I see."

The other Celestia broke, staggering toward Luna, the weight of her own emotions seeming to crush her. "Luna, Luna, oh, I've missed you so much," she cried, tears welling in her eyes. She threw her forehooves around the smaller alicorn. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I never wanted to do it but you said you couldn't keep fighting her off, Discord turned you back to Nightmare Moon and I tried to cast a spell to push her back but I wasn't strong enough, you told me you were slipping and you told me to do it and I never wanted to—"

Luna's horn lit, and the other Celestia slumped and fell to the ground. Celestia raised an eyebrow. "Sleep spell," Luna said.

"Of course." Luna's sleep spell was almost unstoppable – it didn't work on Discord in combat, though they'd never been able to try taking him by surprise with it, and Celestia herself could block it if she saw it coming, but back in the old days Luna had ended more than one sisterly argument about Celestia neglecting her own health with a sleep spell. "I imagine that's the best thing for her."

"Do we have a notion of why Spike would have sent her here?"

Celestia passed the hoofcuffs to Luna. "These arrived with a bit of Twilight's fur on them. I think Spike must have been freeing Twilight from captivity. I'm not sure why he was suddenly able to send me anything; I've been trying to send him messages all day, and aside from the very first one, none have gotten through."

"There would normally be a set of four of these."

"Yes... which is why I haven't tried to send Spike a message. If he didn't have time to free
Twilight's back legs..."

"Who would have known the proper way to magically bind an alicorn? We've kept that secret over the centuries... haven't we?"

"Of course." Many, many enemies of ponykind knew you could stop a unicorn's magic by putting an iron ring on their horn. None knew that an alicorn could transmit her magic through her wings or her hooves if her horn was blocked – just as she could transmit her earth pony strength through her wings to make her flight more powerful, or her pegasus weather manipulation magic through her horn to cast weather manipulation spells every bit as good as anything the best weather management pegasus could do. There had been some, in the past, who'd known it, but Celestia, who'd outlived them all, had made sure their knowledge died out as well. "She must have been the one to bind Twilight. Or to order it done, at least." Celestia sighed deeply. "Discord said in his letter that her eyes were so cold, but to be perfectly honest, if he'd stayed free and unleashed chaos all over Equestria for months before being turned to stone, I think I would have been every bit as cold to him. I was hoping that she didn't know how he was being treated, that this was all the corrupted Twilight acting on her own recognizance... but that seems unlikely now."

Luna yawned. "I should walk in her dreams. Gather as much information as I can about what is transpiring in the other world, and what she's done." She sighed. "I am still troubled by your decision to let Discord free, and I'm still not convinced he is other than a monster... but if there is any possibility at all that the true Discord lurks within him someplace... I understand why you decided to act."

"Aside from any other equinitarian motive, he himself warned that he feared he'd be used as a weapon, if they broke him. That had to be prevented." Her horn lit with the summoning spell for her guards, and they returned. It was hard, sometimes, to get them to obey her standing orders – that they should leave her presence and concentrate on protecting the castle and civilians, should she ever be hard-beset by a foe she couldn't simply drop with a thought. Their instincts told them to protect their Princess, not to consider themselves a liability who would slow her down and impede her self-defense because she'd need to consider their welfare. But these had done well, and she told them so. Then she instructed two of them to go to one of the specific vaults in the Palace, and bring back a set of restraints that consisted of a horn ring, an iron cable, and four large hoofcuffs, larger than these. "Do you want to check on her dreams before I bind her?" she asked Luna.

"Nay, it's not necessary. And probably for the best that I wait, on the chance that I wake her up by misfortune."

Celestia nodded. "See if you can find out why she was attacking me. The best I can guess was that she was jealous of me, because you live and her Luna doesn't."

"I'll seek out that knowledge in particular, yes."

**Opposition, 4 PM – Spike**

*Where was it?*

Dear Celestia, Twilight couldn't have taken it when she took his gems, could she? All of Spike's secret stashes were completely empty. He'd known she took his gems, but when she'd asked him about the stone shards of a deer antler, he'd claimed it was petrified, and he'd found it in the Whitetail Woods, and that it wasn't food but he thought that it was really cool that things that had once been alive could turn to rock, so he'd taken it because the natural world was interesting. Only one of those statements had been true; he really had found it in the Whitetail Woods, in the cave where Celestia had put Discord's statue, surrounded by nothing-is-here spells that would keep a
pony from noticing, but Spike had bribed one of the guardsponies who'd flown the statue there with donuts to find out exactly where Discord was.

Twilight had taken this to be an interest in science, and left it with him, after ostentatiously claiming his gems. But it wasn't in the place he'd been keeping it. And it wasn't in any of his other secret stashes. And downstairs the yelling had stopped some time ago, and any moment now he was going to run out of time. Terror and the sick feeling that he'd screwed things up horribly and doomed them all drove him to run downstairs to check and see whether there was any chance Twilight would be coming up.

Instead he found Twilight asleep on a pillow in the workroom where she'd bound Discord, and Discord himself slumped on the floor. He brightened as soon as he saw Spike. "Spike! Do you have my lunch for me?"

"I can't find it! I think Twilight took it, and why is she asleep?"

"Fluttershy ordered me. She and Rainbow Dash have gone to get bolt cutters. Now would be the perfect time to find your trophy and get it to me..."

"I just said! I can't find it! I don't know where it is! I've looked everywhere!"

Discord raised an eyebrow. "You let somepony steal from your hoard? What kind of a pathetic excuse for a dragon are you?"

"It was Twilight! I can't say no to Twilight! And I don't even know when she did it!"

"Hide it better next time. Give me a moment." Discord closed his eyes and lay down on the stone floor.

"What are we going to do?" Spike asked anxiously.

"We're going to shut up and let me concentrate," Discord snapped. "With my magic bound this is absurdly difficult." He closed his eyes again.

So he wasn't falling asleep. Spike didn't know what he was doing, apparently.

Spike paced nervously for a few minutes. Finally Discord lifted his head. "Basement."

"B-basement?"

"I can't pin it down to where in the basement, but I can hear the tiny squeak of trapped and muffled chaos magic if I really concentrate on it, and it's coming from the basement. I'm sure of it."

"All right! I'll find it! Are you sure Twilight's okay?"

Discord rolled his eyes. "I'm not allowed to harm her, even under orders. She's just asleep."

"But what if she wakes up?"

"Fluttershy thought of that too. I'm under orders to keep her like this."

"Okay... I guess that's all right..." Spike backed out of the room and then ran for the basement.

Above his head he heard the door opening, and swore silently to himself, using words he'd found in books that Twilight didn't know he'd read. And there was Rainbow Dash's voice, absurdly loud.
His entire hoard of non-gem items was in a box in a corner. His comic books. A cravat that Rarity had made for him. A pawful of fireproof baby toys. A few celebrity autographs. A copy of Ogres and Oubliettes, First Edition. Photographs of himself and Twilight, from happier days. And his little bag of shards from the antler of the creature he'd murdered.

At some point today Twilight must have taken his entire hoard and moved it to the basement. To mess with him? To punish him? To keep his stuff safe in case something went wrong with her ritual? Spike had no way of knowing... not unless Discord's plan worked and they were able to fix the Elements and re-harmonize them. He sat on the floor and poured the shards out into his lap. There were five of them, in varying lengths and thicknesses. Because Discord's face had been staring at him, that expression of bitter laughter he'd been wearing when he was stoned and now he was looking at his murderer with that same cynical humor on a severed stone head lying face up on the ground and Spike couldn't stand it, so he'd swung the hammer again and smashed Discord's face in, except that had been even more horrible so he'd smashed and smashed until the pile of rubble wasn't recognizable as a head anymore. Except for the antler, which had broken off very early. As he'd picked it up, it had fallen to pieces, but they were pieces large enough that Spike could look at them and recognize what they were.

He'd needed that. After he'd looked at the rubble he'd created and it had sunk in, you have just killed someone. You have done something irreversible and awful, his mind had reflexively wanted to go elsewhere. Wanted to escape into daydreams, and forget that he'd done this. And that seemed wrong. He'd killed someone. He shouldn't get to run away from that. So he'd taken the antler bits, to remind him, forever.

Maybe it would all balance out if he saved this Discord's life. Maybe someday he'd be able to forgive himself.

He put the pieces in his pockets and headed upstairs.

Rainbow Dash was working the bolt cutters. Discord looked extremely ill and was trembling violently, but he wasn't attacking her. "Hurry up, please," he moaned.

"Stop being such a big baby," Fluttershy snapped at him. "Oh, Spike! Rainbow and I were just wondering where you were!"

"Uh... why?"

"We need to find out if the others have left the palace yet, and when they left. I don't want to get into an argument with them when they get here and I don't want them to take Twilight's side." She looked at Discord. "You did tell him what's going on, right?"

"That the ritual will end up destroying the world? Yes, I told him that... ngggh. Please, I think I might have a seizure...."

"Take a break, Rainbow."

"Not a chance! I'm almost through this one, and we've got two more to do!"

"Did Twilight actually order you not to let anyone break any of the chains, or did she just say the one attached to your collar?"

"All of them..."

"Oh, dear. All right, Rainbow, finish this one and then take a break." She turned to Spike. "Can you write a letter to Princess Celestia and ask her when the others left?"
"Okay..." He started to reach for his pocket and then remembered it was stuffed with shards of the dead Discord's antler. "Let me go get a quill and a scroll..."

Those were easy enough to find in a library. He quickly jotted the note and came back into the room, where Rainbow had finished with the main chain and backed off, letting Discord recover. "Okay, sending this to Princess Celestia..." He summoned up his internal magic and breathed out on the scroll.

The response came almost instantly. He belched it out. "What does it say?" Fluttershy asked eagerly.

"Uh... this is the message I wrote. It didn't go through."

"Oh, no! Can you try it again?"

"It's not going to go through if you try it again," Discord said. "A bounce like that means interference with the signal. My guess is that my Twilight and her friends have done something to block the transmission at the endpoint."

Fluttershy's eyes narrowed. "You mean they've done something to Princess Celestia?"

"Not necessarily. An interference spell doesn't need to do any harm to anypony."

"I'll try it again anyway," Spike said, and did, with the same result.

"I'm outta here," Rainbow said. "I need to check on Princess Celestia."

"And the others. I'll... cut these bolts. Somehow. Oh, maybe Spike could do it!"

"Yeah, no. Twilight said he had to use lethal force to stop me. He can't attack any of you, but he can attack me."

Rainbow sighed with exasperation. "Look, gimme two seconds and I'll get those chains off."

"I'll hold him down so he can't try to attack and maybe then he won't have a seizure from the contradictions," Spike volunteered.

"Like I care."

Spike walked over to Discord. "Put your head down so I can sit on your neck. Maybe if you can't physically attack, you won't get a seizure from the spell trying to make you do it when a different spell says you can't."

Discord sighed. "I doubt it will work, but all right."

As Spike crouched down to climb onto Discord's neck, in the moment when his body was facing Discord and blocking Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash's view of Discord's face, he quickly pulled the shards out of his pocket and laid them on the floor. "Go for it," he whispered.

"Got it!" Rainbow crowed. "Lemme get this other one—"

"No, it's fine, it's small," Fluttershy said. "I should be able to cut it. Go check on the Princess and the others."

"Right, I'm outta here."
Discord's tongue shot out, wrapped around the rocks and pulled them back into his mouth as Spike climbed onto his neck. "What do you want me to do?" Spike whispered to him.

"Wait for it."

Fluttershy started working on the last chain. "Oh, my goodness. Rainbow made this look so easy," she panted.

Discord's head jerked up, as if he was starting to have a seizure, and his breathing stopped for a moment, then resumed, fast and loud breaths through his nose. "Mistress Fluttershy?" he said, less mealy-mouthed than Spike would have thought – had he managed to swallow those rocks already, without chewing them? "Can I tell you something?"

She looked up. "Of course, sweetie, what is it?"

From his vantage point on Discord's neck, Spike couldn't see Discord's face, but he could hear the grin in Discord's voice. "Go fuck yourself."

And then the world turned inside out.

**Opposition, 4 PM – Twilight**

Twilight flung her magic out, catching Rarity with her telekinesis and shielding from the rocks. She teleported to the main receiving chamber of the palace, knowing that Princess Celestia wouldn't be there, and it would probably be locked. With no Princess and with so many guards being called to the roof, it was her guess that none would be spared to guard a room no one needed to be in right now.

Conservation of momentum meant she aimed for being in the air when she teleported, so she would have time to fly down and reduce her speed naturally, without instantly hitting the ground with all the force of her fall. She set Rarity down as soon as she landed. "Rarity, what's this about Fleur de Lis?"

"Shining mentioned that Fleur de Lis is a Changeling Princess, here."

"But Fleur was at the wedding. Cadance's spell would have thrown her too. Any creature that fed on love—"

"I know. And the wedding happened long after Discord broke loose, but it seemed to me as if Fleur here was revealed to be a changeling shortly afterward. Now, perhaps it's possible that Fleur was a captive of the changelings in our world and they returned her before the wedding... but honestly I think she or Fancy Pants would have told me at the wedding, if that happened."

"So in this world, they replaced Fleur?"

"I don't know if you ever noticed this, but in my profession I have to have an eye for body types. Their faces aren't identical, of course, and they're of different colors... but Fleur and Cadance could be perfect copies of each other, with the right makeup and some mild illusion spells, aside from the cutie marks and the wings. Shining told us that 'Cadance's' wings were missing, as if they'd never been there, and he assumed that was Discord's doing, since who but Discord could do that to an alicorn's wings?"

"You're saying..." Twilight felt sick. "The Changelings here murdered Fleur to make it look like Cadance had been killed by Discord? But why? What do they get out of that? If they wanted to frame Discord for killing Cadance, why not just kill Cadance?"
"Well, in part because you can't actually kill an alicorn by dropping her, I'd presume. Even if they bound her wings... well, darling, I've noticed how quickly you heal up from minor bruises and scrapes now, and Princesses Celestia and Luna are immortal, or nearly so. I haven't the faintest idea whether you and Cadance are, but you do seem to heal very quickly."

"They could have killed her some other way and then dropped the body."

"But then they don't have the Alicorn of Love, an expert on love spells, as a prisoner." Rarity swallowed. "We've seen what the corrupted versions of ourselves were willing to do to Discord to make him use his power for their benefit. How much do you think Chrysalis would be willing to do to break a magical supply of endless food to her will? Cadance can cast love spells. And if Chrysalis could break her, as our alternates were trying to do to Discord, to make her obedient...."

Twilight put a hoof to her mouth, trying not to throw up at the mental images suddenly bombarding her. Not Cadance. Not her sweet, kind, loving babysitter and sister-in-law. No.

But it was horrifyingly plausible. And if so... it made it so much more awful that Shining genuinely loved Chrysalis.

She took a deep breath. "I'll tell him. But I should teleport you outside the palace first."

"Nonsense, my place is with the rest of you."

"But you're not in the middle of the fighting now... I could go and teleport all of them."

"And then what? The guards would only pursue us, you know. We need to convince your brother that Chrysalis is playing him falsely."

"He's not going to want to hear it..."

"Is Chrysalis mind-controlling him?"

"I don't know, but... it's weird. When I was listening in on him talking to Celestia, he said that he thought we should be let go and we should be allowed to just take Discord because that way my counterpart would stop obsessing over studying him. Now he says letting Discord go would be terrible, and he keeps talking about the horrible things the other Discord did... mostly to changelings and Cadance. He doesn't bring up what Discord did to the rest of the nation. My brother's loyal, and he cares about Equestria. Why would he keep talking about changelings and not about ponies if he's fully in his right mind?"

"Is there any spell you can use to break him free?"

"If he was fully mind controlled, I could use the memory spell I used on you girls, to save you from Discord. But I don't think he's fully under her spell – just heavily influenced. I don't know how I'd counter that."

"He's your brother. Even if he isn't really your brother, I'm sure he'll listen to you if you can only have a chance to speak without Chrysalis interrupting."

"The problem is how powerful she is. And I can't get my magic through Shining's shield."

"I have an idea. Bring me to Spike; let me ride him. He has the power we need, but the dear young boy lacks the experience. I may be able to direct him. If he attacks Chrysalis directly while you work on separating Chrysalis from Shining Armor..."
"How is Spike going to get through Shining's shield?"

"From underneath, perhaps?"

"No, it's spherical."

"Hmm... darling, I'm afraid you're going to have to break it. You're an alicorn, he's not. Surely you have the strength needed?"

"I don't know... my brother has the most powerful shields in all of Equestria. I might not be able to pull that off."

"Let me think... there must be some way we can use your alicorn status. He won't be expecting that; his Twilight isn't. Is she significantly less powerful than you?"

"Yes, but much faster. I think it's that thing she combined her element with; it seems to have given her a speed boost and made her able to do complex spells a lot faster."

"But she can't fly."

"Uh, probably not. I couldn't when I was a unicorn."

"What if you flew at his shield, at high speed?"

"I don't think that would break it—"

"I'm sure it wouldn't, darling, but what would happen to an ordinary unicorn who fell onto his shield from a height?"

"Uh, it operates like it's a wall, so I guess they'd get hurt... but where are you going with this?"

"Consider. Somepony who looks and sounds like his beloved little sister is flying at high speed at his shield. You weren't nearly as adept at rapid teleportation when you were a unicorn; perhaps she is and perhaps she isn't, but my guess would be that he wouldn't expect you to be able to teleport away at the last moment. And while he may know you're an alicorn... his Twilight isn't, so I doubt very much he will be thinking in terms of your alicorn healing abilities. To him... it'll seem as if you're about to crash. And what would his immediate emotional reaction be to the sight of his little sister about to crash into his shield?"

Twilight wasn't the best at calculating the emotional reactions of others, but now that Rarity had pointed it out, she had to confess it sounded plausible. "So... you think he'll drop his shield?"

"And if he doesn't, you can teleport away before you hit."

"I think you might be overestimating my reflexes... but all right, I don't have a better idea so I guess we'll try it."

**Opposition, 4 PM – Pinkie**

The battle had not been going well.

Applejack and Rainbow Dash seemed to be doing okay against their opponents, all things considered, but they were both fighting five or six Royal Guards each. Rarity had wailed and screamed as she fought, crying and whining about how unfair it was that she had to fight, and she was a lady, and how uncouth it was for Royal Guards to be attacking a poor feminine dressmaker who isn't even a very powerful unicorn... which had led the guards who were going after her to
back down. Fluttershy had succeeded at something similar, convincing two guards that Princess Celestia had obviously not been in her right mind if she wanted to commit necromancy, and Spike had sent her somewhere she could be healed, and she would be very grateful once she returned with her sanity intact that some guardsponies had recognized the terrible mistake she'd made and hadn't carried out such horrible orders. But all this had done for either of them was get Changelings set on them instead. Rarity had gone all out against the changelings, using rocks and discarded helmets and anything else she could find with her telekinesis to smash into them... but Fluttershy hadn't been able to do much except dodge. The Stare, and other manipulations, didn't work on changelings, who had their mother figure right there, giving them orders.

Meanwhile, Pinkie was taking hits.

She hadn't thought her Pinkie Sense would start cutting out from the backlash while she was still in danger. She'd expected it would wait until she was safely home, and then it would drop completely and she wouldn't sense a doozy if it was in front of her painted blue and blowing a flugelhorn to the tune of "Doozy Days Are Here to Stay." But no. It was failing now, her ability to sense how to dodge out of danger cutting out at exactly the wrong moments, so she kept getting hit. It was hard to be as agile as she normally was when her ribs and her belly ached so much and there were claw slashes from a Changeling on her side (how did they even have claws? They had hooves! Had the one who'd hit her shapechanged his hoof into a claw at the last second before he hit her? Oh fudge pudding this hurt) and dust in her eyes and one time she'd landed wrong and gotten a rock in her frog and now she was limping even though she'd managed to get it out.

Still. Fluttershy beset by Changelings. And Rainbow Dash up in the air fighting pretty much every pegasus guard almost single-hoofedly. Spike kept raising enormous gusts of wind to blow at them, but that was catching Rainbow as much as it was her opponents because Spike might know how to fly for some reason but he didn't know anything about air flow like Dashie would know but it wasn't like she had time to teach him. And Applejack was taking on most of the unicorn and earth pony guards, the ones that Pinkie wasn't fighting. No one was free to help Fluttershy... who had a little success getting changelings to bang into each other or to get them to chase her into range of Spike's massive paws, but not much.

Well, there was no help for it. Pinkie just had to step up her game.

She weaved and dodged and blocked as she worked her way toward Fluttershy. The changelings saw her, and there were thus three Fluttershys and two Pinkie Pies in the group that had gone after Fluttershy, but Pinkie knew who was who. These changelings knew to mimic their dyed mane colors, but the expressions on their faces were too savage or mocking or savagely mocking to be either Fluttershy or Pinkie, and their combat moves weren't quite right. The fake Pinkies didn't seem to pronk like she did, and the fake Fluttershys were in the air. Pinkie lured her guards in and got one of them to get mixed up and attack a Pinkieling. She shouted as she fought her way toward Fluttershy. "Fluttershy! Remember the time I asked you if Gummy could eat ice cream?"

"Yes, and you remember that I said no and you fed it to him anyway and then he got sick?"

"I couldn't help it! He wanted it so bad! You try standing up to those baby alligator eyes!" Pinkie grinned. They had both established their bona fides to each other, despite all the changelings, and they hadn't even needed to use Marco Ponio.

Across the floor, she saw that Rarity had managed to break free of her bevy of changelings and had gotten over to Twilight and Spike. "Let's try to get to Applejack! We'll work better as a team!"

"Oh, but Applejack won't be able to tell changelings from the real us nearly as easily as we can, Pinkie, you know that..."
"We'll just do Marco Ponio! Anyway we could totally get the guardsponies who are fighting Applejack to take on some of our changelings!"

"There is that... Okay, then."

Pinkie began trying to move the fight. It was difficult, because Fluttershy, despite being able to fly, wasn't willing to go up to go over a combatant, so they couldn't leap together, and they had to stay together because Fluttershy couldn't really fight. Pinkie had to do the fighting for both of them, although it was Fluttershy who found that if you bucked a changeling hard enough between their neck and their withers that it cracked their carapace, it dropped them. She had a large rock in her hooves, courtesy of Spike or Chrysalis or someone who had smashed up the floor come, and was on her hind legs, staying balanced by using her wings, and lunging at changelings with the rock. It was rarely effective, but at least it made them keep more distance from her than they'd probably prefer. Pinkie didn't need a rock to do the same thing; she was an earth pony. No Applejack, no, but when she concentrated on her legs she could crack a changeling's carapace with a buck, and she was better at fighting in a reared position, on hind legs, than any other earth pony, or in fact anypony who wasn't a pegasus, that she knew. A hard punch to the face with a foreleg sent most changelings reeling, and Pinkie could even jump from that position. She was still taking hits she should have been able to dodge, but she was keeping the changelings from piling on top of them en masse, and that was what was important.

And then they heard Rarity and Twilight scream. Both turned to look, and saw, horrified, as the floor crumbled underneath the two mares and sent them falling into the tower.

If the changelings had thought they could take advantage of the distraction, though, they were mistaken. Spike roared. "Twilight! Rarity!" His voice boomed with rage and horror, and then turned into a wordless scream/roar loud enough that all Canterlot probably heard it... and then flame jetted out of his mouth. Real flame. Burny flame that burned things. Which happened to be changelings. A dozen changelings near the hole in the ground screamed as they were set on fire.

"Oh... oh, my..." Fluttershy whispered. "Poor Spike... when all this is over that's going to give him nightmares, I'm sure. We'll have to tell Princess Luna to help him..."

Pinkie swallowed. "Yeah." Cute, friendly, chubby-cheeked Spike, always helpful, always hungry, always up for a donut or a gem-encrusted cupcake as a reward for a chore... had just killed a dozen changelings. He'd been horrified enough, when they'd been in the forest, that he'd have to fight some. Maybe the changelings would be able to stop, drop and roll, and put out the fire... no, there they went. Nothing but ashes.

Spike took to the air. "I'LL KILL YOU, CHRYSALIS! I'LL KILL EVERY CHANGELING HERE! TWILIGHT! RARITY!" Another gust of flame came out, dangerously close to Pinkie and Fluttershy, but the changelings who'd been besieging them scattered.

Chrysalis shouted, her own voice reverberating loudly. "My changelings! To me! Bring the dragon down!"

And the sky turned black with changelings, not just all the ones on the roof but ones flying up from every window in the palace, from the ground, from places in Canterlot. It was like the wedding all over again. And all of the changelings made a beeline for Spike. He roared and flamed more of them, but there were so many, swarming him. Landing on him, trying to bite him. Covering him with their bodies.

"Oh, no," Fluttershy whispered. "It's like the bees... We have to stop this!"
"Like the bees?" Pinkie asked as she galloped, following Fluttershy, right up to Shining Armor, who was shielding Chrysalis still but staring up at the sky with more horror in his face than triumph.

"Shining! Shining Armor!" Fluttershy shouted. "You have to end this! Without Twilight or Rarity, you're the only one who can!"

"End this?" He looked down at Fluttershy. "He's trying to kill Chrysalis. My love. I can't... I can't let him do that."

"He's Spike. He's the closest thing to a little brother or a nephew you have!"

"He's... not my Spike."

"That's true, and the Twilight who fell isn't your Twilight, and you're not our Shining Armor, but how would you feel if your Spike was protecting Twilight in our dimension and the changelings tried to kill him for it?"

"Yeah!" Pinkie said. "All you have to do to stop this is rescue Twilight and Rarity! And then let us all go! Spike doesn't want to fight the changelings!"

Another gust of flame burned more of the buglike creatures. "He doesn't seem to have a problem with it to me."

"He's a dragon, and he's maddened because of Twilight and Rarity! He'll stop if you rescue them! And those changelings will kill him! Like bees!"

"They can't... how is their venom even going to get through his armor? They can't do anything to him! He's a dragon!"

"No," Fluttershy said, with more patience in her voice than Pinkie could muster up, herself. "When a foreign bee tries to invade a hive, the bees protecting the hive swarm it. They surround it completely, and beat their wings to generate heat. The bee who's surrounded overheats and dies. Spike can't overheat, he's a dragon, but if there are enough of them crawling all over him he won't be able to move his wings anymore. He'll fall. And where he's positioned... he won't fall to the ground in Canterlot. He'll fall to the bottom of the mountain."

"I don't think even Spike can take that!" Pinkie said frantically. "We can get him to stop if you get Chrysalis to call her drones off and you rescue Twilight and Rarity!"

Shining firmed his jaw. "Soldiers! Go downstairs and look for Ladies Twilight and Rarity! Tell them Spike has gone berserk and bring them upstairs to try to calm him! Tell them he's killing changelings!" He turned to Chrysalis, who had paid no attention to the conversation, her eyes glowing as she apparently stared into space, or possibly communed with her changelings. Yeah, that sounded more likely. "Chrysalis! I need you to stop trying to kill Spike!"

Her eyes cleared, and focused on Shining. "He has murdered changelings!"

"He is a child who has been repeatedly faced with a threat to the life of his family and friends, who's just had very rapid and terrible changes happen to his body that I doubt he has any idea how to handle, and you attacked Twilight and Rarity. We can get him to calm down if we can find them."

"Why should I cater to him? You heard the horrible things they were saying about me!"
"You mean like how you probably killed Fleur de Lis and made it look like you killed Cadance so that you could keep Cadance and still win over Shining Armor and Princess Celestia?" Pinkie asked. "Because we were all talking about that when we were still locked up in a cell!"

Chrysalis' face twisted in rage. "How dare you! I should strike you down where you stand!"

Shining put a hoof out. "Chrysalis. Stand down. They don't know you like I do. They're ignorant and they're afraid of what they don't understand. I know you would never have harmed Cadance."

"Well, unless Discord messed with her head to totally change her personality forever, then you know wrong, because in our world she kidnapped Cadance and impersonated her so she could marry you and feed on your love and invade Canterlot, and nopony else has had a completely different personality forever unless Discord messed with them, they just have different personalities because of different stuff that happened, but Cadance got kidnapped before Discord broke loose in our world and—"

"Pinkie. It's out of respect for my sister's friendship with you in my world that I'm not blasting you where you stand. Shut up," Shining Armor snapped.

And then Twilight and Rarity reappeared, above Spike.

"What are you doing to Spike?" Twilight screamed. "Get off him!"

A shockwave of telekinesis blasted from her horn, washing over Spike's body and dislodging most of the changelings.

"Rarity! Twilight! You're okay!" Spike shouted up to them. His wings beat hard, and he rose up to greet them.

Chrysalis' eyes narrowed, and she set off into the air. Shining Armor called out to her. "Wait! What are you doing?"

"Directing the battle myself," she said. "I won't allow Twilight or Spike to harm any more of my changelings. I'll take the field myself!"

"I can't shield you when you're in the air!"

"I don't need you to shield me! I have enough power to fight off one young alicorn!"

Pinkie looked at Fluttershy. There were now no guards on the roof and no changelings anywhere. "Go to Discord," she whispered. "There's probably bolt cutters in the other Pinkie's workshop in the basement at the Cakes', because I have them for a handcuff emergency and I kinda think she has more of those than I do. I'll be a distraction."

"Okay," Fluttershy whispered back. "But, um, if you have the chance while you're talking to Shining Armor? Cadance might possibly be alive, I think?"

"How come?"

"I was at the Tree. Luna's cutie mark was darkened, but Cadance's is there, on the other side of the tree, and it was... flickering. Celestia's was just like on our Tree."

"Huh. Good to know. If I get a chance I'll use it but I've got something better for right now, I think." Pinkie looked at the sky. "Two things." She waved a hoof at Fluttershy and whispered-shouted. "Now hurry up and go!"
Fluttershy said, "Okay", again, softly, and slunk away, backwards, while Shining Armor was still staring up at Chrysalis.

"Yoo-hoo! Shining Armor!" Pinkie waved a hoof in front of him.

His eyes refocused. "What?"

"I have an idea! Why don't you just let all of us go? There's no crazy Princess Celestia here trying to commit necromancy, and if we don't go back through our portal, our Princess Celestia doesn't know where it is so she can't drop off your Princess Celestia at the portal, and she's not a huge giant dragon so I bet she can't mail another alicorn to Spike, so unless you let all of us go how are you going to get your Princess Celestia back? And without her saying she's gonna kill us all so that she can kill Twilight to get Luna back, you don't even have to keep fighting us!"

He looked back up at Chrysalis. "You don't know what Discord did to the changelings. Even if he killed Fleur de Lis to make it look like he killed Cadance, to hurt me because I'm Twilight's brother and everything he did was to hurt Twilight. Everything he did to the changelings justifies never, ever letting him free."

"That's too bad, because I was kinda hoping we weren't gonna have to do this," Pinkie said.

"Do what?"

That was when Rainbow Dash slammed into his shield with all the force of a Sonic Rainboom.
The Ghost In The Mirror

Opposition, 5 PM – Discord

The crumbled remains of his own stoned body tasted like dust and ash when he wrapped his tongue around them, but the magic they contained was like an electric shock, thrumming through his body. Chaos. The pure, heady rush of unconstrained chaos magic. As he pulled them into his mouth, the energy he had available to him increased logarithmically. They would have been very, very difficult to swallow without choking, and his mixed omnivorous teeth couldn't handle rock of any solidity – only his fang was at all draconic, and dragons with fangs didn't use them to crack gems, they used the rest of their teeth for that. But it didn't matter. With the sudden rush of chaos magic, magic both his own and not his own, that he could use, it was easy enough to expand his throat to be wide enough that the chunks of rock slid down easy.

And then the real rush hit.

It wasn't more magic than he was used to in his lifetime – the actual quantity of chaos magic available in a small chunk of his alternate's body was far, far less than the magic stored in his own, but he couldn't get to that magic unless he was ordered to, and he had no restriction on using this. That made it far, far more magic than he was used to lately, and it overwhelmed him. For a moment, all of his senses but his ability to feel magic were blotted out, the world vanishing into the kaleidoscope of impossible colors that he used to see, a long time ago, when he was a mortal chaos mage and he'd pulled so much magic at one time that it threatened his biological integrity and sanity.

He was in a space inside his own head, some sort of spiritual plane that looked a lot like his chaos dimension, but the colors were lighter and mistier. In his perception, he was tumbling, drifting through that space, falling through a realm of no gravity with no attempt to control his trajectory. It was exhilarating, terrifying and free. And in that place within, he saw another entity, catching bits and pieces of glimpses of something that looked like him, until he came face to face with it and stopped himself short.

What he saw horrified him.

It was himself – broken, shattered into tiny pieces, pieces which didn't bleed like flesh but which looked fully alive, not like stone – where the pieces had been somehow stuck back together, but badly. None of the pieces lined up with the pieces it was supposed to fit to, and there were gaps of fuzzy void in the spaces where the fastening didn't quite hold and the pieces seemed to be slightly separated from each other.

