Not The Hero

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Summary

Discord's the only creature in Equestria who can recognize the human for what he is -- not the long-lost Seventh Element that never actually existed and couldn't have existed before the human arrived, but a meta-reality warper, an entity far more powerful than Discord with the power to warp the minds of all around him and the very rules of magic to make sure that he's always the Big Hero. And the role the human's assigned to Discord is the Villain to beat down or kill.

Pre-reform Discord's fine with being the villain. But on his own terms. Not dancing on some alien interloper's puppet strings.
Without friendship, or even allies, Discord's going to have to find a way to defeat a creature who can alter fate itself and who can even mind-control him. Or he may just end up worse than dead.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
In the event of the not-inconsiderable possibility that I should end up dead, turned to stone again, or transformed into some absolutely cliched and utterly humorless Evil Avatar of Pure Evilness, thereafter to suffer one of the aforementioned fates, I am writing my observations down, in hopes that someday, somepony might figure out what's actually going on here, and perhaps even be able to fight back. Although it seems quite unlikely, given the fall of two (possibly three, if Moonie counts separately) alicorns and the wielders of the Elements of Harmony and the inescapable fact that, if I should fall as well... put it this way, those two alicorns fought me with everything they had and until they found their pile of crystal fruit to stone me with, I laughed off everything they tried. So if I fall, I'm really not hopeful for the future of ponykind. Oh, you'll all live, except for those of you who don't, but your lives won't be your own anymore. You'll be puppets on a stage, dancing for the glory of an alien, and you won't even know it.

But it's not in my nature to go down quietly. I may not survive this, but at the very least, I'm going to do my best to ensure that somepony hears from me after I'm gone.

What a strange thought. Me, gone. I have quite the imagination, but I'm having a hard time picturing that one. Bad enough to be locked in stone, but to be gone? Forever? Dead, or twisted into something I'm not? It's... not a possibility I'm looking forward to, but sticking my head in the sand and pretending it can't possibly happen isn't going to work this time. And to think how well that strategy has served me so far! Ah well, I'm change, sooner or later I had to change tactics, right? Or they'll be changed for me.

As fond as I am of radical social transformation, the thought of someone altering the cultural mores of a society for no better reason than the gratification of their personal base lusts rather offends me. Also, the notion that the most dire threat to Equestria, the worst villain any pony has ever faced, far more insidious and powerful than myself, is prancing around (well, not literally, he's a biped) basking in the soppy glow of friendship and love and all that jazz, things no pony could ever be bothered to extend to me (not that I wanted such mushy pap in my life, but I'd have liked the opportunity to say no, at least)... well, I must confess, that rustles my jimmies something fierce. Plus, he's a moron. Seriously. The thought that Celestia, Luna and Twilight Sparkle, all mares who beat me on occasion, should have fallen to this uncreative numbskull who doesn't even know what his power actually is... now that depresses me. And I am entirely too cheerful a fellow to suffer depression! So I'm going to do something about it.

And if I fail, which I probably will, I hold some hope that perhaps somepony will read this account and see my nemesis for what he is.

It's not, you understand, that I had any intention of risking my life to save ungrateful ponies from mind control (and possibly involuntary retroactive sex change, or possibly banishment to nonexistence... I'm not sure which. Math is boring!) If I had a choice... well, if I had a choice, I'd be running for my life. There are other worlds out there, other dimensions beyond the veil of this reality, and I'm sure I could be very happy kicking back with a lemon milkshake and generating glorious chaos in one of them. But that's not an option. He's closed the dimensional gates to any but his homeworld, and I know perfectly well that if I go there I'll just be playing into his immature fantasies in a different way. And if I try to run and hide... well, that doesn't suit my nature. It will be child's play for him to warp me into wanting to carry out some ridiculously stupid revenge plot so he can be
a Big Hero and destroy me. So I have no choice. As long as my mind is my own, I have to fight back, because if I don't fight at all, my mind won't be my own anymore.

(Oh, I can hear you ponies rolling your eyes and calling me a hypocrite. Pff, as if you can judge. Do you know I counted no less than 27 reforming spells in the spellbooks held in the library in Ponyville? Either your great and noble librarian heroine has a bit of a fetish there, or ponies think mind control is just good clean fun as long as the end result is harmonious. For that matter, why are there no pretty glass windows showing Celestia holding puppet strings with ponies dancing on them? Simple: history's written by the winners, and a thousand years and some change ago, I lost. But if you think she hasn't played puppetmaster far, far more often than moi, you simply haven't been paying attention, dear reader.)

To be honest, this isn't actually the first time I've played the role of hero for ungrateful ponies who never knew or acknowledged what I did. During my days as Lord Sovereign Designated Driver of Equestria, I dealt with quite a few threats to my ponies, since the operative word there was my ponies, and sharing my toys with other would-be conquerors... see now, sharing's always struck me as far too harmonious an activity for my tastes. Not really something I'm fond of doing. I can be a very generous Banana Sandwich if I choose, but I can't think of a single entity that tried to conquer Equestria, or part of Equestria, that asked me nicely if they could borrow some ponies for their slave mines or something. I'd probably have said no if they did ask nicely, but I might have let them go home without permanently damaging their sanity if they'd shown me just a little bit of etiquette. Most such threats were utterly pathetic, an enjoyable hour or day or week delivering a most humorous smackdown on whatever creature dared to challenge me. Dragons invading and taking ponies for food? Note the lack of a Dragon Empire any longer! Diamond Dogs looking for slaves? Ever notice how incredibly stupid Diamond Dogs are? Zompony apocalypse? Okay, that one was my fault in the first place.

But there were a few occasions when I was up against something in my own weight class. Like the time that my apprentice in the ways of Chaos tried to sacrifice me to the Outer Gods, and managed to open a portal to their realm that I ended up having to close. (Celestia and Luna might have helped just a bit with that.) Or the time that the Avatar of Order decided that it was too much work regulating magic, and things would be so much more orderly here if we lived in a standard heliocentric system and actually paid attention to the laws of physics and had no more magic, and yours truly bravely challenged a counterpart of equal power to preserve magic in our world. And that time with Grogar. Not that ponies know anything about any of this, and it's not as if I've gone around demanding that ponies give me medals and stained glass windows for my acts of heroism, or even acknowledged that they happened... because I'm well aware of who I am to them. I'm Chaos, and Chaos is always bad.

This time, though... this time what I'm fighting is well above my weight class. You wouldn't think so to look at him. He's so... pathetic looking. So... bland. How can you possibly be the only example of your species on an entire planet and yet be so unbelievably boring in appearance? And the visible powers he demonstrates really shouldn't do more than inconvenience me.

It's the powers you don't see that are the danger. The powers he doesn't even realize he has. The powers he has mind-raped eight mares with, and I use that term intentionally, because making a mare who envisions herself the very epitome of generosity fall in obsessive, jealous love with a giant boulder she thinks is a giant diamond is just pure hilarity, but making ponies love you because you have an itch you need scratching is foul. The powers he has altered the very face of Equestria with. And the powers he's going to kill me with, if I make the slightest mistake in dealing with him.

Ponies call me a god, but I'm not. At best I'm a demiurge. Some creator entity made the universe and left all these wonderful building blocks around; I just play with them. They call me a reality warper,
but I'm not that either. Sure, I can make up become down while I'm thinking about it, but it is very, very hard for me to make permanent alterations to reality and they can't be on the order of "rewrite the fundamental laws of magic and the functioning of the Avatars" or "change pony culture completely, overnight". I'm a very, very powerful, very adept magic user, but there's no one effect I've caused that Twilight Sparkle couldn't pull off for herself if she tried; she just can't do all of them at once like I can. (Well, possibly she can't remove her head and turn it into a balloon. I've never seen a unicorn, or even an alicorn, pull that one off.)

The creature I'm up against is a god. But the worst kind. The kind that doesn't know what it is.

At least I know I'm a villain.

I've delayed too long, I fear; I feel a strange pressure on my mind, a red-hazed hatred for my opponent (deserved, but still! I don't do mindless hatred!), an increasing compulsion to plot some sort of horrific revenge. His powers are working on me and even I can't stand against them for long. I can only stand against them at all because I know they exist. Those poor, poor stupid little ponies, they had no chance at all.

I'm going to fight to save them and they'll most likely hate me and put me in stone for it if I even survive, and that's probably a best case scenario, and I...

I'm scared. I never thought I'd see the day when I'd admit that to anypony. I don't entirely know why I'm admitting it now.

Maybe because my opponent wants me to be nothing but a mustachio-twirling evildoer (haha for him! I have a goatee, not a mustache!) He wants to reduce me to nothing but my function in the story of his Grand And Glorious Adventure in Equestria, make me into nothing but a hateful antagonist, and, well, ponies will go along with that, because that's who I am to them already. And I never cared before that they are completely ignorant of the concept that I have thoughts and feelings of my own, because who needs sympathy? I'm here to spread disharmony! I don't need sopping wet compassion or empathy, I need some laughs and you've got a face I can laugh at!

But I'm more than that. I always have been. I'm... I'm not a pony, but I am a person. A living, sentient being, like you, like the baby dragon that my enemy is ignoring and maybe I can actually use this, like a zebra, like any creature you talk to. I have emotions. And if I'm going to lose all that, if I'm going to be turned into a cardboard caricature of myself, and it may well happen... I want somepony to know, that isn't me. That's a story some asinine monkey told himself about me, and because he has the power to change reality with his thoughts and desires, that's what he's going to try to turn me into. I want somepony to know... I'm no hero, I'm quite happy being the villain most days of the week, because the only thing I like about any of you is how much fun you are to tease and play with, but I'm going up against something much more powerful than I am, to try to save all of you from him, and I'm scared. I don't want to die. I don't want to lose my identity and become a shadow of myself. I don't want to forget the true nature of Chaos and start acting like I consider every mistake in the Evil Overlord Manual to be a blueprint to follow. I don't want to be forcibly converted into a harmonious alicorn pony with a completely different name and mission in life. And I'd kind of like to avoid turning to stone for another millennium.

But I also don't want to live in a world where every single pony life has been warped to serve the egotistical needs of an idiot who thinks his life story is the only important one to tell and he should be the only hero in the universe. That doesn't sound fun at all. And, as I've mentioned, I don't think I have the option of running away anyway.

So here I go. If this journal ends here, then I lost, because if I win I'll probably destroy this journal. If I survive whatever this next encounter is, and I don't win, I'll be back to write some more.
Toodles!

Chapter End Notes

This is not mocking any one individual Gary Stu in Equestria story. This is mocking all of them. That being said, if you've written a story about a human male who goes to Equestria, herds with the Mane 6 as their lover, and is a Seventh Element, then yes, I'm making fun of you.

That being said this story is not intended as humor, and it may actually get quite dark.

Set after Return of Harmony but before Keep Calm and Flutter On, so Discord has not reformed.
Oh chaos above this hurts why am I even trying to write in this thing when I can't sit down?

Okay. That's better. I've got a cloud to sit on now. (Not cotton candy. Why why why do I pull out the damn cotton candy every time I face this bozo? I like cotton candy fine, but I despise repeating myself. This is a cloud of sunshine, and yes, I know, I'm hurt and my magic is drastically depleted and it's a lot more effort to make a cloud out of a substance iminical to cloud, like sun, but I need this. I need a reminder that when his power isn't working on me, I'm still creative, I've still got my imagination and my sense of style.) I've lost a lot of blood and a major limb, but it's growing back. But oh dear how slow it is. Yes, I know, cry you a river, when you lose a major limb yours don't regenerate at all, but you know, it's not like I haven't paid for my power. It's not like I didn't struggle to learn to control what cannot be controlled, it's not like I haven't spent most of my life being rejected by ponies for it, it's not like I didn't spend a thousand years in stone--

No. Calm. I have to stay calm. Which is usually the antithesis of what I'm going for but I've never liked letting rage or panic take over, and for some reason with two thirds of my tail missing and the pain that just won't go away, I'm not feeling the giddy humor thing right now. Oh sweet chaos I want to make him pay for this. It hurts, you cannot imagine how much this hurts. You have a tail but it's mostly a small bone with a lump of long stringy hair hanging from it. My tail's part of my body, as much as or even more than my legs. Or it was until some ass of a human took a whack at it with a sword. Words cannot describe how badly I want vengeance for this.

Which is the last thing I can afford to let myself want. If I come back gunning for revenge I'll play right into his hands. (I like that word, hands! Means a paw with extended digits and an opposable thumb, like mine. Hands hands hands. I'm writing this with my hands! Hahaha, ponies, you have hooves and your pets have paws but I have hands! Rather griffony ones, but hands nonetheless. Dear me I think I'm going into shock. I don't even want to think about how much blood I saw all over the ground.)

I've just conjured myself a plate of nice, rare dead cow meat to eat. What? It didn't come from a real cow! I conjured it! Don't give me that look, I'm an omnivore. I don't eat meat often because, well, because I don't! I don't need to bare my soul to you just because I'm writing a journal of my encounters with the damned Seventh Element of Harmony that doesn't exist. I have reasons and I don't feel like sharing them with you. The point is, no, I do not actually eat real cows, because dead cows in your mouth cannot dance the polka. This meat never actually belonged to a cow any more than the cotton candy clouds ever belonged to a cotton. I just need red meat to replenish myself right now because that is what omnivores do when approximately a third of the blood in their body ends up all over the grass and not in their bodies anymore.

I should probably not write when I'm loopy from blood loss. I'm not actually nearly as funny this way as I am when I'm in full command of myself.

I'm going to eat this and then I'm going to get some sleep and hopefully by the time I wake up most of the tail will have regrown and then I'll tell you ponies all about my big fight and how I ended up sadly separated from my tail.

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THIS HURTS THIS REALLY HURTS I CANNOT GET ANY SLEEP BECAUSE I AM MISSING A TAIL I'VE TRIED HITTING MYSELF IN THE HEAD WITH ROCKS BUT THEY DIDN'T KNOCK ME UNCONSCIOUS I WANT HIM DEAD I WANT HIM DEAD I HAVE NEVER ACTUALLY WANTED TO KILL A LIVING CREATURE BEFORE I WANT
TO HUMILIATE HIM AND BREAK HIS MIND AND THEN I WANT HIM DEAD WHAT IS HE DOING TO ME

I CAN'T BE LIKE THIS

I CAN'T KEEP WRITING IN ALL CAPS MY HAND IS STARTING TO HURT

BUT NOT AS BAD AS MY TAIL OW OW OW

WHY WON'T THIS STUPID THING GROW BACK! GROW BACK, TAIL! COME ON, PLEASE?

Just so you know, those wrinkly spots on the paper are *not* tears because I am *not* crying from how much this hurts. They are lemonade. I dropped my lemonade. I was fortunate that only a few drops of it got on my journal.

My head hurts. Wonderful. He's got me top and bottom. The head's probably dehydration and stress. I... may actually have to switch from lemonade to boring old *water*. Or drink a mug of conjured blood. (I do have the fang for it.)

I don't think a pony can lose as big a chunk from their body as I just have and live through it even if they're an alicorn. That was supposed to be a reassuring thought, but for some reason it's making me feel even worse.

I'm going to die. I can't do this. I lose so much of my intelligence and my creativity and my savoir faire when I'm facing him. He's going to trick me with some mindlessly obvious trick that a foal could see through, and I won't see through it because he won't let me, he'll fog my mind and make me an idiot and I'll fall for it and then he'll cut me to pieces with that damn sword and I'll die. I don't see how this ends any other way.

I've got to get the sword away from him.

I've got to stop confronting him directly. He wants me to be the villain? Fine, right now I want to be as villainous as I can be all over his flank, but there's no reason I have to be so blunt about it. Work from the shadows, do just enough to make him think I'm plotting and planning and he's going to get his big showdown eventually. Do some things that look really evil but aren't. I'll relocate some Ponyville ponies to the lost Crystal Empire where they won't be showing up for a couple of months, given that that enchantment's about to snap, and I'll leave in their place stuffed plushies of them, and Mr. Seventh Element of gaaahhh, *Protection*, oh it hurts my brain to even write that, will think I turned them into plushies. That evil enough for you, monkey boy?

My tail hurts so much. Do you know what kind of nerves are down there? Some of that region's an *erogenous zone* and he just chopped it off. Oh, my masculinity's still quite intact but the underside of my tail can be *very* sensitive under the right conditions except not any more until it grows back because he cut it off.

Well, except for the part that I cut off. Because the stump was glowing, and it burned, and the glow was crawling up my tail, and the piece he'd cut off was glowing and disappearing in a rain of firefly sparks and I was afraid all of me would suffer the same fate, and I tried to throw my magic at it but it was harmony magic, I couldn't make it budge and it was eating its way up my tail, so I amputated a chunk of it myself, with a perfectly chaos-compatible sword I conjured before I had time to have second thoughts about mutilating myself. Now the stump isn't glowing anymore, and I've successfully managed to get it to start growing back, but the *pain*. Oh chaos the pain.
How I wish I dared to get drunk.

Well. At least this just hurts like a tail that got cut in half and not like Harmony's slowly burning me alive from the tail upward. Focus on the positive, that's what I always say!

I need to get some sleep. I don't know how that's going to happen when my tail hurts so much and I don't dare take anything that might possibly impair my thinking or my judgement and my magic is so weak right now, but it has to happen because I can't fight him without a clear head. He'll take me apart. Literally.