That was not what horrified Discord. The visual presentation would have been disturbing, maybe even horrifying, to ponies, but the Lord of Chaos had no qualms with a little bit of body horror. He might even make his own appearance look like that, if it fit the point he was making or if he thought it was funny at the time. No. What filled him with horror, and an existential terror the likes of which he'd never known was that this presentation was real. How the entity appeared to him visually wasn't a prank or a joke or an attempt at intimidation. That was really what it looked like, insofar as a bodiless spirit could look like anything.

Once upon a time, Discord had seen the Godslayer Hammer in use. He'd been fighting Typhon, a creature made of the rage and grief and madness of the dragons he'd driven underground to die of drowning in lava. It was a spirit of pure malevolence and it had wanted to burn the world for having the audacity to live while the dragons whose dark emotions had combined to make it had
died. None of his attacks had been working on the thing – it was already insane, so it took any further chaos in stride, and it was like Discord himself, neither fully corporeal nor fully an entity of magic, but could switch between as easily as he could. A pegasus whose name Discord couldn't remember had attacked the thing with a hammer she could barely hold... and Discord had seen the blows smashing the entity's incorporeal nature, shattering its very soul.

The soul had dissolved, vaporizing. It hadn't gone to the land of the dead; the gateway to the world of the dead hadn't even opened. It had just... fizzled, the pieces of malevolent spirit wisping away into nothing after the spirit had been smashed.

Then the pegasus had gone after him. Celestia and Luna, who'd been on the scene trying to fight Typhon themselves, had hovered there and watched as Discord dodged frantically. Memories from the previous Chaos Avatars had surfaced, of other creatures that were spiritual and magical in nature rather than purely flesh and blood being destroyed by that hammer, and he'd panicked completely. He'd already died two times by then, and come back – he wasn't overly afraid of death, per se, because he'd known it wasn't an end. But that? What that hammer brought? That was an end, and Discord had been terrified beyond reason. There had been a million things he could have done, among them teleporting, but he'd been so shaken by watching a soul's destruction that he couldn't muster up the wits to do anything but dodge out of the way.

Eventually, he'd managed to pull himself together enough to stop the pegasus, who after all had been a mere mortal pony with no special magic of her own, aside from the flight and weather control powers all pegasi had. He'd teleported her someplace – he'd had no idea where, except that it was in the air above a land mass somewhere so she'd probably be perfectly fine – had confiscated the hammer, and then paralyzed Celestia and Luna for half an hour so he could scream at them about what they'd stood by and almost let happen to him, because killing him was all in fun but destroying a soul was beyond the pale. Without his particular affinities for magic, they hadn't sensed that Typhon's death had been soul destruction – they'd thought the pegasus had a weapon that could negate the victim's magic, or something, and since they'd tried to kill him themselves multiple times (and had even succeeded once, for all the good it had done them), they had allowed the pony to attack him and even strongly considered intervening to help her, and mostly hadn't done it because they'd been exhausted and badly injured from the battle with Typhon. Once they'd realized what the hammer actually did, they'd been as shaken as he was, had actually apologized, and had done nothing to stop him from chucking it into a parallel dimension so it could never be used on their world again.

From what Spike had told him about the hammer, when he'd first been taken captive and Spike had revealed his role in the other Discord's death by simultaneously apologizing to him and angrily justifying the murder attempt, Discord had figured out that the other Discord had never disposed of the Godslayer Hammer. This world's Celestia had apparently acquired it, and this Spike had found it and used it. The bonds of Harmony had always held him so tight that half a dozen attempts to destroy his statue had never resulted in him taking any damage whatsoever. For Spike to have actually destroyed the other Discord by smashing his statue... the bonds of Harmony wouldn't have held tight around a chaos avatar whose imprisoned spirit was already smashed to bits. By the time the actual statue had broken under Spike's onslaught, Discord's counterpart had already been worse than dead, his soul shattered to pieces and rendered nonexistent. Or so Discord had assumed, because he knew how the hammer worked. He'd only seen it in action once, but other chaos avatars had seen it used, in the past, and it was a highly magical device... his ability to detect patterns in objects and in magical fields would have told him what it could do if he hadn't already seen it.

He had never expected this. A damaged soul disintegrated. Souls were virtually indestructible, but if you did manage to shatter one, it wouldn't maintain cohesion. The stuff souls were made of wasn't quite exactly magic, though it was a similar force, and just like the magic bound in a spell
would dissipate the moment the spell was broken, the substance of souls couldn't hold together if the soul wasn't bound to itself. Never in all of his own millennia of life and never in the collective memory of Chaos had there ever been a soul that was broken to pieces and yet still existing, still a soul, still aware of its own broken nature.

"What... why?" he stammered, staring at his other self, whose shattered face was twisted in a rictus of agony overlaid by a mocking, bitter smile. "How do you still exist?"

"qUeSTioN!" the other one laughed, a dozen of Discord's own voices speaking in not-quite sync. "NEed aNswEr? hERE!"

And then the other entity rushed at him, and Discord immediately understood what it was trying to do. It was trying to merge itself with his soul, take his whole and solid nature and his body and possess them for itself so it could live again.

**Opposition, 5 PM – Rainbow Dash**

The trick to combat flight was that you had to learn to control where you were pointing the impact energy.

A pegasus flight field protected against impact damage. Pegasi could still be injured or killed by impact damage if they weren't flying – foals, ponies like Fluttershy who panicked out of fear, ponies who had just taken wing damage while in air – but a flying pegasus was nearly impervious to the forces of impact, because her flight field would take the energy and dissipate it all around her, so the things they hit usually didn't take much impact damage either. There were limits; every stunt flyer knew that if they couldn't concentrate on keeping their field properly focused and dense on the impact point, a high speed crash could be damaging or fatal. Rainbow's parents, and later her flight instructors, had drilled her endlessly on how to focus her flight field so it would give her the maximum protection in the area she was just about to hit. It had been boring, and she'd complained constantly about the drills because she'd wanted to go do some stunt flying and not safety practice all the time, but by the time they'd been willing to let her learn stunts it had been second nature, as easy as flapping her wings.

After she'd been humiliated in her attempts to fight an ursa minor and a dragon, in the first few months after becoming the Bearer of Loyalty, Rainbow had sought out active combat training. It would help her to qualify for the Wonderbolts, who were all combat trained, she'd thought. Besides, if being the Bearer of Loyalty meant Princess Celestia was going to send her and her friends on missions, she might need it.

She'd discovered the hard way that combat training meant unlearning half of what she already knew about flight fields and stunt flying. A stunt flyer learned to diffuse her impact, to let her flight field take the energies and disperse them into the atmosphere. A combat flyer learned to concentrate it. In combat flying, all the force of your momentum was supposed to go into the point you channeled it into – usually your hooves, because you were going to punch or kick something, but sometimes you channeled it into the field itself, making the field somehow pointy in front, like you were the hilt of a knife and the flight field running ahead of you was the blade.

Flight fields were magic. Twilight had said that magic could be amplified by emotion. You weren't supposed to use bad emotions, like pure anger or fear, because those could turn into dark magic. But anger for your friends and how they had been treated? Fear for what might happen to them? As long as your emotions were protective toward your friends or family or nation or whoever, they could amplify your emotion and still keep you within the realm of Harmony.

There were so many Changelings crawling all over Spike, and Rainbow knew what happened to a
flyer whose wings were being dragged down. It was awesome that Spike was a giant full-grown dragon now, with wings, and if they lived through this she was totally gonna race him, and teach him some tricks because even though he seemed to just know how to fly he was still obviously inexperienced with it, but if there wasn't an attack on Chrysalis to get the Changelings to back off Spike then he wasn't going to live through this. Innocent little Spike, who wasn't so innocent anymore and definitely wasn't little, but he was still the kid that hung out with them and helped them in their adventures and there was no way Rainbow was letting those Changelings bring him down. So she outflew the guards she'd been fighting, going up, up, faster than they could match, because trained Royal Guards and all but she was the first to do a Sonic Rainboom in like recorded history or something. Faster, faster. More passion poured into her magic, more magic poured into her flight. She reached the apex and headed down.

Twilight reappeared and knocked the Changelings off of Spike, but then Chrysalis went out from under Shining Armor's shield and was going after Spike, but Rainbow didn't have the attention to spare because she was locked into her trajectory, and anyway Shining Armor was still dangerous and still needed to be taken down. Faster, with all of her flight field's kinetic shielding focused in front of her, ready to take that impact and turn it into a pinpoint hammer strike.

The rainbow trailed behind her. She couldn't hear anything because she'd already outrun sound and anyway the rush of the wind would have deafened anypony. Shining Armor's shield was up ahead, with him under it, looking away from her, up at Chrysalis.

Impact.

Even with all her flight magic pushing the force into a point, she still felt the backwash, jolting through her, throwing her backward. Her overtaxed flight field gave out mostly, and she had to stumble to a landing, and fall on her side, to the roof beneath her. But the magical shield took almost all of it. Shining Armor went to his knees, all four of his legs folding out from under him as his horn and body took sympathetic impact, the resonance of the strike against Shining Armor's shield affecting his body as well.

And then his shield went down, and Pinkie was on him, pinning him, and then Rainbow didn't see much else because she was dizzy and the world was spinning and there were Royal Guards in her way, surrounding her. She struggled to get up and get back into the fight but they were pinning her down.

Orange hooves lashed out. Some of the Guards turned to meet the new threat, but there were still enough of them pinning Rainbow that she couldn't get up. Without being able to flap her wings, she couldn't activate her flight field, and with them holding her legs, she couldn't kick her way out of this. Up in the air, Twilight, Spike, and Rarity riding on Spike's back, were fighting what looked like every Changeling in existence. Rainbow didn't see Fluttershy anywhere, and she knew Pinkie was covering Shining Armor. There was no one here to help her but Applejack, and as tough as the earth pony was, these odds were overwhelming. As long as Rainbow couldn't fight her own way free, as long as she was some kind of damsel in distress for Applejack to have to rescue, Rainbow was pretty sure Applejack couldn't win.

She struggled, harder, but the Sonic Rainboom that had brought down Shining Armor's shield had taken a lot out of her. She wasn't getting out of this on her own.

"Come on, Pinkie!" she shouted, though she wasn't sure anypony could hear her over the sound of Applejack fighting the Guards. "Do something!"

Harmony, 5 PM – Celestia
Celestia paced nervously, unable to quite contain herself, outside the large and well-apportioned guest suite that her prisoner was sleeping in... and that her sister was meditating in, her mind walking in the other Celestia's dreams. Celestia knew that Luna could handle pretty much anything she encountered in a dream, and that Luna would not take it well if Celestia hovered over her like a big sister... but she couldn't help it. This broken Celestia had killed her own Luna, and had been willing to torture Discord and to try to kill Celestia herself, to say nothing of the hoofcuffs with Twilight's fur on them. Who knew what horrors she had lived through, that Luna would have to see in her mind? Who knew what she was capable of?

The door opened. Celestia rapidly composed herself and tried to pretend she hadn't been pacing. Luna came through, looking troubled. "I've learned what I can, though what good it will serve for, I cannot say."

"Good work, Luna. Shall we go have some tea and you can tell me about it? You look as if that was stressful."

"It was." She shuddered slightly. "I've seen far worse in ponies' dreams, but much of what I inspired her to dream of was darkest memory, not fantasy... and, too. She's you. Another you, perhaps, but close enough to make my heart keen, or to awaken the rage I once held against you when I believed in my madness that you were the villain."

"How... close to me is she?"

They trotted to the lounge for this set of guest suites, currently empty except for two guards and a serving-maid, who took Celestia's order of tea and cakes for both of them. Luna added, "And a shot of orange liqueur, if you please." If the serving-maid thought the request was strange – this would normally be Luna's breakfast hour, and she didn't customarily drink alcohol until her duties were done for the night – she didn't show it. "Close enough for discomfort," Luna said. "Let me partake of something to relax my nerves and something to energize my weary mind, and I'll tell you all I found."

Cakes, tea and orange liqueur were out in short order. The cakes were actually more like cupcakes than full size cakes, but flatter and wider than the average cupcake. Luna picked up a chocolate one with vanilla frosting and bit into it. She then took a sip of unsweetened black tea, and another of her orange liqueur. Celestia watched her, holding her own teacup with her magic but not sipping at it yet, too tense to eat or drink.

Finally Luna spoke. "I appeared to her as mine own self, filly-like, as I was when I returned from the moon, and claimed no memory of the events that had transpired. She was initially resistant to telling me – I believe, because she thought me too innocent to be corrupted by such knowledge – but I wheedled her into telling me the tale. And as she told me, I used the suggestibility of dreams to make the memories come to life, where we could both safely watch and not be caught within."

Another sip of liqueur. "Sister... that world is a horror."

"I had guessed that," Celestia said. "Where does it diverge from ours? Could you tell?"

"For certain, no. There was a small change to our past, millennia ago. Do you remember that hammer that Discord claimed had shattered Typhon's soul?"

Celestia nodded. "I do, yes. From Discord's letter... I had guessed perhaps that was the one used to destroy the other Discord."

"That appears to be the case. Such never happened in that world... Typhon awakened, we fought it until we could fight no more, Discord appeared because 'twas his way to fight to defend his world
of playthings only after we had exhausted ourselves—"

"—Luna—"

"That was truth and you know it fine well. But to my point. Silver Strike never appeared with the hammer. Discord ended up throwing Typhon into some other reality. It was after he had been defeated that you were given the hammer, by one of Silver Strike's descendants... and you didn't know its nature, only that it had the ability to destroy evils directly. We still fought Tirek together, and Sombra, but many of the foes that you and I matched horns with in our world, or fought with the Elements, you alone took on, with the Hammer... until we learned that it destroys souls. Then you gave it up. The same corruption overtook me as in our world, and this Celestia blamed herself for fighting alone, not at her Luna's side, thinking that the reason I fell was that she was overprotective and treated me more like a child to be protected, less like an equal partner." Luna sighed. "Perhaps we should tell her at some point that in this world, my role was to be Princess of War, and that you trusted me in that role completely... and it changed nothing. My jealousy still consumed me."

"And you think that was where this universe diverged?"

"I don't know. Everything else seemed completely the same until Discord's escape. I have never seen your memories of the first year after the Bearers took on the Elements, but you told me of the events, and they seem to be the same. You groomed Twilight to be the Element of Magic, and succeeded. She and the others freed me. All the events, even the Gala, seemed the same. And Discord's behavior was no different than in our world – up to a point."

"Presumably the point where they failed to put him back in stone."

"Yes. What they fired at proved to be a lifesize balloon, bespelled to look like Discord."

Celestia frowned. "Once the Elements are active, it's impossible to dodge... but I suppose that if the Bearers lock them onto the wrong target, they can misfire. If Discord realized sooner that they were no longer under his thrall..."

Luna nodded. "I suspect that was what happened."

She told Celestia the rest of it then – the year of chaos. The corruption of all the Bearers but Twilight. Pinkie Pie a serial killer, Fluttershy Discord's cruel concubine, the others untrustworthy and venal. The deaths of Cadance, of Sombra. The other Celestia's desperate struggle to free her sister from the corruption of Nightmare Moon, that Discord had forced her back into – and the horrifying moment when Luna had been Luna again just long enough to beg her sister to kill her, because Celestia had been focusing everything she had into the spell to push back Discord's control and Nightmare Moon had been on the verge of killing her and Luna had said the spell wasn't enough, she wasn't strong enough, she couldn't hold the darkness in her own mind back, and Celestia, recognizing that only one of them could survive this night and the world itself might not survive if that one was Nightmare Moon... had killed Luna. And regretted it, every moment of every day she had lived since then.

And then Twilight had found something called the Diadem of Order, and had used it to re-harmonize with her corrupted friends, creating a balance. The corrupted Elements were off-kilter, unable to harmonize because of the presence of their equal and opposite Disharmonies embedded in them. Order was the opposite of Magic, making Twilight's element a contradictory paradox just like the others, and the Order pulling at one side counterbalanced the Disharmony on the other, allowing them to balance precariously in the center, where what was left of Harmony dwelled. It had been just enough. Twilight had broken the spell that prevented her friends from gathering
together in one location, at a pre-arranged time when Fluttershy was keeping Discord occupied with sex. The five of them had come into Fluttershy's home and joined with Fluttershy in turning Discord to stone, minutes after he and Fluttershy had finished their lovemaking, if it could even be called that. He'd had time to stand up and start laughing bitterly, and had been frozen forever in that position.

The chaos had vanished, but the corruption of the Bearers had not. Cadance was still dead. *Luna* was still dead. Celestia had given in to utter despair. Spike had taken the hammer and killed Discord, and that still hadn't fixed anything. Celestia was alone again, once more the only alicorn, once more the only support for the world.

And then this world's Discord had come through, reopening old wounds with his careless, selfish, thoughtless hunger for chaos. He'd hidden the Elements right away, as his letter had admitted. He somehow had never noticed that they were broken. It had taken their Twilight three days to come up with a plan to stop him. She'd paralyzed him with a spell that kept him locked in a perfect dreamworld, fueled by his own chaos, for another few days while she'd researched the spells she'd wanted to use to contain him. And then instead of turning him to stone, she'd bound him, and told the other world's Celestia that she intended to force him to fix all the damage he'd done and take the burden of the sun from Celestia, so she could finally stop being a princess, at least for a little while, and rest.

At this point, Luna paused. "Sister," she said. "I don't mean to pry, but... what I saw in her mind. Her feelings of despair... is it true you lost the ability to feel anything while I was gone? Is it true that you contemplated ending yourself?"

Celestia sighed. "I never wanted to burden you with this," she said softly. "What you suffered from the banishment I sentenced you to... I thought, how dare I feel lonely, when I'm surrounded by ponies and Luna has no one. How dare I feel there's no point to my existence, in a world where all my friends and confidants die and there's no other alicorn, or even entity, to share the burden of immortality with me, when I condemned you to a thousand years with no one by your side, not even ponies that die? But..." She looked away. "Considering how she broke, perhaps... perhaps I need to admit to myself that it was worse than I've let myself believe."

"I thought – the Nightmare thought—you were down here basking in their adoration. Soaking up their love for you, being praised and glorified. I thought you had banished me to the darkness and you were down here being happy."

"We all crave what we can't have, Luna," Celestia said. "I've never felt a hunger for adulation, respect, love... you've been correct all along. I've had those things all along. I was the heir, and I fit in with the palace culture because I was the unicorn, and I've always had a natural talent for being liked and making friends. I can't judge you for needing those things so badly the lack drove you mad – I don't feel like I need them, because I've always had them." She sighed. "What I wanted – what I couldn't have, what I could never have – was a normal, peaceful, average life as somepony that nopony would particularly notice, aside from the ponies in her town, and her friends, and her family. I wanted... what Twilight has. What she had, before she became an alicorn. Respect, and the feeling of satisfaction from doing good things for my fellow ponies, but otherwise to be mostly anonymous to the world. To have a circle of friends, good friends, friends I'd die for, who would die for me, but for all of us to be equals. I wanted a husband. Or a wife, after two thousand years I wouldn't be all that picky, but I still mostly prefer males as lovers. I wanted foals. And I knew I was never going to get any of that."

She took a deep breath. "I couldn't have lovers. Anyone I loved would have to suffer the burden of being my Prince, in the public eye as much as me, and... they wouldn't be my equal, and I never
felt like that was a fair way to love. And they'd die. I tried to have friends, but... again, none my equal. Again, they'd all die. By the time nine centuries had passed I was numb. I'd raised up four alicorns, and had the great fortune of finding another who'd ascended herself, a child, a barely becutiemarked filly I could raise like a daughter... and three died, one left and I have never known where, and my adopted niece was taken from me. I went through the motions, Luna. I continued to try to be the best ruler I could be, because there was nothing else. I felt completely hollow. The only thing – the only thing I dared dream of, was the prophecy. The stars will aid in her escape. On the thousandth night of the Longest Day. You were coming home to me. If I could only find Bearers for the Elements in time, to purge you of the Nightmare's corruption, I could have you back. We could be happy together, as sisters again, and I vowed..." Her voice broke. "I vowed that if I had the fortune to get you back, I would never, ever lose sight of you and your needs again... I would never lose you again..."

Luna got up from her seat, her own eyes bright with unshed tears, and came over to Celestia, who gathered her in a hug. "All that time I hated you, and you were suffering, just as I was," Luna whispered. "I'm so sorry, sister, I'm so, so sorry..."

"It was my fault. I didn't see the signs, I didn't see you were suffering. I didn't realize how withdrawn you'd become, how lonely. You fell because of me."

"No, that's not true. You had a hoof in creating the conditions, yes, but I was the one who was weak. I was the one who broke. I could have been stronger, fought harder."

"If you could have, I'm sure you would have. In another world I was protective of you and the same thing happened. I don't think you had the strength to fight, after what I allowed to happen to you. You must have felt so lonely, Luna, so unloved, and I was so busy in those days, we were building alliances and making Equestria into a world power and there was so much to do and it was so exciting... and I lost sight of what mattered to me the most."

"Even now – I have Cadance, I have Twilight. I might be able to regain even Discord as a friend, if we can save him and if he can forgive what we did to him. But you... you're the most important thing in the world to me, Luna. Please, I want you to know that."

"And you are to me as well," Luna said, choking slightly.

"I want to believe I'm stronger than she is," Celestia whispered. "That if Discord had caused me to kill you... I wouldn't have given in to complete despair. But... I remember when the only thing that kept me waking up and raising the sun in the morning was the certainty that you would be free, and either you would be cleansed and be my sister once more, or... or I'd be dead. I wouldn't have to live without you forever." A soft sob escaped her, and she buried her muzzle in her sister's insubstantial starry mane. "For her... she had you for a year, and then you were Nightmare Moon again, and then you were dead. And she killed you. For the greater good. I don't... I really don't know if I could have kept going at all. I don't know if I have any right to judge her."

"Well, she planned to perform necromancy and raise her Luna from the dead... in Twilight's body. Our Twilight. That, I am certain you would never have done."

"I presume that's why Spike sent her here?" Celestia drew back from the hug, forcing control on herself. The other Celestia had endured a horror beyond endurance... but she was still very, very dangerous. Right now she was sleeping, and bound with alicorn restraints to cut off every avenue of her magic... restraints Celestia had had commissioned for herself two centuries ago when she'd found herself thinking that if she just dropped the sun on the planet then the loneliness and emptiness would end and she'd have peace. She had managed to stay sane enough that she'd never actually needed to bind herself with them, but she'd tested them, and they'd worked on her. So the
other Celestia was probably not going to be able to break free and cause havoc... but Celestia
couldn't afford to underestimate her. If she'd been capable of turning a blind eye to brutal torture, if
she'd been capable of contemplating killing Twilight – any Twilight – who knew what she was
capable of?

"Yes. Which makes me think that we daren't return her until our own have returned."

"Mm. Yes. But it might be best if we scryed for the portal ourselves, and possibly we should even
go there, with our prisoner. I can't be certain that she won't manage to trick some guard into
releasing her by convincing him that she's me."

Luna tilted her head. "Are you thinking of going to that world, to assist with the rescue?"

"...Maybe." Celestia laughed nervously. "It just seems... I could replace her. I could go over there
and order their Bearers to release Discord. If our Bearers have been captured I could order them
freed. I wouldn't even need to fight."

"Sister." Luna met her eyes. "I am not strong enough to bear the sun day in and out as you bore the
moon. This one is mad and I will never trust her. I will not let you go risk your life to save Discord
when our world needs you so gravely. If we should learn from Spike that our own Bearers are in
dire peril, and a word from what the others believe to be their Princess could save them, then
perhaps. But we need more. The last this one remembers, Spike had..."

"Spike had what?"

"Just transformed," Luna said reluctantly. "Some type of draconic growth, perhaps greed growth,
perhaps some other type. Triggered when she tried to have our Bearers taken away to be executed,
because our Twilight had rebelled against her plot to raise the other me by killing her. He was a
full-sized adult dragon, and still had the power of speech."

Celestia took that in for a moment. "No wonder he hasn't sent us a report." She looked at Luna.
"Sister, don't you think that this information makes it even more vital that somepony should go to
the rescue? If this Celestia is bound here, I can take her place and nopony would be the wiser."

Luna sighed. "No, sister. I can't let you risk yourself. The danger if you were to be lost is too great.
What if there are assassins over there plotting to kill the other you for her incompetence and she
knows who they are and can avoid them but you have no idea?"

"Don't you think that's a trifle ridiculous?"

"We need more information. We can't risk you on a supposition." Luna considered. "I suppose I
could go. If they think me to be dead it's unlikely there are any plotting against me."

"Luna... you can't go because they think you're dead. They'd know right away you're an impostor."

"Neigh, I rose from the grave. With my moon powers." At the look Celestia gave her, Luna said,
"Well, why not? Without that world's Celestia there's none to know how ridiculous that is, except
perhaps that world's Twilight."

"Who is exactly the pony you'd need to fool." Celestia snorted in frustration. "I know why you
don't want me to go over there, Luna, and you're right, but... can we risk sending a message to
Spike, now? What if he's in combat? If he's a full-sized dragon they won't keep him back for being
small and young... and if they tried he wouldn't let them, and if it's greed growth there's no reason
to expect he could answer anyway."
"Then perhaps we should trust in Twilight and her friends." Luna held Celestia's gaze. "You told me to trust in them when Sombra returned. Now perhaps it's your turn."

Celestia smiled wryly. "I said that, but then you and I had a gateway open to the Crystal Empire, and we were scrying the whole thing. We would have stepped in the moment it looked as if Sombra would win; I needed to know that Twilight could defy my orders if she had to, if the need was great enough. That she would put saving lives above passing a test. And you know why I needed to know."

Luna nodded. "That business with driving the town mad for a doll because she feared not being able to make a report to you. She surely would not have been safe to ascend to alicornhood if she remained that fixed on the letter of your directives rather than the spirit. But still. You did trust in her."

"I did." Celestia sighed. "But she was never before up against _me_. Or herself."

"Well, she's not up against you any longer. We can expect they were in combat when she came to us. Battles can't last forever. Trust in her, and in Spike, and give them a bit longer to send you a report. Send a query in an hour. Did I mention this one has an alliance with Chrysalis? For all I know, they have codes to guard against impostors... and Chrysalis may be able to sense the difference between a broken pony in despair and that same pony in good mental health. We can't risk you."

"You didn't mention Chrysalis, no. If that's the case... you're right, it's too much of a risk." She sighed. "And here I was looking forward to possibly being able to take _action_ for once."

"Ha!" Luna's laugh was more like a bark. "I knew it!"

**Opposition, 5 PM – Discord**

His other self needed to merge with him because in its condition that was the only way it _could_ live again. It couldn't draw on the disharmony of the newly dead to fuel its magic and create a new body for itself and come back to life... it was too broken to wield any kind of magic, even that magic which unquiet ghosts were generally capable of. But if it could merge its broken pieces with the intact soul of another world's Discord... it could overwrite most of his identity with its own, and live again, at the expense of having a handful of memories that had never happened to it.

By the same token, though, Discord wasn't broken. Not in that way. There were a lot of other respects in which he considered himself broken now, but at least his soul wasn't shattered. And that meant he was stronger. A rush of memories that weren't his own dazed him, but even in the middle of that transfer, he still knew who he was, and that he didn't want to be the other one. He flung it back, away from him, with force of will.

His other self began laughing. The harsh, cacophonous sound quickly turned into sobs, as the broken soul crumpled like a chewing gum wrapper, folding up into itself.

"Did you really think that would work?" Discord asked sharply.

"cAn y2U bLAmE? deSPerAtiOn. nO BeTTeR oPtiOns." The other one looked up. "CaN'T diE. CaN'T liVe. cAN't cAn'T cAn't..." It rocked back and forth, repeating the word "can't" in different tones.

Discord had little attention to spare for his other self, as his mind flooded with the memories that weren't his.
So much was the same. So much. Everything that stood out across the millennium or so that he'd actually been alive and experiencing the world, as opposed to a stone statue, was the same, indistinguishable from his own. If there had been minor differences, he wouldn't be able to tell – a thousand years of memory was far too much to go over with a fine toothed comb.

Everything was more or less the same up until the moment that Pinkie Pie insisted on drinking more chocolate milk before firing up the Rainbow Cannon of Doom.

When Discord had seen that, the brief thought had flickered through his head that that was odd – he'd corrupted her against laughter, against pleasure, against fun. She shouldn't have wanted a drink of chocolate milk. But he'd dismissed the thought, because it was Pinkie Pie. Her own internal chaos could fight back against what he'd imposed on her without restoring her to harmony, he'd thought. And because he'd thought he had an explanation that made sense – a betrayal of chaos, he'd thought after he was stoned, trying to figure out why he'd lost – he hadn't looked any further.

Until the moment he'd felt harmonic energies charging the air all around him, zipping past him, and he'd opened his eyes to see, in horror, that in the moment he'd been posturing with his eyes closed, they'd locked on to him. You couldn't dodge the Elements of Harmony once they were targeted. He'd been paralyzed with terror, knowing he couldn't teleport, trying frantically to think of something he could do to stop this, and then it had been too late.

But the other one hadn't thought of the fact that Pinkie had her own affinity with Chaos. He'd known it, just as Discord had known it, but it hadn't occurred to him in that moment. He'd wondered why Pinkie seemed to be back to herself. So he hadn't closed his eyes to make a grandiloquent gesture of unconcern. He'd looked, with his magical senses, and he'd seen that they were rebalanced, no sign of his work left. Which meant the Elements would work.

Terror hadn't paralyzed him, because it hadn't already been too late. Discord was very, very good at thinking quickly under pressure when he wasn't out of options. He'd needed to buy himself time. He couldn't let them lock. So he'd created a decoy and teleported away, invisibly. He'd had the decoy behave like he would have, screaming and trying to shield itself, as the rainbow rays enveloped it... and then his magic was purged from it, and its true nature was revealed as a balloon. And he'd laughed, and laughed, at the consternation and fear in their faces.

Then he'd taken their wings and horns again and put a slow levitation spell on all of them but Twilight, letting them rise slowly into the air while he'd demanded that they toss down their Elements, or he'd let them float into space and suffocate. It was a bluff. Quite aside from the fact that killing them would just cause the Elements to reset and seek new bearers, Discord despised killing. It made the world more orderly and it was no fun whatsoever. The mares had tried to resist, so he'd teleported the Cutie Mark Crusaders and all of their pets there and told all of them the stakes, and the fillies had pleaded with the older mares to give in and save themselves, and Fluttershy, at least, could understand the pleadings of the pets as well. Even Twilight had joined in, insisting that they could find a way to defeat Discord without the Elements, but if they lost their lives there was nothing they could do. None of them had guessed he was bluffing because Celestia and Luna hadn't been there, and none of them knew him well enough to know he didn't kill.

So they'd tossed down their Elements. He'd gathered them in a bag, made of pipes, and retreated. The Element of Magic was useless on its own, and he was fairly sure there was nothing he could do to it. Twilight had summoned it out of nothing, once. The others were more bound to the physical world... but not bound enough for his tastes. He'd bought time but sooner or later they'd realize that the physical Elements were manifestations of the bond they had to the metaphysical concepts they represented. Whether he threw the Elements into an active volcano, or the ocean, or space, or another dimension... sooner or later, the Bearers would figure out how to summon them back, or how to use them without having the physical objects in their possession. He knew from the
memories of the previous Chaos Avatars that the Elements of Harmony were metaphysical; that was the whole reason Celestia and Luna had defeated him. They’d brought pretty rocks against him and claimed those were the Elements of Harmony and he’d laughed hysterically because the Elements of Harmony weren’t physical objects and how deluded could they possibly be? Except, it had turned out, sometimes they were. And now there was a whole generation of new Bearers who thought they were nothing but physical objects. He could play that for a while... but they'd learn. Eventually.

So. Couldn't hide the Elements forever, couldn't kill the Bearers. His plan to destroy Twilight Sparkle's faith in friendship and thus permanently prevent her from using the Element of Magic she was bonded to had failed. He could disharmonize them again, but it would be harder this time – he'd probably have to use brute force on all of them, like he had on Fluttershy – and it would still wear off, and the whole reason he hadn't done it to Twilight Sparkle herself was that powerful unicorns like she was were trained to be resistant to magical mind control, and if he did get her Celestia could reverse it, and anyway chaotic disharmonization spells lasted only a couple of months at most. What to do?

He thought then of an idea he'd toyed with in his prison but eventually dismissed as too much work – corrupting the physical Elements themselves, disharmonizing them to contain their opposites. The Tree had gone to all the trouble of creating physical Elements that could be given out to ponies so that Bearers didn't need to be high-order magic users in themselves, and the physical Elements would embody the metaphysical connection to the souls of the Bearers. So perhaps it could go both ways. Perhaps, if he corrupted the physical Elements, it would serve as an anchor to keep the spell from being dispersed or wearing off. The Elements of Harmony set up a feedback loop where they chose a Bearer for exemplifying a trait, and then they enhanced that Bearer's connection to that trait, making them embody that trait more as time went on. So it was very possible it could go in the other direction, too.