Well, ponies, you'll all be thrilled to know that I did finally get some sleep last night (or possibly night before last, because I feel as if I might have slept an entire day), and that about half my tail has grown back, and it doesn't hurt anymore. It itches horribly, but at least the pain is mostly gone. So I have a clearer head now. And as I have reviewed this journal, I've realized what a terrible oversight I've made. I started writing this thing because I wanted ponies to know what my opponent is really, but I've never actually explained that! Dear me, it's a good thing I survived this encounter, because that would have been deeply embarrassing.

So let me tell you about how all this began, how I first encountered my enemy, what he is, and then maybe I'll get around to telling you what happened yesterday.

Over ten years ago, maybe as many as fifteen (I may have mentioned not being all that good at math, or telling time, especially when I'm stuck as a statue and can't see daylight), I felt a sudden surge of chaos right near me, so close I could almost touch it, and I felt the bonds that held me starting to snap. Not because of the chaos energy, but because the Elements of Harmony, frozen in stasis for so long, were waking up, and all they had done before they went to sleep was beginning to reset itself. I observed a little filly who'd caused that surge, powerful enough to hatch a dragon egg and force-grow the infant to nearly full size, Celestia's personal protégé, and I knew, that would be the next Element of Magic. And as I followed the threads of "destiny" (a concept I don't believe in, precisely, but there is an operating force on ponies that at least somewhat resembles destiny), I found another filly, a pegasus, who'd triggered that surge in the unicorn, somehow. And she was connected to others as well. It took a long time, but what else did I have to do? Being a stone statue doesn't really fill one's social calendar much. I traced the paths of destiny out from that pegasus and found her connected to a total of five fillies, including the one with such powerful, chaotic magic within her. Now, I complain frequently that math is unutterably tedious for me and I can't often be bothered with it, but I can count to six. I knew who my opponents would be, when my prison finally weakened enough that I could break free.

A garden is a peaceful, boring place... not much in the way of chaos there, sadly. Disharmony was easier to come by. I'd push as much of my power out through the bonds that held me as I could to make ponies irritable around me, usually whenever I could find a large group of them. And apparently, Canterlot Gardens was the must-see place to go for foal field trips, and it's incredibly easy to make foals turn on each other. It doesn't last -- foals are very volatile -- but I didn't need lasting disharmony, I just needed quick, powerful bursts, preferably accompanied by some chaos, and one thing foals are good at is chaos. Little by little I built up a reserve of power, waiting for the day when the bonds would be weak enough that I could break free.

When I wasn't gathering my energy, I observed my opponents. It was terribly difficult, because being in stone meant that I couldn't see, and while for some reason I could hear, it's apparently not the done thing to go to the Canterlot Sculpture Gardens to gossip about fillies from Cloudsdale and Ponyville. But I could walk in dreams -- I had to be more circumspect about it after Loonie came back, but I can
do it in the daytime, and ponies take naps. So I studied my opponents, learning their strengths and weaknesses, preparing a means of destroying the harmony within them and between them so utterly that no one would be able to stand against me.

And then I finally did it. I broke free. I attacked them, turning their strengths to weaknesses, turning them against themselves and against each other. I filled the world with glorious Chaos. And within about a day or so, I was in stone again. About the only possible upside to this was that the new bearers were mortal, and once one of them died there'd be a gap as the others adjusted to carrying the load, and possibly an even longer gap after they all died, so I was looking at 120 years, tops, not another millennium. But I'll admit it, I was... well, after having to wait so long after I'd already waited so long, and after I'd tasted freedom and had it snatched from me so quickly, to say I was "very unhappy" with the situation was a dire understatement.

So when my bonds broke prematurely, when I felt Harmony itself shift and twist radically under me and a massive displacement wave of transformed information hit the world's mana pool and charge my batteries, I didn't waste any time questioning it. I broke loose and promptly held a party for myself... in Zebrica. Hadn't been there in a while, and one notable thing about Zebrica, it is halfway around the world from the Elements of Harmony. Oh, you can get so much mileage out of varying patterns! Ponies get mildly annoyed if you change their colors, but if you change a zebra's color and alter the pattern of their stripes, you've just tipped over the bedrock of their whole world! Hilarity, I tell you. I had to dodge a few shamans, because a really good zebra shaman can be as dangerous as an alicorn in the right context, but it's astonishingly easy to tell a shaman from another zebra; listen for the rhyming. And if they speak at a normal speed, don't stammer, and don't miss their rhymes, then they're an experienced shaman, which meant they were getting a no-expenses-paid tour of Minos before they could pull anything out of their saddlebags and throw it at me. I might possibly also have put a few on the gambling floor of a casino in Las Pegasus. What? Ponies are generous; I'm sure one of the casino staff unicorns would have been happy to cast a cloud-walking spell on a suddenly appearing zebra so they could safely leave the casino. Most zebras have large gold earrings, so I'm sure they found something to pay for their transportation down to the ground with.

But, of course, home is where the heart is, and I love my little ponies far too much to abandon them for zebras forever. Zebras don't scream and run around in circles nearly as adorably as ponies do. And zebras are remarkably difficult to drive insane. I suppose when you don't have the magic to micromanage every little bit of nature around you, and you also have to live amongst lions as a regular thing rather than encountering manticores only on trips to exotically chaotic forests, you learn to roll with the punches. It's sometimes fun to watch them grimly trying to play parkour with chaos, desperately trying to route around obstacles and keep going on with their day, and if you discord a zebra they lose their stripes, which is funny to look at, but it does make it remarkably obvious what you've done. The idea behind making calm ponies little raging balls of fury and cowardly ponies put up their dukes is to confuse and upset the ponies around them who don't realize what's going on, thus spreading disharmony. When everyzebra can look at your target and simply ignore every last thing the poor zebra has to say because they understand that she's not feeling like herself at the moment, it lacks that certain wildfire flair that making ponies disharmonious can trigger. It's as if someone keeps moving some of your standing dominoes before the ones you tipped over get there, thus causing your lovely domino falling wave to stop short.

So I came back home once I felt that I was fully rested, recharged and ready to go. And as soon as I was back within the borders of Equestria, I had a glorious idea. An amazing, wonderful, hilarious idea, one they'd never see coming.

I was going to do the exact same thing that I did the last time!

In retrospect... if I'd been in the habit of thinking about what I was thinking, maybe I'd have seen
what was going wrong then. But it hardly matters. It might be better this way; if I'd recognized what he was doing before I'd understood how powerful he was, I might have made the mistake of trying to challenge him directly on that level. I don't think that would have ended well for me.

Still, have you any idea how humiliating it is to remember having the idea "do exactly what you did the last time with only minor changes" and remember it seeming fresh and original and deliciously unexpected? To be the Lord of Chaos, harbinger of change, spirit of disharmony, and be so unbearably dull and unimaginative as to repeat oneself, and think it would be exciting and fun? I could forgive myself for it if I'd been thinking of it as wittily ironic, perhaps a critique of the predictability of perpetual unpredictability, but no, I wasn't nearly sharp enough to think of that.

I stole the Elements of Harmony. (The spell protecting them was better this time; it had both Celestia and Luna's signatures on it, and Luna is good at traps. But when I decide to be patient and careful, I can be very, very good at disarming bombs. Stop laughing, that wasn't a joke. I actually can be patient and careful when I want to be; my problem's more with the fact that that is enormously boring, so I have to want something a lot to bother being patient or careful.) I stashed them at the Castle of the Two Sisters, hanging them back up in exactly the place they'd been when my dear, sweet nemeses found them in the first place, because "back where you began" could refer to the library where they first learned about the Elements or it could refer to the place where they first found them. (Or I could have hidden them in Celestia's castle, but that's a trifle too close.) Then I poured a big bucket of chaos all over Canterlot so that Celestia would summon the Element Bearers. (I'm lying. It was cotton candy with chocolate milk. See my frustrations up above, near where I was ranting about my tail. Or don't, because I'd kind of prefer you never read that again.)

Luna was asleep, of course, same as the last time. The last time I'd just bespelled her to stay asleep. This time I decided to have a bit of fun with her. I appeared to her in her own dreams -- where of course she's quite powerful, a dreamwalker on home turf is nothing to sneeze at, but I'm familiar with all her tricks -- and when she tried to wake herself up so she could alert her sister that I was back, then she discovered I'd bespelled her to stay asleep. So she came after me, and oh, was she ever ferocious. Pulled out all the stops. Even sent her alter ego against me, as a separate entity. It was loads of fun. Especially the part where I lured them into a lower dream level, disguising what I was doing with so much pyrotechnics, chaos, and innuendo-laden taunts at the two of them that they had no opportunity to notice how far down they were, and then spun them a completely normal, realistic, reality dream and let them wake themselves up into it. Well, let Luna wake herself up, I had no idea where Moonie went after Woona went for my bait.

See, Luna is the Princess of Dreams, and generally speaking more powerful than I am in a dreamworld, but I've spent a thousand years living in dreams I've been constructing for myself. I am much, much better than Luna at inventing a dream that feels real, because while she was able to walk all over the moon and gaze down at the world below, I had nothing but the dreams I made for myself. Now you may ask me, "But, Discord, you turn the real world into a surreal dream landscape every chance you get, why would you bother to learn how to create a realistic, orderly dream landscape?" And the answer is, if you walk in the door and there's already chaos, that's fun to watch, but it's purely a spectator sport. I am an artiste. I enjoy looking at the paintings of others, but what I truly love is to paint my own. So it is much, much more fun for me to corrupt an orderly, normal-looking world and turn it into chaos than to live in a world that's already chaos. I made reality after reality after realistic reality so I could at least pretend I was actually alive and moving around when I unleashed my havoc onto them.

It never really fooled me unless I was actually asleep, but I got it to the point where the only reason I knew it wasn't real was that I knew I'd invented it, and knowing that, I could feel the hollowness in it. Luna would be trapped in my dream for quite some time, believing she was undergoing normal, boring life as usual. Well, as boring as life gets when there's an imaginary moi running around, but
Luna wanted to believe the Bearers would quickly solve my riddle and win the day, so that's what I gave her and she fell for it.

Then I put her in a diaper, an adorable little bonnet, and the most precious little baby nightgown, alicorn sized, and put her in a rocking cradle. Celestia met with the Bearers outside her inner sanctum, and led them in to have her discussion with them -- which was also astonishingly repetitive -- and went to open the new, improved lock for the Elements. And found me inside, dressed as a nanny, rocking the cradle with Luna in it. "Shh!" I said. "Don't wake the baby!"

Well what do you know but Celestia gave out an ear-splitting screech, right after I'd warned her to be quiet, too. "Discord! What have you done with my sister???

"As if I'd do anything to sweet wittwe Woona!" I said. "Look how adorable she is, sleeping peacefully... you know, they're so much sweeter like this than when they're awake and screaming at you. Ever wish they could just stay sleeping forever?"

In the general chorus of dismay, I heard a masculine voice, to my surprise. "Luna! You evil bastard, if you've done anything to harm her--!

"Why does everypony think I'd hurt Luna?" I complained, teleporting out of the Elements' sanctum and into the main hall, as I sent Luna's cradle to her old bedroom in the old castle. "I would never harm that sweet little face! But you might, if you make the wrong decisions."

There was a newcomer to the group, I noticed, now that I was directly facing off against them. A male human. I confess I was quite surprised; it'd been a long, long time since I'd seen one of those, and he'd have to be a worldwalker, or have fallen through a portal, to have ended up here. Immediately I decided to link the enchantment on Luna to the male human kissing her. That joke was so obvious, it was screaming at me to be done. "This is new!" I said cheerfully, twining myself around the human. "Tia, where'd you pick this one up? Magicless Bipeds R Us? Quills and Couch Potatoes? Or is he your mail order husband?"

"He belongs to all of us!" Rarity snapped. "And if you value your life, Discord, you'll keep your paws off him!"

"Oh my! Is Generosity getting greedy again? He doesn't look like such a prize. Though I'll admit he might be an improvement over Tom."

The human glared me in the face. "Back off, Discord," he snarled, and for a moment, I was afraid. Of a human.

Let me back up a bit here and explain why this is ridiculous even by my standards.

Your average mare is about three and a half heads tall, maybe four. Your average stallion is between four and five heads. Celestia towers over most of her little ponies at six and a half heads tall. This is the height of a tall human. Humans are bipeds, so of course if Celestia rears she's a lot bigger than the human, and a normal pony rearing would be within a normal range for human height. Now, my height varies depending on how big I feel like being this minute, but if I'm not doing anything to modify it, I'm ten heads tall bipedal and about seven quad. (Counting down from my head, of course. A lot of that's in my neck.)

Humans do not have hard, strong hooves like my goat hoof. They do not have semi-flexible, powerful hooves like ponies do. They don't have hooves at all. Their hands are like mine, dextrous, attached to arms that aren't very strong in comparison to their legs, delicate and relatively weak but very, very, very useful. However, theirs don't end in claws; they end in thin keratin plates that stick
out the end like someone was trying to design them with claws and just couldn't draw. These are sharp enough to do a little bit of blunt-cut damage to human skin, which has no protection on it, neither fur, feathers nor scales, but against a creature with any protection whatsoever they aren't much. Their legs are stronger than their arms, but no match for a pony's, and their feet are shaped roughly like my dragon foot, with a lot less dexterity, less balance, and no claws. They don't have a tail at all. They don't have wings. And they don't have any magic.

This wasn't always true; their world had magic once, but something happened to it. I have no idea what, because I don't care. On the human homeworld nothing is sapient but themselves and some sea creatures, so they got to the top of the food chain by being smarter than everything else. They're not, however, smarter than ponies (not stupider, but not smarter), and they are most assuredly not smarter than moi. And they have no physical advantages over me whatsoever. They are shorter, they are weaker, they have no tail, they can't fly, no skin protection anywhere, their hands are as good as mine but have no claws on them, neither their legs nor their feet are as strong as mine, and while they are omnivores they have a lot fewer meat-eater teeth than I do. They have some advantages over ponies, hands and height, although ponies have magic so I think humans do worse on that deal as well. They're much more aggressive than ponies, but that just makes them more fun to taunt than they'd otherwise be, considering how weak they are.

So the thought that I would be scared of a human for even the tiniest of moments, that I would back away because an omnivore predator who is substantially less impressive in the predator department than I am glared at me... it's ludicrous. And yet it happened. I backed off.

But I covered for it, chuckling. "Feisty, aren't you!" I said.

"What have you done with Luna?" he growled at me.

"I just put her to bed, of course. She needs her sleep! Stays up all night, every night, poor dear."

He lunged at me, grabbed my beard and dragged my face down to the level of his. "Give her back!"

"Of course, of course. Just as soon as you ponies solve my riddle." I grinned at him. "And you, though I suppose you're not a pony at all, are you?"

"He's a human!" Pinkie Pie said.

"He's our human, so hands off!" Applejack snarled.

"Tell him that. He's the one grabbing me." I teleported out of his grasp and up into the air. "Ready to take notes, mes amis?"

Twilight actually pulled out a notebook and started doing exactly that as I recited. "A weighty choice is yours to make, if a sleeping princess you would wake. Follow the path of twists and turns, if the Elements' place you seek to learn. Once you've returned back to the start, then wake the princess with your heart. Or seek her out without a guide, if you believe my words are lies, and trust your power and your pride that you can cause the moon to rise."

And then I delivered a garden variety maniacal laugh and left them there.

Predictably, they had an argument over whether they could trust me or not, since I'd just basically thrown down a gauntlet and said "play my game, or assume you can beat me without playing." The human was all in favor of assuming my words were lies and going and looking for Luna directly, and Rainbow Dash agreed with him, but Celestia pleaded with him to reconsider, saying that as great as his power was, it was no match for mine, not without the other elements, and that if he arrogantly
assumed he could easily beat me, he might be throwing Luna's life away. This seemed a little odd to me -- Celestia really should have known I don't kill ponies and I wasn't going to start with Luna -- but it worked; the human decided that I was so childish, if he refused to play my game I would kill Luna out of spite, and that was the meaning of the riddle.

In retrospect this is bitterly laughable, that he'd call me childish. But I didn't yet know what he was, or what he was doing.

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Whew! Writing is exhausting work! How does that little dragon stand doing it all the time?

Now if you'll pardon me, I need to go do something subtle, yet so blatantly obvious that my idiotic enemy will pick up on it, so he knows I haven't forgotten I'm the villain here. I do declare, when am I going to find time to actually fight him for real if I keep having to go have pointless confrontations?

I have no idea what I'm going to actually *do*, but I find my most creative ideas usually happen that way. All I know about what I'm going to do is this:

It has to at least look villainous.

It has to not violate any of my personal codes of conduct, such as "don't turn ponies into stone" and "don't be a complete uncreative putz".

It has to stay *well away* from the Element of Protection And Also Rewriting The Laws of Magic And Also Swinging Really Nasty Swords.

It has to not bore me completely.

It has to have no chance whatsoever of me ending up in stone or dead before I'm done with it. So if I'm going to go play a game with somepony, it's going to have to be completely unfair. Le sigh. Well, I'm not doing this for entertainment primarily... though if I do things that don't entertain me, I risk losing myself, since "everything I do has to be amusing" has been one of my core values for millennia.

Terribly sorry to leave you all on the edges of your seats like this, but needs must when the devil dances, or so they say. I'm off to be a bad guy for a bit! Don't worry, I'll finish telling you all about Tall, Bland and Homicidal when I get back.

Or I won't. In which case you probably already know who he is. And it's probably too late anyway.

Arrivederci!
Let Me Count All The Ways In Which This Is Stupid

I have returned! No worse for wear, this time, thankfully. Everything in perfect working order, including my tail and my level of intelligence (I think... though I suppose that if I'd been turned remarkably dense again, how would I know?) I'm sitting back with a glass of lime spaghetti and a plate of bean soda, relaxing after a hard day of being evil. Actually most of what I did today wasn't particularly evil, though I suspect the Seventh Element of Stupidity thinks I'm being evil at every moment of every day with every single thing I do, including my trips to the toilet. (To be fair, most ponies who have to come in to use a toilet after I've just been would agree with him about the evilness of my bathroom breaks, but I digress.)

I spent most of my day resetting the Panauricon, planting listening spells all over Ponyville, and a few crystal eyes. (I don't use real eyes anymore ever since Luna found one and stepped on it back in the day. That was over a thousand years ago and I can still remember the extreme levels of ow that produced.) Then I went searching for potential allies by attempting to identify ponies, or other beings, who might have had negative interactions with the Bearers and their families. Found two con artists, an arrogant showmare, a griffin distinguishable from the others only by the fact that she ever voluntarily spent time around ponies and not by her extraordinarily low opinion of them since that's standard griffin issue, a noble stallion adopted by Celestia as a nephew, and two bratty little fillies. There are probably some others, but this is a good start.

I'm thinking about pulling out the old Elements of Disharmony. Given the Seventh Element's keen intellectual capacity, he's likely to see that as a genuine Evil Plan and not as what it would be, a deliciously chaotic distraction. Celestia could tell him how useless the Elements of Disharmony actually are, but I'll bet she won't, because she defers to him. My splendid orderly nemesis, my beautiful enemy, my proud and powerful Princess of the Sun, glorious and devastating and oh so cruel in her kindness... and she lets a human barely out of childhood tell her what to think. Oh, Celestia. I'd cry for you and what he's done to you, if you hadn't emptied me of tears for you, or anypony, millennia ago. The thing about the Elements of Disharmony that every pony who's faced them, and more than a few chaos avatars who've tried to use them, forgets is that disharmony can't work together. So you put together your Evil League of Evil to take up the Elements of Disharmony and oppose the Elements of Harmony, gather them all together, and they immediately start bickering with each other. And they won't stop long enough to actually fight the Elements of Harmony. One on one, if you wind one up and send her off against her corresponding Element, she might actually win, because individual Elements of Harmony are weaker without their partners, and individual Elements of Disharmony are strongest when alone. But put them all together and they'll fight with each other more than they'll fight the Harmony Elements.

So as a part of a carefully planned and coordinated attack on the Elements, in a group, they are worse than useless; you'd be better off hiring mercenaries. But as part of a wonderfully chaotic show of fire and motion, a bit of the old razzle dazzle to misdirect your opponents and make them think you're actually enacting an Evil Plan when in fact you're sitting back with popcorn and chaos-tan lotion ready to soak in some disharmonious rays, get a few laughs, and cover up what you're actually doing, they're marvelous. The only problem is, I forget where I put them. What? Spend a thousand years in stone and see if you remember where you left your keys! I'm sure it'll come back to me.

Anyway. Reset the Panauricon, identify some potential bearers for the Elements of Disharmony, and also, I stole a foal's ice cream, just to make it clear that I'm playing the villain role like I'm supposed to. Maybe that was a bit much, but honestly, this guy is so incredibly dumb, I'm afraid that if I just work in the background on some Evil Plan or other, he'll get frustrated with the inactivity and force me to show myself so he can humiliate me and cut me up again. I'm really not looking forward to
facing him directly, though sooner or later I suspect he'll make me. If I can put off that day by stealing a foal's ice cream, then by all means, the ice cream shall be mine! Though really it was quite boring. Strawberry flavored, euw. Not even strawberry banana or strawberry with sprinkles. I had to load it up with potato chips and salsa to make it flavorful enough for my palate.

Then I came back here, to continue the sad, sordid tale of my encounters with The Most Uninteresting Man In Equestria.

...You know I really don't want to do this. The part I need to write about next is so unendurably humiliating, I am sorely tempted to just stop writing this thing. I mean, honestly, is there a point? If I win, I'll destroy this journal and all these words will go to waste; if I lose, who's going to read this, really? And what good would it do them if they did? I sorely doubt some mere unimportant pony leading a perfectly ordinary life is going to be able to destroy a creature who warps reality to make himself come up roses every time, and all the important ponies are already under the spell. Who could even make use of this journal if I'm defeated?

Well, if I die... there'll be a chaos avatar after me, and Human McHumanson won't know of his or her existence. This document might be of use to whoever that is, assuming they know how to read (this is not always a given with chaos avatars.) And while Princess Pink Lovey and her hubby think my nemesis is the greatest thing since sliced bread after he annihilated the Changelings and saved them both, they aren't under his control to nearly the same extent as the Bearers and the older princesses. And if I didn't mistake what I saw -- and when it comes to disharmony I rarely do -- Twilight's pet dragon is rather miserable with this whole situation. He's under the spell as much as any of the others, compelled to practically worship the Seventh Element... who is ignoring his existence, as nearly as I can tell. And apparently Prince Blueface or whatever his name is quite despises the Bearers' new pal; I was shocked at first, and hopeful that perhaps somepony else could resist, but no, Bluecrab is also a designated villain, like I am, and that's why He Who Shall Be Loved is allowing Blueballs to hate him. Still, that's a potential ally for me, one with the actual power to do something... not something that will help, of course, because Bluebeard doesn't have anywhere near the kind of power he'd need to fight this guy, but again, fire and motion, and possibly somepony who could make use of this journal if I'm defeated.

So I suppose there's no help for it. I have to write this damn thing, as accurately as I can remember. How boring! But ... I really wish you could hear my dramatic sigh here, it's one of my better ones... this isn't a fight I chose. There's no guarantee it'll entertain me, and if it stops being fun I still have to fight. I hate this. But I don't have a choice.

Onward, then, to the tale of my first humiliation at this creature's hands.

The first time I lured the Bearers into the hedge maze, I was fairly sure they wouldn't be able to resist my power, not for the most part anyway. There had always been a few, but generally they'd been forewarned; nopony had encountered my power in a thousand years, and Celestia had done a terrible job of preparing these six for my capabilities. I thought perhaps one might resist (though I was wrong about which one; I'd expected Pinkie Pie might possibly have greater resistance than she had, considering the connection between Laughter and Chaos -- oh, Harmony, you may try to claim it for your own, but Laughter is really mine and we both know it -- and I never expected the little yellow pegasus who shrieked in fear at my picture would be the one who I'd need to use direct magic inversion on.) But I assumed, correctly, that most of them would fall fairly easily.

You see, the trick is that you get them to open the door by being friendly. Concerned. Helpful. Shakespony might have said "one can smile, and smile, and still be a villain", but most ponies can't comprehend this; intellectually they know I'm their enemy, but when I speak to them soothingly and
I commiserate with them on the greatest anguish they hadn't known they had, it confuses them, and part of their mind takes what I have to say as friendly advice. It's hardly their fault, poor things; they're herd animals. They're so dependent on harmony and the opinions of others, they can't resist a smiling villain. And just as telling a pony not to think of a swordfish causes them to do so, telling a pony about the fears they didn't know they had makes those fears come to life in their mind, and they'll do anything to block them out, including letting my influence in. I can straight-up brainwash a pony, but that's cheating; it's so, so much better when I get them to open the door themselves than when I break it down.

But most ponies can resist me if I go after them a second time using the same attack. So when I'm in my right mind, I'd never try to discord the same pony the same way twice. It's not like I'd ever have to, either. Before ponies named my patented mind-alteration technique after me, I called it unbalancing; it's the process of altering the balance of emotional traits within a pony's mind. I can make a pony so gullible that they'll believe the sky has always been green, or so paranoid that they're convinced all their friends and family are impostors. I can take essentially any trait that exists within them, and either increase or decrease it. I don't have to make it be the personality trait they're best known for... though it's easiest, and oftentimes most fun, to do it that way, and against the Elements of Harmony I thought doing it that way would maximize their inability to harmonize with their own elements. But against these neurotic mares there were any number of angles of attack. They appeared to have a bizarre attachment to this human; if I amplified that to a ridiculous degree I could make them insanely jealous of each other, and tear him apart (possibly literally, but more likely just emotionally) in their conflicts with each other. I could make them so calm and relaxed, they wouldn't have any energy to fight me. I could amplify their Elemental traits ludicrously, so Applejack really would tear their friendship apart being brutally honest and Rarity would drive herself to a sickbed giving her time and energy away and Fluttershy would be incapable of hurting me as much as she would be incapable of hurting anyone else. There were any number of things I could have done!

So this time, of course, I presented each of them with the exact same temptations I'd offered last time. The temptations that they would almost certainly be able to resist, having encountered them before. And they resisted me, of course, because these were the exact same temptations. So I discorded them by pure magical force, the way I had to do to Fluttershy the first time around.

No, really. I cheated. Just like that. I invited them to play a game, and then I just used brute force on them anyway. If I was going to do that why didn't I send them to the moon? Why didn't I hide the Elements in Tartarus? This wasn't any kind of game at all! I'm all right with playing a game that's rigged in my favor -- honestly aren't they all? -- but to not even try to play within the rules I'd set for myself... where's the fun in that? Where's the challenge?

And yet none of this occurred to me until it was over.

I had just finished convincing Rainbow Dash, again, that Cloudsdale would plummet like the House of Usher without her awesome and personal attention to saving it, again, when the human staggered into the clearing we were in, gasping.

"Rainbow! Rainbow Dash! You have to come with me! The others-- they need our help! They've been discorded!"

I'd shrunk back into the shadows to watch the interaction. I wasn't disappointed. Rainbow Dash said, "Help 'em yourself, dweeb -- I've got things I gotta do."

"No!" He grabbed her wing before she could take off. "You can't leave! Don't you remember Discord's stupid rule? If anyone uses their wings or their magic, he wins!"

(I didn't actually take their wings or horns this time. I just told them that if they used them, they'd
forfeit the game, and Luna and the Elements would remain in my custody. And I thought I was being creative! Mixing things up! Oh, the humiliation.)

"Yeah, well, just because you don't have any of your kind here in Equestria, the same isn't true for me, Anon," Rainbow Dash said. "I've got a whole city of pegasi to save, and they're my kind! Not like you! So that's where my loyalties are. See ya!"

As she took off and he broke down in an anguished scream, I could only think, His name is Anon? His name is Anon? Really?

I couldn't control myself. I broke down laughing.

Anon -- no, seriously, that was what she called him -- turned on me. "What have you done to Rainbow Dash?" he shouted at me. "You corrupted her, didn't you? Just like you corrupted all of them!"

I got control of myself back enough to talk. What I meant to say was "Your name is really Anon? Seriously?" Instead what I found myself saying was "You should see the look on your face! Priceless!"

For a moment I was confused. I remembered enough to know that that hadn't been what I meant to say, but I completely lost track of what I had meant to say, or in fact what I'd just been laughing about. Before I could spend any time thinking about it, though, he grabbed me by the neck -- which actually hurt. I've been grabbed by the neck quite a lot in my life. It doesn't usually hurt. Generally, in fact, very little can hurt me. "Fix it, Discord!" he snarled at me. "Put them back the way they were!"

"Or what?" I pulled myself free of him, snickering. "You'll posture heroically some more?"

"No," he said. "They're my friends, and they're under my protection. For I am the Seventh Element of Harmony, Protection, and I will defeat you!"

I gaped at him. Even in my impaired state, I knew what he'd just said was total nonsense, and not the fun kind, either. "There is no Seventh Element of Harmony!"

"None that you knew of, villain," he said. "It could only be activated by the touch of a human, and I'm the first one to enter Equestria in thousands of years! Longer than even you have existed!"

I pride myself on my ability to say things to my opponents that make them splutter, unable to figure out what part of my statement they want to refute first and tangling up their tongue with indecision and rage. I could say with equal pride, before that day, that no one had ever been able to do it to me.

I suppose I can still say no one has ever been able to do it to me on purpose, the way I do it to others; this bozo actually believed every incredibly dumb thing he'd just said. I spluttered, completely unable to think of which stupid part of his several-layer-cake of stupidity I wanted to smash first.

While I was spluttering, he took a white gem out from under his shirt, a pendant on a chain. The top of the pendant was shaped vaguely like a golden hilt, with the chain running through it, and the shape of the gem, with the hilt-like fixture it was set in, made it look rather like a small sword. He held it tightly in both hands, and it glowed, shining through the skin and making his hands look blood red.

I backed away. I could feel Harmony magic radiating from it, but Harmony magic that seemed twisted and wrong somehow... not that I'm an expert on Harmony, but this felt... predatory. Unpleasantly like the feeling behind Order's power, actually -- the sense that the power wanted to
crush anything that opposed it, rather than what I usually felt from Harmony, which was the desire to force you to agree. Violence, rather than mind control. But this wasn't Order; there was too much chaos in it, too much passion. It was Harmony, but the wrong Harmony.

The first time I saw the Tree of Harmony, it scared the pants off me, or would have if I'd been wearing pants at the time. But then, I'd been a child. I've faced and fought that damned Tree and its offshoots and partners many times. I knew it too well to be afraid of it any longer. Concerned, yes; wary, certainly; but afraid? No.

This, I was afraid of. This was Harmony gone very, very wrong.

A suit of light armor materialized around him -- mail shirt and skirt, gauntlets, and a helmet that was hardly more than a hat -- all white and glowing faintly. The gem transformed in his hands into a sword, and he swung it to point straight into the air. "Discord! With the power of Protection, and to save my friends, I will destroy you!"

I shrieked like a little filly and teleported.

I didn't go far, just to the other side of the hedge. But then I heard him screaming. "Coward! Run all you want, Discord! I'll find the other Elements, and Princess Luna, and then I'll destroy you!"

I am not normally in the habit of being terrified of anything just because I don't understand how it's possible. After all, I'm the Lord of the Impossible; if someone else manages to pull off something I don't understand, well, that's my game and I'm not going to let them beat me at it. But for some reason I was completely panicked. "It can't be," I started mumbling to myself. "That power... he can't be... how can he be the Seventh Element?"

His sword came slicing through the hedge next to me. I yelped and barely dodged out of the way. "I can hear you, you monster!" the human shouted, lunging through the hole he'd just cut in the hedge. "You messed with Princess Luna, you messed with my friends, and I'm going to make you pay!"

I was half-paralyzed with terror. A thousand things I could have done to block him, counter him, escape him, and I did none of them -- just stumbled backward clumsily, barely dodging the thrusts of the sword. "Look, can't we talk about this?" I said desperately. "You don't want to kill me, you'll never find out where Luna and the Elements are if you do!"

"I'm confident we'll find them! If I kill you, your spell on Princess Luna will fade, and she can help us find the Elements!"

"And what if you're wrong? What if I left Luna in a trap, so the moment she wakes up and tries to get out of bed, the whole place goes up like a nuke? You are one of those humans from a time period where you know what a nuke is, right?"

He lunged at me again, and I tripped over a fountain wall and fell into the fountain. The human jumped into the fountain and had his sword to my throat before I could get up. "Tell me you didn't, monster," he growled. "Tell me you didn't bring a nuclear bomb to Equestria!"

This was the first time I'd seen him react with anything that looked like fear. I smirked at him. "Well, why not?" I said. "You're here, why not some other examples of humanity's finest work?"

The tip of the sword pricked my skin, and I felt a wave of disruption crash over my magic, wrecking my control. My eyes went wide. I know, I make control of chaos look easy, and I look dead sexy doing it too, but controlling chaos magic is actually very, very hard. That's why so few creatures use it, despite the fact that it's more powerful than either harmonic magic or dark magic. If you know
what you're doing, harmonic magic always does what you want it to, and dark magic isn't any harder to control than harmonic magic -- it just makes it harder to control yourself when you use it, since the more you give in to your most negative emotions, the more powerful your dark magic becomes. But chaos magic does what it wants to do. A lot of what I do is essentially the equivalent of using magic to roll dice, then taking note of the effect I got and running with it. With my power disrupted, my connection to chaos itself jangled and confused, I knew I couldn't reliably get any effect I wanted -- I could try telekinesis and get a bunch of flowers, I could attempt to teleport and instead turn myself inside out. I wasn't powerless, far from it, but with the incredible range of what my powers can do, being unable to control them at all meant that if I invoked my power to try to escape or fight back, I might destroy myself or aid my enemy or just end up looking really stupid. "I didn't!" I said, panicking completely. "I was joking! There aren't any nukes in Equestria!"

He didn't ease up. "Tell me where Princess Luna is, creature! Where have you hidden her?"