He took them back to his private chaos dimension and experimented on them for several days, until he was fairly sure he had it right. And then he returned, with a new game.

He chose to use the labyrinth again because it would lull them into a state of complacency. Ponies lived in a world where things were predictable. They'd expect predictability out of him. Celestia and Luna would know better, so he removed them from the equation. He turned Celestia into a frog and Luna into a reversed wolfequus, a growling, snarling monster trapped in a cage who needed to be released into the moonlight to transform back into Luna. He manipulated the heavens to increase Luna's power, and he set a series of traps.

The game was, find the Elements and the two alicorns before the time limit was up. He didn't take their body parts – he'd done that before – but he implemented other measures to keep them from using wings or horns to cheat, dumping objects on Twilight's head every time she cast a spell other than telekinesis until she stopped, making the air above the labyrinth a maelstrom of whirling scissors that would cut a flyer to pieces. (It really wouldn't have; that was another bluff. The scissors he sliced a hedge with, as a demonstration of what they could do to a pony, were metal and sharp, but the scissors in the maelstrom were actually rubber. But they didn't know him well enough to know when he was bluffing.) They tied themselves together so he couldn't separate them. He made the Elements challenging to find, but not impossible, because he wanted them to find them. That was the whole point. And he dropped hints to tell them how to free Celestia and Luna – Luna, a wolfequus inverted; Celestia, to be freed by true love's kiss. Celestia, at least, would know that Discord had no faith in romantic love, and that when he said true love, he literally meant a love that was true, not a romantic monogamous pact.
It could be either Luna or Twilight. If it was Twilight, she'd be transformed into an infant foal, far too little to use her Element, but still bonded to it, and a spell would fall on Luna to make her irrationally convinced that Twilight was her daughter and needed protection. Luna would resist any attempt from Celestia or Twilight's friends to try to reverse the spell, and the corruption of the Elements would remain dormant until they found a new Magic or Twilight got old enough to wield hers. If it was Luna, the spell that triggered would disharmonize her back into being Nightmare Moon, and suppress her memories from the past year. She'd think she had just returned from the moon. And then, if the Bearers tried to use the Elements to free her... then the corruption would enter them, and collapse the connections of Harmony. Twilight wouldn't be corrupted... and while one could achieve harmony with either a collection of minor keys or a collection of major ones, a major key played with a group of minor would cause dissonance. Not being corrupted meant she wouldn't be able to harmonize.

It had been the second pattern that had played out – the true love of sisters was determined to be greater than the true love of teacher and student, or something. Discord was glad. As funny as it would have been to turn Twilight into a newborn foal, corrupting the bearers and turning Luna back into Nightmare Moon looked like it had a lot more potential.

The Changelings hadn't been pleased. Since his original stoning, it seemed that one Changeling hive had achieved dominance over all Changelings in Equestria, subsuming all the other hives, gathering all control under one queen. This offered many opportunities for utter hilarity, and even while he'd been tinkering with the Elements, Discord had messed around a bit with the Changelings, because Chrysalis was so self-important, even moreso than Celestia. He found out the hard way why; Chrysalis sent emissaries to him to beg him to come to the hive to accept terms of surrender, shortly after he'd transformed Luna and the Element Bearers. He hadn't needed to accept terms of surrender – Chryssy and her bugs were just going to have to put up with whatever he felt like doing – but he was amused to hear what she might have to say, so he went. It was a mistake.

There were two hives. One in the truly unstable area of the Badlands, where most of her changelings lived. One in a slightly more stable area. She invited him to the first, and then teleported him to the second, using a rune circle hidden under sand, where he hadn't seen it. The second had some sort of device that suppressed all magic but changeling magic. He'd been in the middle of a changeling hive and he'd had no magic. The only thing that had saved him was that he'd tried to teleport away the instant he recognized he'd been teleported somewhere, and when it failed, he'd known immediately that this was a trap. Before Chrysalis even had time to gloat, he'd bitten her with his fang, pumping her full of hallucinogens; the venom in his fang might be created by his magic, but it was a physical substance and still there after he'd had his magic suppressed. Then he'd run.

He could still see patterns. The walls of this particular hive were magical, opening and closing random portals, but he could see the magic even if he couldn't control it, and he knew where the portals were going to be. He was bigger than all of the changelings, and Chryssy hadn't been breeding her sons and daughters for brains and ambition; without her guidance, even the Princes and Princesses had been confused, shouting contradictory orders. And he had no love in him, not the kind they could use. They couldn't shapeshift into the form of his loved ones to slow him down; he didn't love anyone. If enough of them piled on him they could drain his emotions anyway, but he was bigger, faster, stronger, and utterly panicked. He'd managed to smash his way out of the hive and had run, on all fours because there were no ponies there to see him do it and humiliate him. The effect had ended at a cliff. Climbing up the cliff, without magic, with Changelings divebombing him and trying to knock him off or glue him there, had been one of the most terrifying experiences of his life, because without his magic, if he fell, he'd die. And without his magic there was no guarantee he could come back.
Even as he'd been running, he'd planned his revenge. If he lived through this, he knew exactly what he was going to do. So as soon as he reached the top of the cliff, and his magic had come flooding back, he'd continued to pretend to be helpless. They'd swarmed him, trying to drain emotion from him, but because he knew they were trying it, he was free to cast an illusion on them that made them think they were succeeding. If he could create illusions of food that had taste and seemed filling, he could create illusions of emotions that would do the same.

And as soon as there were enough of them, he'd focused all his will on them and had deliberately warped them into gullibility, like the first time he'd done to Rainbow Dash, convincing her that Cloudsdale would fall. He'd placed on them the certainty that the thing that was blocking all but Changeling magic was going to explode, and let them fill in the details. It had worked better than he'd dreamed; with Chrysalis still out of it, under the influence of his venom, the belief he'd inflicted on fifty Changelings had spread like wildfire to the whole hive, because they shared their perceptions with each other, and they were wired to believe other Changelings.

Discord wasn't very good at math, but when Chrysalis had later claimed that he'd sent five hundred Changelings against what they called the Stone of Shielding, he could believe it. The changelings, as desperate to save their hive as Rainbow Dash had been to save Cloudsdale, had thrown themselves at the stone, battering it, breaking their fragile carapaces as they did their best to smash it, sometimes shattering their carapaces entirely and also every bone in their bodies by divebombing it. By the time Chrysalis had recovered – faster than he'd expected her to, he had to give her that – she couldn't get control over the chaos. Her frantic screams at her changelings to stop went completely unheeded – they'd been reinforcing each other's belief that the stone had to be destroyed for a good ten minutes by then.

The stone had shattered, and with it, any hope Chrysalis had of defeating Discord – who'd been infuriated by the fact that she'd tried to capture him and made him have to risk death to escape. He'd gone into the hive, Chaos Incarnate, and closed all the portals on each level but one... and then made the Changelings believe that the temperature of the hive was high enough to cook them all. It had been an illusion, but a deadly one. Changelings had trampled each other in their frantic desperation to get out of the hive through the tiny number of openings he'd allowed to remain.

Afterward, he'd gone to a broken, weeping Chrysalis and told her that she hadn't trained her Changelings very well; surely a swarming species should know better than to stampede and crush each other! She'd spat at him. "None of that, my dear," he'd said mockingly. "This is entirely your fault. I had no quarrel with you—"

"You're turning ponies against each other! You're drying up the supply of love, and making them paranoid! We couldn't survive under those conditions – we had to stop you!"

"Well, you failed. So I suggest you learn to adapt," He'd laughed at her. "All these poor Changelings, injured or dead, all because their queen thought she could challenge the Lord of Chaos. So sad for them. Maybe they should depose you, Chryssy, replace you with a competent queen, one who knows not to punch above her weight class."

So she'd promptly framed him for the murder of Celestia's adopted niece (whose location he couldn't even find – how the hell was she hiding an alicorn from him?), and went and pledged an alliance against him to Celestia.

He'd wanted an entertaining three-way combat between himself, Luna, and Celestia. Celestia getting a powerful ally was cheating. He'd dropped in on Nightmare Moon to tell her about the alliance between Celestia and Chrysalis, and Moony had retaliated against Chryssy by flooding her hive in the Badlands, bringing a ferocious storm that would normally never have occurred, so
far out into the desert. It was funny – Luna's mom Imbrium, the one she'd taken after, had died fighting his father, Mayhem, when Mayhem had generated a hurricane inland and made it powerful enough that it would kill ninety percent of all pegasi who might try to control it. Now Nightmare Moon was herself generating an inland hurricane, dragging moisture from the ocean across hundreds of gallops, in order to kill Changelings. It hadn't taken Chryssy out, but it had done her troops damage. So she'd hooked up with Twilight's older brother, Shining Armor, a very powerful unicorn, and comforted him over the death of his fiancée, the Alicorn of Love, who wasn't even actually dead as nearly as Discord could tell. But it had worked – Shining Armor had power to spare, and plenty of love, and before long Chrysalis was at alicorn-level power herself, albeit young alicorn like the niece that where the hell was Chrysalis keeping her?

Meanwhile, the corruption Discord had put in play was taking over the Bearers. He'd laughed at Pinkie when she'd finally been caught enjoying the fun of murder – a strange side effect, he'd been going for something more directly opposite like when he'd disharmonized her in the maze, and he hadn't quite liked it at first because he wasn't a fan of gore or death... but the incongruity between her bright and cheery attitude and the horrific things she was doing was just so great, and so darkly hilarious, it won him over. He didn't really like watching her actually kill them, but the lead-in when she explained to them that she was going to kill them and why, when she was so absurdly cheerful and so apparently oblivious to how wrong her society considered what she was doing, and then the aftermath when her friends caught her and reacted with disgust... oh, those were comedy incarnate.

Applejack, Rainbow Dash and Rarity still bored him. It was fun sometimes to watch them interact with each other – the arguments, the sniping – but there was nothing really special there. They'd turned banal, self-centered like most ponies but nothing too extreme, nothing really funny. It was Fluttershy, though, that he felt strangely drawn to. It was odd. She wasn't nearly as funny as Pinkie – she was certainly entertainingly cruel to her friends on occasion, but the sheer sadism she was sometimes capable of toward her animals reminded him of... ponies he'd left behind him more than two thousand years ago, ponies he had no desire to remember. It wasn't pleasant. He didn't really know why he was drawn to her, except that he felt... something. Some kind of kinship.

Discord remembered, back in the old days before he was the chaos avatar, when he would play pranks, and they'd backfire and somepony was genuinely hurt, and the incredible guilt he'd felt, the desperate need to pretend he wasn't all that affected while inside something told him he was horrible and he didn't deserve the company of ponies and he should probably die. He'd never listened to that voice and he'd gotten good at shutting it out, but it hadn't actually gone away until he'd become the Lord of Chaos. Maybe not even quite then. Maybe it had taken a while after that.

Fluttershy was suffering, because she was resisting her new nature, hating herself for what she was becoming, and that wasn't really all that funny. He'd gone to her, to give her advice, to help her through this transition, because she reminded him of what he'd been through. Also because she was the only one of the Bearers who actively lusted after him. She didn't want to admit that to herself, but lust was generally disharmonious, especially when it was in conflict with the luster's beliefs. Discord could always tell.

And then he'd been harassing her, trying to teach her to embrace her cruel desires, to stop feeling guilty over what she needed to do, and she'd hit him. Punched him in the face, repeatedly. He'd been too startled to stop her. She'd screamed at him over and over that she hated him, that she wanted him to die, that he was the worst creature in the universe... but the conflict between what she said, true as she felt it to be, and the other truths churning in her heart had kept him mesmerized. Such a beautiful display of disharmony. He couldn't even get angry at her, even though he hadn't been incorporeal and her punches had actually hurt.
Instead, he’d waited until her anger was spent, and she was sobbing in his arms, slumped against him. He’d leaned down into her face to whisper, "Feel better now?"... and she’d grabbed his head with two hooves and kissed him.

What had happened after that had been intermittently sexy and hilarious by turns. She was still shy, still unwilling to say the words that described what she wanted, still barely able to admit to herself that this was something she even wanted... but she’d wanted it so badly, and Discord had been more than happy to oblige. He’d been too busy raining chaos on the world and getting into fights with Celestia, Nightmare Moon, Chrysalis or all three to pursue his sexual needs, and he’d been trying to convince himself he didn’t need sex anyway, not when he could duplicate himself or any pony he wanted. Trouble was, as erotic and pleasurable as sex with his doppelgangers or his creations could be... it was still masturbation. There was nothing unexpected – part of him always knew what they would do before they did it. And there was no emotional component – no radiated lust and confusion, no glorious disharmony. (No tenderness, but that had been long, long gone anyway even before he’d been turned to stone, and he’d convinced himself he didn’t miss it.) So there had been fits and starts, because Discord knew she wanted him to sweep her off her hooves and ravish her, so she could get what she wanted without ever having to admit to him or herself that she wanted it, and no. He wasn’t going to play it that way. She was going to take the initiative every step of the way if she really, truly wanted some draconequus lovin’. He’d made her either ask for, or demand, everything she wanted from him, or directly take it for herself.

It hadn’t been the last time. She could resist him – she was good at resisting him. But he’d rile her up and make her angry. Taunt her with what she was, how evil by her own lights she’d become. Mock her for the things she did to her animals (some of which came uncomfortably close to sexual molestation, and as much as he hated himself for the weakness, Discord still found himself bothered by the thought of rape far more than he thought a Chaos Avatar should; he’d redirected her energies toward him, taking the form of the animals she’d plainly lusted after but with his own recognizable yellow and red eyes, so she’d pay attention to him instead of them... and also so that she wouldn’t rape them, because rape wasn’t funny. But mostly, he told himself, it was because he wanted her sexual energies focused on him, not them.) It wasn’t hard. As soon as she got angry, she’d lash out at him and try to hurt him, and he’d play along. And then, once she was spent, she’d want sex. Sometimes she’d demanded the sex while she was still angry, and had channeled the violence she’d obviously wanted into furious coupling, and it had been amazing.

Eventually he’d told her entire group what she was doing with him, and how mutual it was, and she couldn’t bring herself to lie to them and say he was the one lying. They’d turned on her in disgust, just as he’d known they would. What he hadn’t realized was that they were bound together by their Elements, corrupted as they were, too tightly for that to last. Almost all of them had, ostensibly, forgiven her and asked for her forgiveness. Rainbow Dash was the only one that wouldn’t, with her black and white views on morality and loyalty. All the others acknowledged that if Fluttershy wanted to have sex with the enemy, that didn’t directly harm any of them, or any other ponies.

Not that they could meet as a group. When they’d had one too many conversations about how they could work together to defeat him without the Elements, he’d dropped in on them and separated them, casting a spell that would randomly teleport one of them away, to a random location, any time all six tried to gather. Celestia tried to send five of them, at least, to "fight" him on numerous occasions... which he knew meant "distract him", but he enjoyed the distraction.

The lineup usually included at least Twilight and Fluttershy, because the fact that Twilight was still uncorrupted, still desperately struggling to make sense of the world he’d made, made her a delight to him. He flirted with her, forced her to dance and gave her flowers and suchlike, in front of Fluttershy because he knew Fluttershy would be enraged with jealousy and Twilight would be disgusted, and the disharmony was wonderful. Also, Fluttershy was so very hot when she was
angry. Rainbow Dash was usually the one missing from the group, because she had joined the Wonderbolts and was generally off with them trying to minimize the damage Discord was causing, as if anything they did would help, as if he wasn't generously allowing them to do that when he could take their wings or turn them into pigeons any time he wanted to. Also, because she'd lost most of her loyalty to her friends and couldn't be bothered to spend time with them unless Celestia demanded it. Applejack was more fun now that she was willing to lie, and Rarity was still comedy gold if he dangled shiny things in front of her... she wasn't as irrational as she'd been when she'd fallen in love with “Tom”, but she was perfectly happy to flirt with Discord or try to cut deals with him if she thought she'd benefit. And Pinkie was always entertaining.

Shortly afterward, his plunder vines finally came up, well-fed after nearly a year of chaos. Discord was delighted and irritated at the same time – originally, he had programmed them to find the most concentrated sources of magic, the alicorns, and devour them, because he’d known that Celestia and Luna were looking for the Tree of Harmony and if they found it, they could destroy him. But he’d only just planted the vines when they showed up and turned him to stone, so it hadn't done him any good, and now he neither wanted nor needed the alicorns dead. It had taken him enormous effort to turn them away, to reprogram them on the fly so that they'd stay in the general area of Ponyville and the Everfree and not let them go to Canterlot, or to wherever Nightmare Moon was making her base now.

Fluttershy had been enraged with him, because he'd done nothing to stop them from ravaging the Everfree, destroying thousands of animals’ habitats. As amusing as it was when Fluttershy said she hated him... for some reason it bothered him that she was angry this time. He'd relocated many of the animals. Of course, many were already dead, trapped by the plunder vines. (He hadn't told Fluttershy about the zebra who'd died in there. By now there had been so much violence that he could barely bring himself to care about sapient collateral damage, but he knew Fluttershy had been friends with the zebra, once upon a time.) But he did what he could, because she wanted him to... and she'd repaid him.

In the meantime things were escalating. Shining Armor and Chrysalis tried to retrieve the Crystal Heart from the Crystal Empire. That was another fruit of a Harmony Tree, and possibly could turn Discord into stone itself, or do other harm to him, so he couldn't allow that. They'd run afoul of Sombra instead, who'd made the mistake of using the Heart to amplify his own dark power, against Discord, when Discord came to claim the Heart. Discord was tired of being hurt – so many battles against Celestia and Chrysalis together, where with their combined power and ruthlessness they'd actually managed to injure him. So many battles against Nightmare Moon, who tried to kill him every time she saw him. It was what he'd wanted, at first, but it was getting old and he didn't see how to get out of it. If that hadn't been the case maybe he'd have left Sombra alone, to be a fourth wildcard in this game of theirs... but Sombra caused him pain. So he caused Sombra pain. The Umbrum could do very little magic without his horn, and when the Crystal Ponies remembered everything Sombra had done to them, courtesy of Discord ripping the protective veils around their memories away... Sombra didn't last long at their hooves.

Chrysalis had a Changeling impersonate Fluttershy to try to lure him into a trap. It didn't work. To his magical senses, it was obvious that that was a Changeling. But he was enraged at the attempt. How dare she drag Fluttershy into this! Fluttershy was his enemy-lover and her battles with him were their own, no business of Chrysalis'. He retaliated, convincing a large number of Changelings that they were moving base again, and that an active volcano was the new base. Chrysalis came after him with Shining Armor and a few hundred Changelings, gunning for revenge, and they had secret weapons – some sort of magic-negating slime from the bodies of creatures out at the ends of Equestria. They didn't manage to hit him with enough of the slime to completely negate his powers, only to exhaust him and make the battle much harder than it needed to be.
When he finally got away, he learned that while he'd been occupied, Celestia had had a death battle with Nightmare Moon... and had won.

Luna was dead.

He tried to tell himself it was better this way, that she was dangerous, that if she'd ever figured out how to compensate for the spells he used to protect his dreams she could have been deadly to him. It didn't work. He was grief-stricken, because he'd never meant for it to go like this. He'd never meant for Luna to die. If it had to be Luna or Celestia then he'd rather it be Luna but it shouldn't have been either! He shouldn't have been off fighting Chrysalis during their death battle, he should have been able to show up and intervene and prevent either of them from killing the other!

It was Chrysalis' fault.

He cast a spell on the Changelings. Out of every five Changelings, one would be so repulsive to all, no matter what form it took, that nothing could ever love it. Other Changelings couldn't bear to share their supplies of love with it. Chrysalis herself couldn't bear to be in their presence.

She confined them with each other, hoping they would be able to share love with each other, and prolong all of their lives until Discord could be defeated. It didn't work. They starved to death.

That was what Chrysalis deserved for distracting him at the wrong moment and letting Luna die.

He considered resurrecting her. He even went so far as to heal the wounds on her body, in her sarcophagus, and to open the sarcophagus to the light of the moon. Every night, the light of the moon replenished some of the magic in Luna's corpse, so she didn't decay. No one else knew. The spell that made the lid of the sarcophagus transparent to moonlight was overlaid with an illusion that made it look as if it was still solid and opaque. Even Celestia wouldn't know that her sister's body wasn't rotting in there; alicorn bodies retained a lot of their magic for a long time after death, and took a long time to decay, but Discord's spells would ensure that Luna's body would remain pristine, as if she was sleeping and not dead, for a good few centuries. He put in all the effort to make the spells permanent.

But in the end, he didn't resurrect her. Necromancy could summon a spirit to a body, as long as the gate between life and death was opened with a sacrifice, but it was impossible to get the correct spirit. So many hungry spirits clustered around the gate, seeking a way to live again. The only way to safely do it was to die yourself, and go find the spirit you wanted, and lead them back to the land of the living. Discord had the power to do that without necessarily staying dead, because the emotions of the newly dead were so disharmonious, his magic would replenish itself, in his spirit, where he was the Avatar, not his body where he was merely a draconequus. It was a risk he'd taken for Celestia, once, aeons ago. But that was before Celestia and Luna had turned him to stone.

In the end, his grief and guilt over Luna's death were not enough to make him willing to risk his own life... not when anypony who found his body while he wasn't inhabiting it could destroy it. That wouldn't necessarily stop him either – the destruction of his body while he was dead would just mean he'd need to build a new one. But every time he did that, he lost memories. Not the most recent memories, not the moment of death or the days before it, but the past two months through a few years. He could end up losing most of the memories of his freedom. Or he could end up staying in the land of the dead, being unable to return. There were predators there who devoured magic, and metaphysical dangers. It was risky, and he wasn't going to take the risk for Luna, who hated him and had even advocated killing him with the Hammer of Celestia, a weapon that destroyed souls, before he'd turned her to Nightmare Moon.
Instead, he’d spent more time with Fluttershy, taking refuge in her arms, and taking his feelings out on ponykind the rest of the time. None of this was fun any more, but he was stuck. Celestia had given everything she’d ever felt for him to Chrysalis to feed on, and now when she interacted with him she was nothing but icy cold duty and cool righteous rage, and he couldn’t rile her up anymore. Chrysalis would kill him in a moment if she had the chance; Discord hid the Hammer of Celestia in a gem vault rather than an armory so she’d never find it. He could have dropped it into the ocean or thrown it into another dimension, but he didn’t really want to. Part of him, still, wanted to leave the ponies the opportunity to use it on foes who weren’t him if they had to, now that he’d deprived them of the Elements of Harmony; he didn’t want to take on extradimensional monsters and ancient arisen evils anymore. They thought they could handle it without him? Fine, let them handle it. Once upon a time he’d have been horrified beyond belief at the thought of a weapon that destroyed souls, but now... now he was just angry and afraid, all the time, and whatever morality or compassion he’d ever had was worn to bits.

He wanted it to all go back the way it had been, to reset things so that he could start the fight over again, before escalating it to the point where he had no choice but to be the blackest-hearted villain he could be, just to survive. He wanted to take over, unequivocally, to have all of ponykind bowing to him like he had the first time, but to do that he’d have to crush Celestia and Chrysalis and all of the Bearers, and while he could enjoy crushing Chrysalis, and often thought of maybe doing so, he didn’t want to hurt any of the others as badly as he’d have to. He didn’t want Celestia to die, and he didn’t want her to feel nothing for him, like she did now; he wanted it to go back to the way it was before he’d been turned to stone, when she’d hated and loved him at the same time, like Fluttershy did now. He didn’t want the Bearers to die, because they were fun, and because killing them would tip Fluttershy over the edge to cold hate as well, and she was all he had.

A day came, like any other day, a day where he was miserable and stressed and angry over so many things, and turning some ponies into mobile trees and chasing them with a swarm of parasprites had lost its charm pretty quickly, and the ponies that he demanded participate in his fashion extravaganza actually tried to say ‘no’ so he got angry and the clothes ate them and he hadn’t meant to do that but it was their fault for rejecting him, and there was Fluttershy. Sweet, beautiful, kindness-and-hate-filled Fluttershy, who for once didn’t taunt him and didn’t tell him how much she hated him. She saw how upset he was, and took him to bed, rubbed his back and then made love to him, gently and then passionately, keeping him on the wonderfully agonizing edge for what seemed like hours with all the skills he’d taught her, and he’d let her. Surrendered to her, because he needed this, he needed for just a little while to not be in control, to not be trying to do things that would go spectacularly wrong, to not be screwing anything up that he’d regret later. Just letting her pleasure him, losing himself in her.

It had been the last mistake he’d ever made.

When Fluttershy had gotten up from where she’d snuggled against him in the afterglow, and he’d opened his eyes lazily to watch her, he’d seen her slip her Element onto her neck. Still a bit dazed from the amazing sex, it had taken him a critical few seconds to realize that that was abnormal, that she had no good reason to wear that thing around him.

He’d rolled over in time to see Twilight, her Element of Magic blazing half purple, half empty white, and all of the others behind her, their corrupted Elements glowing. A twist of the head, and he saw Fluttershy’s Element glowing as well. He knew what was about to happen, but it was too late, they’d locked on and there was nowhere to run to. Discord scrambled to his feet, partly because he was panicking and on autopilot and his body was trying to prepare to dodge something his mind knew was inescapable, partly because he didn’t want to spend the next millennium or whatever sprawled out on a bed looking unprepared and foolish.
"Goodbye, Discord," Fluttershy had said clearly, and Discord had started to laugh, bitterly, brokenly. He'd needed an escape from his own chaos so much, a respite, a moment of peace, and now the peace of stone was all he'd have for at least their lifetimes, if not longer. He'd trusted Fluttershy even though he'd known how much she hated him, because he'd known she loved him as well, but she was just like Celestia. Love hadn't been enough. Love would never have been enough.

Later, in the numbness and the darkness-that-wasn't-even-darkness that came from no longer having eyes, he'd heard Celestia directing the ponies who carried him away. They'd put him in the Whitetail Woods, at the mouth of a cave, far, far away from ponies. There was the mild chaos of a forest, but frankly with the care that ponies had to put into all the stupid animals in everyplace but the Everfree, it might as well have been a curated garden. And unlike the garden, there were no foal field trips, no lovers sneaking away from polite society. No one who could or would talk, anywhere near him. Nothing to do but live with his regrets, to watch his own failures play out behind his stone eyes over and over.

It had been a relief when he'd heard the little dragon's voice, talking to him. Finally, something to break the monotony, something other than his memories of Fluttershy's betrayal and Luna's death and everything else he'd screwed up.

And then he'd heard what the dragon had been saying.

For most of the time when Spike was talking, he'd been screaming, pleading inside his head where no one could hear him, begging Spike not to do this, for someone, anyone to come stop this, please, he didn't deserve this, not the destruction of his soul, not everything he'd ever been, please, he could accept death, he could accept stoning, but not this, please not this...

The young dragon was very, very long-winded.

By the time the talking had stopped, Discord had succumbed to resignation. Maybe even acceptance. Maybe this was what he deserved, and when his soul was destroyed, it would all end. He wouldn't pass on to the Shadowlands with the pain of his memories trailing behind him; he wouldn't be tempted to try to return to a world where everything he touched was ruined and his beautiful plenipotential chaos had ended up in entropy time and time again. It would be over. He would have oblivion, which wasn't the peace he would have chosen if he'd been given a choice, but no one was giving him a choice and he supposed oblivion was better than eternal torment, or something.

He'd screamed when the first blow hit. It wasn't a physical pain, more of a concentrated existential horror as he felt his very sense of self fracturing, his mind falling apart. Another blow, and another, and at some point he was aware that there was a shattered statue at his feet and a purple dragon still battering it furiously with a hammer except that he wasn't aware of anything because there wasn't any him left. Only sensations, random knowledge, flares of momentary ego in a sea of memory without consciousness.

It had taken a long, long time for him to recognize that he was somehow still him, still thinking, still aware, except that now there were many of him and they were all incomplete and it was like when he'd personified aspects of himself to stand outside him and be his friend except that these were all his enemy because he hated himself and what he'd done and what he'd become and all of his pieces hated himself which meant they hated each other and there was nothing but the mind-destroying cacophony of the voices of all the pieces that he now was reliving every terrible thing they'd ever done and the guilt he couldn't deal with and all the pain he'd suffered in his entire life...

When he'd(they'd) realized what had happened to him(them), that his(their) soul was broken and shattered and yet still pinned together, that he(they) couldn't have the peace of death because
he(they) was(were) too broken even to enter the Shadowlands and he couldn't have the joy of life because he(they) was(were) too shattered to collect magic and he(they) couldn't have the quiet of oblivion because the magic he'd(they'd) put into those Elements was still there, still active, pinning him(them) to reality, holding him(them) together as a shambling mass and not a unified soul at all... and all there would ever be, until the corruption was purged, was the inability to remember and the inability to do anything and a thousand iterations of his(their) own mind screaming all of his own self-hate at every other part of him, forever...

They didn't know how long they had been screaming, begging for fate to put an end to this. Let their soul heal and knit back together, or let the magic pinning their pieces together fade and let them cease to exist. Something, anything. End this, please.

With their mind broken in so many pieces it was impossible to tell time, impossible to sleep, impossible to think. Even for an unquiet spirit they had been unusually helpless, too shattered to gather any energy to even haunt with. They could do nothing but experience the agony of knowing their failures and rejections, of relieving every horrible memory, of their own self-hate being shouted at them by every piece they were, and nowhere to go to escape it. Until the other had come through.

Obliviously stupid, fixated on his own selfish desires, the other had never noticed the broken shade of this world’s Discord while he still had control over his own powers... and then he'd been captured, and tortured. The spectacle had fascinated the shattered spirit. The torture the other had been made to suffer was a catharsis for the spirit’s own self-hate. They didn't need to relieve every terrible memory at once, every moment of every endless day; they could watch another Discord suffer physical torment in their place.

At first they felt the other deserved it. Every one of their pieces delighted to see the whip come down, to watch Twilight's magic searing through the other's body, to hear the screams, because Discord deserved to suffer and this one was also a Discord and therefore deserved it. But over time, reluctantly, some of the pieces, and then many of the pieces, began to feel excitement, and then pride, as the other fought against the forces trying to break him, with no weapon other than his own mind. His cleverness in winning a helping of edible food, of earning a gentle rape rather than a brutal one, of gaining a drink of water or a few extra moments of sleep here or there, made them remember why they had once felt pride in themself. At the same time they hated him, because he hadn't destroyed his life, he hadn't ended up in stone, he had been happy and cheerful when he'd come here and then he'd thrown it all away so stupidly by underestimating Twilight, just as they had.

Their opinion changed every day, sometimes minute to minute. He deserved it because he was stupid and got caught. He didn't deserve it because, based on that letter he was writing, he hadn't done any of the terrible things they had that had ruined their lives and gotten them killed. He did deserve it because he was dragging out writing the letter, endlessly adding to it rather than just wrapping it up and sending it off to get help. He didn't deserve it because according to the letter he’d actually managed to win over his Fluttershy as a friend, without breaking her, without making her hate him. He did deserve it because they were furiously jealous of him for that accomplishment. He didn't deserve it because he was clever even in the face of pain and starvation and sleep deprivation and he was fighting so hard to retain an integrity of self that they could never have again. He did deserve it because if they couldn't have an integrity of self why should he?

But slowly pride turned into compassion, and many of their pieces began to hope for him to get away, even as others still longed to see him suffer to satisfy their jealousy or their self-hatred. For themself, however, there was no hope. If he got away, there would be nothing to watch and nothing
to do but drown in horrible memories again, because if he hadn't noticed them the first time he certainly wouldn't once he got away, and there was no reason to believe anything would ever purge the corruption from the Elements and release them from this.

Then the other Discord's friends, the ones who had been their sworn enemies and defeated them, came over to try to save him... and they began, desperately, to hope again. If the other Bearers defeated these and reharmonized the Elements... they could finally have the oblivion that was all they dared hope for anymore.

"If you wanted oblivion so badly, why did you attack me?" Discord snarled at his broken alternate. He was reeling. Over a year of memories that weren't his, for a time period when all he'd been doing was being bored out of his mind in stone, hallucinating and occasionally succumbing to despair – nothing as vivid and compelling as the time this one had spent spreading chaos. He was good at handling a huge amount of information being dumped on him very quickly, but even for him, this was too much.

The other spread its(their?) paws in a shrug and laughed. "tRyINg!"

Yeah, all right. Discord would have taken the opportunity once it presented itself, too. The only reason he could see and interact with the entity at all was that he'd consumed its body... and now he was trapped inside his own mind, in a moment between moments, as his body processed the chaos magic it had just taken in. If he had been in the entity's situation, and known this was the only opportunity he'd get... didn't mean he didn't hate the other for doing it, though, because the memory dump was bringing a wholly unwanted realization.

There wasn't, after all, any significant difference between this particular cognate and himself.