I looked up into his eyes and realized I was well and truly screwed. If I didn't tell him, he'd kill me. The disruption to my power meant that I couldn't reliably invoke my magic to heal or transform my way out of whatever damage he might do me -- with my magic I'm nearly invulnerable, but without it, I'm flesh and blood like anything else. But if I did tell him... I was afraid he'd kill me anyway. He didn't look sane. The psychotic hatred in his eyes, the fact that his sword was apparently an Element of Harmony except one perverted into a tool of destruction and war, the fact that he was human and humans are aggressive little monsters... there was bloodlust in his face, and it wasn't going to be sated by my cooperation.

As my mind was racing, trying to come up with a way out of this, I heard Twilight Sparkle's voice. "Anon, what are you doing?"

"I'm trying to get some answers out of this misshapen monster!"

I wanted to make a wisecass comment about that, but refrained, since there was still a sword poking me in the throat. "I'll tell you whatever you want to know, if you back off! How do I know that you won't just kill me after I answer your questions?" I said.

"Anon would never do that!" Twilight said. "He's honorable, unlike you!"

"Then I want his word of honor that if I tell him where Princess Luna and the Elements are, he won't hurt me."

He grinned coldly at me. "I'll swear not to kill you, Discord. I won't make any promises about not hurting you."

I really did not like the sound of that. "Fine. Get that thing off my neck and give me your word that you won't kill me."

"And how do I know you won't run away the moment I sheathe my sword?"

I rolled my eyes. "You're still standing on top of my neck. Where did you expect me to go?"

"Release my friends from your spell and I'll sheathe my sword."

I wasn't falling for that. "Give me your word of honor that if I release your friends, you will get that sword out of my face, and that once I tell you where I hid Princess Luna and the Elements, you won't kill me."

He poked me harder. The part of my neck he was poking with the sword was directly under my chin, since the rest of my neck was underwater in the fountain, so I couldn't see, but I felt moisture
and I thought I might have just started bleeding. "You don't have room to negotiate, Discord!"

"Please, just give him your word," Twilight said. "Please, Anon. You can always take it out on him later if he lies, but right now, our friends and Princess Luna are what's important!"

He growled at me, his eyes narrowing. "All right. I accept your terms."

"Go get your friends," I said. "They should all be released now." The truth was, of course, that I'd lost hold of that spell the moment he disrupted my power, so his friends were all already free.

Twilight used her magic to send up a flare, and the others gathered quickly. The last one to arrive was Rainbow Dash, who had apparently been halfway to Cloudsdale before my power wore off her.

"Anon! I am so, so sorry I was so cruel to you," Rarity sobbed. I'd say overdramatically, but if you know Rarity, you know that went without saying.

The others all had similarly hysterical sappy apologies to make to Anon (if I hadn't still been half terrorized out of my mind, I'd probably have had a much harder time not snickering at that name). He wasn't paying attention to me anymore, he'd sheathed his sword and he was entirely preoccupied with the mares hugging him and sobbing out frantic apologies.

I took a deep breath. I had enough control of my power back to safely teleport.

So I did, straight up into the air, about thirty heads above them all. Rainbow Dash could have reached me easily, except that, with my power back, I was able to attach a cuff attached to a heavy iron ball to her hind leg, so she couldn't launch. Twilight or Rarity could get that off her within a minute, but it gave me the time to do what I needed to do.

"Well, this little adventure has been delightful, but since Rainbow Crash down there used her wings, the game's been forfeit for some time. So I suppose you'll all have to find the Elements, and Luna, without my help. Best of luck to you!"

"Discord!" Anon (can I actually write that without snickering now?... no, not quite) shouted up at me. "You swore you'd tell us where they are!"

"Oh no, I made you swear not to kill me if I told you. I never promised I actually would tell you."

"I'll kill you!"

"You'll have to catch me first," I said, and before he could pull yet another impossible magical superpower out of his large intestine, I continued with, "Ta-ta!" and vanished.

Minutes after I got back here, I was reeling. Nothing that had happened today made sense. Yes, I know, I know, where's the fun in making sense, do you know how many times he's made me say that? It's like, when I'm dealing with him, all my tricks and quips from my earlier encounter with the Bearers start repeating in my head until I actually use them.

The truth is, Chaos is not about nonsense and never has been. It is not about meaninglessness or true randomness. Well, okay, pure chaos is about those things, but I'm not here for pure chaos. I am not an emanation of the force of entropy (which isn't synonymous with chaos anyway), I am not a personification of an abstract concept. Chaos existed before I did and it will exist long after.

I am here because magic needs chaos. And because life needs chaos, and magic has the power to crush the chaos out of life, thus crushing life and magic itself. I exist, or more precisely my role
exists, to maintain a balance that allows magic and life to co-exist. And I'm outnumbered. My partners/opponents in this endless game, my opposite parties, are Order and Harmony. It's two against one, but then it might have to be. In the immortal words of Rainbow Dash, I am just that awesome.

But that means I am here for the chaos that life generates, and that life thrives on. And that is not the chaos of meaninglessness. That is the chaos of so many different meanings, a pony cannot make them all out within the cacophony. My name means the sound of too many sounds, conflicting with each other, drowning each other out (as well as meaning the single note that doesn't fit, conflict, and disharmony itself.)

Everything that happens has a reason; everything that happens fits into a pattern. When there are so many reasons and so many patterns that no pony can figure them out enough to predict what will happen next with any certainty, that is chaos. Chaos isn't meaninglessness, it's complexity. Ponies have a hard time with this concept. One little thing goes wrong, they start declaring that the world has become total nonsense! To be brutally honest, when I first made that quip, Celestia was being an idiot, complaining that it made no sense for the Elements to be gone when she knew I was loose, she knew I knew they had the power to stop me, and she knew I'm much more powerful than she is and an expert at breaking any sort of magical lock. It actually made so much sense for the Elements to be gone that I had been half tempted to leave paste replicas of them in there to see if Celestia would be surprised to see them still there, when I took them.

In this case, though, nothing about this made any sense because there were so many directions in which everything was wrong. To begin with, there is no Seventh Element of Harmony. I've fought Harmony long enough that I would know this, and before me, I have the knowledge of the chaos avatars before me. As far back as Chaos and Harmony have warred with each other to maintain the balance on this world, there has never been a Seventh Element. Secondly, the fundamental nature of Harmony and its greatest weakness is that all the pieces must be present; one missing piece of Harmony and there is no Harmony. So if there had been a Seventh Element, none of the occasions where six elements were in use would actually have worked. Thirdly, Protection has nothing to do with Harmony! I am no expert on Harmony, as I've said, but that much I know. Harmony is about working together; Protection is about working alone for the benefit of others. All of the Elements of Harmony except Magic are reciprocal; one is supposed to both give and get those traits to maintain harmony. Be honest, and get honesty from those around you. Be kind, and get kindness from those around you. Blah blah blah harmonysauce. Protection isn't reciprocal; it's extended from a protector to a protectee. Watching each others' back isn't the platonic ideal of Protection; Protection is ideally extended from the strong to the weak, and the weak do not have the power to extend it back.

And fourthly, humans have nothing to do with Equestria. It makes just as much sense to say that humans can activate a particular power of Equestria as it does to say grey aliens can. Humans are an amusing race, and overrepresented in the multiverse, and I greatly enjoy them, but they are not part of our world and never were. It's certainly possible that on coming to Equestria a human could develop magic, because their world had magic once and lost it, so the capacity to do magic is probably there in the genome somewher. But to develop a power that is one of the fundamental underpinnings of the balance of magic? As Big Macintosh might say, nope.

Then there was the violence of his power, the nature of Harmony magic that could disrupt and kill. Harmony does not, normally, disrupt my magic... exactly. Harmony imposes a will on chaotic magic that turns it controlled and orderly, forcing it to conform to the will of the Harmony wielder, and when this happens, I lose control of the magic because I don't do harmonic magic. Disrupting chaos ought to be technically impossible, and certainly, disrupting chaos with harmony sounds like someone didn't read the dictionary definitions of either one.
There was something very wrong here. So I went forth to do some research.

And next time, I'll regale you all with the thrilling tale of my research, but right now I think I would rather watch paint dry. I am so bored. Cooped up in this cave, staying out of the way of ponies because while they're as much fun as they ever were, they have a would-be protector who wants me dead and has demonstrated rather too much potential to accomplish his goals for my taste. I have to go do something, I'm miserable in here.

I wonder if dragons are as easy to annoy as they used to be?
When They Say To Change The World, This Is Not What They Mean

I don't want to do this anymore. I want to go exploring! Over a thousand years, and the world has changed completely. Equestria's remained horrifically similar to what it was before I took over; they've even built a town, Ponyville, where the suburbs of Equapolis used to be, and Canterlot, aside from making use of that mountain I built that one time, is frighteningly similar to what Equapolis was. New Marestad'm's now Manehattan, but Fillydelphia's still Fillydelphia and Vanhoover's still Vanhoover. The Crystal Empire's in a time lock, but it'll be popping out and becoming visible to ponies within a couple of months. Quite a lot of the culture's still same-old, same-old, but what do you expect from a place that houses the only Tree of Harmony left and has immortal rulers?

The rest of the world has gotten a lot more interesting, though. I mean, I knew Albion had established a Parliament because I could feel the sweet, sweet disharmony even when I was in stone, but it's so much fun to watch ordinary, democractically elected ponies getting into vicious shouting matches with hoity-toity nobility (not to be confused with Hoity Toity, who is actually a pony living in Canterlot), and have it considered a totally acceptable means of running a government! Also they play a form of hoofball where neither magic nor wings are allowed, but ultra-violence apparently is, and routinely riot in the streets over the performance of their favorite hoofball teams.

Then there's the Griffin Empire, where they consider themselves highly enlightened for not eating their ungulate subjects very much (they spare ponies, but not cows or sheep... helps to have the Alicorn of the Sun come from your species, I suppose. Celestia lets the little people self-govern for the most part, but she draws the line at pony-eating anywhere in the world.) Why, I remember the days when the entire territory currently claimed by griffins was overrun with dragons... of course, I might have had something to do with why that's not the case any longer, but when I ran things, the dragons were still there, just... possibly not entirely and completely sane enough to reproduce. Looks like while I was out of circulation, the griffins killed a whole lot of crazy dragons. Good riddance, I say. I wasn't going to kill them myself, not after defeating them as thoroughly as I did, but... you know, you'd think crazy dragons would be endlessly amusing, but truth was they got pretty boring within a century or two.

And then there's where the non-crazy dragons went. The entire southern continent of this hemisphere used to be dominated by the feathered serpents (well, it used to be dominated by the draconequui, but sadly, those glory days happened before I was born, and the quetzalcoats moved in from the far south once my kind were all dead), but the dragons of Western Neighropa who kept their sanity did it by running for Southern Amareica, and apparently I never noticed at the time because I was too busy having fun with the Neighropan dragons. Well, no one ever accused me of being detail oriented. So now there are nations down there of dragons and quetzalcoats and sea serpents living together the way the pony tribes do up here, with an occasional admixture of Eastern dragons and even the occasional long-ma (funny how they swear up and down that they are not draconequui despite the fact that, well, frankly, they basically are. I'm sure it has nothing to do with not wanting to be associated with me; I'd consider that positively insulting.)

Of course the further north you go, the more disorganized, violent and disharmonious the dragons are, which explains why ponies in general seem to have no idea that dragon nations even exist. Not that the civilized dragons are remotely peaceful; they're constantly at war with each other, warlords and matriarchs overthrowing each other in a perpetual churn of power, but they do manage to stick together in sufficiently large groups to have a war. See, now, that's harmony for you. When total disharmony reigns, no creature can actually get enough other creatures to team up with them in order to have a war. There were never any wars when I was the Superdave of Equestria! And ponies think
harmony is so peaceful. I ought to take Twilight Sparkle down to the dragon nations to see what harmony gone wrong can do.

...oh, I just had to remind myself of what I'm trying to not think about, didn't I?

Yes, I'm sure you've guessed it. I went on a short world tour so I wouldn't have to think about having to face... bleah, Anon again. (Seriously, that's his name? I can just picture his momma rocking him in her monkey arms, crooning, "Who's my little nameless one? Yes, you are! You don't have a name, no you don't!") Admittedly maybe I don't have room to talk, considering that I was equally nameless until the day my mother died, but a draconequus adult without a name would have been like a pony adult without a cutie mark, and besides, my mother called me Child, not Nameless.

I don't want to be having this fight. I want to have fun. I want to explore. I want to see if I can bring about the end of the perpetual warfare within the dragon lands by making them all hate each other so much they won't stick together well enough to form an army. I want to enjoy the lovely disharmony between Saddle Arabia, Camelstan, Minos and Tauros. I want to find out if I can get them to crown me Great Dalmuti of Neighypt for making it rain even if the rain is green lemonade. I want to see if Scorpan the Peacemaker is really as badflank as everyone says he is or if I can make him flip out, give up on harmony and go become a hermit somewhere crying into his beer about what he did to his poor big bad bro. I want a rematch with Apep for the honor of Chaos (that's a joke, son, laugh! I said laugh!) I want to find Ar where she's sleeping, tickle her until she wakes up and see if she's really as hot as legend says (in the sense of attractive... she was a dragon who was a chaos avatar, I'm fairly sure she was as hot as she wanted to be in the literal sense.) The last time I was out and free I spent all my time tormenting ponies, but there's a whole world out there to be introduced to my chaos! Admittedly I'm not as ignorant of the changes to the world as Loonie was when she came back -- connection to disharmony, dreamwalking, and being able to view other realities kept me relatively au courant in comparison to the Moon Maid -- but feeling things happen at a distance, or viewing somepony's dream of events, isn't nearly the same thing as experiencing it for yourself.

Zebrica was loads of fun, and when I think about the fact that I could do the same thing in so many other nations, with so many other creatures, all over the world... and instead I'm stuck in a cave trembling with fear of worried about some stupid human... This is completely unfair.

Unfortunately I know better.

They have their Elements back, after all. If I go run off somewhere and completely ignore Anon and pals, I'll get distracted and forget to keep looking behind me and one day bam, they'll sneak up on me and I'll be a statue again. Or Anon will chop me to bits. Or both. I'm not sure how both would work, I'm fairly sure that my statue was virtually indestructible given the number of times during the first few months after Celestia and Luna first turned me into a bird bathroom that some pony or other tried to take a sledgehammer to me, throw me off a cliff, blast me with magic or drill holes in me, but if anyone could manage to smash an indestructible statue it would be Anon, since the limitations of the rules of magic don't seem to apply to him. You cannot imagine how much this irritates me. I am supposed to be the only one that the rules don't apply to! And honestly, that's because there's a superset of the rules, the laws of metamagic, that do cover me and what I do, and just because ponies don't know what those rules are and think I have to abide by unicorn magic rules, that doesn't make their ignorance my problem.

Maybe there's a super-superset of rules Anon is covered by. I wonder how I'd go about finding out what they are?...

Well. I know some of them. And one of them strongly suggests that I'm not getting out of this fight.

Let me go on with my story and explain what I do know about Anon.
When we last left our intrepid and handsome hero, he had narrowly escaped death at the hands of the psychotic human, and had retreated to this very cave to contemplate how a Seventh Element of Magic was even possible. Upon such contemplation, he realized that in fact everything he had been doing since coming back home to Equestria was, in fact, stupid beyond belief, and normally entirely outside the range of what he'd have chosen to do... which implied that he was mind-controlled somehow, and only now, back home, was he free of the insidious control. So he began to think to himself, *how long can I keep up writing about myself in the third person before I get totally sick of it?* And the answer was, about this long.

No, what I actually thought to myself was that I needed to do some research.

I'd had sources of information available to me, while I was trapped in stone. When I was fully awake and paying attention, ie, not manufacturing a lucid daydream for myself or opening myself up to the collective unconscious, I could hear more or less anything that happened in Canterlot Gardens, and for reasons I'll explain later I was fairly good at deciphering snippets of caught sound from outside the gardens. I also had my Discord Sense™ (hey, if Pinkie can have a Pinkie Sense...), which allows me to feel any major occurrence of disharmony pretty much anywhere on the planet, and by feeling out the shape of it I could generally figure out who the disharmony was happening between and what sort it was. When I was asleep, I could dreamwalk... my ability to affect the dreams of others was almost nonexistent, aside from pre-Nightmare Luna (I didn't actually have the ability to affect Luna's dreams either, but she had the ability to sense me, which meant I could goad her most entertainingly), but I could watch. And I could open vision portals into possible futures, alternate presents, and nearly anything that happened in the past.

If this is sounding like I had plenty to watch to keep myself entertained... imagining cutting off your tongue, your legs, your wings (if you have them) and your horn (if you have one) and lying in a bed in a movie theater all day long. Exactly how entertaining would those movies have to be to compensate for the fact that you can't move or talk? I thought so. So hopefully we'll have no more of this "oh surely it wasn't that bad because you didn't go totally insane" sort of talk, and move on, shall we?