He'd been clinging to their differences the whole time he was being tortured. He didn't deserve this because he wasn't the one who had done any of those things. The other one had done them, and they were horrible, so the other one deserved all this. The other Discord had caused Luna's death. The other Discord had permanently corrupted the Bearers with a spell that he had thought went beyond the pale. The other Discord had let the plunder vines destroy the Everfree, the chaotic ecosystem he'd been so proud of once. He was used to traveling to worlds with monstrous cognates, alternates of him that didn't seem to share his past, who were genocidal or homicidal or thought brutal physical torture was funny or enjoyed committing rape, and he despised them as much as they despised him. Sure, he was a bad guy, but that was because ponies couldn't handle Chaos so of course they hated him. He wasn't evil, he was chaotic. He was completely different from all those terrible cognates, so of course he was completely different from the one who'd ruined this world so badly, Spike of all creatures had murdered him.

But the memories fit. Everything up to that moment of realization, that the Bearers weren't disharmonized anymore, was the same as far as he could tell. Oh, probably the fight with Typhon had gone differently because the Hammer of Celestia was the Godslayer Hammer and it was still here, but honestly the fight with Typhon had been a footnote in his long life. All of the important differences had happened when he'd managed to not get turned to stone right after he'd broken out. And... in context, in the order they'd happened... Discord understood all of them, and knew he would in the same circumstances probably have done the same thing.

He wasn't any different from the Discord that had ruined this world, the Discord he'd been tortured in place of for two months, and as much begrudging sympathy as he might feel for the horror the other had been enduring since its death, he couldn't help but hate it for showing him that he was the same as it was. That, if he'd been smart enough (or, given what had happened, unlucky enough) to put more weight on Pinkie Pie's anomalous behavior, everything that this Discord had done and
everything that had been done to him, would have been his burden instead. That this world would have been his world. Except he wouldn't have ended up dead like this, because Godslayer no longer existed in his world. He'd still be trapped in stone. But Luna would still be dead, and Celestia would still be cold and empty, and Fluttershy and Pinkie and Twilight would still be monsters.

"Fine. You tried, you failed. I'm stronger than you. Now I've got places to be." He started to gather his focus to leave his own mind and re-enter the world of reality, with the power to do something to shape it, at last.

"wAiT!"

Discord glanced at the broken entity. "Why? What's in it for me to keep you company? You were right, old pal, you screwed up big time and I didn't. Now you're dead and I'm alive and I've got things to do to keep it that way."

"inFoRmA TIon. Yo u nEeD."

Discord narrowed his eyes. (Not that he was really narrowing his eyes, not here within his own mind. But if he'd really had eyes he would have been narrowing them.) "What kind of information?"

"wOU LD be TeLLInG! pRoMiSE fiR St. i NeEd."

"Promise what?"

"fReE mE. FiX eLeMEntS. SaVe tHEm. LT e iT eNd."

Discord glared. "No. I have no desire to do anything to help them. I'm going home and I'm bringing my friends and I'm having nothing to do with this universe ever again. Forget it. You had this coming, and you know it."

"pItY FrIend wOn'T LeAVe wI tO u t, bUt yOU KnOw BeSt!"

"Yes, they will. They won't stick around here any longer than they have to. Fluttershy told me, she told me she'd take me home and I'd be safe."

"tHeN wHy. pIeCE oF tREe. tHeY BrOu ghT. No rEaSoN i GU eSs!"

"What do you mean?" Surely they didn't want to stay here any longer than they had to, right? Surely they weren't going to go out of their way to do favors for the monsters their counterparts had become, right?

But they didn't deserve to become this. They were corrupted. By him. And he's me. I would have done it, in his place, I would have done it... doesn't that mean... I have to...?

No! They don't deserve anything from me! I don't have to help them! "It doesn't even matter! You think I can undo that spell? In my condition?"

"hArMOny cAn. NeEdS hELp. r eHa rMOniZaTIoN."

"In case you've forgotten, that's not what we do."

"cHaOs. tUrBiNes. tReE cAn rEha RMoNizE iTsELf exCepT. tuRbiNEs in WaY. YOu kNoW WhY."

The chaos turbines. He remembered -- close to two millennia ago, when Celestia and Luna had first
started opposing him, when he'd remembered how they'd seen peace and love and beauty in the glittering crystal branches of the Tree, and he'd seen only stasis and death. He hadn't been able to articulate then how he'd known it could hurt him – he'd just known it could. He'd had to seal it away, surround it by a moat of chaos that its siren song couldn't cross. So he'd planted turbines in the magma layer of the earth, below the bedrock, far, far below the level of the forest itself. As the moon and the sun moved around the earth, their gravity, tugging on the planet, created tides, not just in the chaotic ocean, but deep underground in the magma layer. The turbines generated magic from the chaos of that constant back and forth and piped that magic upward, to saturate the land all around the Tree of Harmony. Harmonic magic dissolved in the noise of constant chaos. Without a relay station, the Tree couldn't spread its seductive evil, its siren song of ending all conflict, all individuality, all change, through his moat of chaos. And then he'd killed the Tree's relay stations, the other Trees all around the world, to make sure that Harmony was bound.

"Is the Tree even alive? The plunder vines came up!"

The shattered face twisted in an expression of scorn... Discord thought. It was hard to read when his face was in pieces. "sTuPiD qUeSTiOn. yOu KnOw."

Of course he did. If the Tree was dead, its Elements would have had no power, and the constraints Twilight bound him with wouldn't have worked. "Did you...?"

"nOt fUn, thEn. nO eLeMEnTS, no CoRRupTiOn. pULLeD the ViNE's pUnCHes. WeAK bUt. STiLL aLiVE."

"Bet you're regretting that now."

"rEgREt." The broken spirit laughed again. "eVErYtHinG. HoPE yOu NeVEr kNow. hOpE YoU dO."

Discord ignored that. "The girls can't reharmonize this tree. They gave up their Elements to save theirs. And they don't know yet that the Elements are part of them."

"hAVe TrEe pIeCE."

"... of the Harmony Tree?" It could propagate through cuttings, he knew that, but... they had carried a piece here? He felt obscurely betrayed. Who had they come to rescue, him or their monstrous counterparts?

Both. You know Twilight would always pick both, if she can. That was the voice in his own head, not an aspect of the shambling soul in front of him. He ignored it too.

"CaN't rEHarMoNize. LOsT iT. wiLL wAsTE yOu rEmEmBEr rApISt, toRTurEr, sErIaL KiLLeR? CaNNibaL? whEn tRue SeLF aGaIn? HElpInG?"

Discord scowled. "I don't need to look like a hero. They'll rescue me anyway."

"yOu sAiD sORrY. rEgrEt. nOt LyINg thEn So rEEmbEr. yOu WanT thHiS."

"No, I don't! I don't want to do anything to help them, or save them! I want them to suffer! I won't take revenge, I just want to go home, but I don't want to help them in any way, shape or form!"

His alternate laughed again, and laughed, and kept laughing, until Discord wished he could finish the job and shatter the soul in front of him the rest of the way with a punch. "hElpInG? rEmEmBEr rApISt, toRTurEr, sErIaL KiLLer? CaNNibaL? whEn tRue SeLF aGaIn? HElpInG?"
He... had a point. If the ponies were restored to their true selves... the memories would still be there. They'd have to live with knowing what they'd done... *Fluttercruel* would have to live with knowing what she'd done. To her animals. To *him*.

Discord had given up hope for revenge, but now that his alternate had pointed it out... oh, yes. That would do nicely. And if his friends had come over here planning to do it anyway, they wouldn't even recognize that he'd done it for revenge, if he was the one.

But he still thought he'd be far too weak to undo that spell. "How do you expect me to do it?"
"tURbiNes. BrEaK. tHeY hAve cuTTinG. tReE pieCe. caN dO FoR iTsELf if No tUrBInEs iN wAy."

"I thought you said they lost it."
"i KnOW. YoU'D sEnSe if TrIed bUt oKAy, bE LaZy. teLL yOU. iF PrOMisE."

Discord sighed. "This goes against my better judgement, but... all right. I promise. I'll do whatever is within my power to reverse what you did to the Elements, and free you to... die." The shattered soul wouldn't die. It would evaporate. Discord couldn't imagine how horrible things would have to be for that to be the better alternative... but then, he didn't need to imagine it. He had the other one's memories. "Where is the piece of the Tree that you're talking about?"

The other one grinned, a horrible expression on the broken face. An image came to Discord's mind. And then he was lying on the floor in a body full of pain and the weight of a small dragon on the back of his neck, Fluttercruel trying futilely to cut her way through his chains, and there was no air in his lungs. He gasped, his body jerking as he felt himself inhabit it once again... but now, with chaos magic he could use thrumming inside him. Not very much. But enough.

All of that in the space of one breath. Chaos truly was a wonderful thing.

He lifted his head. "Mistress Fluttershy? Can I tell you something?"

"Of course, sweetie," Fluttercruel panted, and Discord grinned his biggest grin ever. If he never saw her again it would be too soon, but he was glad to have this one last moment with her, one last chance to tell her how he really felt. "What is it?"

"Go fuck yourself," he said, with great delight, watching the expression of shock bloom on her face. And then, before she had a chance to order him to do anything, he teleported.

**Opposition, 5 PM – Pinkie Pie**

The moment Shining Armor's shield collapsed, Pinkie Pie was on top of him, pinning him with her weight. He was pretty physically fit and strong for a unicorn, bigger and heavier than she was, so that wasn't going to last once he shook off the daze from having his shield broken. But unicorns paid a lot of attention to you when you grabbed their horns.

Shining tossed his head, trying to dislodge her hoof from his horn. Unicorn horns turned warm right before a magical discharge, and Pinkie, like most earth ponies, was strong enough to break a horn right off a head if she used all her strength... and a military pony would know this, so Shining plainly knew he didn't dare use magic. She'd feel it in his horn before it could take effect, and break it. (Or maybe she wouldn't. Maybe she was bluffing. Pinkie herself wasn't sure. Shining wasn't a bad pony who deserved the trauma of a broken horn just because Chrysalis had him wrapped around her hoof. But she couldn't let him go back into the fight.)
"Shining Armor! Stop wiggling! I've ridden a lot stronger ponies than you!" Pinkie snapped at him, and then giggled at the double entendre. "I mean, I didn't mean it that way, though that's true too! But stop struggling, I don't want to hurt you!"

"Captain!" one of the unicorn guards shouted, his own horn lighting up.

"Uh-uh!" Pinkie snapped. "Touch me and I break it! I might not be your Pinkie and I definitely do not eat ponies because that's just gross and not even funny, but if you know her, do you seriously think you can hit me with a spell or telekinesis before I can react? Because if you do you maybe wanna go down to the think store and buy yourself a whole bunch of new thinks!"

"She's right," Shining Armor said, panting. "Stand down, soldier. Let me handle this. Go help deal with Rainbow Dash and Applejack."

"Aye, sir."

"Listen, you need to know something," Pinkie said, "so stop trying to throw me off so I can tell you, because this is very important!"

"Why should I believe anything you say?"

"Because this is a thing you can check on! Do you guys even know about the Tree of Harmony?"

"The what?"

"I thought so," Pinkie said. "Now let your Aunt Pinkie tell you a story here." In the distance she heard Rainbow yelling at her to do something. "A short story. There's a tree, except it's made of crystal, in the Everfree Forest. It's at the bottom of a ravine but there are stone stairs, and it's right near the old castle of the Two Sisters, where Twilight and the rest of us got the Elements of Harmony. Any of our counterparts would know where that is if you don't."

"I know where it is," Shining said tightly. "Good! So this tree, it's right near there. The ravine we had to cross to get to the castle? It's in there. All the way at the back, inside a cavey-thing. And this tree is the source of the Elements of Harmony, which you're gonna be able to tell like right away because there's a huge spot on the Tree that's shaped like Twilight's cutie mark, and on the branches there's spots in the colors in all the rest of our Elements and on the trunk there's Celestia and Luna's cutie marks! Okay? And the Tree's probably all sick and stuff because in our world the plunder vines nearly killed it and they wrecked the whole Everfree here, so it might not be all glowy and shiny like our Tree is, but Fluttershy says it's alive. She says Celestia's cutie mark is glowing, and Luna's is all dark. Got all that?"

"Get to the point," Shining snarled, trying to toss his head again.

"The point is! On the other side of the tree, facing into the cave that it's in, there's Cadance's cutie mark. And the light isn't out. Like Luna's. It's flickering, Fluttershy says."

Shining tilted his head back to look into Pinkie's eyes. "What – what do you mean by that?"

"I don't know! All the cutie marks are glowy in our universe, and I didn't see it, Fluttershy did! But I think – if the light's not out, and Luna's is, and she's dead, and Celestia's isn't, and she's alive, then... don't you think maybe that means Cadance might not be dead?"

Shining shook his head, hard and rapidly, until Pinkie yanked on his horn to keep him from pulling out of her grip. "She can't be alive. I... I wanted her to be alive, so much, I wanted to believe it..."
wasn't really her, but... I know my fiancée. I know her... uh, I knew what she looked like. Really well. It was her."

"But what if it wasn't? What if she's in trouble, sick and injured and maybe starving? In our world when Twilight found her she hadn't eaten in weeks, and that was more than a year ago! Alicorns can't starve to death, I don't think, or how could Princess Luna have lived for a thousand years on the moon? I asked her if it was really made of green cheese and she said no, it's just rocks, and you can't eat rocks! I should know! Maud tried to feed me stone soup lots of times and it was always yucky! But I bet if you can't starve to death and you're stuck somewhere and you can't eat you probably get really really really really hungry!"

"She's not! She's dead, Pinkie! All the pretending in the world isn't going to fix it!" His eyes actually teared up. "Why do you do this to me? For months every time I saw our world's Pinkie she asked me if I'd found Cadance yet! I thought she was doing it because Discord had messed with her head but here you are saying the same thing!"

Pinkie took a deep breath. "I'm gonna tell you a little secret, Shiny," she whispered. "Sometimes... sometimes I just know things. And I don't know how I know but I just know the things. The other me isn't messed up like she thinks dead ponies are alive, she's messed up like she likes to cut up ponies and eat them. If she kept asking you if you'd found Cadance, it probably wasn't because Discord made her nutsy cuckoo, because there's different kinds of nutsy cuckoo and she isn't the right kind for that! But she might have just known Cadance was still out there!"

"Then why wouldn't she tell me that?" he shouted.

"Would you believe her? I don't tell ponies the things I know that I don't know how I know most of the time because then they ask me how I know and I don't know!"

Somewhere she heard Chrysalis' triumphant shout, a scream from Twilight and a bellow from Spike. She wished she hadn't sent Fluttershy on to get Discord. Discord needed getting, that was important, but Fluttershy could maybe had talked sense into Shining Armor faster. "What if Cadance is stuck somewhere and she's starving and she's weak and her light is flickering? What if someone did fake her death? Can you take that chance?"

"And let me guess, if I let you go you can all lead me to her?" he asked bitterly.

"Nope! I have no clue! Not even one! Twilight found her in the catacombs below Canterlot Palace but it would be really weird if she was there aaaaalll this time because you and Princess Celestia would have been so close by!"

His breathing started to grow rapid. "In the catacombs?" he whispered.

"Yeah! I've never been there but they sound cool! There's like all these caves and tunnels going all the way into the mountain!"

"The catacombs that Chrysalis has never let me or any of my soldiers enter, because she's always said it's unstable and Changelings are natural burrowers and they can handle a cave-in better?"

Pinkie frowned. "It's not that unstable. If there were cave-ins under Canterlot Palace, that would make the palace all shaky! Like an earthquake! And I've never heard of an earthquake in Canterlot Palace, have you?"

A sound very like a sob escaped Shining Armor then.

Royal Guards, battered and much worse for wear, surrounded them. Eight of them were holding a
struggling Applejack and Rainbow Dash, one guard per leg. "Sir! We've captured these two!" a pegasus guard said, though it came out more like "Thir" because somepony had knocked out his front teeth. "Should we flyers go assist Queen Chrysalis against the dragon and the other two?"

"No," Shining said. "No. Let them go. Pinkie, get off me."

"You believe me? You believe me now?" Pinkie asked, bouncing eagerly in place.

"No. But I can't take the chance. And stop bouncing on my back, that hurts."


"Sir... with all due respect..."

"Soldier, due respect means you obey orders, because I'm your Captain. Now, are you going to obey me or not?"

Reluctantly the soldiers released Applejack, who stumbled but stayed standing, and Rainbow Dash, who dropped to the stone floor, went immediately up to a hover without even getting to her hooves, and started ostentatiously rubbing her legs. "Ow. You guys play rough."

"Are we letting them all go, sir?"

"But Princess Celestia—"

"Isn't here," Shining said. "In her absence my orders to the Guard are final. The next in line of succession is Prince Blueblood, and he's in the Crystal Empire. And also a good friend of mine. We have another priority, soldiers."

"Yes, sir!" they chorused, raggedly and with more than one "yeth, thir" in there.

"We're going down to assess the catacombs. You and you, go to Canterlot University and find me a structural engineer who understands mines." He pointed at two pegasi.

"All the best mining engineers are in the earth pony cities," Pinkie said. "You might need to go to Vanhoover!"

"That's much too far away. A decent structural engineer will do."

"Sir, yes, sir!" The two flew off.

"The rest of you. We're going to search the catacombs. We're not going to go in deep until we have our mining engineers, but if I have to I will shield every single tunnel from cave-in personally."

"Sir, Queen Chrysalis has set the catacombs off limits, and Princess Celestia backed her."

"Yes, and I did too. But I'm—" His voice cracked. "I have my reasons, soldiers. We're going to inspect the catacombs."

"You're going to what?"

The screech came from Chrysalis, who was hurriedly descending behind Shining Armor. Shining turned. "We're going to go search the catacombs, Chrysalis. Why? Do you have a problem with that?"
"I've been telling you and telling you that they aren't safe!"

"I can shield all of Canterlot at once... I think I can handle some caves."

"This isn't like you!" She strode forward. "What kind of lies have these mares been telling you?"

"The true kind! Like how you had Princess Cadance trapped in the catacombs for weeks before you tried to marry Shining Armor while you were pretending to be her, in our world!"

"What she said!" Rainbow Dash said.

"I know you never met the me that was, before Discord corrupted her," Applejack said. "And I ain't gonna tell you I can’t tell a lie, but I can sure tell you I am plumb terrible at it." She met Shining Armor's eyes. "On my family I swear, Pinkie is telling you the Celestia-honest truth." Her head tilted forward as she leaned toward Shining Armor. "Also, I gotta say, I think it's darned interestin' that Queen Chrysalis broke off leading the attack on Twilight and Spike and came down here to talk to you just while you were talking about exploring those catacombs."

"This is insane! Shining, Cadance is dead! Surely you can't believe I'd be holding her prisoner somewhere? After all this time? All we've shared?" She put a hoof to his face. "Please, Shining. I love you. I never thought I was capable of love, not for ponies... for years I thought of all of you as food. But you were so kind to me, while we were fighting Discord together. I let you see me weep, when he killed a fifth of my children by starving them to death, and I remember how you held me, and comforted me, and promised me that your sister would find a way to stop him... It's true that I did plan to kidnap Cadance, originally, and take her place. But then Discord broke loose and killed her, and destroyed the only means we had of protecting ourselves from him, so I formed an alliance with Celestia, and you... and I changed. I learned. I discovered that I can feel love." Her eyes misted. "Please, Shining. Please tell me you aren't going to cast me aside on the word of these mares."

"I'm not going to cast you aside," Shining said. "I'm just going to search the catacombs. And if nothing is there to find, then nothing will change. I can promise you that. All I need you to do is step aside and let me do it. You don't even need to help. And if you're right, then nothing will change."

"Yes, it will!" she snarled. "I'll always know that deep inside, you don't trust me! You say you love me, and I can even feel it in you, but if you don't trust me then your love is poisoned! You're going to search the catacombs because you think there's some possibility that I am monstrous enough to have kept your fiancée imprisoned, even after all we've shared, even after I've seen how much her loss hurt you... all on the word of these sick, twisted mares!" She spat. "You know what they are! You know what they do! They're the monsters here, not me!"

"Actually, I've never met them," Shining said. "I never got to meet my Twilight's friends before Discord corrupted them. But I trust my sister's judgement, or I trusted it anyway, before she was corrupted too. I read her letters... I know what kind of mares her friends used to be. And these ones... they claim that Discord never corrupted them, and I believe them. I see how they work together, how they get along with each other, how they try to watch out for Spike, and I know... these mares are the ones my Twily's friends should have been, before Discord ruined them." He took a deep breath. "And if there is any, tiny, remotest possibility that maybe they might be telling the truth about what happened in their universe, and if there's any tiny remote possibility that the same thing might have happened here if not for Discord, and if that tiny remote possibility means there's an infinitely tiny possibility that Cadance is alive... I have to check. I'd be remiss in my duties as Captain of the Guard if I didn't, and I'd be failing the pony I've loved for over a decade."
"I told you it wasn't safe for you down there. I declared it off-limits under my authority as Celestia's ally. If you're going to disobey me... then this alliance is ended. As well as our relationship."

"You actually don't have any authority over Canterlot Palace unless Princess Celestia specifically backs you up, and I know that Princess Celestia would do anything to get one of her family back. She'd want me to follow up even the smallest chance. And I'm in authority over the Royal Guard in her absence... unless you want to take this up with Bluey." He sighed deeply. "I don't want our love to end, Chrysalis. And I don't want the alliance between Changelings and ponies to end; I think it's been good for both of our kinds. But if that's the way you're going to be, then I can't stop you." He turned back to the guards. "To the catacombs, ponies. Let's go."

Chrysalis screeched again, a sound of pure rage... and then the Changelings that had been fighting Twilight and Spike and Rarity left that fight behind, and descended toward the roof. "No! You won't! My Changelings, attack any pony who tries to enter the catacombs!"

Applejack shook Pinkie, who'd been watching the whole thing, riveted. "Pinkie... no one, pony or Changeling, 's trying to fight us anymore. It's a good time to go."

Battle broke out again, this time between the Royal Guards and the Changelings, and Pinkie desperately wanted to see how it all turned out and if Cadance was really alive down there, but she knew better. Rescuing Discord was more important.

Rainbow Dash had already flown up to join up with Twilight, Rarity and Spike and get them down here. Spike descended, hovering in the air by the parapet, with Rainbow coaching him. "That's it! Fast flaps, up and down, but you're using equal force both ways, so you stay in the same place!"

"This is a lot harder than normal flying," the deep draconic voice that was Spike, now, complained. Twilight levitated Pinkie and Applejack. "Whee!" Pinkie cheered, as Twilight deposited her and Applejack on Spike's back. Pinkie put her forelegs around Rarity, who was sitting right at the place where Spike's neck met his back. "You're not even squishy, Rarity!" she complained. "You look so much like a marshmallow that I forget, and then I hug you and you're not squishy at all!"

"Please be careful of the mane, Pinkie," Rarity managed. "And perhaps you could squeeze not quite so tightly."

Applejack wrapped her own forelegs around Pinkie. "Ain't never rode a dragon before," she said. "I hope you know what you're doing, Spike."

"So do I," Spike said, as he pulled away from the wall. Pinkie squee'ed. She could feel the play of the great wing muscles, rippling under dragonskin.

"That don't fill me with confidence, I'm afraid," Applejack said.

"Well, you're doing a lot better than I was, that time I tried to fly from Canterlot with the plunder vines," Twilight said to Spike encouragingly.

"Don't remind me."

"Beat hard on the down stroke if you wanna get height! Take it slow, don't overexert those wings, they're pretty huge!"

"Do I even need height? We're going to Ponyville and we're in Canterlot. It's all down from here, isn't it?"
"Yeah, good point, but you wanna be out of the pegasus lanes!"

"And away from the Changelings, as quickly as possible," Rarity reminded him.

"You don't have to tell me twice."

Pinkie looked down from dragonback, in ecstasy at the thrill of actually flying, up so high. Her gyrocopter had never gotten her this high, and flying in a balloon was so much less immediate, so much less thrilling than feeling the wings moving under her. All of Equestria spread out beneath her, so tiny. It was a wonderful distraction from how much her entire body hurt.

"What's the plan, Twi?" Applejack said, sounding more than a little queasy.

"We know from Fluttershy that he's in the library, and that the other me is planning to sacrifice him at sunset. Which... probably isn't going to happen, with Princess Celestia gone, and sooner or later she'll figure that out, and she's probably using a clock for it anyway, but it's a couple of hours away anyway. Let's get in there, get into the library and retrieve him if Fluttershy hasn't, and then... we lost our piece of the Tree of Harmony, so I guess we have to just go home..."

"When Pinkie and I were taking some weird shortcut, I heard a creepy voice, and it said the piece is in the forest," Spike said.

"I am not even going to ask for more details about that, but of course it's in the forest. I'm sure I dropped it while we were fighting the Changelings, or my other self. That doesn't mean we'll be able to find it again..."

"Not to mention the question of how the heck we get it to grow," Applejack said. "It wasn't real helpful when I asked it, and it ain't like we've got our Elements."

"I am perfectly all right with going home and letting this terrible universe take care of itself," Rarity said. "I need a bath. Of approximately six hours. And a brushing. And a hooficure. And quite possibly a manecut." She took a deep breath. "And that's from having endured this world for one day. I am quite sure Discord is going to need considerably more than that. The sooner we can get him home, the better off we'll all be."

Pinkie shook her head. "We can't leave a me that eats ponies around to eat more ponies. We just can't."

"I gotta say... I don't like the idea of leaving me the way she is either," Rainbow said. "I talked to her when we were fighting. She thinks friendship is a lie. Some kind of scam ponies pull on each other. She's toughing it out, she's not going to let anypony see her get upset, but... I can't imagine living life without my friends. And Scoots still looks up to her, and Discord turned her into some kind of weird bat-pony-thing with giant wings, and the version of me that's here is gonna break that poor kid's heart because she just doesn't care about anypony, because she can't believe anypony could care about her. If there's any way we can find that tree piece and fix all this... I really think we should."

"We'll just have to play it by ear," Twilight said. "Let's go, Spike!" She sped up, headed for Ponyville.

Spike gulped. "Oh boy."

"It's so funny to hear you say things in that voice!" Pinkie giggled, as Spike did his best to put on speed without losing his passengers, and Rainbow shouted coaching instructions at him.
Opposition, 3 PM – Spike (Opposition)

When the world returned, Spike was still sitting on Discord's neck, but now they were in the heart of the Everfree Forest.

"Ohhh no," Spike said in almost a moan, looking around himself. "This isn't good."

"What's not good?" Discord asked, panting. "Get off my neck, I can't breathe."

Spike rolled off Discord and got to his feet. "We're in the Everfree! Do you have any idea what's happened to the Everfree?"

"Huh." Discord got to four feet, wobbling slightly, and craned his head around. "From the look of it, I'd say the plunder vines came up." He licked one of the digits on his lion paw and stuck it in the air... then started to fall forward, unbalanced. Discord cursed. "Can't believe... how weak I am. Give me a moment." He pulled himself to two feet, using his claws in the bark of a tree as leverage, and then wrapped his tail around the tree and leaned back against it. "Didn't... really expect them to do this. I'm not thrilled by the new look, to be honest."

"You did the vine thing too?"

Discord looked down at Spike with an eyebrow raised. "You do know they were planted over a thousand years ago, right?"

"Uh... no, no, I didn't. It's not like our Discord ever explained himself."

"It's not like you ever gave him a chance, Mr. Hammer Happy."

The words stung. They shouldn't have – Spike had spent so long facing his regret for what he'd done. Discord's flippant comments were nothing next to the lectures he'd endured from Twilight about his actions. But it still filled him with so much shame that he'd killed someone, even someone who'd deserved to die. "It wasn't like I wanted to. I just thought I had to. Sooner or later he'd break out again, and then what?" He scowled at Discord. "We don't have a kind Fluttershy anymore who could have reformed him."

"He regretted everything, you know," Discord said. "Before you killed him. He ruined everything that made him happy. If you'd let him live and he'd broken out again, he wouldn't have been looking for revenge; he hated everything the world had become."

"Everything he turned the world into, you mean," Spike said sharply. "And I thought you said you had nothing to do with him!"

"Still don't. But it turns out you can learn a lot about a guy from nibbling on his dead body."

"How was I supposed to know that?" Spike asked, taking refuge in anger so he wouldn't have to feel horror. If he really hadn't had to kill Discord... if the Discord he'd killed had regretted everything he'd done, and wouldn't have sought revenge... "And how do you even know this? You said you didn't know anything about why our Discord did the stuff he did!"

"Did I say that?" Discord shrugged. "I suppose I probably did. Things are different now, you know. I have a little bit of magic back." He pushed off from the tree with his tail, uncoiling it.
"We've got something to find, and then I'll use the rest of what I've got to find my friends and free them."

"Something to find?"

"Are you just going to question everything I say?"

Spike ground his teeth. Discord was so irritating. He didn't seem to have any humility or any further remorse for trying to destroy the world, and for a moment Spike regretted helping him... but only for a moment. Being irritating didn't mean he'd deserved being tortured, or... that other thing he'd said about what Fluttershy was doing to him. Also, if Spike had never helped him, he probably would still have ended up cracking and trying to destroy the world, but no one would have stopped him like the alternate Fluttershy did. "I can't help look for it if I don't know what it is," Spike said.

"It looks like a tree branch."

Spike looked around. "We're in a forest. A tree branch isn't going to stand out much."

"This one will be rather distinctive, trust me." On two legs, Discord half-walked, half-staggered forward, plainly having difficulty staying upright. His body swayed in every direction. "Pretty sure it's this way."

"I could help look if you could give me some more details..."

"I don't need you to look," Discord said. "I can feel where it is. What I need you for is to pick it up, since I'm not going to be able to touch it."

"Why not?"

Discord sighed. "You ask a lot of questions. Doesn't that ever get tiring?"

Spike followed him in as close to a trot as a biped could manage. "No, not really."

Discord almost fell over, catching himself against a tree. "Amazing... what months of being chained in quadrupedal position... will do to your balance. And your glutes. I've practically wasted away to nothing."

"Why don't you walk on all fours, then?" Spike asked.

"Would you, in my position?"

"Probably."

"I've never seen you walk on all fours."

"Dragons my size aren't designed to. I think. You can do both, though. That must be convenient."

Again Discord almost fell over. "Not right now it's not."

An animal called, somewhere in the distance. Spike shivered. "Let's try to get this done before nightfall. It was mid-afternoon; night was still a long way off, but the very idea of being stuck in this forest when it happened was 'terrifying'."

"Your message to Celestia bounced. I'm not at all sure night is falling."
"Wait." Spike frowned. "Are you saying... are you saying those other Bearers, the ones from your world, they're strong enough to hurt *Princess Celestia*?"

"They defeated both me and Nightmare Moon, why not Celestia?"

"Uh, because they did those things with the elements of harmony?"

Discord smirked. "My Twilight isn't any stupider than yours just because she's an alicorn now."

"But... they wouldn't really hurt Celestia, would they?"

"The note she sent said she had a use for Twilight, and she'd let the others go. If that use for Twilight was, shall we say, less than healthy for Twilight, I would imagine her friends would have provoked a confrontation, if they could. And if Twilight was defending her friends from a maddened Celestia? I put nothing past her when it comes to defending her friends."

There was a time when Spike's Twilight had been that pony. He swallowed against a sudden tightening of his throat, a sudden burning in his eyes. "Well, the sun is still where it's supposed to be... more or less..."

Discord shrugged. "Means nothing to me. I have no idea what time it's supposed to be."

"It's maybe around 3 pm?" It was summertime, so the sun stayed high in the sky for a good long time, but... it still looked wrong, even for summer. "So... Princess Celestia can't really be all that distracted by a fight or something—"

"No. The sun automatically moves, all day long, as long as Celestia isn't incapacitated. It's an unconscious function of her magic. Her being distracted wouldn't stop the sun from moving. It would take her being unconscious, or not on Equestria anymore – say, for example, banished to the moon, or Tartarus – or dead. Now, I doubt very much Twilight and company would kill Celestia, or that they even could... but a nice spot of banishment might be just the thing for her."

"But the sun is still where it should be... I think..."

Discord took a deep breath. "Let's just say I'm pretty sure that's exactly where it's going to stay, for a while."

"How do you know?"

"I sense fluctuations in magic." He closed his eyes. "I'm not sensing any sun-bearing alicorns anywhere in the world. And I'm paying attention. I didn't notice Luna being gone, when I first got here, because I wasn't really paying attention. But I can sense alicorns. The only one I can feel is my Twilight. So she's alive, and still in this world, but Celestia's... not one of those things. Like I said, I suspect she's alive, but banished somewhere."

"If they did that, then who would move the sun?" Spike asked, somewhat panicked at the thought. "If the sun doesn't move, we'll all burn!"

"Oh, you'd be fine. You're a dragon."

"I'm not okay with all the ponies dying!"