The point is, I wasn't wholly ignorant of the world around me while I was trapped (forsooth, had such been otherwise, I might verily have arisen from my stone entombment speaking thusly to all ye ponies, and in such a way have made of myself a laughing-stock, the object of jest and jape rather than the jester in self. Truly 'tis fortune that upon my arousal the command of today's vernacular was mine, or none might understand me save Luna and Celestia. Oh, if 'twere my fate how cruel would it have been, to be understood solely by dullard alicorns of ennui!) But I didn't know anything at all about Anon, how he got here, how he ended up with an Element even in the mundane sense of where he got it from, let alone how it could possibly exist, or what his relationship was to the others. They'd seemed very, very close, weirdly so really, but then the Elements worked off friendship between the Bearers, so I supposed that perhaps that might have explained the possessiveness and overprotectiveness I'd seen. Or perhaps the girls were trying to balance out his stupid, non-reciprocal Element of Protection by protecting him, so it would be reciprocal like the others. Though that continued to fail to explain how he'd been able to use it by itself. Elements of Harmony, by themselves, were useless.

So I set out to learn as much as I could about the world, without revealing myself to anypony.

First I hit the headquarters of the Equestrian Associated Press in Manehattan. A free press has always been near and dear to my heart; nothing generates controversy like the news. While most other institutions of government, business or academia seek a calm, happy, pacified population, the press knows that what bleeds, leads, because what the public craves to know about are the most chaotic and disharmonious things that might be happening in their world. The EAP receives news wires by
telegraph and retransmits them all over Equestria so that if there's a massive brush fire in Appleoosa, or a politician indicted for corruption in Baltimare, or a model in Canterlot goes out in public with a few hairs loose from her manestyle, every newspaper in Equestria can print the information. All the news that’s fit to print, and plenty of the news that isn't. I slipped into the building, late at night, located their filing cabinets, and took them, replacing them with solid chocolate replicas. While obviously everypony was going to know it was me, I thought it most likely that they'd assume I turned the filing cabinets, contents and all, into chocolate, thus destroying the archive of news articles. I strongly doubted anypony would realize I needed to catch up on the news. Then I took the filing cabinets home and bespelled the articles to read themselves to me. As perhaps one might possibly have guessed from my name, I'm very much at home in the center of cacophony. As I mentioned earlier, the chaos I prefer is the chaos of complexity, of so many patterns that no pony can distinguish them; I, however, am a different story. Understanding fifty-three news articles reading themselves to me at a time is an enjoyable challenge for me, a good hard workout for my brain. I made it a little more interesting (and much funnier) by speeding them up so they sounded like how you might imagine squirrels or bunnies would talk, if they could. Within a day or two, I'd gotten through the entire archive. What I gathered from it was that Anon had appeared in Ponyville, coming out of the Everfree Forest, about a week prior to the wedding of Princess Cadance and Twilight's Big Bootied Brother Furry Fatso, or I think that's what that silly acronym stood for, anyway. He had accompanied the Bearers to the wedding, which had been crashed by a particularly ambitious Changeling queen and her hive. During the resulting altercation, Celestia's clever trick for hiding the Elements really, really well backfired, as none of the Bearers were able to get in to get their Elements, but through some means wholly unexplained by any news article, Anon found the Element of Protection, proved to be its Bearer, and proceeded to more or less annihilate all the Changelings in Canterlot, of which there were quite a number. He was then given a medal and a stained glass window, which I resolved to change into a picture of him on the toilet at the first available opportunity.

The interesting thing about all this was that the day after the wedding was the day I got free. As I might have mentioned earlier, I was too busy doing a happy dance of delight at my freedom, in Zebrica, to think much about how or why it had happened. So I thought about it now.

Of course I'd noticed the Changeling invasion -- chaos and disharmony on that scale wouldn't have escaped me anywhere in Equestria, let alone in my own back yard. Superficially, one might guess that that was what had given me a flood of power and broken my bonds. But it didn't match up. When Goodnight Woon had her jealous hissyfit and launched an uprising against her sister, there had been a lot more chaos. Oh, that had been so deliciously painful, like being presented with the most gloriously delectable-smelling banquet right in front of you, only to find that you're chained to your chair and can't raise a paw to take a morsel of it. The bonds of Harmony had held me tight; I'd caught only the tiniest crumbs of power from that event, to the point where it would have taken me twenty thousand years of massive civil unrest to gather enough energy to break loose. Only when the Elements had reset in the process of transferring to new Bearers had my bonds begun to weaken, and it was a year after they'd finalized and transferred entirely to their new Bearers before I'd been able to gather enough power from disharmony to break myself free. One battle with a Changeling horde could not have begun to possibly make the tiniest chink in my prison, unless the Elements were shifting again.

Well. Transforming from six Bearers to seven was certainly a shift. Not a shift that seemed even remotely possible, but certainly a shift. But even then, a change from one set of Bearers to another had still left me gathering power for years, for a whole additional year after the shift was done, and I was as weak as a kitten when I'd first gotten out... admittedly if you've ever seen a kitten in action you'd know they're capable of quite a lot of chaos, but the point is, I'd had to start slow. A bit of
chocolate rain in Ponyville, a bit of cola raining onto Cloudsdale. Chaos is the gift that keeps on
giving; I put some power into generating a bit of chaos, and ponies react with such sheer horror and
confusion, I gather far more power from them than I lost creating the chaos. It hadn't taken me long
to build up to speed, it's true, but there would have been no way I could have teleported to Zebrica
right after breaking loose that time.

Something hadn't just shifted the load the Elements were carrying and loosened my bonds.
Something had charged me up. Someplace there had been a massive wave of chaos, and I'd missed
it... and so had these news articles.

I went exploring Equestria, wandering invisibly through towns, trying to find what had changed.
When I thought back to that day, I remembered feeling a building wave of disruption and
transformation all throughout that week; I'd been very excited, though I hadn't for a moment
expected it would free me when it hit its peak. I remembered trying to find it, trying to stretch my
senses, and coming up with nothing. It had tasted fresh, like change, not stale like entropy. But I
hadn't for the life of me been able to feel out what exactly it was. On the day of that gloriously
chaotic invasion, I'd thought to myself, oh, this was it all along, and by the time I would have been
able to tell that no, the invasion couldn't account for it... I was free and paying exactly no attention to
any of the problems I'd been worrying about in stone. In fact I'd kind of forgotten about them.

This didn't worry me nearly so much as lapses like thinking I was being original and cutting edge by
repeating myself; I knew why I'd forgotten about them. Sun! Sky! Lungs that can breathe! Food!
Muscles that can move! My powers! Flying! Food! Colors! Sounds that aren't muffled by going
through rock! Smells! Touching things! Hilariously terrified zebras! Food! My powers! Being able to
stretch! Being able to lay down and sleep! Dancing! Wiggling! Food! No, it was entirely reasonable
that I'd lost track of wondering about what that chaos I'd been detecting might be, once I was out.

Something had to have changed. A lot. And yet there was nothing in the papers.

At this point I need to briefly digress into another explanation of chaos, entropy, and information
theory.

You ponies think "information" is intelligible, understandable knowledge. "Pinkie Pie is a baker" is
information. "Qtsafwjojwjojwqj" is not information. "Aujourd'hui, maman est morte" is not
information unless you understand French, in which case it is. "Princess Celestia is a potato" is a lie
and therefore not information. "A long long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away, Princess Celestia was
a potato" is fiction and therefore not information. However, the truth is that they are all
information. To distinguish between information that has a meaning, and information that does not, we can
use the terms "signal" and "noise." Signal is information that is meaningful; noise is information that is
not. And one pony's signal is another pony's noise. To a pony who speaks only Equestrian, anything
in French is noise, but to a polyglot like moi (which, for those of you who don't know French, means
"me"), French is signal. For that matter my fifty-three newspaper articles reading themselves to me at
high speed would have been noise to any pony, even Tia and Lulu. But because I have a truly
astonishing ability to distinguish signals from each other and parse them into separate meaning so
they don't degrade into meaningless noise, to me those articles were signal.

The truth is, the whole world is information. This startles you. To you, information is what's held in
books. Chairs are not held in books, therefore chairs are not information. But when I look at a chair, I
see it as a collection of pieces of information, and if I change some of that information, the chair
changes. It becomes a banana, or it walks off, or it tries to eat the hapless pony sitting in it. Magic is
the manipulation of information, and frequently, the transformation of it.

Now, if you shout off the side of a mountain, out to another mountain, you'll hear an echo... at first.
It'll die off quickly. What happened to your signal? It degraded to noise, and then to nothingness, because it ran out of energy. This is the form of chaos called "entropy", disorder caused by a loss or transference of energy. Entropy annoys me because it disorders what it affects by making it less complex. It's still disorder, so it still generates magical energy I can use, but it's not... hmm... flavorful. When chaos is caused by things becoming more complex, when information becomes more dense, that produces much tastier magical energy. Disharmony is by definition more complex than harmony, because in harmony, signals are synchronized, and to a certain extent their behavior matches each other or can be predicted from each other. A disharmonious signal could be any signal at all that doesn't match, and the world of what doesn't match is always so much larger than the world of what does.

One way or another, when information changes, it gives me power. Destruction is entropic change. Creation is change toward complexity. However, for either one to have happened on the scale that would have refueled me so thoroughly after the Elements drained me such a short while ago, it really should have turned up in the papers. How could the world have undergone a massive change and nopony noticed?

So I went exploring, invisibly walking (and flying) amongst ponies in search of whatever it was that had changed. And at first, I didn't see it. Their world seemed every bit as idyllically peaceful and dull as it had ever been. Earth ponies still worked the fields and took their goods to market, pegasi still micromanaged the weather, unicorns still stumbled through life using only the tiny fraction of the glorious energies they were born to command that would help them enact the picture on their flanks. Same old same old.

Until I realized... where were all the stallions?

Now, just in case you're reading this at a time when the changes are still in effect -- which you probably are, because why would they revert if I haven't beaten him yet? -- you need to know this. Historically there has always been an imbalance in favor of mares, but throughout most of pony history it has not been all that large. I'm not the guy you want to go to for numbers, so I couldn't quantify it, but in a class of say 20 foals, a little over half of them would be fillies, maybe 12 to 8 instead of 10 and 10. During times of war and organized violence, the imbalance increases significantly, but I think we all know how harmonious and peaceful Equestria's been for the past several centuries. If you stroll down the street in an earth pony town like Ponyville you might not notice so many stallions, because a disproportionate number of them are doing work that involves physical labor, tilling their fields or restocking the shelves, and whether you're in Ponyville, Cloudsdale or Fillydelphia, the fact that the Royal Guard is around ninety percent male means that many of the boys are off in Canterlot. Males tend to do the work that involves being away from home for long periods of time, as well; they're the lumberjacks, and they're OK. Pegasus and unicorn stallions with water-magic talents may be off at sea. Nothing stops the marefolk from doing that kind of work, of course, but Equestria's a matriarchy that runs on friendship; mares stick close to home where their power base is. In the big cities, where power concentrates in noble families or where it's not about how many you know but who they are, this tendency is less pronounced, so you see a more even balance of genders out on the streets.

Here's something else you need to know. I'm not going to be running for Her Royal Pinkness' job anytime soon; I dislike nearly everything to do with love and romance and would prefer I never had to deal with such sappy concepts again, but unfortunately for me, Canterlot Gardens has been the go-to place for romantic trysts between Canterlot citizens for an unacceptably long period of time. I have heard far, far too many couples whispering sweet nothings to each other or making loud, smacky kissyface noises. Few of them actually went so far as to have sex in the gardens (more's the pity; that might have been fun to listen to), but trust me, I have been present at enough passionate clinches that Cadance ought to be paying me damages for mental cruelty. And I can tell you that the majority of
these lovey doves were mare/stallion pairings. Again, numbers and I don't get along, but I'd guess as many as three-fourths of them were heterosexual couplings, and of the remaining couples, about two-thirds were mare on mare and the remaining third were fabulous.

I didn't really notice this at the time, of course. As I said, I'm not interested in romance. I have as much interest in sex as any other red-blooded draconequus male (yes, it is red, I certainly saw enough of it when Anon cut off my tail that I can certify this), but ponies having sex with each other, without even inviting me to watch, let alone join in, isn't really a topic of pressing concern to me. And since personally I can't be bothered to limit myself to a single species or a single gender when I do go looking for playmates, the question of whether a mare is sucking face with a mare, a stallion or a grapefruit is normally not one I care about. But I have a very, very good memory, and when I was trapped in stone, I paid a great deal of attention to ponies any time they were near enough to my statue that I could easily hear them, regardless of what they were doing or saying or how unbelievably dull I'd have found it if I'd been free to go pay attention to something else. I remember the pony pairings I didn't care about at the time, well enough to assess their approximate gender balance and makeup.

You know what I never got to hear? A threesome. Or moresome. I suppose it's possible that some of the chattering groups of friends I overheard went home and had wild sex with each other, but of the partnering ponies gazing up at the Mare in the Moon and murmuring pet words to each other while leaning up against the convenient backrest my plinth provided, I can't remember any of them being a group of more than two.

Herds are rare. They turn up in times of unrest -- during the wars between the pony tribes, there was a severe shortage of earth stallions, because when ten earth stallions go up against a unicorn battlemage, nine of them die in order to distract the battlemage enough that the tenth can get in and buck the mage's head off. (Oh, you don't think ponies were ever that violent to each other? Au contraire, mes amis, your species eagerly sought to enslave or commit genocide against itself when you split along the tribal lines. Windigos don't show up because of petty quarrels.) So there were few enough remaining stallions that earth ponies herded, back then.

And when I was in charge, there were herds, albeit more polyamorous than polygynous ones, on the logic that... well, I am the Spirit of Disharmony. I used to amuse myself frequently by influencing ponies to break up marriages or turn their kids out the door. (Hey, don't look at me like that. I was an orphan, left behind in the wilderness to fend for myself from the age of four, and I turned out just fine! There were pie trees and lollipop flowers and chocolate snow everywhere; no foal starved on my watch. Lost all their teeth, maybe.) When I unbalance a pony's personality it doesn't last that way forever, though, and ponies found that their families would hold together much better if they formed larger ones, so someone could keep the home fires burning and watch the kids until the unbalancing wore off and their lovers came back to themselves. (Eventually I figured out that this was what they were doing, but by then, I'd decided to go big or stay home, and I'd treat an entire town at once to an upside-down mindset for a week or two. Herds didn't help them much with that.)

During times of peace, herds are not common. Lesbian relationships are common, but hardly a majority, and stallion on stallion does actually happen, maybe only half as often as the lesbian relationships but it's hardly unheard of.

I'm sure none of this makes any sense to you, because the world I'm describing, the world that existed for millennia up until the moment Anon changed it, is not the world you know. Because what I found out when I noticed the stallion dearth is what you probably believe the world has always been.

I had observed that there were far, wind fewer stallions than I expected to see. I went looking for them
in the places I'd expect to find stallions, and, aside from the Royal Guard, I found mares instead.
Mares tilling the fields, mares cutting down trees, mares sailing ships... usually, mares in lesbian
 couples or threesomes or more, and I could tell this because despite the fact that I was observing
 them at their jobs, they tended to be all over each other, sopplily affectionate and exchanging highly
 unprofessional pet names while logging or sailing or whatever. In the Royal Guard, a majority were
 still stallions, but the guard itself seemed... smaller. More ceremonial, less capable of fighting any sort
 of military force. Admittedly they haven't had to fight a military force in centuries, but they're
 supposed to be able to if they have to.

And where I found stallions still living and working at ordinary jobs, I found that most of them had
 two, three or more wives. Herding was more common than pairing, now. (By this point, you
 understand, I was actively looking for anomalies relating to gender; it's normally utterly beneath me
to care how many wives the stallion from St. Ives has.) And where I found a two-pony marriage still,
most of them were two mares. There were still some traditional couples -- the Cakes in Ponyville,
Cadance and her boytoy -- but for the most part, what I was seeing involved either two mares and no
stallion, two or more mares and no stallion, or two or more mares plus a stallion, with the old school
pattern of one mare and one stallion almost absent.

Now, far be it for me to look down on anyone's fun! Why, if Equestria had suddenly exploded into a
hotbed of polyamorous perversity because of some sort of social change I could see, I'd be all for it!
After all, I was an immoral polyamorous sex beast before it was cool. I could really enjoy a world
where everywhere I turn there's mare on mare action... if it weren't for the fact that no pony alive
appeared to be aware that this was a change.

So I did something that horrifies me to this day. Something so awful, I shudder uncontrollably when
I look back on it.

I took the form of an ordinary pony, went to the central library of Manehattan, and went back
through two years' worth of newspapers... reading the wedding announcements. Guh! I want to
scrape my brain out with a whisk broom and a can of maple syrup.

I didn't repeat this experiment anywhere else, but I didn't need to. Prior to Princess Cadance's
wedding, the wedding announcements were exactly what I would have expected... mostly
announcements for mare & stallion couples, with a fair amount of mare/mare and a small but
noticeable number of stallion/stallion. The first announcement of a herd wedding, between a stallion
and three mares, was the day before Cadance's wedding, with the actual date set a month in the
future. After Cadance's wedding, I couldn't find any traditional mare/stallion announcements.
Admittedly at that point I'd been free less than a month, and I broke loose the day after her wedding,
but... there hadn't been any time prior where there had been no mare/stallion weddings announced
for longer than two days, let alone a month.

I already knew there was nothing in the papers discussing the change. And there should have been!
An upheaval like this was only possible if either an enormous number of stallions vanished into thin
air, or transformed into mares overnight. There should have been rioting! Grieving widows
screaming at Celestia to find their husbands, if they'd vanished, or former stallions shrieking at their
leaders to solve this problem and restore their lost manhood, if they'd changed gender! There should
have been panic in the streets! There should have been chaos!