"Somepony will figure something out. I'm s—" Discord tripped and hit his head on a tree branch, hard enough that he fell backward on his tail. "Ow! Why didn't you warn me about that tree branch?"
"Dude, you are ten times taller than me. I can barely even see the branches that might hit you."
This was an exaggeration; Spike could see them just fine, if he craned his head up, which he didn't want to do.

"I suppose you're right," Discord sighed. He sat there for a minute or two, not moving.

"Don't you think we ought to get going?"

"Everything hurts," Discord whined. "I ache, all over. It's so hard to get up... it's so hard to keep walking..."

"But you have your magic back, don't you? Can't you heal yourself?"

He shook his head. "I don't have that much magic. Only what was in the piece of my statue you gave me, and teleportation took a lot of that. I have to save it. I might need it for something."

"Oh, yeah, you said you were going to use it to rescue your friends."

"Yes, or removing my own ears if Fluttercruel or your Twilight turn up, so I can't hear anything they order me to do."

"Huh. That's a good idea. But you still don't want them to show up here before we find the thing we're looking for, do you?"

Discord shuddered. "No."

"Why don't you do all fours? You wouldn't hit your head so much, or trip."

"No," Discord said again, despite the fact that it still looked like he could barely keep himself upright.

They walked in silence for a few minutes, before Discord spoke again. "Do you know anything about what I am? About Chaos, or chaos magic, or the avatars? Anything at all? Did Twilight share anything with you?"

Spike's eyes narrowed. Why did Discord need to know that? "What're you asking for?"

"To know how much I need to tell you."

"About what?"

"Well, if I knew how much I need to tell you, then I could tell you, and you'd know what."

Spike rolled his eyes. "That's helpful."

"Isn't it? I thought it was very helpful."

"Maybe by your standards." But he had to admit he was curious. "What did you need to tell me?"

"So you don't know anything?"

"About Chaos? Not much. I know that Twilight found out in the research she did in the Crystal Empire that there was something called the Diadem of Order that supposedly has the power to beat you because it's imbued with the Spirit of Order the way you're the Spirit of Chaos and the Elements of Harmony form the Spirit of Harmony."
"Not exactly accurate, but go on."

"Well, it did enable her to beat you – other you – because of something about balancing out the harmony?"

"Each of them were fused with their opposite," Discord said. "For five, that's disharmony – Cruelty, Disloyalty, Greed, whatever you'd call the kind of manipulation Applejack does, and I have no idea what you'd call Pinkie. Corrupted Laughter? Psychotic Laughter? The Element of Evil Clowns?"

Spike shuddered slightly. "Let's not talk about Pinkie, okay?"

"Mm, yes, I agree, let's not." This time Discord managed to duck the tree branch that would have smacked him in the face. "But Magic isn't inherently harmony. Magic, at its base, is chaos. Chaos magic is raw magic, uncontrolled by the structures of Harmony. Reverse chaos, and what do you have? Order. Joining herself to a fragment of Matrisse must have made it possible for her to harmonize with the others, because then they'd all be bound to their opposites."

"What's Matrisse?"

"I'll get to that. No one likes an impatient dragon."

"We don't have all day, you know. Fluttershy said they can't track you in the Everfree, but the moment Twilight realizes she can't track you, she'll know that the Everfree is exactly where you are."

"It's a rather large place."

"Yeah, but even still. We're trying to save the world. If Twilight catches you—"

"Yes, yes."

"If you don't have all your magic you're no match for her even if you take your ears off."

"Yes, I know. Really. How can I tell you anything if you're chattering at me all the time?"

"So tell me something then. Something useful."

"What I'm going to tell you... is something I rather hope won't be useful."

Spike frowned. "Then why are you telling it to me?"

Discord stopped and looked down at Spike, something he hadn't done yet the whole time they were walking. "Because if you do need it I want you to have it. No one had it for me. The one who could have given me anything died when I was a small child and he wanted this for me, anyway. I... don't want it for you. You won't handle it well. No one does, but you'll be particularly bad."

"Handle what?"

"Chaos," Discord said.

"Why would I—"

"Shhh, there's a grownup talking. Listen. Chaos magic is raw magic. It's the hardest to use and the most powerful. Very, very few chaos mages are actually any good at doing anything other than blowing themselves and their friends up. It's almost impossible to master, but it was my special
talent. Like ponies have their cutie marks. So I was a chaos mage, and I was good at it. I knew the Tree of Harmony existed—"

"Tree?"

"Yes. It's a tree. The Elements are just... mmm, seeds? Not exactly, they can't plant a new Tree, but the Bearers can manifest it when they use the Elements. So I knew the Tree of Harmony existed, but I didn't know about Matrisse and I didn't know about the chaos avatars. I was a mortal draconequus, a powerful chaos mage but nowhere near what I eventually became."

"I still don't know who Matrisse is."

"The Spirit of Order. It was a mountain. It went crazy more than a millennium and a half ago, and tried to remove magic from our world. Dragons wouldn't even have existed anymore, you need magic to live. Ponies would have existed but no more manipulating tools with their hooves, no more flight, no more magic in their horns – it would have destroyed them. So... I destroyed Matrisse. At great personal expense, I might add." He sniffed.

"Sure, I bet you deserved a medal," Spike said skeptically.

"I did! But that was after I became the chaos avatar. The Spirit of Chaos. You see, I – I died, to be honest. And they told me, when I was floating in that place between life and death, they said – you can rest. You can continue on down the river, you can go to the Shadowlands and pass on to the world beyond. Or you can take up the burden. You can be Chaos' avatar, Chaos' representative in the world. You can be the one who stokes the engines that keep magic moving. Because that's what I do, Spike. Magic needs there to be chaos. With magic, it's possible to make life more regimented and controlled than any non-magical society could dream of... but order makes magic fade. There has to be someone who keeps chaos going."

This sounded rather like self-serving horseapples to Spike. "So how did magic survive when you were trapped in stone?" he asked. "Or after I, uh... after you were..."

"After you killed me, you mean?" Discord grinned mirthlessly. "Oh, don't fret. My predecessor died when I was 2, or 4, or something like that... I'm not good at math. And I know I was at least in my 20s before I ascended. Maybe 30's. So there were decades without a chaos avatar. Magic fades slowly; there's a lot of it. And a thousand years in stone would have been a problem except that it was Harmony that did it, and Harmony needs chaos and order both; it let magic flow through me, like I was porous. I couldn't hold any of it or use it, but it could purify itself, turn back into raw uncontrolled magic by passing through me. Eventually it would have been a problem, though, and Harmony would have had to let me go... or Chaos would have picked another avatar. There's usually a backup plan. Or 27. Chaos likes to keep its options open." He was breathing hard, but Spike didn't know if that was exertion or emotion.

"Okay, so... why are you telling me this?"

"Chaos chooses randomly most of the time, but there are two exceptions. I was one of the types of exceptions. The child of the previous avatar gets first right of refusal. My predecessor... fathered me. Well, he wasn't any kind of a father to me, I only even met him once – twice if you count the time travel – and he was a completely awful draconequus and I hate him, but he was my biological father. And the other exception... is if someone kills a chaos avatar. If there's no descendent, no heir, then the choice comes to the one who killed the last one."

A chill went down Spike's spine. "You mean... chaos is going to make me into something like you?"
"Oh, don't sound so horrified. Godlike power is nothing to sneeze at. Of course, you have a much more orderly mind than I do, so it'll probably drive you insane, and that's before the loneliness, because it's almost impossible for chaos avatars to have friends, and... oh, yeah, your Twilight is practically an avatar of order now that she's taken up a piece of Matrisse and joined it to her soul, which would turn you into her eternal nemesis. So I guess there are downsides, for you."

Spike shook his head frantically. "No. No. I don't want that. I don't!"

"It's always a choice," Discord said. "But it's a rigged choice. I'd just been killed, in a war, and I had every reason to think that— that the others in my family, that the one I loved and her sister, had been killed as well, and I wanted to come back to protect the ones that my family had cared for. In their name. And, well, it didn't go according to plan because chaos never does." Discord took a deep breath. "It'll come to you when you're vulnerable. When it seems like everyone you love will die if you don't accept, or the world will end, or something, and you just. Need. Power. You're helpless and everything's on fire and you want the power to save the world, or your loved ones, or yourself, and that's when it will come and it'll say, 'do you want this? Do you want to take up the burden, and carry the power?'"

He stopped again and leaned down, face close to Spike's. "Say no. You won't want to. You'll be terrified of what will happen if you don't. But find another way. Say no."

"I – I thought you loved chaos."

"I do. I love chaos. You don't. It'll tear you apart, because you'll try to use it to create order, and you can't use it like that. There was another dragon, she was the avatar once, many millennia ago. She wanted the power to save females of all species who were being oppressed by the males of their species. The overreaction to her attempts was so severe, there are no places in the world where they destroy their daughters' minds and make them into unquestioning slaves, because they followed a way of life that Ar brought into existence by trying to create the opposite. I don't want chaos misused that way, and I know it'll pick someone else." He sighed. "Not Brightest Star, though. I think she's dead, here. And I hope it doesn't go for Pinkie Pie... I think she's too damaged."

"I think I'd be a better choice than Pinkie Pie," Spike said, laughing nervously.

"That's because you have no idea what depths a lonely omnipotent dragon who craves order and friendship and now stands for the destruction of both could fall to." Discord snorted. "Pinkie Pie... well. I don't need to admit to you how much she, uh, bothers me."

"Yeah, you were crying just because she was in the room with you."

"I am not under any restriction not to hurt you. Don't make me kick you for being rude."

"But it's true, though. She's... she's really awful."

"Yes. But she'll get over that. She'll kill and eat a few hundred ponies and decide, naah, that's boring, let's find something else fun to do. Eventually she might even heal from the corruption. I'm not saying she'd be a good choice, and the fact that chaos avatars don't have friends, that would probably break her, but she's still more chaotic than you are. So say no. Don't get all noble and think you have to take it or it'll go to Pinkie, she's not the only chaotic being on this planet and it won't even go to a pony by preference unless it decides it would be funny, or something. Chaos... is rather impulsive."

"I've noticed," Spike said dryly.
Discord shook his head. "I don't even know why I'm bothering. The noble ones are awful. Chaos'll get you to say yes if it really wants to, because it'll ask you when you're at your weakest and you'll be too noble and self-sacrificing... and admittedly, too greedy for the glory of being able to save your friends yourself – to say no."

"Are you sure this world's Discord never had a kid?"

"Positive. I'm sure you know a few things about the birds and the bees."

"Uh, yeah, and I don't need to be talking about them with—"

"Dragons and draconequi are compatible, but dragons and ponies are not without magic – for reproducing, anyway – and draconequi aren't fertile with ponies without magic, and while I've been with a few lady dragons in my time, I..." He hesitated. "I didn't want a threat to my power. I didn't want the risk of creating an heir, so Chaos might possibly cast me aside for my own child. I was careful. And with ponies, there just wasn't a chance unless I wanted it, and I didn't."

"But he was different—"

"Not different enough," Discord said, looking away. "Not nearly different enough." He sounded upset about it.

"So... I'm going to be forced to become the chaos avatar someday if I'm not strong enough to say no when the chips are really down and things are really bad?"

"More or less. Yes."

"I'll just... say no. I'm pretty sure I can do that. I mean... I've had to have a lot of self-discipline lately."

"We can only hope," Discord said. "Let's go. Shards of Harmony trees don't find themselves."

That was the first indication Spike had of what they were looking for. It reassured him. This wasn't a wild goose chase, and Discord hadn't lied to him; this was going to help save his friends. A shard of Harmony sounded like it could be very helpful.

The sun didn't move at all, the whole time. So Spike had no idea how long they were traveling through the forest, Discord staggering like a drunken pony and almost falling over a few times, and Spike's feet and legs getting tired from trying to keep up with Discord, because even when staggering and unsteady the draconequus still had much longer legs than Spike. Eventually, though, they stopped. "It's here."

"Where?" Spike asked, somewhat irritably. After marching through this forest with Discord for what felt like it had to be at least an hour, he wasn't much in the mood. "I don't see anything."

"Sparkly crystal tree piece. Right there." Discord pointed at the ground ahead of them.

Spike moved forward so he could see better, and whistled. "Okay, yeah! That is definitely a sparkly crystal tree piece!"

It looked delicious, honestly. It shone like a diamond, but it was shaped like a tree branch. It had facets, smooth and polished. Spike found that he wasn't quite drooling, but his mouth was definitely watering a bit. It had been so long since Twilight had allowed him to eat a gem. Days. "I... don't suppose it's safe for me to take just a tiny nibble?"
Discord laughed. It wasn't a mocking laugh or a sardonic laugh, it was the full-bodied laughter of someone responding to a joke. "Oh, that's marvelous, Spike, I needed that," he said. "Eat a piece of the Tree of Harmony!" And then he was laughing again.

"I'm guessing that's a no."

"Oh, stop, stop. I've thrown up too many times recently, my ribs hurt, my whole abdomen hurts, I can't stand laughing this much! Please stop being so funny!"

Spike made an exasperated noise. "Okay, what do you want me to do with it?"

"Just carry it. We're going to find my friends and give it to them, and I can't touch it."

"Why, what happens to you if you do?"

"In my weakened condition, without being able to fight back? I have no idea, but it won't be good." He shuddered.

Spike shrugged, and picked the branch up. It was a little too large for him to fit it in his pocket, unfortunately, and the pockets on his skin were uncomfortable if they were forced open. But the branch wasn't heavy or hard to carry. "Got it. What do we do next?"

Discord sat down heavily. "Now I use my magic to figure out where my friends are. If they're safe, I'll contact them and let them know where we are. If they're in danger... I guess I'll see if I can teleport to Canterlot."

"You are not looking like the kind of guy who's healthy enough to teleport to Canterlot."

"I'm not." Discord closed his eyes. "I doubt I'd make it, but they came for me and that's why they're in danger. I have to do something about it."

That was a sentiment Spike understood. He sat down as well. "Don't suppose you could use your magic to find some gems? I'm feeling really peckish right now."

"I don't find gems." Discord glared at Spike. "When I'm at my full power, I can make gems, but finding them? Pff. I have better things to do."

"Just in case anyone forgot you were a jerk for a single solitary moment," Spike mumbled.

"Do be quiet. I need some concentration for this." He closed his eyes again and breathed deeply.

"I guess I'm just supposed to sit here," Spike said to no one in particular.

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**Opposition, 3 PM – Twilight (Opposition)**

Twilight blinked groggily. Fluttershy was screaming.

As she came awake, she realized the scream wasn't of pain or fear, but of rage. Twilight shook her head, trying to drive the sleep from it. How had she fallen asleep? Had somepony drugged her? What had happened here?

She was in her workroom. Fluttershy was here too, with bolt cutters... and Discord's chains, hanging empty.

"He teleported!" Fluttershy screamed at her. "You told me he couldn't possibly do that! You said
he had no ability to use any of his magic unless one of us ordered him to!"

Twilight got to her hooves. "You lost Discord," she said dully. The full extent of her so-called friend's failure hovered right outside her comprehension, waiting to hit her like a ton of rocks. "You lost him. He wasn't allowed to break his own chains, he wasn't allowed to go through the door – how did he get out?"

"I told you! He teleported! Something you told me he couldn't possibly do! And he took Spike with him, not that you care anymore since you turned into such a cold bitch!"

Discord had his powers.

Discord had his powers.

"You absolute moron," Twilight hissed, taking refuge in anger to try to hold off the growing panic. Not the days of chaos again. No, please. She couldn't bear it. Discord couldn't possibly be free and at full power... not when she was so close to ending any threat he could ever be, and saving Princess Celestia, and protecting all of ponykind from death itself. No. "You fought with Rainbow Dash, didn't you? Was that the last straw that broke our harmony as friends and let him get his powers back?"

"Oh, no, that was you," Fluttershy snarled. "You think I could be friends with someone who goes behind my back to kill my—" She hesitated, sentence unfinished.

"Your what? You were only supposed to be holding him prisoner and training him! You weren't supposed to develop feelings for him!"

"Well, too bad! You were happy to exploit those feelings when it let us distract him from destroying Equestria, or when it let us put him in stone, before your assistant murdered him! If you forgot about how I felt about Discord, that's your problem, not mine – it's not as if the others didn't take every possible opportunity to taunt me about it!"

"This one isn't even the same Discord!"

"I know! Because your pet dragon murdered the one I—cared about! Did you think I was really going to let you kill the other one, after by some miracle I had a chance to have another one?"

Fluttershy shoved Twilight – not particularly hard; she was still the physically weakest of all of them, for all her new viciousness.

Twilight scowled at her and shoved her back, with magic. "Don't touch me. This is your fault. You knocked me unconscious and – bolt cutters. You were going to cut him free. How did you plan to get him out past the fact that I forbade him to leave this room?"

"I'm not stupid, Twilight," Fluttershy sneered. "I was going to knock him unconscious."

"And what, carry him out by hoof?" She had to think. This was a disaster. "No. I don't have time to argue with you. Where did he go?"

"How would I know? He just said 'Go' – uh, a very bad word, and then 'yourself', and then he vanished. With Spike! Don't you even care?"

"Of course I care! If he has his powers back—"

The door banged open. "The what now?" Applejack asked. "Did you just say Discord has his powers back?"
"He teleported out of here! After Fluttershy knocked me unconscious! And where's Rainbow? She's not here! She was here before!"

"She went to check on Princess Celestia. Spike tried to send a message and it bounced, it didn't go anywhere. We thought it would be better if Rainbow checked on the Princess. Discord said—"

"Discord said! You believed anything he said? If he has his powers back, he could be lying—"

"How in tarnation does Discord have his powers back?" Applejack shouted. "Twilight, you had one job!"

Rarity and Pinkie Pie crowded in behind Applejack. "Discord's powers are back?" Rarity was hyperventilating. "This is the worst possible thing!"

For once, Twilight couldn't disagree with her. "We need a plan. Princess Celestia? Does anyone know what actually happened to her? Did Discord do something?"

"Are we sure Discord has his powers back?" Pinkie asked. "Because I don't see any chocolate milk or flying fish or any kind of crazy chaos anything!"

That brought Twilight up short. "That's... a good point." She could believe that maybe Discord might refrain from launching his chaos right away. The other one had held off for three days between taking the Elements from them and tricking them into becoming corrupted. This one probably could lay low without chaos for a while. But she wouldn't believe for a moment that he would forego any kind of revenge. If he had his full powers back... she and Fluttershy wouldn't be free to be having this conversation right now. She shuddered.

"It's unrealistic to imagine that Discord wouldn't attack us for revenge if he was at his full power," she said. "Fluttershy. Describe to me exactly what happened, including the issue that made you think that Rainbow needed to check up on the Princess."

"Well. After you took your restful nap, which I'm sure was very good for you after you've been working so hard—"

"You ordered Discord to put me to sleep, didn't you."

"It's not at all harmful for an overtired, stressed mare to get some nice, healthy sleep for once," Fluttershy said, smirking. "Rainbow got bolt cutters after I realized that you had spelled the latch on his collar shut, and we started cutting through the chain. I was worried about the rest of our friends and why they hadn't gotten here yet—"

"We were on one of the slower trains," Applejack said impatiently. "Every stop between here and Canterlot."

"And it never occurred to you to order the train to skip the other stops and go straight to Ponyville?" Twilight snapped.

"Ain't like any of us thought you were gonna lose Discord if we didn't hurry," Applejack retorted.

"Um, excuse me, if I might finish?" Fluttershy's voice was hardly louder than it had been in the old days, before Discord, but it had a poisonous edge to it under the sweetness. "I had Spike send a message to Princess Celestia, asking when you had all left... but it came back immediately. Discord said that meant that something was interfering with the signal, so we decided that Rainbow should go and check on the Princess, after she got the heaviest of the chains cut for me. Spike volunteered to hold Discord down so he wouldn't have a seizure, since it was very difficult for him to hold still
when your orders were to stop anyone from removing his chain with lethal force, but the loyalty spell prevented him from harming me."

"I would imagine," Twilight said drily. "We're all still alive and not being tormented, though, so how did he get away? You didn't cut his collar by accident, did you?"

Fluttershy shook her head. "No. I don't know how it happened. I was cutting through one of the smaller chains, and he said to me, 'Can I tell you something, Mistress Fluttershy?' So I said go ahead, and he..." Tears welled in her eyes. "He said something very rude to me, and then he vanished. With Spike still on top of him!"

Okay, Twilight. Think. Discord couldn't have his full power back... unless. Could it be that the loyalty spell was holding, but the spell that kept him from using his power wasn't? Then he wouldn't attack... but he probably would turn the world upside down. He wasn't known for subtlety. Could Spike have accidentally opened his collar? It was designed to stand up to dragon claws, though... Twilight hadn't been able to take the risk that Discord couldn't get his dragon foot in position to rip the collar off.

If the collar had come off, Discord wouldn't be an issue for much longer. His chaos magic would feed the crystals inside him and rip him apart within half an hour, maybe less if he used a lot of magic. But if the collar was still on but just not working properly... would the same thing happen? It depended on what part of the spell had failed...

"Why don't you scry for him?" Fluttershy asked. "You used to do that all the time."

She had. Back before the Diadem. For what little good it had done; knowing where Discord was had never been all that helpful, when she'd had no hope of stopping him. But it hadn't occurred to her now... or rather, she realized, it had. Somewhere in the back of her brain, she'd thought of it and rejected it, because chaos magic disgusted her profoundly nowadays. She didn't want to touch it with her brain, even to the extent of scrying for it.

But there was no help for it. Twilight sighed and began the preparations. They needed to know where Discord had gone. Also they needed to know what was going on with Princess Celestia. Where was Rainbow? Why wasn't she back yet?

"Do any of you know what was happening with Princess Celestia?" she asked.

Rarity rolled her eyes. "We would hardly be so irresponsible as to leave Princess Celestia if we had any inclination that there might be any sort of problem. When we left her, our counterparts were in her hooves and accompanied by the Royal Guard, so we had no reason to believe there might be any sort of difficulty."

"But what did she do to restrain the other – the alicorn?" The thought of verbally recognizing that the other was her counterpart, was her, was too much. "She's got to be very powerful! She's an alicorn!"

"Last I checked, so's Princess Celestia, and a lot older and wiser to boot," Applejack said.

"Something's gonna happen," Pinkie announced.

"Something...? That's hardly helpful," Rarity said.

Pinkie shrugged. "I don't know what's gonna happen! Pinkie Sense isn't exact like that! But something's gonna! Something big."
"Good or bad?" Twilight asked.

"Dunno! Just big!"

The door banged. "You are not gonna fucking believe this," Rainbow Dash said, panting hard, plainly out of breath. And then, "Hey, where's Discord?"

"We'll know in a moment," Twilight said, preparing the spell. "What's happened?"

"Their Spike got big. Like big big. There's a huge fight at Canterlot. Right now. I couldn't even get close enough to tell where Princess Celestia was, I didn't see her but the air was full of changelings. Figured I'd better tell you what was going on. As much fun as it would've been to get in there and kick some butt, the entire airspace was lousy with bugs and I couldn't have gotten through without breaking some shells. And they're supposed to be allies so I figured I wasn't gonna do that."

"What do you mean, their Spike got... big?"

"I mean you remember that red dragon whose butt we kicked up on that mountain, back before Discord?"

"You mean the red dragon that I saved you all from because you were all being idiots?" Fluttershy asked.

"Yeah, the one you were being a major league coward about until you finally grew some at the end. Anyway... their Spike is as big as that guy was. He was getting swarmed by changelings, but... he was big."

Now that was completely unfair. She was an alicorn and her assistant was a full-grown dragon, not the useless child Twilight herself was stuck with? Twilight took a deep breath. As much as she wanted to race off to Princess Celestia's rescue – she was sure the Spike dragon wouldn't be any match for her magic combined with Princess Celestia's and Shining Armor's – retrieving Discord and getting him back under control was the higher priority. She cast the scrying spell.

It came back blank. Nothing. No large concentrations of chaos anywhere but the Everfree, which was always a large concentration of chaos. Which meant he was in there, somewhere. Using the chaos of the Everfree to hide his signature, the same way he used to.

Think. The Everfree was a huge place. It might be days before they found him. If his collar wasn't broken and was still restraining him and the teleport was something he'd managed to pull off by trickery... except that if the alicorn found him first, she could easily magically remove his collar, and if it was in a few days, he'd have passed the crystals out of his body and there'd be nothing whatsoever stopping him.

If the alicorn found him... but she would. Because both she and Discord knew the location of the portal back to their own world. And the alicorn was riding a giant dragon.

"He's in the Everfree," she said.

"The Everfree? We can find him then!" Fluttershy said. "Can we go now?"

"The Everfree's too big to search by hoof... or wing, for that matter. But he'll be going to the portal he created, the one that leads back to his home... and our counterparts came through that portal. They know where it is... and a giant dragon is hard to miss." She turned to Rainbow Dash. "Rainbow, I want you to patrol the area of the Everfree along the shortest flight route from Canterlot. As soon as you see their Spike again, hide until you're behind them, then follow them
secretly until they meet up with Discord. He can't leave this world right away or the crystals inside him will kill him."

"Do we know that?" Applejack asked. "Your spell was supposed to keep him from teleporting. I ain't sure we can know for a fact that anything you did is working right."

Twilight forced down her anger. Losing her temper wouldn't help now. "It's most likely that he took advantage of a momentary glitch in the spell. Fluttershy siding with Discord to knock me unconscious won't have done anything good for our harmony as a group."

"Yeah, her fighting with me probably didn't help either," Rainbow Dash said, casually, as if she and Fluttershy hadn't caused a spectacular failure that could end up destroying their world.

"In any case. We can't take anything for granted, but if all they do is simply leave our world... then all we need to do is knit the portal shut. That would take some research, but with the help of the Diadem, Twilight was sure she could figure out how to do that. "If they're planning anything else... they won't leave before Rainbow can get back and let us know where they are."

"Darling. Rainbow is hardly the stealthiest of ponies," Rarity said. "And while under most circumstances I might imagine Fluttershy would be better at concealing herself, her current degree of, er, emotional compromise would seem to rule that out."

"I could go!" Inexplicably Pinkie was dressed as a ninja. "I can be super stealthy when I want to!"

Rainbow gave her a look of disbelief. "You can't fly, Pinkie."

"I'll give you some sort of item. A magical flare, of sorts. Follow them to Discord and set it off some distance away from them, so we know where they are but the alicorn doesn't notice. Don't engage them in combat until the rest of us are there. They've got a dragon and possibly Discord with his powers on their side. Our only hope is the element of surprise."

"Then we shouldn't use a magical flare," Fluttershy said. "Discord told me – the first Discord, I mean – that he can sense fluctuations in magic." She took a deep breath. "I'll go with Rainbow. And I'll stay behind, watching them to make sure they don't leave, while Rainbow goes and gets the rest of you." She looked into Twilight's eyes. "I won't let you kill him," she said earnestly, "but that doesn't mean I don't remember our friendship. I remember you were the only one of all of us who didn't treat me like garbage for feeling for Discord the way I did."

That felt like a lifetime ago. Twilight was fairly sure that Fluttershy's proclivities had disgusted her, even then, before the Diadem... but she'd been better at hiding emotions like disgust then. Or maybe it hadn't been the thing with Discord that had disgusted her. It was hard to remember what it had felt like to not have her fur crawl at the very thought of Discord and his chaotic magic, but back then... what he'd been doing had horrified her, she'd hated him, but his magic hadn't nauseated her the way it did now. Fluttershy might be remembering it correctly; maybe it had been her rapist tendencies that had appalled Twilight, then, and her thing with Discord had at least been consensual. And useful, considering that it had been key to defeating him.

She swallowed. She didn't care about any of them the way she had back then... because now, she'd fully accepted that they were monstrous. They weren't going to change back to the mares she remembered. But that was partially her fault. With the skill in understanding and analyzing magic that the Diadem had given her, she was fairly sure she could have separated the girls from their corrupted Elements... but it would have meant either giving up the ability to harmonize with them, or giving up the Diadem. And Twilight was never going to give up the Diadem. It made her so much smarter, so much better at magic. She'd defeated an alternate self who was an alicorn with it.
Given that she'd done nothing to undo their corruption when she was finally smart and skilled enough to try it, given that she wasn't *going* to do any such thing... could she really hold the fact that they'd become terrible ponies against them?

"I, uh... I remember our friendship, too, Fluttershy. What you're suggesting... it's probably a good idea. Go ahead with Rainbow Dash."

Of course, given her vitriol toward her other self, Fluttershy would probably kill the alternates the moment Rainbow left, if Discord had his powers and she could take control of him. But that was all right. If he didn't have his powers, Twilight could trust her not to do anything rash.

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**Opposition, 3:30 PM – Fluttershy (Harmony)**

In the tree that formed Golden Oaks library, in the eaves, Fluttershy crouched, covered entirely by the leaves of the tree, trying to control her breathing.

The train to Canterlot took anywhere from 40 minutes to an hour to and from Ponyville, depending on whether it was an express. The average pegasus could do the trip in half an hour without working up much of a sweat, considering that the train had to go through numerous switchbacks to get up the mountain that a pegasus could avoid. Rainbow Dash had been known to make the trip in 10 minutes when she was pushing herself, but not to Sonic Rainboom levels.

Fluttershy had, once in a while, managed to match Rainbow Dash, but only when the life of a friend was at stake.

From the top of Canterlot Palace, high up the mountain, the thermals and the direction of gravity favored very high speed. Fluttershy had pushed herself as hard as she could to get here. Originally she'd planned to go get the bolt cutters from Pinkie's basement first, but then she'd caught sight of Rainbow Dash, in the distance, heading toward Ponyville, and she'd known it was the Opposition side's Rainbow. Instead of going to Sugarcube Corner, she'd followed their Rainbow, knowing that Rainbow never bothered to look behind her when she was flying, always too focused on getting ahead.

And now she was in the eaves of Golden Oaks, wanting to pant and gasp because of how hard she'd pushed herself, and not daring to. She felt like she was on the verge of fainting, like her heart was pounding so hard it would explode out of her chest. Like her blood was boiling in her veins. But she didn't dare breathe hard enough to get the air she so desperately needed to stock up on, out of fear that they'd hear her downstairs.

From here, she could hear the conversation in the evil Twilight's workroom, clearly. She'd come in late, but it was plain that Discord wasn't here anymore. He'd gotten away, somehow. Fluttershy was sure that he wasn't at full power, because if he was at full power, he'd have teleported her to him, rescued their friends, and gotten them all out of there... but at least he was free. He was safe, for the moment. And when it became clear that he had to be in the Everfree, because their Twilight couldn't find him, she realized that she probably knew where he was.

Discord would know where the portal back to their own world was. And it was near the Everfree. Presumably, Discord was staying in the Everfree because he knew Twilight couldn't find him there... but he'd be near the portal, wouldn't he? It was the only thing that made sense.

Fluttershy knew where the portal was. Evil Twilight and her friends didn't.
Her own evil counterpart and the other Rainbow Dash were going to go try to intercept Spike on his way in from Canterlot – which assumed that he and the others had won that fight, but this Twilight seemed to be assuming that that would happen. Fluttershy was enough of a pegasus to know where someone flying down from Canterlot would most easily intersect the Everfree. It wasn't near the portal.

Once the two enemy pegasi had flown off, the other Twilight had directed her versions of Applejack, Pinkie and Rarity to get some sleep so they'd be in better shape for the upcoming fight. This started an argument, because the other Applejack wanted to go back to Sweet Apple Acres and the other Rarity wanted to start trying to salvage what she could from the wreckage of the Carousel Boutique. Under cover of the loud argument, Fluttershy finally drew in enough air that she felt she could breathe properly again.

She took off, heading for the Everfree, but not for the part of it that the other Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash were heading to.

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**Opposition, 4 PM – Spike (Harmony)**

He still couldn't believe it.

He had wings. He could fly. He was flying right now. It was terrifying, because he had Rarity and Pinkie and Applejack's lives in his keeping, riding on his back, and for all of Rainbow Dash's coaching, he felt like the more he thought about flying, the more he was likely to screw it up. Already there had been one or two lurching drops, drawing terrified screams from his passengers (well, from Rarity and Applejack; Pinkie had been screaming "whee!") before he could get his flight back under control.

And he was huge. Ponies were riding on his back. He'd been this size twice before in his life, but he didn't remember his moment of hatching at all, and he could barely remember the greed growth. Why was this different? Why was his mind still clear, not hazed with possessive hunger like when the greed growth had happened? He'd been thinking that his friends were his, his possessions, when the fury had swept over him and he'd suddenly become... this.