But there wasn't. The change had happened, it had created such a massive transformation of
information that it had filled me up with energy, just the same as if there had been chaos... but there
was no disharmony. There was no visible disruption of order. Something had radically changed and
ponies just went on with their lives as if it had always been that way.
This horrified me. I love change, I live for it. But to change everything underneath our feet and leave us unaware of how it happened, or when, and, for the ponies, even that it happened?

I had to admit I had a bit of an existential crisis. Kidnapped a few mares from a small town near Vanhoover and forced them to tell me what they saw when I changed things. I made a hill into a checkerboard bowl, filled it with giant cornflakes, made the cornflakes float as if they were in milk, and made them ooze pine sap so the ponies kept getting stuck to them. Turned one of them into a balloon and used static to stick her to another. Chased them around with giant waffles that were trying to eat them. Caused some of the checkers to be quicksand and then rearranged them when the ponies figured out where the safe places to stand were. The whole time I kept asking them, "Now what am I doing? What did I just change?" By the end most of them were crying too hystercialy or too shellshocked to keep talking to me, but one of them managed to describe my chaos back to me all the way to the end of the session, so I didn't do any of the apocalyptic or horrible things I'd threatened to do to them if they refused to talk to me... I sent them back home, completely unharmed. Well, I might have rearranged their manes some and cast illusions to make it look like I'd switched their cutie marks, but that all would wear off in a day or two.

As nearly as I could tell, reality was still real. Things I set into motion randomly, without knowing what I was creating, could be described by ponies who were looking at it, before I turned to look myself. Ponies still occasionally did things I didn't realize they were going to do. This wasn't a dream I'd fallen into, in stone, and forgotten it was a dream. I could be fairly sure of that, at least to the extent I can ever be sure of that.

Yes, you're glaring at me now, I'm sure. I did terrible, terrible things to those poor ponies, you say. I terrorized them. I made them think I'd kill them or subject them to fates worth than death if they didn't cooperate. Well, yes, but if you thought there was a significant chance that reality wasn't real, would you really care about the welfare of possibly imaginary ponies you were using to perform a reality check? Besides, none of them suffered any worse pain than exhaustion or the nasty feeling of pine sap in your coat, and in the end none of them came to any harm, and if you're so worried about their sanity, why aren't you worried about mine? Just because I don't behave like what you think a sane pony would act like when I'm at my best, you think I deserve to be left in some solipsistic hell where I can't be sure reality even exists? I never trapped ponies in a dream for longer than a single night! Well, okay, except for Luna, but given that her turning me to stone was what left me in a place where I started losing track of the difference between reality and dreams... she had it coming.

I'd confirmed that what I remembered being true had been true, and I seemed to be the only creature who remembered it that way. I'd confirmed I wasn't trapped in a dreamworld. That left only one possibility, horrible as it was. Someone had actually altered reality.

Don't tell me I'm a hypocrite. I don't alter reality. I alter things in reality. If reality is a house, I rearrange the furniture, replace the drapes, pull up the carpet, repaint the walls and hang new pictures, but I don't turn the house into Ponyville Station, and most especially I don't make it so the house always was Ponyville Station. Of course, you think it was always Ponyville Station and I'm just insane, or trying to trick you. The historical records haven't been altered to match everypony's memories. At least, not last time I looked. You can confirm that what I'm saying is true. You can check it.

Listen, this isn't what I do! This is radical change, yes, but there's no chaos. There's no disharmony. I want ponies to notice when I change something! I want them to look out their windows and yell "SWEET FILLY CELESTIA ON A POGO STICK, IT'S RAINING UMBRELLAS!" I want them to be shocked, amazed, horrified, discombobulated, confused. I don't want them to just go on with their day as if nothing had ever happened! This is a perfectly harmonious change, a massive transformation of absolutely everything that bothers nopony because nopony can remember that it
happened at all. Aren't you **horrified**? I am! The bedrock of reality, the consensus of the collective unconscious, the one constant value even *I* could never bear to change because if you change it, it becomes impossible to measure or even notice any other changes... and it's been altered. Do you feel violated? You should! I do! And I'm the only one whose memories weren't altered, probably because I was trapped in stone when the change happened, and if magic could alter my stone form in any way, I'd have been able to use chaos to alter myself into something that could actually do something, a long time ago.

This is **not** like you ponies utterly losing your marbles over what I do to the world with my chaos. This is completely different.

Still think I'm a hypocrite, flipping my own lid over someone doing to the world something very similar to what I do, except I'm not the one who did it? Fine, whatever, believe what you like about me, but if you hate my chaos you should hate this even **more**. Have you realized yet that thousands of ponies have either been vanished from reality entirely, with their loved ones having no memory of their existence, or have had their memories so massively rewritten they've undergone a gender change and they **don't know it**? Do you understand now why I'm afraid? Do you know now why I'm willing to face a maniac who's already cut off my tail once and nearly killed me, in the desperate hope that if I can find a way to stop him, I can restore reality?

If I was going to change thousands of stallions into mares, I'd make **quite** sure they remembered what they were supposed to be. Fine, I'm sadistic, I'm disharmonious, I do these kinds of things specifically because they upset ponies. But I wouldn't make it permanent, and I wouldn't make it so nopony remembered the world the way it had been before. That makes me better than this. Doesn't it?

Even knowing that someone had altered reality, I didn't immediately assume it was Anon. He'd seemed really pretty pathetic when I'd fought him. Okay, he'd beaten me, so he wasn't *that* pathetic, but he seemed so... average. Unnotable, aside from being on a planet where no other of his species resides. He wasn't a great intellect, and I didn't yet understand why I'd put up such a poor showing against him, but I did know that his swordfighting skills weren't that spectacular. I'd just gotten really, really unlucky, I thought.

When someone has done something, and you know absolutely nothing about who they are or how they did it, the one reliable clue you may be able to turn to is this: who benefits? So I considered that.

Who benefits from altering the structure of the Elements of Harmony in some way to add a seventh that can be used independently? Not the Tree of Harmony itself, the new Element was too unlike the others. Order, maybe, and Matrisse had actually attempted one of these bedrock changes to reality once; of we three avatars Matrisse is the only one with the power to alter the playing field, because it's the entity that sets and enforces the rules. Except it's suffering from a slight case of unfocusedness due to the fact that I smashed it into tiny pieces, and if enough of Matrisse had come back together to do something like this I would have felt the shift in the thaumic field. I can detect changes in the balance of magic, and that would have been a major one.

Who benefits from altering the structure of Equestrian society so there are a lot fewer males, and herding and lesbianism have become common? A male who wants a herd and doesn't want a lot of fair competition. But how could anypony who wielded such power have such a ridiculously venal motive? I mean... I don't wish to be crude here, but put it this way, when you have the kind of power that can make your dreams come true, a lack of nookie ceases to be a major crisis. Self-satisfaction takes on a whole new meaning when instead of being limited to Madame Paw, you can have Madame Realistic Full-Tactile Illusion Of Absolutely Anypony You Want. Entities as powerful as I
am just aren't motivated all that much by sex, because it's too easy to get almost anything you might want. Love is another story, but the kind of love that involves mind-controlling your partner and altering their memories so they think they have always loved you is not satisfying. Believe me, I've tried it. It doesn't work. Even altering their memories so they don't remember that they ever stopped loving you, when they were your lover once but broke up with you over irreconcilable differences like the fact that they think you're a monster now, turns out to be tremendously unsatisfying and actually rather painful.

Who benefits from making me act like an idiot? Any of the Elements of Harmony, including Anon, but none of the ponies demonstrated any such power in the past. Anon was the only one of the group who could have done it.

What's the likelihood that the mares of Harmony would embrace a new member who was a male stranger of an unknown species, who they just met, as thoroughly as they seemed to have? Well, they did make friends with each other shockingly quickly, but on the other hand, I happened to know that all of them had been linked since the day of Twilight's magical surge, that the force that grants ponies their cutie marks had connected them somehow. If someone rewrote reality so that there had always been a Seventh Element, perhaps they might have also rewritten it so the bearer of that Element would be connected to the others in the same way, and more or less instafriend them. But why would anyone have chosen to bring a human here to wield the Element of Protection, when there are plenty of none-too-bright stallions who could have been tapped to do the job?

But I was looking at this the wrong way. What if the point hadn't been to create a Seventh Element, and then choose a human to wield it? What if the human had come first, and the Seventh Element had been created for him?

If Anon was the one who had done this, then the timing matched; the transformation of information started happening after he came to this world. Wouldn't an entity who wanted to alter reality and then pull in some poor sucker from another world to take a role in the new reality have performed the alterations first and then dragged their target in?

If Anon had done this, then there being a Seventh Element of Harmony for him to wield would fit, because he'd have been the one to create it for himself. To give himself power, and a role. And that would explain why I had been an idiot in his presence. But why make me an uncreative idiot? And where did the business with the stallions fit in?

So I went and spied on Anon in Ponyville, invisibly. Amazing how much you learn when you turn invisible and coil around one of the branches of Twilight's library tree.

I learned that he knew a great deal about the Bearers, and always had -- in his world, they apparently had a fairly accurate fictional adaptation of the Bearers' lives running as a popular entertainment, but most humans were unaware that the adaptation was an adaptation, assuming it to be pure fiction. (I assumed. Either that or our lives really are fictional stories written by coatless monkeys, but I am having a hard enough time with my grasp on reality to be willing to go there.) I learned that everyone in Ponyville liked him except for two bratty fillies, who he had demonstrated considerable cruelty to in the course of teaching them to stop bullying the sisters of the Bearers... despite which, the father of one of the bratty fillies liked and respected him even more for "knocking some sense" into his daughter. Because everypony knows, if you can't manage to keep your child from misbehaving, you'll consider a coatless ape five times your daughter's size who roughs her up to teach her respect a gift from the heavens! I learned that his hands were considered wonderful and vital tools that everypony in Ponyville wanted him to make use of to perform any number of activities. Oh, if I'd only known hands were such beloved accoutrements by ponies, I'd have manifested myself some! Certainly I wouldn't have encountered fear and suspicion and disgust at being an unusual creature,
unique to this world and unfamiliar to ponies, if I'd just had hands! I imagine little Spikey-Wikey will be thrilled to learn this as well!

I also learned that all of the Element Bearers, who he referred to frequently as the "Mane Six", were herding with him. All of them. With occasional orgies.

I'm very much in favor of orgies. I'm very much in favor of orgies involving multiple ponies having sex with a male who has hands and comes from a completely different species and is the only representative of his kind on the planet. But I'm not in favor of involving ponies whose personalities have been altered by said male in such orgies unless they specifically requested that said male perform the alteration. And I'm very much not in favor of rewriting the entire universe and disappearing or gender-switching thousands of ponies so that their failure to compete with me will allow me to get ponies who wouldn't otherwise have wanted me involved in my orgies.

It was Anon. It had to be Anon who had done this. Whatever other entity might have thought there was a benefit to creating a Seventh Element of Harmony and then picking a human for the role, no such entity could possibly have thought it was a good idea to make all of the Bearers of the Elements fall in love with him. After all, friendship is magic... lust is chaotic. The potential for jealousy tearing the group apart if they were all in love with the same male was a terrible, terrible idea, from the perspective of someone who wanted to make the Elements more powerful by adding a seventh. But that potential would be completely ignored, if the one who made the change was a selfish twit who really wanted to have sex with six attractive, powerful mares and didn't think he could win them over the hard way.

And yet he showed no signs of knowing what he'd done. I spied on him a lot, as the seven of them searched for Luna and the missing Elements. I'd have thought that one of them would have thought of the Castle of the Pony Sisters right away, but even Twilight didn't seem to think of anything unless Anon said something that gave her the idea. However, I saw no active use of magic from him, and I never heard him say or do anything that would suggest he knew he'd made them love him or he knew he'd made them his sycophants, unable to think for themselves unless it pertained to their special areas of talent.

It wasn't as if he was running around throwing mind control powers about willy-nilly. It was more like... he'd turned Equestria into a stage, and our lives a play, with himself in the starring role. Except it was a fairly terrible play because, as the star, he was the leader, the one who came up with all the good ideas, and in reality his ideas were fairly stupid, so everypony else had to play the role of idiots in order to let him shine.

I have no idea how his power works. But since I went out and did all that research, everything else I've seen backs up my conclusions. He wants to be a big hero, and events conspire to allow him to be. He wants to be beloved, so six mares herd with him, and don't consider it strange, because the whole world has altered such that herding, once a rare practice looked down upon by mainstream society, is now common and normal. He wants everyone to be his friend, except the ones he doesn't like; those, he wants to be his enemies, and he wants to defeat us, humiliate us, crush us and, at least in my case, kill us.

The desire to confront him, to do something to harm him, is getting stronger. He doesn't want me to hole up in a cave writing down my observations about him, he wants me to go taunt him to his face and do some moderately annoying things so he has an excuse to cut me or thrash me. I want to know how long I can hold out, but at the same time, I'm afraid that if I wait too long, I'll lose myself in the emotion, and behave recklessly, and he'll kill me. It's not worth the risk.

Time to go take my life into my hands and make my token appearance in front of him again. If I
survive this, then the next time, I'll write about the various confrontations I've had so far, including the sad and humiliating details of the incident with my tail.
Well, I was going to go taunt Anon villainously, but at the last moment I chickened out had a much better idea -- I decided to go find my Elements of Disharmony! I had an idea where three of them were, and with three of them I might be able to zero in on the others better.

There's an odd number of Elements of Disharmony -- seven rather than six, because six lines up neatly, whereas seven is both odd and a prime number, making it inherently less harmonious than six. They're Selfishness, Rage, Cruelty, Deception, Greed, Hatred and Arrogance -- very much not the concepts I personally think of when I think of disharmony. I'd have put a much more positive spin on the whole thing. For instance I would definitely have included Rugged Individualism. And possibly Competitive Spirit. But I'm not the one who made them; I'm just the one who gets to infuse them with power and hand them out to exemplars of these various vices to get them to go create some delicious havoc. The thing about the Elements of Disharmony is that each one, individually, has power; unlike the Elements of Harmony, where you need the full set to do anything, I could get a good bit done with just three Elements of Disharmony.

I got the Element of Arrogance back very, very easily -- it was in Canterlot, in a museum. It never ceases to amaze me how dumb Celestia is sometimes. She's been in how many wars, fought how many monsters and evil overlords and devourers of souls and of course me, and yet she just isn't paranoid enough, ever. Deep down inside she's still the filly who wanted to believe that the dragons were sincere about surrendering when -- you know what, I'm not going to finish that sentence. Nothing good comes of my thinking about those days.

The point is, Celestia is a big fat idiot sometimes. She trusts that goodness and courage and friendship will always save the day. Equestria's got no actual standing military, though the Guard was a lot larger before Anon got hold of it, and there is a militia at least, thousands of ponies across Equestria who train on weekends waiting for a call to arms that they hope will never come. As if a militia of ponies who train on weekends is going to stand up to a professional army. Of course, the fact that she controls the sun puts Celestia in a unique situation vis-à-vis the rest of the world; she's not overly afraid of military invasion because she can always hover the sun over her enemies for a few hours to demonstrate why they should not mess with her.

The thing is, Celestia is not the first to wield the sun -- Ra the Arabian alicorn in ancient Neighjypt and Amaterasu the kirin in Neighpon were two sun-wielders like Celestia, and they've both been dead a very long time. For that matter unicorns in what is now Northern Equestria and the Crystal Empire used to manage the job. Celestia's never had to deal with a sun war where another entity of similar power fights with her for control of it -- when I take over the sun, Celestia can't begin to oppose me because I'm just that much more powerful than she is, and Luna's never wanted to fight with Celestia over the sun, she just wanted the sun to go away and not come back. But part of the reason Saddle Arabia is a desert is the battle Ra had with Aten, another Arabian alicorn who managed to take over the sun for himself. So Celestia's belief that no one will ever invade Equestria because they're worried about the sun being used against them is... I'd say charmingly naïve, but I stopped being charmed by Celestia's naivete a long time ago.

All of this goes to show you why a powerful magical artifact with the power to make anypony with a little bit of pride in themselves act like an egotistical, pompous twit was sitting in a museum in Celestia's capital city, three blocks from the palace. I mean, maybe she never noticed because the unicorn nobility and wanna-bes that populate Canterlot are already egotistical, pompous twits, but that's not a good excuse for failing to notice the magic it radiates. In my day, unicorns knew how to detect chaos magic (the ones that didn't made great ten-legged hamsters), but nowadays, unicorns
seem to barely be able to tell when an artifact radiates dark magic, let alone chaos magic.

It was shockingly easy to take it. I basically just walked up to the display, liquified the glass case, removed the Element, and replaced it with a facsimile that will squirt banana yogurt at any pony who handles it. Admittedly I was sort of broadcasting a "somebody else's problem" field to keep anypony from bothering to notice me or what I was doing, but really I expected more difficulties. Where was the room full of infrared lasers and explosive ordnance that I was going to have to use my fantastic flexibility and acrobatic skill to dodge my way through?