To be perfectly honest, he was still reeling. He was huge, he had wings, and... he'd just killed, in combat, with his fire. His mind shied away from that. He was a killer. Spike knew from Discord's letter that the other Spike, his counterpart in this universe, had killed the alternate Discord, so he'd known he was theoretically capable of killing... but he'd actually done it. What was worse, he didn't feel bad about it. Not like when he'd attacked Changelings in the forest, breaking carapaces and make them bleed. Then, the violence he'd committed had horrified him. Now? He felt sick at heart because he felt like he should care about the Changelings he'd burned... but he didn't. Chrysalis had tried to kill Twilight and Rarity, and if she'd failed it was only because of Twilight's power and skill, not any lack of intention. She'd deserved it. Her troops had deserved it.

He knew that was wrong, that he'd just done something awful. Necessary, but awful. Why didn't he feel guilty?

Maybe because he had to put so much focus into his flying.

"That's Ponyville up ahead," Twilight said. "Fluttershy went ahead to try to free Discord, right?"

"Right, but who knows if she'll have gotten anywhere," Rainbow said. "Flutters is great, but she can't exactly go hoof-to-hoof with alternate you, and the other Fluttershy and the other me left long before she did to try to save Discord from alternate you. Pinkie, I really wish you hadn't sent her."
Pinkie shrugged. "I bet it'll all work out okay," she said. "Look! Ponies are so tiny down there!"

"Tactically, it didn't make a whole lot of sense," Applejack said. "Did you get something from your Pinkie Sense that Fluttershy should leave then?"

"Yeah, it was just a hunch, but those usually work out for me!"

"Spike, is there something wrong?"

This was from Rarity, who apparently was the first to notice Spike's discomfort. There was a scratch in his throat and a queasiness in his belly, similar to the feeling that he was about to get a scroll... but he didn't want to think about what would happen to his passengers if he had to rear up and burp out flame, up here.

"I'm... not feeling great, but I've got it under co—hrrgkk!"

The flame that came out of him felt like vomit and looked purple and black, shot through with sparks of yellow... nothing like his usual flame at all. It had a strong taste, like a combination of black licorice, contaminated gems, and sour chocolate milk.

A large unfolded... something... it was more like a tapestry or a tablecloth than a parchment... materialized. It started to fall, but before it could, Twilight caught it with her magic and held it up.

It was a map. A very idiosyncratic map where Sugarcube Corner was represented as a gigantic cake, not to scale whatsoever, and all sorts of wild animals were inexplicably on top of the trees in the Everfree, not to scale either. There were multiple images of ponies, including a scowling Twilight face with the helpful legend "Evil" under her at Golden Oaks, a Fluttershy and a Rainbow Dash in circles with red diagonal lines thru them more or less straight ahead on his flight path, and a giant X marking what looked like the general area of the portal where they'd come in. There was a grinning Discord face above the giant X, his talon visible in the image and his thumb pointing up.

"Guys! Do you think maybe Discord sent this to us? Maybe he knows where the other us are and he's warning us!" Pinkie shouted, standing up on Spike's back, which made him very nervous.

"Pinkie! Sit down!" he and Rarity shouted at once, though his was louder.

"Gee, I do wonder," Applejack said, in that flat tone that made Spike quite sure she had an eyebrow raised, even though he couldn't really see given that she was on his back.

"We can't be certain," Twilight said. "The other me could be sending us a fake map that looks like Discord made it, to lure us into a trap."

"But, Twilight, that didn't look like Spike's usual flame at all. If you were casting the spell to send a message to Spike, wouldn't it look roughly similar to when Princess Celestia does?" Rarity asked.

"I'm pretty sure it came from Discord. Ugh." The taste wasn't as bad as it had been when he'd sent the original letter that started this journey, but that didn't mean it was pleasant. "So should I head for the portal, Twilight?"

"Maybe I should fly ahead and check?"

"Uh, egghead... that's not your job." Rainbow flew ahead of Twilight and hovered in front of her. "If anyone's gonna fly ahead and check, don't you think it ought to be me?"
"But you're coaching Spike in how to fly!"

"It looks to me like he's gotten it down pretty good."

"Uh, I'm not so sure about that," Spike said. "Maybe we should just all go together? I mean, what if it was a trap and somepony flew ahead? You'd be going right into it! But if we all stick together then we won't be outnumbered!"

"I think you're forgetting something, Twilight," Applejack said. "Maybe your evil twin came up with a clever plan to fool us, but it seemed to me like she was... how'm I gonna put this... she didn't seem like the kind of pony who's all that great at understanding what other ponies would likely feel. And the idea that she could figure out what kinda thing Discord would draw on a map just don't feel—"

"Likely," Rarity said. "Or possible, to be perfectly honest. She was a terrible pony, Twilight. I don't think for a moment she could imagine what Discord would come up."

"Uh, you're all missing the other really obvious thing," Rainbow said. "We have a huge dragon on our side! I betcha bits to bagels she's got no idea about our Spike dragoning up like this!" She slammed her forehooves together with a wide grin. "I just can't wait to get a look at her face when she sees him like this, if she tries to come back and give us trouble again."

"You have a point," Twilight said. "Pinkie, any hunches?"

Pinkie shook her head – which Spike was only able to tell because she did it so vigorously it twisted her whole torso back and forth slightly. "Nopers! I might've broken the hunch factory just a little bit," she said, sounding oddly embarrassed.

"All right, then I guess we'll trust that this map does come from Discord and he's telling us where to find him. Fluttershy must have gotten him loose. Though I don't know how he has enough power to send us a map..."

"So is that where I'm going?" Spike asked again. Flying had been a thrill when he first started, but now his wings were aching and he was really, really nervous about being up so high with ponies on his back.

"Yes. Let's do that. Head for the portal."

"All right! The sooner we can get back down to sweet, sweet ground and I don't have to be worried about ponies getting killed if I mess up doing this thing that I don't even know how I know how to do and I just started doing it like half an hour ago, the better!"

"You ain't fillin' me with confidence here, Spike," Applejack said.

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**Opposition, 4 PM – Discord**

So little power, so little strength. His body ached everywhere. Especially the muscles of his abdomen, when he stood upright. Being forced to walk on all fours, never being allowed to stand up straight, for two months, while being starved... it hadn't done anything good for the muscles that held his flexible body up against gravity. But he'd forced himself to stand upright anyway, even though it made him go slower and it made him vulnerable to being whacked with tree branches and he kept almost falling over, because he could, now. He was free. Weak, with very low magic, and with crystals in his belly that would kill him if he was freed all the way, so the option of, say, asking Spike to bite through the lock on his collar wasn't available. Not safe. But free.
And his friends were coming for him.

The scrying spell took a lot of what he had left. He didn't waste power making an external focus to look into – he just pulled the images directly into his mind's eye. Fluttershy was on her way to the portal back to their universe. The rest of the team – he still wasn't sure he could call any of them his "friends" aside from Fluttershy, but they'd come here to rescue him and that counted for something – were flying here... on Spike's back.

Spike – the Spike from his universe, presumably, since the other one was here by his feet, grumping about being bored – was a full-size dragon.

Discord grinned. Oh, was that ever going to get Order Twilight's goat, if she had the opportunity to see it.

He visualized a map. With his mind's eye positioned high above the Everfree, he could see much of Equestria, sprawling out beneath him as if he was flying. He located Fluttercruel and this world's Rainbow Dash, flying toward the edge of the Everfree, on the inverse of the trajectory Spike The Giant Dragon was on. He observed that Order Twilight and her minions were still at the Golden Oaks library.

Then he spiraled out, looking for potential allies, searching for anyone, anyone at all, with magic sufficient to make a difference in the fight between the Opposition Elements and the Harmony Elements. "His" side had the advantage, with Spike's sudden growth, but he couldn't count on that, not when Order Twilight had demonstrated the ability to defeat Alicorn Twilight despite the power differential between an alicorn and a unicorn, and not when he knew the Opposition Elements all had years of combat training that his Bearers didn't. He had to make sure that no one could come into the fight on the Opposition side to tip the balance, and he had to see if there was anyone he could call on to help his side, before he ran out of the stored magic from his alter ego's shattered stone antler.

Ignore everyone outside Equestria. The Dragon Lord, the hippogriffs, the reindeer... none of them could possibly respond to a call from Order Twilight fast enough, or from Celestia if she somehow came back. Confirm Celestia's absence from the entire world's thaumosphere, not just from Equestria. Eventually that would be a problem, but not his problem, so he didn't care. Luna—yes, there was her magically preserved body, right where his alter's memories placed it, but as perfect and undecaying as her corpse was, it was a corpse. No Luna spirit inside.

A flicker at Canterlot. Changelings in large numbers... a surge of magical energy. His mind delved into the catacombs below the palace. Something down there was blocking magic. He wondered how his alter had never noticed what was essentially a black spot in the thaumic field around Canterlot. Well, it wasn't truly black; it was more like it was in shadow. It didn't stand out; that was probably how he'd missed it. Nothing inside that field was within his reach, so he pulled back.

No alicorns. No umbra. No dark wizards of inordinate power. His friends would be on their own, but so would the enemy. Given that he couldn't cross the portal as long as those crystals were in him, this was almost certainly going to come to a fight. Their best strategy would have been to keep him hidden in the Everfree until the crystals worked their way out of his body, but Spike's sudden growth was going to make that difficult. Unless the Opposition Elements had killed one of the Everfree-dwelling dragons, there was probably nowhere to hide Spike... oh, wait, hadn't his alter thrown the red dragon from that mountain, the one who'd been defeated by Fluttershy in his world, into space? Maybe they could all go hide in that guy's lair.

But the important thing was for them all to gather together. With almost all the strength he had left, he created a map and mailed it to Big Spike.
Discord opened his eyes, breathing hard. "Okay. I know where we need to go now."

"Great. I'm all ears," Little Spike said.

"Spike, why do you have to give me straight lines like that when I don't have the power to do anything with them?" Carefully Discord pulled himself to his feet.

"I guess it's too much to ask where we're going?"

"Not in the slightest! We're going to the portal between the worlds. My friends came through it; they know where it is. All I was able to tell Twilight when she questioned me was that it was in the Everfree someplace. I can draw maps, but she had me tied down and she never asked me to draw a map, and I'm absolutely terrible at giving directions."

"So my Twilight doesn't know where this is, but yours does?"

"Yes. It's the perfect place to meet up."

"So you're not gonna need to teleport to Canterlot to rescue them?"

Discord shook his head. "They're on their way here." He thought of what this Spike's reaction would be to seeing his alter, and grinned. "Try not to die of envy when you see it."

"See what?"

"Oh, you'll know, trust me."

It would be easier to make his way to the portal on all fours. He was dizzy, and exhausted, and his abdominal muscles hurt so much, and he had always been capable of going faster that way. But when he thought of dropping to all fours, after being forced by Fluttercruel into that posture for so long, he felt sick. He could inch like a worm, or slither like a snake, but both would be a lot slower than walking.

"So, um."

When after a moment or two it didn't seem that Spike would be forthcoming with any more of that sentence, Discord prompted him. "Um?"

"I was just wondering..."

Again a hesitation. Discord sighed. "I am too tired for this, Spike. Spit your question out or forever hold your peace, I'm not going to keep prompting you."

"What's gonna happen to me?" he blurted. "I've betrayed Twilight for you—"

"You saved the world by doing that."

"Twilight won't see it that way. And Fluttershy will be angry I let you go."

"What, are you asking if you can come home with us? That's not my call. You'd have to ask my Twilight. Though I suspect our Spike might have objections."

"That's not – I don't want to leave my world, I just want to know what do I do?"

"You know what that shiny crystal thing in your paw is, right?"
"You said it's part of the Harmony Tree. What is the Harmony Tree anyway?"

"An annoying busybody, but necessary. Listen. My alter corrupted the Elements of Harmony, but that was only possible because they've spent so long being removed from the Tree of Harmony, it's substantially weaker than it should be. With this – a cutting from the Tree of Harmony from my world – it should be possible to reharmonize the Elements. Everypony but Twilight will be restored to their original selves. Twilight made her own decision to unite with the Diadem of Order; the Tree can't force her to give it up, but if she's the only one left with an Opposition Element, she'd have to give it up to be able to use the Elements of Harmony."

That wasn't what was going to happen. Oh, Discord could have some hope that the Tree would help the real Twilight escape the corruption of Order, but he wasn't at all convinced there was a real Twilight in there anymore. That was Matrisse, or a piece of it, looking out from behind Twilight's eyes. But he didn't want to tell Spike so. Let the kid have hope.

"So... so they're going to be restored to normal? To who they used to be?"

"I don't know," Discord admitted. "I'm pretty sure that's the plan, but it's not my call either. Twilight and her friends will make that decision, not me."

They would never be normal again. Undo the corruption, and they'd still have the memories of who and what they'd been. When he unbalanced ponies, there was a protective amnesia effect most of them experienced as it wore off, where for at least a little while they couldn't remember what they'd done, and when the memories came back, they'd be weaker. But that was caused by the impermanence of his unbalancing spells. These ponies had been the opposites of their true selves for years. They wouldn't forget. And remembering would probably destroy them.

He thought of Fluttercruel, and smiled thinly. He couldn't wait.

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**Opposition, 4 PM – Rainbow Dash (Opposition)**

This was taking *forever.*

How slow could a full size dragon fly, anyway? Rainbow flew in restless circles around the place where Twilight had told them to wait, getting more and more frustrated. Fluttershy kept insisting they had to wait, that they didn't know where Discord was and that intercepting the other Spike was their best chance of finding him. Sweet cheese, but she was so sick of Fluttershy mooning over Discord. Wasn't even like this particular version of the butthole *wanted* to be with her like the other one had. It'd been bad enough that Fluttershy had been fucking the enemy, but what she'd started doing after he'd been turned to stone was sick and twisted, and what she'd been doing to this new version of Discord... well, better him than some innocent pet, but it was still sick and twisted.

Why was she even putting up with this? She didn't even *like* Fluttershy. Friendship was a crock and she couldn't figure out why some part of her still wanted to be friends with such a total diamond bitch. Not like any of them were all that much better. But she guessed it was because it was what Equestria needed. She was still loyal to her nation and her city; Discord hadn't changed her nearly as much as he'd changed the other ones. Honestly she wasn't sure he'd done anything to her at all. When your friends turned into total buttwipes, did you really need to be warped by Chaos magic to decide you didn't like them or want to hang with them anymore?

The sun hadn't moved, and that was making Rainbow profoundly nervous. She'd gone to investigate if something had happened to Princess Celestia, and there had been so many changelings in the way she couldn't even do that, and now the sun wasn't moving. "I really oughta
be going back to Canterlot to check up on Princess Celestia," she said. "Maybe I'll run into their Spike along the way."

Fluttershy rolled her eyes with exasperation. "If we recapture Discord, we can use him to make sure Princess Celestia is safe," she said. "But if we don't, then none of us are safe."

"And you're not worried about Twilight killing him anymore?"

"Hopefully Twilight understands now that killing him is a terrible idea and will just lead to the destruction of our world, because we won't be able to hold him without her help."

"Look." Rainbow hovered in place in front of Fluttershy. "This is taking too long. Something's gone wrong with the plan. I'm gonna go scouting."

"But if they see you, they could attack you! Discord might not be able to do anything to you because of the loyalty spell, but the others—"

"They aren't nearly awesome enough to be a problem for me," Rainbow bragged. "Only one who might even be a challenge is Spike, and I bet he's not all that. I mean, just because he got big doesn't mean his mind isn't still wimpy little Spike the baby. I can handle him."

"I think we should stick to the plan."

"I know what you think, but you're an idiot, so I don't know why you think I care. Listen." She cut off what was likely to be another furious nasty insult before Fluttershy could do more than open her mouth. "You stay here and watch for Spike if he comes in. I'm gonna fly a search pattern. Whichever one of us finds him first, we report back to Twilight."

"If I see him, I'll have no choice but to report back to Twilight because I won't know where you are, but you should report back to me first. We need to stick together as long as there's a chance that Twilight's still insane."

"Yeah yeah." She waved an impatient hoof. It was like Fluttershy just couldn't get it through her head that Rainbow didn't have to take orders from her, wasn't it.

Within moments, she'd left Fluttershy behind, perched in the trees at the observation station they'd been using, and began to fly a spiral search pattern. The Everfree was devastated by the vines, half empty in many places, a shell of its former self. A big purple dragon shouldn't be too hard to see.

She'd been flying for what she guessed was probably half an hour or more when she finally caught sight of something large and purple, off to the west. There. A quick flight to catch up, a dodge under tree cover – not like any of them were actually looking for her, or any other potential enemies. Idiots.

Rainbow got close enough to see the large purple dragon land in a clearing... a clearing that already contained Discord, and Fluttershy with the wrong mane color, and a small purple dragon. Her eyes narrowed. Spike's body language didn't look like a prisoner's. Was he in cahoots with Discord? What had the draconequus promised him, to make him turn on his friends like that? Loyalty wasn't the be-all end-all of her life anymore, but she still wasn't a big fan of traitors.

Well. Screw Fluttershy. Maybe it was time she learned the hard way that Rainbow didn't have to take her orders. Rainbow turned and headed straight for Golden Oaks. As annoying as Twilight was... Twilight really was their leader. Fluttershy just thought she could tell Rainbow what to do because she always had. Well, Rainbow didn't have to listen. Twilight needed to know about this first.
When Fluttershy reached the clearing where the portal was, she looked around in dismay. No pony was here. No draconequus, either. "Discord?" she called softly, in case he was hiding. "Hello? It's me... your friend Fluttershy... from your world? Are you here?"

He could be hiding in fear, not sure which Fluttershy she was. "Remember the light rain, Discord? The other one wouldn't know about that, would she?"

No response. She slumped, her ears flattening. She was so sure that he'd be heading here...

If he wasn't here, she had no idea where he might be. Anywhere in the Everfree. Could he have gone to the Castle of the Two Sisters to take shelter? To the dragon cave that Spike had found that one time a few years ago? It would help if she had any idea how he had escaped. He'd said that removing his collar would kill him, and if he had removed it, he'd be at his full power for however long he had before the crystals killed him, but if he hadn't removed it, how had he escaped from Twilight? Oh, could he possibly be looking for something to eat that would help purge the crystals from him? Maybe he'd gone to Zecora for help... since he probably didn't know she was dead.

She felt paralyzed. Finding Discord was urgent, but she couldn't imagine how to prioritize where to look. The Everfree was so large, and there were so many things she could imagine him doing...

As she stood there, racking her brains for where to go now, she heard a rustling. Quickly she dove into one of the sparse few bushes that still existed in the Everfree, trembling.

She heard Spike's voice. "Just do all fours already! I'm not gonna be able to pick you up and carry you if you fall, you know."

And then – Discord's voice. "I don't see why not. Dragons are strong. I've seen you with Rarity's luggage."

"If you don't understand why a short guy should not carry a really, really tall floppy noodle guy, then I don't know what to tell you. Do you like getting dragged? Because that's how you get dragged."

Fluttershy burst out of the bushes. "Discord!"

Horrifyingly, she saw him flinch, a sudden look of terror on his face. She stopped herself short before throwing herself at him for a hug. His face changed as he registered which Fluttershy she was. "Fluttershy?" It was almost a whisper, strange-sounding after he'd been speaking at his normal volume with Spike.

"Yes, it's me, Discord," she said. "Do you – do you need me to, um, share things that the other one wouldn't know? Like the light rain, or, or the gravy boat that was shaped like a fish—"

He collapsed suddenly, as if his knees buckled under him, falling not even to all fours but to his bottom end lying flat and snaky on the ground, with his front paws under him holding him up shakily. "Fluttershy," he repeated again. He sounded as if he was about to cry.

She spread her wings slightly, about to embrace him with them, and then realized that he might have very bad associations with that. "Is – is it ok if I hug you?"

He nodded, and she went up to him and wrapped her wings around as much of his torso as she could reach. Discord sagged against her, no longer supporting himself, and she had to dig in her
back legs and use her front legs to hold him as well to keep him from falling over or knocking her over.

"You're safe," he said, a sob catching in his throat. "They told me they'd captured you. I was so worried about you – I mean, I checked once I got here, since I had a little power, and I knew you weren't hurt, but it wasn't real, I wasn't sure—"

"Where's the rest of your friends?" Spike asked.

Fluttershy blinked. She knew Spike had grown into a full-size dragon, she knew that logically speaking, there was no way that her world's Spike could have gotten here to be with Discord before she did, but she hadn't been thinking about it. Subconsciously she'd assumed that that was their Spike until now. "Um... Discord, is their Spike helping you? Is that how you escaped?"

Discord went all the way down to the ground, pulling Fluttershy with him, curling around her as if she were a favorite plush toy. "I'm so tired, Fluttershy. Everything hurts. Do you think maybe I could take a nap while we wait for the others?"

"Are – are they coming? When I left, they were fighting the Changelings still..."

"They're on their way. I sent them a map." He giggled slightly. "Don't tell Spike. I want to see his face when our friends show up."

"You mean, about the gro—"

"Yes, that." He reluctantly released Fluttershy enough that she could squirm her way into sitting next to him. She ran her hoof over the fur of his upper body, along his side.

"I'm so glad to find you free of those horrible ponies," she said. "But how did you do it?"

"Oh, you know," Discord said. "This and that."

"He ate a piece of, um, the statue. The other guy, the one who was here."

"The one you killed," Discord snapped.

"You ate a piece of... the statue? Wouldn't that be... made of rock?"

"I'm a dracon-equus. I can eat rocks."

"That doesn't sound very good for you..."

"It was full of chaos magic. It was actually very good for me."

He didn't look any healthier than he had before... but he was free, so she couldn't argue against that. "Do you still have any magic?"

Discord shook his head. "It was only a little piece. I had enough to teleport here, and find the others and send them a map."

"But... you didn't teleport here. You weren't here when I got here..."

"Oh, hey, Spike! Show Fluttershy what we found!"

Spike came around Discord's reclining body with something bright and sparkling in his paws. Fluttershy drew in a breath as she realized what it was. "The cutting from the Tree of Harmony!
Oh, that's wonderful, Spike!" She turned to Discord. "We brought this from the Tree of Harmony
because Twilight thought—"
"—that you could use it to reharmonize the corrupted Elements and free this world's counterparts
of you and your friends from the corruption, yes, I know." He closed his eyes. "I promised to help."
"Wait. Who did you promise?" Spike asked. "Because I'm pretty sure you never actually promised
anything to me, so unless I missed something—"
"Promised myself," Discord said, and chuckled softly.
"The... the branch talked to Twilight, Rainbow and Applejack. Back when they first took it from
the Tree," Fluttershy said. "I wasn't there, but they told me about it. They said it said 'chaos must
smash chaos' for us to be able to use it to reharmonize the others. Do you know what that means?"
"Huh. Nearly as I can tell, Spike already smashed chaos in this universe, so I don't see what's left
for me to do... oh. Oh. Yeah, of course, that's what it would want." He smiled mirthlessly at the
branch. "Well played, Harmony. And you know I can't refuse under these circumstances, don't
you?"
"What does it want?" Fluttershy asked anxiously. "It's not something that will hurt you, is it?"
"Only my pride. And I can't do it until these crystals are out of me. You know any herbs with
laxative properties?"
"Um, yes, but in your condition that's not a good idea. You're a very large animal, with a long
digestive tract. Anything I know that would work to get crystals you consumed today out of you
would be much too harsh for you; you need something gentler, and that means you've still got
maybe a day or two. Oh, unless I'm completely wrong about how your biology works; I know back
home I never saw you need a bathroom, but I'm guessing with your magic suppressed, you have
normal animal needs?"
Discord turned bright red. Not in the way he might have with his powers, just in the way of any
pony blushing. "This... isn't exactly a topic I enjoy discussing, Fluttershy. But... yes, the, uh, cycle
from... well, from in to out again... generally takes me a few days." He shook his head. "I don't
want to wait that long. Maybe this world's Zecora knows something that'll work faster."
Fluttershy shook her head. "Zecora – Zecora's dead. I found her hut. The vines..."
Discord slapped himself on the forehead. "That's right. I knew that. Hard sometimes to remember
things that happened to someone else."
"She's dead?" Spike's eyes went wide. "Celestia, that's horrible! I – we never knew what happened
to her. We thought maybe she ran away, when the vines took over the forest..."
"YO!"
Joyfully Fluttershy looked up, before remembering that just because the pony calling down to her
looked and sounded like Rainbow Dash, that didn't mean it was her Rainbow. "Oh, Rainbow?
Um, can I ask a question?"
Though her voice was quiet as normal, pegasus hearing was excellent; Rainbow was shouting more
for the benefit of Spike and Discord, also because she was always shouting. "GO FOR IT! But
we're on our way here! I just gotta race back and let the others know exactly where you are!"


"Tell me something she wouldn't know?"

"Well, for starters, she doesn't even know about Tank! I don't know if she just doesn't have a pet, or if she's not mentally capable of seeing how awesome a turtle that loyal and hardworking is, and she picked a different pet or what, but she definitely doesn't have Tank."

"I didn't know that," Fluttershy admitted. "But is there anything I know only you would know?"

"Uh, fish tureen thing?"

"That works," Fluttershy said. "I should tell you something too?"

"Naah, I can see you're the right Fluttershy. I'm gonna go get the others!"

"But what if she dyed her mane too?" Fluttershy asked, to no one, because Rainbow had already flown off.

"She wouldn't," Discord said. "She can't fake being you, Fluttershy. She can't control her temper and she can't stop being evil long enough to fool anyone."

"Rainbow doesn't know that," Fluttershy said. "Of course, it's fine, because I am the Fluttershy she thinks I am, but I worry sometimes about how careless she can be." And then she caught herself and decided not to say anything further on that topic, because she was talking to someone who was so careless he'd gotten himself captured and tortured for months because he hadn't noticed that the Elements in this dimension were corrupted.

"What the – is that a dragon?"

Fluttershy tracked where Spike was looking. She presumed that dragons had distance vision as good as or better than pegasi; flying creatures tended to have excellent vision, although generally optimized for either day or night. "Yes. That's a dragon."

Discord clapped his paws together. "Oh, I'm so excited! I can't wait to see your face when you get a good look at him, Spike."

"Why would – wait. Wait." He turned to face Fluttershy. "Is your Spike an adult? How does that even work?"

"Oh, darn it, you figured it out," Discord sighed. "Ruin all my fun, why don't you."

"He looked just like you when we came to your world," Fluttershy said. "But Princess Celestia was going to kill all of us for trying to rescue Twilight, because she was going to kill Twilight to resurrect Princess Luna, and... he just grew. Nopony expected it. I don't think he expected it either." A thought occurred to her. "In your world... did you ever have the incident with your birthday, and the greed growth?"

"The greed what?"

Fluttershy explained about their Spike's episode with greed growth, as his shape grew larger and larger on approach. Before long she could see all her friends – the ones who couldn't fly riding on Spike's back, and Twilight and Rainbow Dash keeping pace with Spike.

This world's Spike stared into the sky. "Holy fewmets."

"Language," Fluttershy said automatically, before realizing that probably this Spike had a lot more
reason to occasionally use foul language than her world's did.

Large Spike came to an awkward landing, with Twilight shouting a lot of panicky and contradictory advice to him, and Rainbow having to shout the actual correct instructions over her, but no one ended up crushed or injured in any way. He nuzzled the ground with his now much elongated muzzle. "Sweet ground, I love you! I promise to never leave you again!"

"Good luck with that," Rainbow said. "You got wings now! Welcome to flyer life!"

Pinkie had disembarked before Spike was even all the way down. She bounded over to Discord—who flinched. Fluttershy knew why, and interposed herself between Pinkie and Discord. "Pinkie, Discord's very... fragile right now."

"Oh!" Pinkie stopped herself short. "Sorry, Discord! I brought Cotton Candy in a Can over here to feed you, and cookies, but I had to use all the cookies to fight Evil Me and then we got captured and I lost all my Cotton Candy in a Can!"

"Great. Why would you tell me about it if you don't have it?"

Pinkie clapped her hooves to her cheeks. "Oh my gosh! I'm so sorry! I didn't even think—"

"Can it, Pinkie," Applejack said, coming over. "We got other fritters to fry, here." She looked down at Discord. "I don't wanna be putting a lot of burdens on you here, Discord, but the soonest we get movin' back home the better. Can you walk?"

Discord slithered to his feet, and wobbled. "Yes, but that's not the issue," he said. "I can't leave yet."

Applejack raised an eyebrow. "How's that now?"

"It's all very complicated magical things that I don't expect you to understand, but the long and short of it is, if I try to leave now—"

"He's got magical crystals in his gut that eat chaos magic, and until he, uh, gets them out, he needs to wear the suppressant collar, and it won't work on your side of the portal," Smaller Spike said.

Discord turned red again. "Do we need to keep having conversations about my bathroom requirements?"

Larger Spike was looking down at Smaller Spike. "You're me," he said awkwardly.

"Um, yeah," Smaller Spike said, just as awkwardly.

"So, uh, I brought some gems with me because I was thinking maybe we might need to bribe you to help us, but, uh, I lost them in the woods someplace. We were fighting Changelings. Maybe you could, uh, find them one of these days?"

"I, uh, I don't go in the Everfree much. It's—" he gestured around himself —"really creepy nowadays. And sort of dead."

Twilight landed and cleared her throat. "Listen, everyone," she said. "It sounds like we're not going to be able to get out of here as quickly as we'd hoped, and we're not going to be able to use Discord's magic for anything for a few days. So I think we're going to need to find somewhere to go to ground and lay low. This might be challenging, given Spike's current circumstances—" she looked up at the large dragon —"but there's got to be someplace around here they won't look for
us. Spike, uh, Smaller Spike, did you end up meeting that green dragon in the Everfree in your universe as well? Did he leave with the dragon migration? Did the dragon migration even happen?"

"I don't know, I don't know, and what's a dragon migration?"

"We could try sheltering at the Castle of the Two Sisters," Rarity said. "The courtyard is large enough that it might accommodate Spike, and if not, perhaps we can take shelter by this world's Tree of Harmony. Without the experiences we recently had, I wouldn't suspect they'd know about that."

"Why can't we just go now?" Rainbow asked.

"Reasons," Discord said. "Could we just leave it at that?"

Fluttershy felt a great deal of sympathetic embarrassment for him, and was ready to shut down Rainbow's further questions if she had any, but Twilight spoke up instead. "Why wouldn't you be able to use your magic to remove the crystals once you had access to it?"

"Your alternate told me they eat chaos magic. I'm guessing that means I can't use chaos magic to pull them out."

"Oh, right, that makes sense."

"Fine, I'll scout for a hiding place," Rainbow said. "Be right back!" She zoomed straight up—
--and then back down again. "Incoming! We got the jerk brigade coming in!"

"Quick," Discord said. "Somepony, anypony, you've got to plug my ears with something! If they give me an order, I can't disobey!"

Twilight scooped up dirt from the ground with her magic. "Will this do?"

And then there was a flash, and her other self was there, accompanied by the other Applejack, Pinkie, and Rarity. The other Rainbow came into view above them, as the unicorn Twilight spoke, tonelessly. "Discord. Kill them all."

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Showdown

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Opposition, 5 PM

Twilight (Harmony)

Twilight's blood ran cold. Discord hadn't had time to plug his ears before her alternate self gave the order. If Discord tried to kill them, could she really fight off his magic?

"What kind of a shitty order is that?" the other Rainbow Dash complained. "We don't need Dipcord to kill our opponents for us! We kicked their flanks once, we can do it again!"

Discord snapped his talon. "Done," he said.

Twilight didn't feel particularly dead. As nearly as she could tell he hadn't done anything. The other Twilight was obviously just as confused. "What—?"

"I've just manipulated entropy to make sure none of them live past ten thousand years," Discord said.

The other Twilight was focused on Discord, not on Twilight, so she took the opportunity to cast the zipper-mouth spell on her counterpart. The other Twilight spluttered behind her zipper, and cast a spell to cancel the zipper, but the other Rainbow Dash had already stepped in. "Oh, for Celestia's sake, don't screw around with magic! Just like fly and bite them or use your claws or something!"

"As you command," Discord said sarcastically, and launched himself directly into the air... at Twilight's Rainbow Dash. Rainbow's eyes went wide, and then she charged straight up, and Discord followed.

"You idiot!" Other Twilight yelled at her Rainbow, freeing herself from the zipper. "Now he can't hear us!"

The other Rainbow smirked. "Yeah, I know. 'Cause it's total stinking pigshit that you're gonna use Discord to kill them. What's he gonna do, drown them in pies? Turn them into tomatoes and throw them at a bullseye? They're us. They deserve to die in a fight, not one of Discord's sick jokes!"

"I have a better idea, how about we don't die, and we beat you?" Large Spike rumbled.

Other Rainbow's smirk got bigger. "Oh yeah. I'm gonna kick dragon flank today!"

She shot toward Spike, aiming for his face. Desperately Twilight fired off a fireworks spell directly in front of her, to blind her temporarily and throw her off course. The other Twilight hit her with a spell that caused intense agony in her chest... for a moment. Even through the pain she analyzed the spell. It was horrible, an instant-kill spell that stopped a pony's heart... but alicorns apparently had resistance to it, judging from the fact that she wasn't dead.