So now I have the Element of Arrogance, and a few possible candidates for who to give it to. I'm fairly certain that the Element of Greed is in the possession of a dragon way down south (really, who else would have it?!) and the Element of Rage is held by the Kraken in the Mareland bay near Baltimare. They're not bearers, they're just hoarding powerful magic items. I also think the Element of Hatred is probably in the Crystal Empire but I don't think I actually want to use that one. So tomorrow I'm going to head to Baltimare to get the Element of Rage, but today I'm going to try to catch up with myself and finish telling you all about my adventures with Anon.

After I figured out that Anon had warped the world, made the Element Bearers fall in deep carnal love with him and actually altered the gender balance of Equestria to make this more plausible, created a Seventh Element for himself to wield, and so on and so forth, I decided I needed more information about my enemy. I'd spied on him, of course, but nothing could beat personal knowledge of him straight from the horses' mouths, as it were.

So I went first to honest Applejack, who was, as usual, bucking trees. Seriously, what kind of a life is that? Monday: buck trees. Tuesday: buck trees. Wednesday: buck trees. Thursday: get really wild and take apples to the marketplace, then buck trees. If I had to live a life like that, I think I'd have ended up hanging from one of those trees.

I coiled up in a tree she hadn't gotten to yet, waited until she got close, and then had the tree step backwards, out of her way, as she bucked. So her hooves, of course, hit thin air. "What in tarnation--?" That's what I love about these earthy farmer types, they're not shy to express their frustration with bowdlerized curse words.

She tried again, of course. This time I had the tree yell, "Hay! What's the big idea, lady?"

Applejack looked around herself. "What the -- who the hay was that?"

"It's me, hay for brains! I'm right here!" the tree said in the best Manehattan accent I could give it.

She stared at the tree. "Did... are you the tree talkin' to me?"

"No, I'm a giant banana. What do you think? Do I look like a big rock or something here? 'Cause I thought anyone with a brain could tell I was a tree, but apparently you're dumber than a box of pears, and that's saying something when you consider how dumb pears are."

"My apple tree. Is talkin' to me."

"Pretty sure I didn't stutter, lady."

"The hay with this. I better tell Twilight and Anon about this."

"Not so fast," I said, disappointed that I was getting such a lackluster response to my prank, and grabbed her with my tail, pulling her up into the branches to face me. "Don't you know it's rude to run off without even saying 'hi' to someone?"
"Discord! I mighta known this was your fault!" She struggled, wiggling. "Put me down right now!"

"Now, now, no need to be so hasty," I said, bouncing her up and down a bit, mostly because she was strong enough that if I didn't disorient her she might actually be able to wiggle loose from my grip. "I'm just here for some information, and then I'll be off on my way."

"Information?" She glared at me. "You ain't gonna get any!"

"By hook or by crook, I will, dear Applejack," I said, grinning broadly at her. For some reason it unnerves ponies when I do that. It might have something to do with my random collection of carnivore teeth. "After all, you wouldn't want to lie to me, would you?"

"I can keep my mouth shut without lyin' at all," Applejack retorted. "Just cause you ask a question, there ain't no reason I gotta answer you."

"And here I thought mares loved to talk about the object of their affections," I said, pressing the back of my paw to my forehead. "Oh, dear, will I ever understand the vagaries of love?"

"Of love? What the hay are you talkin' about, Discord?"

"Anon, of course! A little birdie told me that you love him, so I thought you'd be eager to tell me all about him! Isn't that what mares do when they're in love?"

"I ain't telling you a darned thing about Anon!"

"So you don't love him. Why, Applejack, you naughty filly! I never took you for the caddish playgirl type!"

"No -- that ain't what I'm sayin'! You're twistin' my words all around, Discord! Now put me down!"

I'd brought her just a trifle too close to my face, forgetting how very inventive these particular mares can be sometimes, not to mention determined. She twisted her body around in my grip and kicked me in the face. A foreleg kick isn't nearly as powerful as a backleg buck, but it's nothing to sneeze at either. My head rocked backward and I lost my grip, allowing Applejack to fall to the ground, where she immediately started running.

So I warped space, making her run straight toward me. She caught on immediately, spun around and started running in the opposite direction. We played this game for a few minutes, where she'd try to charge off and then I'd flip space around so she was running back toward me again, until finally she gave up in defeat and flipped around and I lost my grip, allowing Applejack to fall to the ground, where she immediately started running.

"Let me go, you darned varmint!"

I started giggling uncontrollably. In part because the sensation of her legs stuck in my taffy abdomen was actually kind of ticklish, but mostly because she looked ridiculous, stuck to me with her back legs buried half-deep in my stomach, balancing precariously on her forelegs. "Of - of course I will!" I said, laughing. "Here, perhaps a little lubrication to help you pull free!" I summoned up a cotton candy cloud and made it rain chocolate milk directly on top of her, turning the ground to mud that her forehooves sank into. (No comments about the unoriginality, please, I already know.)

"Let me go!" she shouted again.
"Oh, dear, Applejack, you seem to have caught a bad case of repetitionitis. Are you able to say anything other than 'let me go'?

"Of course I am! Now let me loose!"

"But I have so many questions to ask you! Tell me more, like does he have a car?"

"A what?"

Celestia and Luna know my full range of capabilities, of course, but I'd gotten the distinct impression they'd never told their little ponies everything I can do. So Applejack would be prepared to fight back against my making her a liar... not to stop me from turning her eager to share her honest opinions about everything. Increasing the trait of Honesty tends to make honest ponies happy to express themselves. "Hmmph," I said. "If you really loved this Anon, you'd be desperate to tell me all about him!"

"I do love him!"

"Prove it," I challenged. "Tell me all about him. Why do you love him, Applejack? How did he win your heart?" I looked directly into her eyes.

Her eyes didn't swirl -- they would have if I'd used brute force, but her desire to prove her love opened the door, just as her desire to preserve her friendships had the last two times, and when I'm making ponies more like themselves, it doesn't show up as if I'm hypnotizing them. Their auras brighten and turn harsh-looking, more monochromatic and sharper, the brightness wiping out shading and subtlety, but even most unicorns can't see auras unless they're trying, and a brighter aura is much less noticeable than the graying, aura-dulling effect I get when I make them into their opposites. "You'd never understand," she said, glaring behind herself. "I'll bet you've never even been in love. What would you know about how it feels to find a soulmate?"

I released her, letting her back hooves fall free of me and turning myself back into flesh. She pulled her forehooves out of the muck and turned to face me, as I knew she would. The flowery word "soulmate" told me she was under my spell, ready to spill her most honest thoughts and feelings. Applejack's actually had a much more sophisticated education than she chooses to let show, because she doesn't want to remind her family of her months as a teenage runaway living the Orange life in Manehattan. She doesn't normally perceive hiding her advanced vocabulary and educational level from other ponies as dishonest, because she sees displaying those traits as putting on airs, or so she said as a newly becutiemarked filly, returned from her adventures (remember I spied on these guys with all the meager power I had available to me in stone, from the time of Twilight's magical surge to the time I broke loose, because I knew they'd end up as the Bearers of Harmony.) Under my influence, however, the internal censor that made sure she talked like an Apple was gone, and what came out was the full Applejack. "Why would I know anything about it? I need you to tell me, Applejack. Tell me how it feels to find a soulmate. Tell me why you love him."

So she did. She waxed ecstatic for the next ten minutes or so about how strong and dependable and down-to-earth Anon was, how important family was to him now that he'd lost his (apparently he had a tragic past in which his entire family was killed in a plane accident on vacation while he'd been in college, which had in some unspecified manner led him to arrive in Equestria), how understanding and kind and determined he was, yadda yadda. When I pointed out that it hardly seemed kind and dependable for him to be the lover of six mares, she retorted that the herding had been the mares' idea, and that Anon came from a world where one man paired up with one woman, so they'd had to convince him that being with all of them at once would keep there from being jealousy or conflict between them. I've discorded too many members of herds to believe that herding actually does anything to stop jealousy; it just gives ponies motivation to suppress it.
"But aren't you in the slightest bit jealous?" I asked the Most Honest Mare In Equestria.

"I'm jealous of all my friends sometimes," she said. "Rarity's so much prettier than I am, and Rainbow's a blowhard but she's got the chops to get away with it, and Twilight's so darned smart, and Fluttershy's just so nice and Pinkie's energy never stops. Lots of times, I wish I was more like them. But I ain't jealous of Anon loving them, 'cause they're lovable. I love them. I wish I was more the kind of pony they are instead of being just some simple farmer with dirt on her hooves, but I ain't, and that's why I ain't jealous of his lovin' them too. I'm just so lucky that he loves me at all, even close to as much as he loves them, 'cause I ain't the kind of mare any fella wants to take out and treat fancy, if you get what I'm sayin'. I'm lucky anyone can love me as a mare at all. Anon's the best thing that happened to me."

Part of me thought this declaration was absolutely hilarious. But... for some reason, it saddened me as well. It's true, by pony standards of beauty Applejack was probably the least conventionally attractive of her group, but that expression "conventionally attractive" is always one I wished I could burn out of the pony psyche with molten chocolate lava or something. I'd never seen or heard any evidence that Applejack was anything other than proud of herself and happy to be exactly who she was, and as I said, I've been spying on her and the other Bearers for most of their lives. She's not my type -- it's hard to imagine a less chaotic pony, even Pinkie's rock-obsessed sister generates chaos by being so unbearably monomaniacal about a subject that bores everyone that it's unusual and disturbing to ponies -- but I'd always respected her for being exactly who she was and proud of it, even if there were a good number of ponies who'd look down on her for it.

Either she'd been hiding this kind of insecurity her entire life and my spell had brought it out of her... or Anon had warped her. I didn't know which, but... it bothered me to feel this way, ponies are my playthings and the Bearers are my enemies, I shouldn't feel any kind of sympathy for any of them... and yet I did. For... personal reasons, it bothers me when a pony who's different from the norm is ashamed of that difference. There are ponies who should definitely be ashamed of who and what they are, because they're pompous twits or hypocritical boremasters or pretentious artsoids, but Applejack is not one of them.

My original plan had been to find a weakness, an insecurity and work on that to increase the disharmony between her and the other Bearers. But I couldn't do it. This particular insecurity bothered me. I couldn't bring myself to make a pony less proud of the differences between herself and other ponies. I told myself I was going soft (I'm still telling myself this, in fact), but it didn't change how I felt, and, well, chaos is all about going with your whims and doing what you feel like doing, and I didn't feel like making this particular bugaboo of Applejack's worse. So I didn't. I wiped her memory of the conversation, instead. (Memory's not a personality trait, but I can affect it as easily as I affect personalities, at least for the first twenty minutes or so after an event I don't want ponies to remember takes place. After that I can't neatly erase a given memory, and attempts to do so usually lead ponies to end up with giant holes in their recollection, large enough for parents, best friends, or the taste of lemonade to fall into.)

I left her confused and alone, standing in chocolate mud, apparently trying to remember what she'd just been doing, and went off to find Rarity.

Rarity had closed up shop and was in the middle of making... something... I think it was an outfit, though honestly it looked to me more like a parade float. Her sister was at school, her front door was locked, and she was in a room full of ponyquins. Perfect.

"Mommy!" I made one of the ponyquins cry. "Mommy! I'm hungry, Mommy!"
Rarity looked up, startled. "What in the world--"

"Mommy, I'm bored! Can you read me a story?" another ponyquin demanded.

"Mommy, can I have cookies?"

"Mommy, I have to go to the potty!"

"Where is this coming from?" Rarity looked around herself, but of course didn't find any actual foals in her workroom. Because I didn't make them move, or give them mouths to talk with, it took her a few minutes to realize the cries were coming from the ponyquins.

Hilariously, her first conclusion was that her ponyquins were haunted, and she tried to flee the room, which was a little difficult for her because I'd turned the door into a life-size paper photograph of a door hanging on the wall, and when she used her magic to open it, it tore into shreds. Meanwhile the ponyquins were crying for "Mommy" louder and louder. Rarity backed herself against what used to be the door, sewing needles and scissors floating in the air in front of her, ready to shred an attacker to bits. Sad, really. The baby ponyquins just wanted love from their mommy, and instead she was preparing to kill them if they came near her! What a terrible mother Rarity is.

I dangled down from the ceiling and tapped Rarity on the head. She let out a shriek and fired a bolt of magic straight up at me, which I of course dodged. "Oh my!" I said. "I hope I'm not interrupting anything..."

"DISCORD!" The lungs on that mare. "What have you done?!"

"Why, what makes you think I've done anything?" I said, putting my paw over my heart. "I've just come to drop in on an old friend for a chat! I'm shocked that you think I'm up to something nefarious, after all we've meant to each other!"

"All that we've meant to each other? All you mean to me is a hideous nuisance who's ponynapped Princess Luna!"

"How soon you forget, Rarity!" I floated down from the ceiling. "I hooked you up with your last boyfriend! It's hardly my fault it didn't work out between you and Tom."

"Be quiet, you ruffian!" She started throwing things at me, such as scissors, needles, etc.

"Well, now, that's hardly ladylike behavior," I complained.

"You do not deserve ladylike behavior, you monstrous brute!"

"And here I was thinking that ladylike behavior is inherent to the lady, not to her audience. Oh, how cruelly my illusions have been shattered!" I put my taloned arm to my forehead and fell backward onto her fainting couch. She took the opportunity to send her entire arsenal at me, so I turned them all into cheese puffs and funneled them all into my mouth, chomping them down. Rarity stared at me, one eye twitching.

"You... you monstrosity! What have you done to my sewing supplies?"

"Oh, I ate them. They were delicious! Your hospitality is excellent as always, Rarity, thank you." I wiped my lips with the whatever-it-was she'd been making, getting cheese puff crumbs all over it.

Before her eyeballs exploded out of her head, I leaned forward. "But actually, I'm here for some information. I must confess, this Anon fellow of yours has me stymied. However did someone like
That win the hearts of six mares? I have a hard time imagining that you would all find him attractive."

"That simply shows how little you know," Rarity huffed. "Anon is a true gentlemen, a paladin, a knight in shining armor! Not to be confused with Twilight's brother, of course, who is quite the handsome stallion, but Anon is a gem, a paragon of male beauty!"

"But he isn't even a pony," I pointed out.

"I know," Rarity said dreamily. "So exotic! And the wonders he can perform with his hands!"

This, I had to admit, rather ticked me off. "I'm exotic, and I have hands," I said crossly. "What's Anon got that I haven't got?"

Rarity glared at me. "Symmetry."

All right, she had me there. "So what's so great about symmetry anyway?"

While I'd been having this conversation with Rarity, I'd been slowly working on her, increasing her talkativity and desire to gift me with her opinions. This was actually easier than it was to do to Applejack, and didn't even require me to alter her aura much; Rarity was already a gossip who'd share her strong opinions about anyone and everything at the drop of a hat, probably after quickly dusting the hat off and complaining about how it was practically ruined now from touching the ground.

"As if you could possibly understand," Rarity sneered. "A creature like you couldn't hope to understand the appeal of someone as wonderful as Anon!"

"Then tell me," I said. "Educate me. If you think he's so wonderful, surely you can spare a few words to explain why!"

"Gladly," she said sharply, before losing her edge to that dreamy expression again. "He's so well-mannered and so caring, such a delight to be with. Why, any mare in his embrace can't help but feel as if he'd move heaven and earth to take care of her. He's so strong, but so gentle; so sweet, but so fierce in our defense. He always has a compliment or a gift for us, and he's so considerate and loving..." She shivered, a sultry smile on her face that rather annoyed me, given that I knew how little it had to do with being in my company. "And those hands, and the magnificent things he can do with them. So very splendid."

"And you don't mind sharing him with five other mares? How very generous of you."

"I..." Rarity flushed and looked away. "I confess it... sometimes... sometimes I feel unworthy of him, of my friends, because I can't quite live up to my ideals... I'm supposed to be the Element of Generosity, but there are times... there are times I do want him all to myself, and I resent that I must share him with my friends. What a terrible thing for me to think! Sometimes I feel like such a failure... I'm not truly generous at all, am I?"

It's so very interesting to make ponies want to babble their deepest, darkest secrets to me. I always get such intriguing tidbits out of it. "Of course not!" I said. "Feeling jealousy at having to share your lover is a perfectly natural, normal thing for a pony to feel! After all, you're not perfect; no pony could possibly be. I think it's positively wonderful of you that you can even share a lover at all, and keep any jealous feelings to yourself! No one could blame you for what goes on in the privacy of your own mind, after all."

"You really think so?" Rarity asked, by now deep enough under my spell that she'd forgotten I was her enemy Discord, Spirit of Disharmony, and had apparently mistaken me for a gal pal from the spa
"Of course!" I said. "Besides, given what they've said about you -- oh dear, I wasn't supposed to talk about that, was I?"

Even under my influence, Rarity's finely honed instinct for gossip about herself was as sharp as usual. "What do you mean?" she asked, glaring.

"Oh, I'm sure Applejack wouldn't have meant me to share the information," I said, talons against my lips in my best impersonation of a coy ingenue. "She only shared it with me because she's so very honest; I'm sure she would prefer that I keep it in confidence."

"Did she tell you not to tell me?" Rarity demanded.

"Well... not really... it never actually came up, to tell the truth," I "admitted".