Twilight gritted her teeth. The other one was so discomfited by her existence and wanted her, specifically, dead so badly, she'd wasted her shot. Twilight cast a counter-spell protection on all of her friends. Spike might not need it — dragons were highly resistant to magic, and the effect intensified with size, so he should be practically immune right now — but she wasn't taking
chances.

Immediately the other one started firing off deadly spells, rapid-fire, trying to force Twilight into using up her magic or resources by blocking them all. Instead, Twilight used her wings, the main advantage she had over the other, to get height, and double-shielded herself like she had the last time she'd fought her counterpart. The open meadow offered neither of them any opportunity to shelter behind cover, and that meant that tactically height was the best advantage she could get.

She wished she'd trained more with Rainbow. She wished she'd let Rainbow teach her more stunts. Twilight knew very little about combat flight, only what she'd deduced from reading pegasus military history. Tactics, but not techniques. She knew she could make a strong play for breaking the other one's shields if she did a dive-and-swoop attack, but she didn't know how and she wasn't sure she'd be able to pull out and avoid crashing if she tried it. So she looped in air, dodging the other one's spells while firing her own.

Wear her down. You're an alicorn. Your pool is much deeper than it was; your body regenerates; you need to sleep like normal ponies, but you recover from exhaustion much faster. She's smart, and she's much faster than you, and she's more ruthless... but she's only got a unicorn-sized magic pool and a unicorn body. She'll feel every hit she takes until the end of the fight, she'll wear out sooner, she'll deplete her magic. Just keep occupying her and don't overuse your own magic. Alicorn flight and strength all drew from the same pool as their magic — there wasn't specifically unicorn or specifically pegasus magic in an alicorn's body, it just expressed itself through different organs — but neither flight nor strength needed nearly as much magic as casting complex powerful spells did, so as long as Twilight didn't overuse her spells, she wouldn't run out. And she had a flight advantage that most pegasi, with the exception of Rainbow Dash, Bulk Biceps, and some Wonderbolts, had; channeling earth pony strength into her wings made the physical wings so much stronger and so much more capable of manipulating her flight field, she barely had to put effort into flight... as long as she stayed fairly high. Close to the ground, technique mattered a lot and she hadn't even had a thorough pegasus education in flight.

From her vantage point in the air she could see Spike and the enemy Rainbow; Rainbow was doing very well, landing hard blows and dodging before Spike could hit her with flame, tail or talon, but Twilight knew that a giant dragon had far greater reserves than a non-alicorn pony. As long as Rainbow didn't hit him in the eye, his new body could take whatever she could do, and if he hit her once it was over. Unfortunately, Spike didn't seem to know that. Having been a large dragon for about two hours, he wasn't used to his own reserves, or the thickness of his scales; he was flinching from her attacks, wasting a lot of energy in trying to dodge blows that realistically there was no way he could evade but that couldn't honestly hurt him much either. Twilight wished she could give him advice, but if she turned away from her own fight with her counterpart long enough to send him a message, she was probably dead.

Applejack, Pinkie and Rarity had each engaged their own counterparts again. It made sense; the enemy Pinkie was fast and unpredictable enough to be able to easily overwhelm and kill Applejack or Rarity, and the enemy Rarity had such skill with the needles and rocks she used in combat, she needed to be countered by another skilled unicorn. The other Applejack kept trying to break free from Twilight's Applejack and attack Rarity — probably, at the least she was trying to work their fight in a Rarity-ward direction — but Applejack kept countering her, engaging her and pushing her back. So other Applejack was probably thinking she and other Rarity could double-team Rarity and dispose of her quickly, and then they could both turn on Twilight's Applejack, but Applejack was smart enough to see the ploy and she wasn't having any.

Far up high, Rainbow Dash and Discord flew circles around each other. Twilight didn't even dare look up at them.
And there was Fluttershy with other Spike, historically completely useless in combat. She couldn't get through the Rarities' cloud of sharp objects or join the Pinkies in their deadly acrobatics, and her strength would do very little against the other Applejack. Twilight didn't expect the other Spike to fight on their side, didn't even know exactly what he was doing here or why he wasn't attacking any of them, but he'd been here with Discord and Fluttershy so at the very least his loyalties seemed divided enough to stay out of it.

She wondered where the other Fluttershy, the evil one, was.

Rainbow Dash (Harmony)

Discord was fast, Rainbow thought. How was he so fast? He was skin and bones and his wings were tiny and atrophied and he wasn't allowed to use his magic, so how did that work?

When she had the opportunity to stop and drop, letting him overshoot her, she could see part of it. His wings had morphed. They were huge now, an appropriate wingspan for a dragon his size, or an alicorn larger than Celestia. "Nice wings! Where'd you get'em?" she yelled, hoping he had the same adaptation pegasi did, that he could hear through the rushing of the wind in his ears.

"I was given an order to fly and catch one of you, and if I'm going to catch you I need my full-size wings. They don't usually give me open-ended orders because I get to use my discretion in carrying them out," he said. His voice seemed to effortlessly carry over the wind. "Rainbow, if you stop like that, I will catch you. I can't disobey an order."

"Yeah, I know," Rainbow said, waiting until he was committed to his lunge in her direction, and then shooting up and out of the way. "But hay, even if you're as good as me at stunt flying normally, which is totally not likely, you're not gonna be as good as me now after you've gotten so skinny. These pig turds didn't feed you, did they?"

She spun to check his position again, and see his face, as she said the last. He smiled wanly. "Not so you'd notice."

"Well, then. You were ordered to fly after me and, uh, 'bite me or use your claws or something', but not to use magic, right? That's what the other me said?"

Again he dove at her, and again she waited until he had momentum and zipped out of the way, letting him overshoot again. "That's... basically it, yes," he panted, hovering for a moment as he turned to face her.

He was doing strafing runs. There were more efficient ways to fight another flyer in the air, particularly with his flexibility, but he'd chosen a method that was pretty much never going to catch the fastest pegasus alive unless she got really, really careless. "So I guess you just have to fly around way up here where we can't hear anything going on down on the ground until you catch me or pass out from exhaustion, right?"

This time he grinned. "It's a terrible burden, a torture really. But I have my orders. I have to try to kill one of you with my body by flying and using my teeth and claws. And I can't hope to get through a unicorn's magical shield without my own magic, and any earth pony could kick the stuffing out of me in my current condition, and if Fluttershy uses the Stare I'll probably have seizures, and Spike is obviously too large a dragon for me to be able to hurt, so I have no choice but to chase after you."

Again he shot forward, arms extended outward from his body to increase his reach. Again
Rainbow dodged. "Yeah, wow, this is awful. I sure hope you don't catch me," she said in the kind of casual voice that expressed the exact opposite of what she was saying.

His expression turned very somber. "Do take this seriously, Rainbow. If I do succeed in catching you, I can wrap you in my tail, bite you with my fang, and rip your throat out with my claws. Just because you've never seen me fight with my body rather than my magic doesn't mean I'm not capable."

"Sure, sure, you're a badass. But you're not as fast as me!" She zoomed away again, narrowly evading his grasping paws.

"Don't get too cocky. No matter how powerful or talented you are, underestimating your opponent and assuming you're untouchable can destroy you. Take it from someone who's learned it the hard way." He hovered across from her, more or less parallel in air.

"Yeah, you'd've thought you've have learned that the first time you got turned to stone, or maybe the second," Rainbow said.

Discord scowled — and pivoted faster than she thought possible, twisting his body in a circle so he came up at an angle toward her, from below. Rainbow involuntarily made a "yaii!" yell of surprise and barely shot out of the way in time. "This isn't about me, you stupid pony!" he yelled. "If I catch you, I'll kill you! I won't be able to stop myself! It doesn't matter how much I hate what I'm doing or how badly I wish I could stop, if I disobey my orders and resist, the magic takes hold of me and uses me as a puppet and I don't have any control over it!" Through his speech, he was twisting in air to follow her, changing trajectories rapidly, not letting her stop and chat with him. But he couldn't keep it up. By the time he was done yelling at her, he had to hang in air, panting and trying to catch his breath.

Rainbow, an athlete in excellent shape who flew constantly rather than a starved and beaten mage who never flew much or physically exerted himself much before he'd been taken captive, hovered in air, barely breathing hard. "I know," she said. "I'm not gonna let you catch me, trust me."

"Good," he panted, smiling. "Sooner or later I'll fall out of the sky when my wings give out on me. But when that happens, the evil Twilight is going to be able to give me orders again. I need you to do something for me if that happens."

"Kick you in the head hard enough to knock you out?" Rainbow suggested.

"No, because it might take more than one kick, and if she orders me to use my magic to kill you in a specific way, with clear instructions — like, for instance, 'replace all their hearts with baked potatoes' — I won't be able to stop myself. I can hold off for five seconds and then you're all dead. You need to remove my collar." He gestured at it, the horrible black leather thing studded with metal in the shape of runes, tight around his neck. "You have to do it fast enough that I don't have time to try to kill you, because I will. I'm ordered to kill anyone who tries to remove my collar. But that's what's blocking me from using my magic, and with all of my magic back, I can break the obedience spell. The Harmony is weak between those six, and especially right now; they mostly hate each other. It wouldn't take much of an effort from me, and then I'd be free. You wouldn't have to worry about me being ordered to kill any of you."

"So why don't I do it right now?"

"Because I cannot overstate how badly it's going to hurt. Twilight — the evil Twilight — put a booby trap inside me, crystals that will feed on chaos magic and grow. It'll be like being stabbed multiple times from the inside. I can deal with it if the alternative is harming any of you, but I
really don't want to go through that if I don't have to."

Rainbow's eyes were wide. "Wouldn't that... kill you? Or, I guess you're immortal or something, so it'll heal?"

"Twilight's an alicorn. Just now, a few minutes ago, her evil alter ego cast a spell to stop her heart, and she shrugged it off. It hurt, but she'll live, because alicorns heal injuries. So do Spirits of Chaos." He made a face that Rainbow couldn't quite interpret, like something about the idea disgusted him or upset him.

"Yeah, okay. Not gonna go for the collar unless it's all we can do. So when you go down because you're too tired to fly, I'll follow you and rip the collar off while you're falling."

"With what? It won't tear free and it would take a dragon to bite through it, and Spike's a little big to be doing such delicate work right next to my face."

"Good point." She looked down at the ground, with the eagle eyesight pegasi had in flight. "Maybe I can get a knife off the crazy Pinkie." That was questionable; the last time she'd gone down to the ground to hit a group that contained the crazy Pinkie, she'd gotten a frying pan to the head. On the other hoof, she'd have her own Pinkie supporting her... though it looked like Pinkie had her hooves full.

"Newer orders supersede older ones, and Twilight's order to kill anyone who asks was a few hours ago, so if you can trick the other you into ordering me to take it off..."

"That... doesn't seem likely. She knows it's what makes you have to obey orders, right?"

"No, it's what restrains my magic except when I'm following orders, but I could probably break the obedience spell if I had access to my powers."

"Whatever. She knows it's important." Rainbow shook her head. "What if I ordered you to take it off? She's me and I'm her and if the spells came from the Elements of Harmony then we're Elements of Harmony too, so it should work."

He shook his head. "Fluttershy and I tested this. It doesn't. It has to be from them." He looked as if he was lost in thought for a moment. "One time I had to obey a changeling I thought was Fluttercruel because I didn't know it wasn't her, but as soon as I knew, I didn't have to obey anymore. But I know which one you are, so it wouldn't work."

"Eh." She shrugged. "We'll figure it out when it comes up, if it does." And zipped away as Discord launched himself at her again.

Fluttershy (Harmony)

"I don't know what I should be doing," Spike complained. "I mean... those are my friends you guys are fighting, but..."

"I think you have a better idea than you think you do," Fluttershy assured him. "You remember what they were like before they were corrupted. If we win here, we're going to try to reharmonize them. You know that, right?"

Spike nodded. "Discord told me so. I had to carry around your branch for a while." He shook his head. "Still can't believe that the Elements of Harmony come from a Tree."
"So don't you think it's best if we win and get them to revert back to the ponies they used to be?"

"I guess, but... I don't feel good just sitting here while they're fighting, but I don't want what they want. They want to torture Discord and they want to stay the way they are, corrupted and totally changed from what they used to be. I want them to be like they used to be."

Fluttershy smiled, nodding. "Of course. And if they were truly themselves, they would want that too. They never asked for this, did they?"

"No. Discord did it to them."

"But not this Discord."

"No, but he says he knows stuff about the one we had here now. He had to eat a piece of the statue to get enough power to get us here. I think... I think he somehow learned stuff about the Discord of this world from eating his statue."

She raised an eyebrow. "That's very interesting. I'll definitely want to ask him about it." Fluttershy leaned forward. "You know he reformed because he wanted to be my friend, right?"

"Yeah, that's what he said, but... that's so weird. How did you get to be friends with him?"

"Well, Princess Celestia asked me to reform him, and I felt that someone who had lived so long without ever having a real friend might respond to being treated kindly, and offered friendship. And it worked. Discord's... well, certainly not perfect, or he'd never have come here, but he's so much better. The whole reason he came here was he didn't want me to see him create chaos, because he thought I'd be angry at him, but... he felt like he needed chaos. And I think that's my fault. If I could have convinced my friends to let him do some harmless chaos with us, someplace where it wouldn't hurt anypony, he might never have come here."

"I don't think you should blame yourself. He's a grownup. He can make his own choices. And he didn't have to choose to start chaos here."

"That's true, but don't you think he's paid enough for it?"

Spike shrugged. "Yeah... I guess."

"So the fact that the Element Bearers here want to torture him... I know you don't agree with that."

"I don't, but..."

"It's perfectly all right to stay out of a fight if you think your friends are in the wrong, and if you think losing will actually help them," Fluttershy said. "Our side isn't fighting to kill them, we want to reharmonize them. Then they'll be their real selves again, the selves who are your friends. It's really just like Nightmare Moon and Princess Luna."

Spike's expression turned dark. "Discord turned Princess Luna back into Nightmare Moon and made Princess Celestia have to kill her."

"That's terrible! Of course, that's an awful thing! But you avenged her, right? You, um, you... destroyed the statue?"

"You can say it," Spike said, still brooding. "I killed the Discord of this world."

"So our Discord, who did not kill our Princess Luna, is completely innocent of that and doesn't
deserve to be punished for a crime he didn't commit... a crime that the one who did commit it paid the ultimate price for."

"I guess I don't understand where you're going with any of this." He gestured to the battleground. "Our friends are fighting, and here you are just chatting with me."

"Well... well, my alternate hasn't shown up yet, and I'm very bad at fighting, so I haven't tried," Fluttershy said. "But what I wanted to ask is if you would help us." She made her eyes very big and pleading. "These Element Bearers of corrupted Elements are out to kill us. They're us, and we don't even want to hurt them... we want to restore them to who they were. But if we keep having to defend ourselves, they might get hurt."

"I'm not going to attack my friends!"

"Of course not. No one would ever ask that of you." She looked intently into Spike's eyes. "But if you distracted your Twilight, just enough that our Twilight could make her sleep... then our Twilight would be free to peacefully defeat the rest of them, just by making them sleep. And then we could cast the reharmonization, and everything would be back the way it was."

"I... I don't know," he said wretchedly. "I don't want to hurt Twilight."

"And we would never want you to. Look, our Twilight has to fight with all her strength against yours, because yours is trying to kill her. So she might, actually, hurt her. But if you distracted her so our Twilight could cast a sleep spell on her, then we could disable her without hurting her at all."

"I just don't know..."

Fluttershy did not sigh, the way she really wanted to. Patience was crucial here. She couldn't let Spike see her frustration; she had to be gentle but unyielding, applying soft but steady pressure on him. He was their best chance right now, with everyone occupied in one fight or another. There wasn't much hope of her personally turning the tide of any of those fights, but the other Twilight was the heavy hitter here, and Spike was her only real vulnerability. If Fluttershy could persuade him to cooperate, they could win so easily. If not... she wasn't sure they could win at all.

Where was her other self, anyway?

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**Pinkie Pie (Harmony)**

Pinkie was going to die.

She didn't know how she'd survived this long. She didn't know how long she was going to be able to stay out of Other Pinkie's range. There were score lines all over her legs and flank where she hadn't dodged in time, because Other Pinkie had Pinkie Sense, and Pinkie didn't.

This was the path she'd chosen, the one where most of her friends got out alive. She wondered if she counted as one of the ones who would live, or not. She was strongly considering the possibility that she wasn't. She'd broken Pinkie Sense to find out how to survive Celestia, but she hadn't expected to need it this badly. If only she'd known!

...Well, she still would have done it. Celestia would have killed them all. If she died to make sure her friends all lived, she could live with that. Ok, not really live with it, but she was sure anypony would know what she meant.
Other Pinkie came at her with one of the long knives, swinging it with a huge grin on her face. Pinkie barely managed to dodge, flipping backwards. She had never fully grasped before how dependent she was on her Pinkie Sense in a fight. When she had nothing but her ears, eyes and nose to tell that a pony was coming at her, she could barely keep up. Or maybe it was because her opponent was herself, except with her Pinkie Sense.

"Why are you even fighting us?" she tried. "We just want to take our Discord and leave! We haven't done anything to hurt you!"

"You're on Discord's side! That makes you a meanie, and I get to eat meanies!"

"It doesn't make us meanies! You eat ponies, that makes you a meanie! Our Discord never made anypony eat a pony!"

Other Pinkie actually stopped in her assault for a moment. Then she shrugged. "Twilight's my friend and I stand up for my friends!" And she lunged at Pinkie with the knife again.

Pinkie was too out of breath to say anything else.

She needed cover. She needed somewhere she could grab weapons or hide from the other one. Not that it was really all that possible to hide from her, so it would probably very hard to hide from the other, but she needed something. As the other pressed her attack, Pinkie moved back toward the forest on the north side of the clearing.


There was a tree at her back. The other one charged at her, somehow managing to gallop on three legs, which should be impossible but Pinkie herself had pulled it off on rare occasions when there was an emergency and she needed to carry something with her hoof and also move fast. Pinkie sprang sideways, and the knife that would have pinned her to the tree through the heart went through the tree, instead.

The other Pinkie spent half a minute trying to pull her knife out, giving Pinkie the chance to get her breath and find a weapon. She was out of cookies and baked bads, and she'd lost almost everything she was keeping in her mane during the last fight with these guys. But look, there was a tree branch! She grabbed it and swung it at the other Pinkie. "En garde!" she yelled.

The other Pinkie pulled out another knife, not having managed to dislodge the first one from the tree yet, and swiped it through the tree branch, which turned out to be more than half rotten. It crumbled as soon as the other one's knife hit it. Pinkie smiled fearfully. "Oops."

"Yep, that was an oops all right!" The other one charged at her with the new knife, ignoring the loss of the old, and Pinkie had to dodge again.

She glanced quickly at her friends. All of them except for Fluttershy seemed fully engaged in their own battles, and she knew better than to think Fluttershy could help her against her cannibalistic alter. "Wind things up, somepony," she muttered under her breath. "I could really use some help here..."

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**Rarity (Harmony)**

Rarity didn't know how long she could keep this up.
Her head pounded with exhaustion from using so much telekinesis. She could barely see for the sweat and dust in her eyes. All the small cuts and bruises she'd taken from her alternate's attack early this morning (had this really only been just one day?) ached fiercely, and every new blow she couldn't deflect in time added to the pain.

She could only hope the other one was suffering just as badly.

This was getting nowhere. It was the telekinetic equivalent of a slap fight. They had needles and jewels and dirt and grass from the ground in play, trying to hit the other one — preferably in the face — with the things they were holding, while deflecting the things the other one was holding. Because they were exactly equal in strength and skill, Rarity couldn't get an advantage over her. The other couldn't get much of an advantage over Rarity, either, but it was maybe, just slightly possible, that the other one was in better shape for extended combat than she was. Which was entirely unfair. Yes, it made sense that an evil version of herself from a terrible world where Princess Celestia was so far gone she was willing to kill an innocent alicorn to bring her sister back might end up getting more practice in combat. But surely being on the side of good and decency and not torturing anyone and not wearing every single gem you own in an extravaganza of tackiness should count for something?

And then she remembered what Rainbow had said when they were catching up on all they'd done, on the flight over here. If she could get her alter ego angry enough, maybe she could get the upper hoof.

"I'm so sorry to hear of your recent troubles, darling," she said in her most sickly-sweet fake solicitious voice. "But perhaps your boutique would have proven itself to be less flammable if you weren't the sort of mare who condones torture."

"You unutterable creature!" The other one's face twisted in fury, and the objects she was wielding came faster and harder, forcing Rarity to put all of her focus into parrying. "I cannot even begin to accurately describe you, because I am too much a lady to use the necessary language!"

"Odd, I had never heard that torturing helpless victims is a ladylike activity. Perhaps you need a refresher in etiquette?"

"My sister could have been in the boutique!"

"But she wasn't."

"But she could have been! And my dear, dear Opal has gone missing!"

"Opal is a very intelligent cat. I'm sure she would have fled the building the moment there was the slightest danger. Once she's sure the danger is past, she'll come back, I'm certain. Or she won't, because she recognizes what a horrible pony you really are, rather like Fluttershy's pets."

"You monsters burned Fluttershy's house down!"

"I believe it was Fluttershy herself who did that, after making sure that all of the pets were safe and free. It must be very difficult to deal with the idea of your beloved home being used as a place of abuse and torment of the most disgusting sort."

Now her alter was straight up throwing rocks, with very little finesse but a great deal of rage-fueled power. It was all Rarity could do to keep blocking them. "You — smug — diamond bitch!" The other Rarity panted with exertion. "How dare you! You have no idea what we've all been through! You don't know what our Fluttershy suffered!"
"Perhaps not, but if the end result is that you all became monstrous, I don't know why I would care," Rarity snapped. She was soaked with sweat and her head was pounding and it felt like if she kept using telekinesis her horn would explode, but stopping wasn't an option right now. "You've done far, far worse things than Discord ever did."

"Discord caused the death of Princess Luna! We haven't killed anyone who didn't deserve it!"

"Really? Pinkie Pie eats ponies and you say you've never killed anyone who didn't deserve it? Tell me, what does a pony do to be considered 'deserving' of being eaten?"

A rock struck her in the flank, breaking her concentration for a moment, which meant a great deal of dirt and dust and stinging needles were flung into her face. Rarity cried out and flailed around with her telekinesis, unable to see anything the other one was doing, forced to operate solely by feel. The other one pressed her advantage, forcing Rarity to back away under the sudden onslaught.

Perhaps she'd made a slight tactical error. She'd wanted to use the largest difference between them — namely, that this Rarity had lost everything to Rainbow Dash's adventures in arson — as a way to break the stalemate, but she'd intended it to break in her own favor. This really wasn't working out the way she'd hoped.

And then there was a roaring sound, and the other Rarity broke off her attack for a moment. "Oh my goodness, is that a hydra?"

Rarity, who still couldn't see, took the opportunity of the other one's distraction to pick up the rock that had hit her in the flank and fling it at the other one's horn, while she quickly wiped her face. The other one managed to deflect it, barely, but it bounced away from her horn and fell, hitting her in the snout.

"Owwww! My beautiful face! You'll pay for that!" the other Rarity yelled, but now Rarity had caught her breath, recovered her concentration and opened her eyes, so she was able to follow up her attack, and they were back on even footing again. Out of the corner of her eye, Rarity could see a pink and yellow blur — so the evil Fluttershy, then, since the good Fluttershy had dyed her mane — riding on the neck of something with a very long and bendy neck, and there were other long and bendy necks involved, and she felt the sheer animal terror any pony would feel on being confronted with a hydra... but she had to rely on her friends to be able to deal with it, because her opponent was taking all of her attention.

**Rainbow Dash (Harmony)**

Discord was visibly tiring. Rainbow was, despite herself, worried about him. She couldn't go near him to support him, not while the order to kill was in effect, and she couldn't let him go anywhere near the other Twilight, but she didn't want to lead him too far from the fight where she wouldn't be able to see her friends, and move in to support them if needed.

And then both of their attentions were drawn toward the freaking hydra that came in, with the evil Fluttershy riding on it.

"Ponyfeathers," Rainbow swore. "Am I gonna hafta—"

She didn't get to finish the sentence. Discord, hovering nearby trying to catch his breath, interrupted her. "Is that — is Fluttershy going in to deal with that?"

Yes. Yes, their Fluttershy was going up to try to deal with a hydra being controlled by her
murderous rapist torturer counterpart. "Look, you don't want Fluttershy having to fight that thing and neither do I. How about we call a temporary truce so I can go kick its flank and get it out of here?"

Discord shook his head. "You're not thinking. I'm under orders to kill one of you. Not specifically you. If I can't get anywhere near you... the spell might make me go for one of your friends on the ground. And if I follow you, and I end up within range to hear Fluttercruel..." He visibly swallowed. "You can't let that happen. She'll make me kill Fluttershy, just to torture me."

Oh. Right. "This really sucks," she complained.

"How do you think I feel? I've been living with this for two months."

"Well. If we need to keep you away from Fluttershy and little miss evil, how about this?" She zipped toward the Everfree where it curved to the north, away from evil Fluttershy's hydra to the east. "Zoom zoom! Try to catch up!"

As she shot out, she saw, on the ground, a knife stuck in a tree. Apparently Pinkie had managed to half-disarm her opponent. Well. That might be useful later.

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**Applejack (Harmony)**

Applejack had managed to get the upper hoof on her alter ego only briefly in their wrestling match when the other Fluttershy showed up with a hydra.

"Oh, shuck a corncob and jam it down my throat, does she seriously think she can control that thing?" the other Applejack muttered.

That was a trifle unnerving. Applejack was fairly certain that her Fluttershy wouldn't bring a hydra to a fight if she wasn't absolutely in control of that hydra, but hearing that the other one's friends weren't confident that she was actually in control of that hydra was worrisome. On the other hoof, the enemy Fluttershy being unable to control her hydra would be as great of a threat to the other side as to Applejack and her friends.

"You think she can't?" Applejack asked.

The other shook her head. "You've gotta have heard about the kind of crap she gets up to lately. Back in the old days, animals mostly listened to her because she was nice, and she only had to use her Stare thing the one time with the dragon. Oh, yeah, and the cockatrice too."

"Yeah, that happened in our world too," Applejack said, disengaging from her opponent. If the other Applejack wanted to talk rather than fight, Applejack was comfortable with that.

"Well, she doesn't get much done for being nice anymore. She uses that Stare a lot, and it doesn't always work anymore. Me, I wouldn't risk having her bring a hydra into this fight; if she loses control of it she could do as much damage to us as to you."

Applejack's own Fluttershy flew up toward the hydra. "And also there's that," the other Applejack said.

"I don't like the idea of the two of them in a tug o' war over some innocent creature's mind, even if that creature's a hydra," Applejack said. "It's dangerous to be sure, but it's just an animal doing what nature made it to do."
"Don't see what we could do about it, though," the other one said. "It ain't like Fluttershy's gonna listen to me, and yours is gonna feel like she's gotta get involved as long as ours is pushing it around."

"True enough."

The hydra had lunged at Twilight, in the air, but as Fluttershy intercepted the attacking head, it reared back in confusion. Applejack's heart pounded. Could Fluttershy really get control of that hydra away from her counterpart? "Can you tell me something?"

"Might as well."

"I understand why you thought it was okay to torture Discord. I understand why you think killing him's a good option. But why is it that letting us get him out of your universe completely's such a bad idea? Is it just because your Twilight doesn't want to let him go?"

"Was, at first," the other Applejack said. "But I ain't so sure anymore." She sighed. "Your Fluttershy said that Discord managed to trick our Twilight into trying to do a thing she thought was gonna give ponies immortality, but would actually destroy the world. I don't rightly know how Discord managed to tell one or the other of them such a whopper when he's under a spell where he can't lie, but I feel like your Fluttershy was saying something she believed... so Discord has to have lied either to her or to Twilight, and she was right. He's got more motive to lie to Twilight."

"I remember, you said you were going to talk to Princess Celestia about that. You ever did?"

"No. We couldn't get in to see her."

"She was too busy trying to get our Twilight to agree to die to bring back your Princess Luna, I reckon."

The other Applejack shook her head. "Everything's screwed up lately. I ain't sure it's the right thing to do for my friends to stand by them, right now."

"Well, you know what I'm gonna tell you."

"I do." The other one looked at her. "But you're me, right? Before Discord screwed everything up. You're not under his control."

"Hay no. We got him to... well, we say 'reform' but it's plain to see he's not reformed in any serious way. He still thinks he ought to be able to do whatever he wants and he ought to be able to unleash any kind of chaos... but he wants to have friends. He wants to have Fluttershy as his friend. And she won't let him get up to that kind of horsefeathers. Whole reason he's here is he wanted to make chaos somewhere she wouldn't see it and be mad at him."

"So if you don't think he's reformed, why are you here to rescue him?"

Applejack shrugged. "I think he's trying to learn to not be evil, and I guess I gotta give a guy some credit for trying to be better than he is." She didn't point out that what the Opposition team had done was appalling; she wanted to reinforce her similarities to the other one, not the differences.

"Ours had a thing for Fluttershy, too. It was a lot more twisted, though. He corrupted her rather than her reforming him."

"That makes sense."
"I feel like maybe we ought to have just killed him. I don't know if we're safe to just let him go. What if he comes back wanting revenge? We're not gonna be able to stop him the same way again, and if you guys could stop him from going off to another universe and wreaking havoc, he'd never have come here in the first place."

This was true, but not a direction Applejack wanted her counterpart going in. "Now that he's done this thing, I think we can be pretty sure that Fluttershy and our Princess Celestia aren't gonna let him go try it again."

"Can they really stop him?"

"I don't know, to be honest, but you know what you've been doing ain't right."

"I don't, though. I don't care anymore what's right or what's wrong. I care about what protects my family and keeps them safe. I care about protecting my country, and my friends, and my hometown. Don't really care about good or evil anymore."

"You know you wouldn't be that way if Discord hadn't messed with you."

"Discord messed with my whole world. Am I like this because he messed with my Element, or because his chaos killed my granny, ruined one of my sister's friends' life, made my Princess a half-competent drunk a good bit of the time, near-on destroyed my country, and made some of my closest friends into evil freaks? If you've been through what I have, even without him corrupting your Element, maybe you'd feel the way I do."

"Maybe I would," Applejack admitted. "But do you want to be the way you are?"

"I don't rightly see how I could be anything else, given what's happened to me."

"Sure you ain't just making excuses?"

The other one suddenly lunged at her, pivoting to kick, but Applejack had been expecting it and reared out of the way just in time. "Guess I hit a nerve," she panted.

"Not so you'd notice," the other one retorted. "Just don't figure on wasting my time shooting the breeze with you anymore. We're supposed to be fighting."

"You could do something different. You know that if your Twilight wins, your world's in danger," Applejack said, breathing hard, as she dodged a second attack and aimed a hard buck of her own, which missed.

"Didn't say I was gonna let Twilight do whatever she wanted," the other said. "But I can't let you win. You wanna leave, fine, do it, but Discord's gotta stay here. We can't risk letting him go and having him come back for revenge."

The sad thing was, she was right. Applejack was sure that Fluttershy would be able to keep Discord from returning to get revenge... but that Applejack only knew the corrupted Fluttershy who'd tortured Discord. She didn't trust or didn't remember how strong Fluttershy had been before that corruption, and she had no reason to trust her counterparts. So from her perspective, what she was doing was the best way to protect her family and the rest of her world.

Well. No choice left but to kick her flank, then.

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Fluttershy (Harmony)
As soon as Fluttershy saw the hydra, her heart sank.

Fluttercruel was here to join the fight. She wasn't free to try to work on the other Spike's loyalties any longer; she had an opponent to counter.

The hydra lumbered forward, shrieking. "Excuse me," Fluttershy said to Spike. "I think I need to take care of this."

He was staring at the hydra, eyes wide. "What's she doing? What if she loses control of that thing?!"

"Well," Fluttershy said, as one of the heads that her counterpart wasn't riding lunged at Twilight, "if you distracted your Twilight enough that ours could put her to sleep, our Twilight could deal with that hydra easily. So if you're afraid that your world's Fluttershy can't control the hydra and you're afraid of it running rampant and attacking your friends... you know what you'll need to do, right?"

She didn't wait for an answer; she flew up to address the head that Twilight had had to fly away from. "MISTER, WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING?" she yelled. "IT'S OVER A TROT FROM THE SWAMP HERE! WHY DID YOU COME ALL THIS WAY?"

"HE CAME TO HELP ME!" Fluttercruel yelled. "BECAUSE YOU AND YOUR FRIENDS ARE MONSTERS AND NEED TO BE DESTROYED FOR EQUESTRIA'S SAKE!" As she said it, the head lunged at Fluttershy, forcing her to rapidly drop with an involuntary "eep!"

She came back up, approaching a different head. "She's lying to you!" she called to the hydra. "All we want to do is go home; she wants to kill all of us and torture our friend! We're not monsters!"

The hydra, confused, conveyed the question as to whether Fluttershy and her friends were changelings.

"No, we're not," Fluttershy said. "We're the same as they were before they were turned cruel and mean." There were limits to precisely what you could explain to an animal, and the hydra, despite having five heads, wasn't exactly the brightest star in the sky.

"OF COURSE YOU'D SAY THAT," Fluttercruel shouted. "SHE'S THE ONE WHO'S LYING!"

"Oh, dear," Fluttershy said to the hydra, dodging it as its head snapped at her. "Poor thing, you must be so confused! I'm so sorry she brought you into this conflict; she really shouldn't have. That was very rude, to drag—"

"DON'T LISTEN TO ANYTHING SHE SAYS! ALL SHE CARES ABOUT IS PREVENTING YOU FROM FIGHTING ON OUR SIDE!" The other one leaned forward, urging the head she was riding onward.

Fluttershy rose out of range of the head that was snapping at her, and into hearing range for a third head, flitting around the top of the head where the hydra couldn't easily snap at her. "Well, of course, I don't understand why she wants you to fight at all! It would be different if you were starving, or if we were hydoras who were in your territory, but I know you prefer to stay in your own territory and fight only to defend it, or take prey. And your skin's so glossy and well-cared for, I'm sure you're very good at hunting—"

"SHE'S MAKING YOU LOOK WEAK!" Fluttercruel screamed. "SHE WANTS TO MAKE IT SOUND LIKE YOU'LL GET HURT IF YOU FIGHT AGAINST PONIES, LIKE YOU'RE A COWARD, BUT YOU'RE NOT! YOU'RE SO MUCH STRONGER THAN PONIES!"
Another of the heads came up to attack Fluttershy, but she dodged under the third head's chin, making the fourth head come close enough that the third head automatically flinched, an instinctive reaction to prevent tangling or inter-head injury. "Of course you are!" she said to the fourth head as she hovered next to its neck, where it couldn't get at her except by employing another head. By now, all five heads were weaving around in an obvious state of confusion. "I'm only worried about other hydras moving in on your territory while you're not there to defend it—"

The hydra reacted to that, two heads focusing in on Fluttershy, and asked if it was true that other hydras could move into its territory while it wasn't there.

"I can't say for sure that they will, but I'm sure you have a very lovely territory that any hydra would want to have, and of course they wouldn't dare try to take it while you're there, you're much too intimidating, but if you're not there..."

The head Fluttercruel was riding came in toward Fluttershy — close enough that her keen pegasus hearing could pick up on Fluttershy's quiet voice. "THERE AREN'T ANY OTHER HYDRAS IN THIS AREA! SHE'S LYING!" she shouted.

"Really, do you think she knows everything about the location of every hydra in the Everfree Forest and nearby? I'm sure you'd know better than she would—"

"THE PLUNDER VINES KILLED THEM ALL! NO HYDRA IS GOING TO TRY TO INVADE YOUR—"

"Oh, that's awful," Fluttershy interrupted. "So you haven't had a chance to mate with another hydra in over a year?"

Confused, the hydra conveyed that actually, it had had quite a lovely mating season last time.

"Well, that does mean there's at least one other hydra around here, but I'm sure you're fine with sharing territory with your mate—"

The hydra snapped at her, clearly expressing its opinion of sharing its territory with any other hydra.

"Listen!" Fluttercruel wasn't screaming anymore, but she was speaking more loudly than Fluttershy herself. "She's just trying to confuse you and trick you into not attacking! We can help you protect your territory once you've helped us protect ours—"

"Goodness! Did she just say she doesn't think you can defend your own territory?"

The head nearest Fluttershy snapped at Fluttercruel. Since she was on another head, the head she was on flinched away at proximity. "Of course you can defend your own territory, I'd never question that! Even if there are other hydras around here, you're plainly bigger and stronger than any of them! That's why I knew it would be safe for you to come help us!"

"Didn't she just say there weren't any other hydras? That's not a very consistent story," Fluttershy tsked. "I think that answers the question of which one of us is lying, don't you think?"

"There probably aren't any other hydras, but even if there were, you'd be able to fight them off, because you're very strong and powerful! And even if they tried to invade your territory while you're not there, you can kick them out easily!" Fluttercruel glared at Fluttershy as she spoke.

"After they've eaten all the best food, though..." Fluttershy murmured. "Oh, but I'm sure the good food will come back in a month or two."
That seemed to do the trick. The hydra roared and flung its head back and forth, shaking Fluttercruel off of it, as it turned around and lumbered back the way it had come.

"You diamond bitch!" Fluttercruel screamed, and flew upward straight at Fluttershy — who waited until she was close, and then pulled her wings tight against her, dropping like a stone. Once she was clear of Fluttercruel, she flapped her wings just hard enough to land, heavily.

"Oh no you don't!" Fluttercruel was yelling, up in the sky, as she dove at Fluttershy. Fluttershy galloped out of the meadow and into the forest, pursued closely by Fluttercruel... who was now no longer in the sky, where Discord was, where Discord might be able to hear and be forced to obey an order she might give.

Fluttershy was not looking forward to fighting Fluttercruel; she'd lost their last fight because she wasn't cruel or ruthless enough to win against a version of herself who was capable of torture. She didn't think the situation was going to have improved any, either. But in the forest, at least, she had cover to hide behind, and weapons she could use, and more importantly, Fluttercruel couldn't use her control over Discord as a weapon. Any amount of pain Fluttershy suffered was worth preventing that.

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**Spike (Harmony)**

Spike desperately wanted to help Pinkie or Twilight, who seemed to have the most vicious opponents — at least, that he could see; now that Fluttershy had gone into the woods with her counterpart in pursuit, maybe she had the worst one — but every time he moved in any direction whatsoever, there was the other Rainbow Dash, slamming into him.

Physically, his skin was a lot thicker and tougher than it had been; most of the kicks and blows didn't hurt, despite the speed she was delivering them at. But she wouldn't *stop*. Spike kept trying to hit her with the transport flame — his memories of burning the Changelings with actual flame made his stomach turn, and he wasn't willing to use real flame on a living opponent again, but transport flame seemed like a fine idea. No version of Rainbow Dash was a match for Princess Celestia. But he had no experience trying to hit *moving* things with transport flame, and the other Dash just kept dodging and then coming back to hit him again.

And *some* of the blows hurt. He was getting bruised, he was sure. Especially when she hit him in the face.

So far she'd been keeping him almost completely boxed in, unable to go anywhere because every time he started in a direction there she was, slamming into him. He couldn't get into the air because his wings were one of the things she could actually hurt when she hit, and he wasn't going to leave them open and exposed to her. Besides, taking to the air against one of Equestria's best stunt flyers when he'd only learned to fly, or even *had* wings, today... that did not seem like it would go to his advantage.

But he could see the rest of the combat in the meadow. The evil Twilight kept firing spells that were obviously dark magic against his Twilight, who was shielding against them or dodging with her wings and not fighting back particularly hard. The two Rarities were surrounded by a cloud of dust, dirt and other objects; the two Applejacks were wrestling. He couldn't see Discord and his own Rainbow Dash; they were high up over his head somewhere. Likewise, Fluttershy had run into the forest and her evil version had followed her.

Everypony he could see seemed to have their situation evenly matched, except for Pinkie Pie.
He didn't know why, but he could see that his Pinkie Pie, the one with the blonde mane and the blue tail, was losing. She was covered with blood from shallow cuts where she hadn't managed to dodge the other one's blows in time. She'd managed to get one of the crazy Pinkie's knives away from her and embedded in a tree, but the other one had apparently had two, again, and was still swinging the one she had left around and jabbing it forward. Occasionally evil Pinkie would pull a frying pan out of nowhere; she hadn't managed to hit Pinkie in the head with it yet, but she'd gotten her on the back and on the legs.

So he wanted to go to her aid, but firstly, he wasn't sure how — he couldn't hit Rainbow Dash, and evil Pinkie was just as fast, albeit a lot more earthbound — and secondly, he couldn't get through. Whenever he tried to move, evil Rainbow would hit him.

And then it occurred to him that so far, the most evil Rainbow had managed to do to him was bruise him some. Sure, he wasn't used to combat, and he wasn't used to getting bruised — even in his tiny kid body, his skin had been pretty tough — but Pinkie was bleeding. Surely he could endure some bruises.

He lumbered forward toward Pinkie. Evil Rainbow hit him in the side of the neck, which was a bit of an ow, and then divebombed his eye; he ducked his head down quickly so she slammed into the top of his head, where he could barely feel it. It wasn't enough to stop him.

Evil Rainbow didn't like being ignored. "Hay! Hay, loser, what's the matter? Too slow, huh?"
Another slamming blow to his back. "Can't hit me, so you're not gonna even try? What's the matter, you running away? Huh?" This one to his folded wings on his back, which did, actually, hurt quite a bit. Dragon wings were apparently more sensitive than the rest of their bodies. Good to know.
"You're just a loser, Spike, even if you're a giant dragon now! You've always been a loser, just like our Spike!"

"Wow, nice," Spike rumbled (was he ever going to get used to his new deep voice?). "A guy stands by you and your friends after you all turn into such jerks no one would want to befriend you, because he remembers who you used to be, and you call him a loser. That's great, Rainbow, that's really sweet."

"Ooooh, did I hurt the poor wittle dwagon baby's feewings? Loser. That's you! You're all big and strong now, but you can't even fight!"

He thought about mentioning the Changelings he burned, but the thought of talking about that as if he was proud of it made him sick. He thought about mentioning this world's Celestia, who he was pretty sure he had sent back to his world's Celestia, but even Evil Rainbow might be loyal enough to her Princess for that to drive her into a frenzy. Better that she underestimate him. "I don't care what you call me. It's the fact that you insulted your Spike that bothers me. I thought you were supposed to be loyal."

"Yeah, no, loyalty's a crock. Everypony's out for themselves in the end. Spike's an idiot and a loser and so are you."

Then, as he was heaving his way toward Pinkie Pie with his heavy, oversized body, and the evil Rainbow Dash was continuing to slam into him and loudly insult both him and his alter ego... his Rainbow Dash came diving down out of the clouds at high speed. Her wings were flapping, and she was traveling faster than a thing falling would; she was in control of this, or as much in control as she ever was.

The two Pinkies both jumped out of the way, in different directions, though Spike's Pinkie was slower to do it. Rainbow hit the ground back hooves first, striking with such speed she kicked up a
dust cloud and a small shockwave. She skidded a bit on her hind legs, fell over onto all fours, grabbed the knife out of the tree with her teeth, and took off again.

Evil Rainbow had been watching, as had the two Pinkies. "Hardcore," Evil Rainbow said approvingly. "Dunno what she's gonna do with that knife... maybe try to cut his wings off so he can't fly after her."

Spike took that opportunity to look for Pinkie — but she wasn't there. Hiding? "Ooh, hide and seek!" the evil Pinkie yelled. "I love that game! Ready or not, here I come!"

And then Discord plummeted out of the sky — with no evidence that Rainbow had attacked him; it looked more like he'd been trying to follow her, couldn't go as fast, and had lost control. He almost crashed into evil Pinkie, but vanished and reappeared on the ground at the last second, panting and gasping.

"Ooh! Ooh! I have an idea!" The evil Pinkie bounced toward him. "You have to obey any orders from any of us, so if I say—"

She was too intent on her plans with Discord to notice Spike's paw until he had slammed it into her and flattened her to the ground, knocking the wind from her.

"Shit!" Evil Rainbow yelled. "Let her go!" She hit Spike's leg with enough force to dislodge it from the stunned evil Pinkie. Before the fully-pink pony could get her breath back to get up, her pink, blue and yellow counterpart from Spike's world had leapt out of a nearby bush and landed on her, with a colorful winter scarf in her hooves, which she wrapped around Evil Pinkie's neck. Evil Rainbow charged at her, but didn't have enough runway to build up any significant speed, so Spike managed to hit her this time, with a hard swat that sent her flying into a tree.

"Dude," he said to Discord, who was still on the ground gasping. "Get out of here, before one of them comes by to give you an order!"

And then evil Twilight appeared in a pop of teleportation, swaying on her feet. Discord tried to fly, but he was obviously too exhausted; he'd barely gotten a pony height off the ground before evil Twilight snapped, "Discord. Kill the alicorn with the same name as mine."

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**Rainbow Dash (Harmony)**

As they circled back to the area where the others were fighting, now that the hydra was gone and Fluttershy and Fluttercruel had both run into the forest to the east, Rainbow looked back at Discord, who was struggling to keep up behind her. "I don't think you're gonna be able to stay up very much longer," she called to him.

"Prob...bab...ly... not," he gasped.

The other Rainbow was beating up on Spike. "Hey, if I dove down there and mixed it up with the other me, would you be able to tell the difference between us?"

He shook his head. "No."

"So maybe I should do that? You can't kill her, so you can't kill me if you think I'm her."

"No," he panted. "The magic... would... make me... find... another... target."

"Oh. Yeah. That would be bad." She looked down again. "I spy, with my little eye, a knife in a tree
that crazy Pinkie lost. Maybe I need to go get that."

Discord visibly shuddered. "Those knives... are very, very... sharp," he said, his breathing finally evening out. "That would probably... work, but you can't... grab it off the ground easily. I'll have to follow you down, and as soon as I'm in range to hear Evil Twilight, she'll yell."

"You have no idea how fast I really am," Rainbow said, and blasted into the air like fireworks shot from a cannon, gaining enormous speed with each wingbeat.

She wasn't going to try for a Sonic Rainboom. She just had to go really really fast. And then grab a knife out of a tree barely a pony-height above the ground, and then not crash into the ground but pull up and get back into the air, and do all that before Discord could get into range to hear the other Twilight's voice. Piece of cake.

Behind her Discord followed, flying much more slowly than she was.

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**Spike (Opposition)**

When Fluttershy took off to fight the hydra — or more specifically to fight her counterpart's control over it — Spike was haunted by the last thing she'd said.

He knew, of course, why she was trying so hard to get him to turn on Twilight. He had to face the facts. Twilight had turned into a monster. They all had, to one extent or another, but he'd tried so hard to believe that they had been corrupted by the evil disharmony Discord had introduced into their Elements, but Twilight had taken into her Element Order, the antithesis of Chaos, and so she was still good.

He'd wanted to believe. Even while she was torturing Discord, he'd wanted to believe. The ends justified the means sometimes, right? Discord was evil and deserved it, and Twilight's experiments could, maybe, make ponies immortal. She'd been so cold, so heartless, but he'd wanted to believe she was doing the right thing, that maybe she had a hard time showing it but she still cared. He'd seen her be so compassionate and kind with Princess Celestia, and she'd trusted and relied on him enough that she'd let him assist her with that, sometimes, let him alone of all of the group see Celestia drunk and depressed and lost in her eternal black grief.

And then, when Twilight was going to sacrifice Discord and end the world — she hadn't known. Discord had lied to her and manipulated her. Spike had to help Discord escape because the result of those lies was that Twilight would inadvertently destroy the world thinking she was saving it, but it wasn't her fault.

But then the first thing she'd said when she'd arrived was "Kill them all." Not even "Kill them all except our Spike." For all Spike knew, Discord could have interpreted her order to include him, and Twilight had shown no concern, no fear that that might happen. And now she was fighting her counterpart with dark magic, with spells Spike had seen used to kill. He remembered that monkey-like creature who'd conquered a large part of Amareica south of Equestria, who'd tried to take advantage of Equestria's shattered infrastructure and absence of soldiers to overpower Celestia with a device that had turned her to stone and try to conquer Equestria, and his lieutenant with the broken horn... and he remembered Twilight dropping them both with spells as dark as any Sombra had cast, stopping their hearts before the others had even arrived to bring their Elements to bear.

She had no reason why she should want the others dead so badly. They were just like her and her friends before they were corrupted. Twilight was trying to kill them, not negotiate, not befriend, not capture... just outright kill, because the Diadem of Order had turned her into a monster every bit as
bad as Discord.

You were willing to kill Discord to save Equestria from him. But you’re not willing to knock Twilight unconscious to save Equestria, and a group of innocent ponies, and your own other self?

But it was Twilight. His sister/mother/best friend/teacher and mentor, the pony who'd been there from the very beginning, whose side he'd been beside his entire life. How could he do anything to harm or betray her?

He saw the alternate Fluttershy drive off the hydra, saw her land and run into the forest, and the Fluttershy of this world follow her, screaming imprecations and threats, and knew if his world's Fluttershy caught up with the other one, she'd hurt her, maybe even kill her. Still, he hesitated. He owed no loyalty to alternate universe versions of his friends. It was his Twilight he'd sworn to serve, his Twilight's friends that he was bound to help.

And then he heard Rainbow Dash repeatedly calling him a loser, and pathetic, and dumb, and incompetent, because she was trying to rile up his other self — who had somehow managed to become a full-size adult dragon. He'd stood behind all of them, working with Twilight for months to try to find a way to fix them, and then, after she'd gotten the Diadem, doing his best to be as good of a helper and friend as he could be... and Rainbow Dash, who was supposed to be loyalty, was calling him a loser.

Twilight hadn't. Twilight hadn't said anything to him... but Twilight had said "Kill them all" and hadn't cared if it included him.

Maybe the other Fluttershy was right. If the alternates had the power to do something to reharmonize Twilight and his friends, maybe he should help them win. If his "side" won, they'd kill the others, but he'd seen how the alternates behaved the way his friends used to, before Discord. That meant alternate Fluttershy was almost certainly telling the truth.

Spike took a deep breath. Another one. And then he headed toward where the two Twilights were fighting.

It wasn't even fully accurate to say that two Twilights were fighting. The alicorn was mostly only dodging and shielding. Occasionally she fired a spell from her horn, but it was gold or white or the light purple of Twilight's normal aura. His Twilight, the unicorn, was the only one actually fighting. She fired spell after spell at the alicorn, most of them churning and dark, spells that promised death and pain. Most of them hit the alicorn's shield; she was plainly better at magic than she was at flight. She'd clearly learned a lot from Shining Armor, maybe even more than his Twilight, to make such perfect shields. Spike saw, over and over, how the shield broke and there was another one inside it. Once his Twilight took down both of the alicorn's shields, and there was a third one inside. His Twilight was mechanical, precise, but her magic revealed her true feelings, black as moonless night — which happened a lot nowadays, when Celestia got too overwhelmed with grief to touch the moon.

She was the bad guy here. He'd read so many comic books, and wondered over and over why the villains' minions ever demonstrated loyalty, when even the best of the villains were mean and abusive to their minions. Now he knew. How many of those minions, he wondered, thought the villain was probably doing the right thing, desperately trying to convince themselves that the pony they loved and trusted was still a good pony? How many of them served evil, believing they were serving good?

He wasn't going to be one of those. Not anymore.
"Twilight!" he yelled. "Twilight, you need to—"

She turned toward him, her eyes dark and leaking energy, and before he even registered what was going on, she fired a bolt of magic at him.

He staggered, an overwhelming pain in his chest bringing him to his knees. "...Twi... light?" he gasped.

And the darkness in her eyes vanished. A look of horror formed on her face. "Spike? Oh no. No! That wasn't for you!" She ran over to him. "Spike, you have to be all right!"

He was pretty sure he wasn't. The pain hadn't stopped, and the world was growing dim around the edges. He heard Twilight shouting, "No, no, no!" and felt her pull him into her hooves, but it all felt very far away. His chest burned, but his limbs were cold and he couldn't feel them.

"Let me try," he heard Twilight say, but it didn't have the raw anguish in the voice that he'd just heard. And then he felt warmth, and an easing of the pain. "You've hit me with that thing so many times, I came up with a healing spell for it."

Spike breathed, and realized that a moment ago, he hadn't been. He coughed, and blinked, because his eyes had been open but he hadn't been seeing anything anymore and now his eyes were dry. "What... just happened?" he managed.

There were two Twilights. The unicorn was on the ground, holding him. The alicorn was standing up, the glow from her horn fading. And then the unicorn's eyes went black again, and she dumped him on the ground and fired a spell at the alicorn — who returned fire.

"How dare you? How dare you? I save his life from your stupid mistake and the first thing you think is to attack me? How dare you even call yourself Twilight Sparkle?" The alicorn's magic slammed Twilight into the ground, and every time her horn lit up, another bolt of magic struck her head, keeping her from being able to get up or use her magic. "You're not me! You've given up everything about you that made you me! You're a monster! You're so jealous and selfish you almost kill Spike and then you attack me again right after I save him?"

"You're right! I'm not you!" Twilight managed to shield herself from the alicorn's onslaught as she paused to catch a breath. "You were weak, and pathetic, and you couldn't even save your friends! You thought you'd fixed everything when you got the Elements of Harmony and freed your friends from Discord's first spell, but it just made everything terrible! And then in your world you got lucky enough that it didn't matter! You won, even though you didn't deserve to win!"

"You weren't weak and pathetic!" the alicorn yelled back as they traded blows, both of them shielded, each one's magic splashing uselessly against the other's shield. "You were unlucky! That was all it was! And then you sold yourself to save your friends and defeat Discord, and that was noble but it was stupid because you aren't even you anymore! I don't know what you are but I could never try to kill someone who just saved Spike's life! What good did it do you to defeat Discord when you didn't break his spell on your friends and you didn't free yourself from that thing you merged with and you turned into a monster?"

"Shut up! Shut up shut up shut UP!" Twilight's barrage intensified in speed and viciousness, but the alicorn just stood there, determination on her face, letting the magic bounce away from her shields. As soon as Twilight stopped to catch her breath, the alicorn started crushing her shield with a wall of raw force. Spike could see just enough of it to follow what was happening.

"I feel sorry for you, but I can't let you keep trying to kill me. Others are getting hurt — like you
just would have killed Spike if I hadn't healed him!"

"Stop it! Stop it! Just die!" Twilight was firing spells from behind her shield, but the alicorn was relentless.

"No. You and your friends need to be saved from yourselves, and I know how to do it." She walked forward. "You forgot, I'm an alicorn. You're faster than I am with that thing added to your power, and before you got obsessed with killing me and overwhelmed with your own dark emotions, you were smarter... but you hate me so much for not being corrupted like you, it's ruined your judgement. My pool is larger than yours. You're close to exhausted now, aren't you?" She spoke, even as Twilight continued to yell at her to shut up and die, and continued to walk forward, and continued to crush Twilight's shield in her magic. "I was counting. See, I know how powerful I was when I was a unicorn, but you have no idea of my reserves. I let you use yourself up, but I'm not even tired yet."

At that point there was a crashing noise behind Spike. Despite how riveted he was by the battle between the two Twilights, Spike couldn't help but turn to see what had happened.

There were two Rainbow Dashes near the other Spike, one higher in the air than the other... and Discord, down on the ground, looking like he'd been stunned. The other Pinkie bounced toward him, the other Spike stepped on her, one of the Rainbow Dashes charged at him and he swatted her into a tree. Discord was still on the ground, not even on his feet.

He looked back at the Twilights — but his Twilight had followed his gaze and was obviously looking at Discord. And then, with her shield under intolerable strain and about to crack, she vanished in a flash of teleportation.

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**Discord**

"Discord. Kill the alicorn with the same name as mine."

Three minutes. Fluttercruel's orders. *Wait three minutes before obeying Twilight's orders.*

What could he do? How could he get out of this within three minutes? His normal five seconds was up; his body had started to tremble, because the three-minute rule made it *possible* for him to not comply, for three minutes, but it was still a struggle to hold himself still.

Where was Rainbow Dash? He looked around desperately, and saw her up in the air, near Spike, but he was too close to Twilight and if she tried to fly in with the knife she was holding, Twilight would block her. Evil Twilight. Where was the other Twilight?

There she was. "You've lost!" Order Twilight shouted at Alicorn Twilight. "Discord has to obey my orders, and I've just ordered him to kill you!" She turned back to Discord. "Immediately. Not as part of some sort of long-range thing. I want her dead *right now.*"

Three minutes, and how much of it had he used? Looks of horror on everyone's face. Determination on Alicorn Twilight's face. She'd try to fight him off, but because he'd avoided killing, she had no idea how deadly he was. She couldn't stop him from putting a chicken egg in her brain or making her teeth into high explosives (no don't think about it think about another way to do it one she can fight no too late you've thought it)

Rainbow flew at him, only to be knocked back by unicorn Twilight. "Kill that one, too, while you're at it. In fact kill all of the ones that came from your universe."
Large Spike was drawing a deep breath. It wasn't going to work. His power wouldn't let him burn and it wouldn't let someone else's power teleport him without him actively allowing it to, which he couldn't do because he had no control over his power.

"Hay! Loser!"

That was Rainbow. The evil Rainbow. Probably. He looked around. A Rainbow was hovering in mid-air, over by Spike, but he couldn't tell whether it was the one Twilight had knocked away or the one Spike had hit.

"This stuff with you killing ponies is stupid! Me and my friends don't need your help, we don't need anyone's help! Just take off your stupid collar and stop listening to Twilight's dumb orders!"

*Which Rainbow was it his Rainbow or the other was it the one he was compelled to obey or the one he couldn't obey which Rainbow which Rainbow*

Only his Rainbow would say to take off his collar but only the other Rainbow would say "me and my friends don't need your help" because they were the ones he was compelled to help so which one was it which one which one

"What the—" Order Twilight turned on the Rainbow. "What are you doing?"

Evil Pinkie, from the ground, yelled, "It's not—" and then Spike stepped on her again, mushing her face into the dirt and keeping her from talking.

The second Rainbow came up. "That's not me! I didn't say that!"

Of course she didn't, that wasn't the question. He knew which of the two Rainbows had said the words but not which Rainbow that one was.

"Course you didn't, lamebrain," the first Rainbow sneered. "I did. What, did you get confused?" She looked directly at Discord. "Yo, Dipcord! You heard what I said! Do it!"

"No!" Order Twilight yelled, but three minutes. He didn't have to obey her for three minutes, but he was supposed to obey Rainbow Dash without delay.

And then he smiled. He was Discord, the master of chaos. Reality was what he said it was. Harmony and Order had combined to place this spell on him, to make him obey the Rainbow Dash of this world, but it was up to him to define which Rainbow Dash was the one he had to obey. And the one who'd told him to take off his collar was rude, abrasive and insulting. Which described all Rainbow Dashes, but this one was doing it to excess. Also, her statement that they didn't need help sounded a lot like her reason for telling him to kill the others by "biting them or something." Obviously, that was this world's Rainbow Dash and he was required to remove his collar.

As soon as he thought of it, he felt his power flexing without his conscious control. Then the collar fell away, and a world of chaos magic returned in a roar.

"No!" Order Twilight shrieked. "You have to—"

And then he didn't hear anything else. He smirked at Twilight, and showed her the pair of ears in his paw. "Sorry!" he caroled, and he could hear that through the bones in his ears, but the sound of anything outside his head had been warped to mush. "I couldn't quite make that out!"

Her horn flashed, and letters appeared in front of him. Except he had dyslexia, according to his Twilight; he could read easily with magical assistance, or with great effort and concentration
without such assistance. He would put neither the effort nor the concentration into reading Order Twilight's words; they were a blur of meaningless letters. "Oh, no, the horror!" Discord called out. "If only I could read, I might be able to tell what you're ordering me to do!"

For two months he'd been thinking about this. Carefully mapping out how this would work, how he could perform what was probably the largest and most complex working he'd ever done, if he ever got the chance. He hadn't factored in the piece of Harmony, still lying on the ground where this world's Spike had set it down, nor had he considered the role of the crystals inside him, which he could only survive if he poured out all of his magic. And maybe not even then, but he was free. His power, now fully his own, ripped through and broke the bindings of Honesty and Loyalty and obedience that had bound him for two months, meaning he was safe to restore his hearing again.

He could improvise. His original plan, what he'd intended for this working, had been less ambitious. With Harmony in the mix and the need to dump as much of his magic as possible, he had a lot more power to work with than he'd thought he would, but limits on what Harmony would let him get away with. Well, Harmony ought to be positively over the moon with joy if his plans worked out. If it had the intelligence of the tree it had been taken from, it would cooperate.

Next, he reached out to find Fluttershy and Fluttercruel. They hadn't gone far, but Fluttercruel had caught up to his Fluttershy, and they were fighting. He summoned them both, dropping them in separate corners of the meadow, and thought momentarily about getting revenge on Fluttercruel... but he'd made a promise, and his memories of his own other self told him that he had made her the way she was, and the thing he was planning to do would probably be more than enough revenge, anyway.

Ponies all around him were yelling — the Opposition were trying to get past the Harmony ponies to attack him. He assumed, attack him. They weren't trying to run away, anyway. Order Twilight was firing various deadly spells at him, and Harmony Twilight was shielding him, but that wasn't necessary; he could protect himself. With a thought, he turned Order Twilight's horn into a Longest Night noisemaker, the kind you blow and a loud noise and strands of tinsel fly out. She tried to perform magic, and the noise rang out, tinsel flying from her horn. Somewhere, both Pinkie Pies were laughing hysterically.

He didn't dare use his magic to sense the crystals — touching them directly with chaos magic would make them grow all the faster. He'd like to survive this, if it was possible... and survive it without abandoning his body. If he had to come back from the dead without his body, he'd lose a few years' worth of memory... which was long enough to hold all his memories of Fluttershy, all of his knowledge of friendship. He'd keep the most recent memories, the past two weeks or so, but those were largely memories of being tortured, and if he didn't remember friendship he could become a danger to his friends. If that was going to be the case, he'd rather stay dead. Which meant he had to expel as much of his magic as possible. Good thing the working he was planning was likely to take nearly everything he had.

With telekinesis, he grabbed the piece of Harmony. It didn't want to respond — it didn't like being touched by his telekinesis, even though straight-up TK wasn't particularly either harmonic or chaotic — but he was able to force the issue. All around him ponies were yelling. "Discord, be careful with that!" "Stop! Don't let him—" "You fools! He's going to destroy the entire world!" "Discord, please! Don't!" That last was from Fluttercruel. He grinned at her.

The Branch of Harmony floated into his paw, which immediately turned numb. Discord wanted an audience for this, so he cast a spell of silence on everyone. The screaming and yelling stopped abruptly, as did the Pinkies' laughter.
Don't waste power on a dramatic costume. Resist the temptation to make a speech. Yes, he had wanted for so long to tell Order Twilight and Fluttercruel and all the others what he really thought of them, but there would be time for that afterward if he lived, and if not, oh well.

Even chaos magic needed words to anchor it sometimes, a spell that constrained it into doing a specific thing. Or an uncountable number of specific things, in this case.

He cleared his throat. Everyone was listening, watching him.

"Untie, disperse, unbind
Restore, untwist, rewind
Let disorder disorder disorder, thus order
Unravel the end till begun
Let all that chaos has wrought
By chaos' touch be undone!"

As he spoke, the pressure of the magic he was constraining built up, everything he had. With his last phrase, he slammed the Branch of Harmony into the ground with his numb paw, and drove a spike of magic down into the chaos turbines below the Everfree, smashing them. Ending the Everfree's protection from Harmony, but at this point the world was too broken and there'd been too much chaos, and chaos alone couldn't fix it, and he'd made a promise. Chaos must smash chaos for the sister to reach. With the turbines gone, the Branch would be able to communicate with the Tree, and re-harmonize it. And that would free his alter ego to finally stop existing.

It would be far too small, at first, to do much of anything. But there was about to be a boatload of free, ambient magical energy the Branch could suck in and use. Funny. He'd killed this Tree of Harmony once, but unlike the others he'd killed, it hadn't stayed dead. Foolish of him. You couldn't kill Harmony any more than you could kill Chaos, or Order.

What was this going to do to Matrisse? Oh, he so hoped he'd get to see.

And then the rest of the magic he'd been holding back poured forth, turning the sky dark purple and gold, blotting the sun and the clouds and making the world turn dim, and he realized that his body had been teetering on the edge of losing consciousness for some time, kept going by his order-driven attempts to kill Rainbow Dash — thank you, Rainbow Dash, thank you for knowing that if you were a huge jerk I could pretend you were the one I needed to obey, thank you for saving me and if I die it's okay because I'll be free — and then by his magic. Which was now rushing out of him, while at the same time, there were stabbing pains in his gut, making him want to double over in agony. The magic couldn't pass out of him without touching those crystals. Survival was looking less likely. Consciousness was something he was about to have to give up.

Oh, wait, he'd been using chaos magic to heal himself from multiple horrible injuries over the course of the last two months, hadn't he. Well, yeah. Survival was very unlikely. This was going to hurt unimaginably, except for the part where he was about to lose consciousness and wouldn't feel any of it. Didn't matter. He'd fulfill his promise, free the broken shade of his other, and protect his friends, and if he died, he'd die free.

He swayed on his feet from the exertion, from the pain, and smiled at Order Twilight and Fluttercruel. "I win."

The ground began to shake. Discord's legs gave out, and he felt himself falling, but darkness claimed him before he hit the ground.
Chapter End Notes

We've got only four more chapters to go!

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