"Then there's no reason you can't tell me!" she said triumphantly.

"I... suppose you're right," I said, feigning reluctance. "Well. If the truth be told, Applejack told me... something about Anon that... oh, I really shouldn't be telling you this."

"Discord, tell me now!" Her telekinesis grabbed my head and yanked it forward so she could glare into my eyes.

"Oh, well, if you're going to be so forceful about it..." I pulled my head back. "See, Applejack was sharing some of her insecurities with me... you know how honest she is..."

Rarity blinked. "Honest or not, I cannot imagine Applejack sharing insecurities with you," she said, overlooking the fact that she just had.

"Wellll... it might have had a teeny tiny bit to do with a spell I put on her to amplify her honesty..."

"You brute!"

"Oh, make up your mind, girl, one moment I'm making her a liar and I'm a brute for doing that, and then I make her more willing to exemplify her Element and I'm a brute for doing that too? If anything I just made her more powerful against me, did you ever think of that? I mean your little lightshow only works when you're really feeling your Elements, right?"

"You... do have a point," Rarity said reluctantly. "Well, go on then, what did she tell you?"

"Well, she was saying how insecure she feels around all of you, because she feels like all of you are so much better than she is. In particular, she pointed out how much prettier than herself she feels you are, Rarity."

"Oh... but Applejack could be so beautiful if she only put some time and attention into her appearance! I'm not really all that lovely, naturally, I simply know how to make the most of what I have! Oh, I must teach Applejack some things about makeup and fashion, I'm sure I could help her to become truly stunning!"

"Oh, no need, no need!" I said. "You see, Anon helped her with her feelings by telling her that she's his second favorite of all of you... next to Twilight, of course--"

"But I always thought his favorite was Fluttershy," Rarity said weakly.

"Well, there's no way to tell if Anon was lying to Applejack or not," I said. "But what he told her
when she said she thought you were more beautiful than she is, was that you're his least favorite pony. Something about being just like the stuck-up girls from his high school?"

Rarity was turning even paler than usual. "But... surely Anon couldn't have..."

"Of course, Applejack wouldn't have lied to me," I said, "but Anon could have been lying to her to make her feel better."

"Of course," Rarity said weakly, before putting a hoof to her mouth. "Except... Applejack can tell when anypony's lying..."

"But Anon's not a pony! So perhaps he can lie to her!"

Rarity was shaking her head, her face a mask of dawning horror and misery. "No... no, Applejack can tell when he's lying, too... she always knows..." She burst into tears. "Anon doesn't love me!" she wailed.

"Now, now, I'm sure he loves you," I said reassuringly. "Just because you're his least favorite of his six marefriends doesn't mean he doesn't care about you! Just not nearly as much as he cares about any of your other friends!"

"I -- I must be strong," she hiccupped, obviously trying to stop sobbing. "It's... it's his decision, not theirs... I must not be jealous of my friends' good fortune..."

"Well, if they were good friends, I'm sure they'd understand," I said. "It's certainly painful to be told the one you love loves five other mares more... seven if you count Celestia and Luna."

"He loves the princesses more than me?" Rarity wailed.

"Of course," I said. "They are the princesses, after all. But don't worry! If you want to keep the fact that you know this from your friends so they won't think you're jealous, you needn't worry about Applejack! I put a memory spell on her when we were done with our little chat, because I didn't want her to run to Anon and tell him I was in town, so she has no recollection of our conversation at all! And as long as you don't question her on the matter and reveal that you know something, she won't have any way of guessing that you feel jealous of her!"

Rarity glared at me. "And how do I know you're telling the truth?"

I put up my paws in a gesture of surrender. "You're the one who demanded I give you this information! I certainly didn't volunteer it to you, madam, and I find it quite rude of you to insinuate that I'm lying to you when you practically had to pull my fang to get me to tell you any of this!"

The anger on her face collapsed into misery again. "That's true... if you were lying you'd have just told me without my insistence... oh, why did I even ask?"

"Don't you think you have the right to know where you stand?" I said softly to her. "Rarity, all the world knows you're a magnificent mare. Not my type, of course... you're far too symmetrical." I grinned at her. "But for some reason you ponies do like this whole symmetry thing. By pony standards, you're stunning. Surely if you feel slighted by Anon, you could do better elsewhere? Isn't it better to know the truth?"

"I... I couldn't do better than Anon," she whimpered. "I'll never find a stallion as wonderful as he is..."

"I'm sure you could," I said. "If you keep your eyes open. Which you can't do if you spend all your
time gazing at Anon. There's a whole world of stallions out there, girlfriend! Go on, go out there and carpe stallionem!"

"I... but it's Anon I want..."

"Well, then you might have to compete with your friends for him. Just friendly competition, of course, you're all in a herd together. It's not as if you're going to backstab them and force them out of the herd to improve your standing with Anon; after all, they're your friends."

"Of course I'm not..."

"That's right! It'll be much harder to win his love all to yourself without making them look really bad and ruining his love for them, of course, but that plan of action is right off the table because you'd never do such a thing to your friends, even if they've all betrayed you by taking the stallion, excuse me, man that you love and making him love them more than he loves you!"

"I... I have to think about this..."

"Well, of course you do. Put as much thought into it as you need to, my dear. None of it's any skin off my nose, anyway; I don't have a mare to root for in this fight. Though I must say that anyone who'd prefer a country bumpkin like Applejack to someone as sophisticated, intelligent and artistic as you are... well, honestly, I truly do think you could do better. Why, even my old friend Steve has nothing but wonderful things to say about you, and when Steve waxes ecstatic about a female, let alone a female pony... well, it's just amazing to me that no stallion has come along and swept you off your hooves yet."

"Steve?"

"Why, you know him, Steven Magnet! The river serpent? We're old pals!" We aren't. He expressed extreme displeasure when I changed the river water to chocolate syrup and attempted to attack me. Oh, dragonkind, always trying to posture draconically at me as if I were a mere dragon-pony hybrid and not the Lord of Chaos. And yes, water serpents are, essentially, dragons by any other name. I did know him well enough to know which direction his gate swings in, though, quite fabulously too if I'm not mistaken.

"I... but there are so few stallions, I'd have to share nearly any of them with their other wives..."

"Like Cup Cake shares Carrot?"

Rarity frowned at me, but it was an "I'm thinking" frown, not an unhappy frown. "That's true... Cup Cake doesn't share Carrot... except maybe with Pinkie but she's never said so one way or another..."

"Now surely you don't think you're less alluring than Cup Cake, do you?"

"Of course not!" She drew herself up in a posture of great offense. "I am much more attractive than that... little... baker!"

"That's the spirit! You go out there and be as Rarity as you can possibly be, and some stallion or other is bound to swoon at your feet! Even if you're not interested in him... you can always use him to make Anon jealous, now can't you?"

"Yes... yes, of course, I could do that..." She brightened.

"Do tell me how it all turns out, won't you? Ta-ta!"
Oh, what a marvelous day that was. And since then I do believe I've seen bits and pieces of disaffection with Anon from Rarity. I was hoping to make her turn on her friends in jealousy, but making her fall out of love with Anon might be even better -- if she starts to see him for what he is, it'll either drive a wedge between her and the rest of the Bearers, or between the Bearers and Anon, and either way will be good for me.

My next few interviews... did not go nearly so well. But I've quite exhausted myself writing about my own cleverness, Dear Reader, and since Luna's free now (that happened round about the same time as Anon chopped off my tail, and I'll get to telling you all about it, eventually), I have to be careful to get my sleep during the day. It's off to nap a bit for me, and when I get up, I'll try to finish writing about my interviews with Pinkie Pie and Fluttershy. Though maybe I won't write about my conversation with Fluttershy. Ever.
In which I pretty much don't succeed at anything

I'm quite proud of myself! I've spent about half of today creating a spell to block Luna from a pony's mind. Of course I can block her for myself -- I have quite a bit more raw power than she does -- and I could easily enough cast a chaos field around any given pony to make Luna's spell fall apart as she tries to enter their dreamscape. One thing chaos magic is exceptionally good at is disrupting harmonic magic. Oh, you should have seen what those vines I was breeding a millennium ago could do to any unicorn, even one who wasn't actively trying to cast!... shame about those, they were supposed to sprout after I planted their seeds, but that was right before I was turned to stone the first time, and I suppose they needed something I wasn't around to give. Ah, well, c'est la guerre.

The problem is that if I cast a chaos field around a pony, Luna's going to know it, and she's going to know that pony is important to my plans. Also, an alicorn can superconcentrate harmonic magic to the point where if they try really hard they can break any spell of mine that I'm not actively concentrating on myself. So I'd tip Luna off that these ponies are useful to me, which is exactly why I don't want her spelunking in their dreams, and in the end I wouldn't be able to keep her out of their heads anyway. Once I finish collecting my Elements of Disharmony, or some of them anyway, I'm going to be handing them out, and once I do that I want the ponies who have them to be immune to Woona The Dream Spy.

Creating actual spells is not what chaos magic is particularly good at. Harmonic spells are easy, if you do that sort of thing, which I don't because boring. There are little routines you make a spell perform, orders you give it if you will, and if you link them together just right you get a very, very predictable spell that will do the same thing every time you cast it, unless you're Twilight Sparkle and much too powerful for your own good. (Someday Sparky's going to figure out she's a chaos caster, that she's using pure willpower to force raw magic to do her bidding and, spoiler alert, raw magic is chaos magic. Entirely the wrong way to go about it. If she learned some chaos theory she'd be dangerous, but fortunately for me she has entirely the wrong mindset to be able to learn to manipulate chaos. On the other hand... just the fact that she can make raw magic do her bidding with willpower is impressive as it is. The only ponies I've ever seen pull that stunt were Starswirl, and Luna when she shouldn't have been able to do classical magic at all. But I digress!)

Chaos magic does not work the same way. As my little digression above should suggest, raw, uncontrolled magic is chaos magic, and vice versa. Change, disorder, transformation of information, is the engine that generates magic in our world, so stirring up disorder increases the available free magic in the local mana pool. This actually makes more magic available to everyone, not just me, but since I can actually detect ebbs and flows in the thaumosphere that ponies can't, I become aware it's there a lot sooner than unicorns do. And I can use it directly. Users of harmony magic, aka every sane unicorn ever, can't.

Think of it this way. Raw magic is waiting to do what you tell it to. But raw magic is, mmm, hyper. Raw magic is full of energy and it wants to do things with that energy. It wants to flow through you and make cacti into giant marshmallows and turn bananas into spiders and make water rain up. It comes from change and transformation, and that is what it wants to do. The act of casting a harmonic spell is the imposition of rules from the superstructure of Order, the metamagical rules that govern what you can and can't do with magic, to strip raw magic of its free will and make it do what you want, at which point, generally, it does exactly what you told it to do. Which is not necessarily what you wanted it to do, but then, that's why unicorns who experiment with creating and testing spells usually have a short life span if they don't get really good at it really fast.

(There is no such thing as Order magic, by the way. Magic is chaos. Ordering chaos is harmony, not
order. Order supplied the rules that magic works by; it is not in itself a form of magic.)

I don't think this is very fair to magic! The poor thaumic particles, they just want to play and have fun and reproduce by causing disorder and change to make more thaumic particles, and stuffy stick-in-the-mud unicorns strip them of their ability to do what they want to do and force them to do what the unicorns decided, and I consider this a travesty! Won't anyone think of the poor thaumic particles?

Chaos magic, by contrast, is not about telling magic what to do. It's about persuading magic to do what you want. Convince magic that what you want would be fun, and it will happily cooperate... losslessly. See, adding the structure of rules to harmonic magic weakens the magic. You're burning up some of it in creating the structure that the rest of it will follow. The more precise your magical operation, the less power you have (and vice versa... this is why Twilight Sparkle, the world's most powerful unicorn, cannot match her friend Rarity for precision and dexterity.) But talking magic into doing what you want it to do? That consumes nothing. All the magic you were drawing on is available for creating the effect; none of it goes into shaping the magic.

Magic is my friend. It trusts me. It knows I'll create chaos, which will make more magic. Magic knows I won't force it to do things that are no fun. Twilight Sparkle may be the Element of Magic, but that's an element of Harmony. I am Chaos, and whatever sappy things Twilight might have to say about friendship... Chaos is magic. So magic does pretty much anything I want it to without my having to force it.

Thus, most of my spells are very spontaneous. Half the time I don't even know exactly what they'll do before they go off. I summon "pie"! Will it be cream pie? Cherry pie? Chicken pot pie? Snozzberry? Papier mache? Mud pie? Pinkie Pie? The circumference of a circle divided by its diameter? (Usually it's not that one. Chaos hates math, unless the math is really complicated or interesting.) But when I have to create a spell that produces a consistent effect when I'm not around to guide it... that takes work, because frankly, magic is brainless. Magic is such a hyperactive ferret it makes Pinkie and I look like stolid college professors. This is why most creatures have to use harmonic magic to get anything resembling consistent effects; magic is stupid and you have to tell it what to do.

So it was a real challenge for me. I had to create a spell that would use chaos magic in a consistent way when I'm not around to tell it what to do, and it would have to perform a task much more complex than "mess up harmonic spells".

What I did was to create a spell that generates dreams. Normally it leaves dreams alone entirely; dreams are chaotic, and the chaos of dreams feeds the spell, strengthening it. When it senses dreamwalking magic -- anyone's, it doesn't have to be Luna's -- it sends a compulsion to the dreaming mind to relive happy childhood memories. I picked happy childhood memories because every creature that dreams has some (and if their childhood was endless misery, most likely my spell will just make them make up some happy things to dream about... it's a dream, after all, it doesn't have to have actually happened). Luna won't interfere with a happy dream, and a dream about my minion's childhood will necessarily take place before they became my minion and therefore include no telltale imagery of talking statues or cotton candy or my handsome face. And because the effect will produce different dreams for every pony I cast it on, every time it goes into effect, it is sufficiently chaotic that it falls within the purview of what I can use my powers for, which allows me to get away with adding just enough structure to it that it becomes a repeatable spell with consistent results that work when I'm not focused on it.

I realize I am damaging my villain cred by plotting to cast spells on my minions that give them happy dreams of idyllic foalhood. I know, I know, I'm supposed to be cackling "bwahaha" and giving them horrifying dreams that rend their souls and shatter their minds. Boring! Also stupid. If I select ponies
because they're useful to me, odds are, driving them insane will make them less useful! Otherwise wouldn't I have picked insane ponies to begin with? Besides if I'm going to shatter somepony's mind and drive them into gibbering insanity... I want to do it when they're awake. And I'd do it to my enemies, not my allies.

See, unlike other villains, I don't take minions for granted. Most of the time, I work alone. I also really, really enjoy disharmony, which makes it close to impossible for anyone to work together. And I put a lot of value on freedom from nonsensical rules. So I don't treat minions like slaves, or servants who are honor-bound to carry out my whims; I treat them like contractors. They'll work for me as long as I'm paying them and they haven't gotten a better offer, therefore, I need to keep their working conditions fairly tolerable. Also I haven't figured out how to make anyone slavishly subservient and loyal to me without also making them fall in love with me, and if there's one thing infinitely worse than a disrespectful, wiseassed minion, it's a clingy, emotionally needy minion. (I like to think this is because I am so anti-authoritarian that I simply can't comprehend the mindset of slavishly serving anyone unless you're madly in love with them, not that I'm incompetent or something.) Other villains can growl "You have disappointed me for the last time" and kill their minions for a minor screw-up; I just tell them that they'd better get their plot in gear to fix their mistake or no Hearth's Warming bonus for them! And yet I still have far fewer minions than pretty much any other villain ever. Go figure. I guess minions don't like nice villains like me; they prefer to be pushed around by flankhole villains who mistreat them.

Anyway. At the moment I don't have any minions; I still need to go collect the Elements of Rage and Greed. But first, I'm going to tell you the rest of the story of my interviews with the Elements of Harmony.

When I dropped in on Pinkie, she was singing some sort of inane song about baking cupcakes, so I joined in with her.

As she was singing, "Cinnamon/vanilla too/Add them to our treat/A nutmeg pinch, a dash of salt/Soon they'll be ready to eat!" I chimed in "Cutie marks/and wingies too/Add them to our treat/A griffin pinch, a dash of Dash/Soon you'll be ready to eat!"

Pinkie turned and glared at me. "Do you mind? Those lyrics are really really gross and will ruin our Y7 rating!" (No, I have no idea what she meant by that. The ways of Pinkie can be mysterious even to me.) Then she did a comic doubletake. "DISCORD?!"

"No, no, no, discord would be if I'd been trying to sing a completely different song," I said. "For instance, you sing your song about cupcakes, and I sing 'A peanut sat on the railroad track, his heart was all a-flutter/Round the bend came the Number 10/Toot toot, peanut butter!'"

"Mmm, peanut butter," Pinkie said dreamily. "Hey, I could add some peanut butter to the cupcakes!"

She went rummaging around in the pantry to dig up a jar of peanut butter, piped some into six of the cupcake centers, and only then swung back around to face me. "What are you doing here, you big meany pants?"

"Now what did I do to deserve that?" I asked her. "I come to visit, I sing with you, I even give you ideas for your cupcakes! And yet suddenly I'm a 'big meany pants!' Where's the friendship? The harmony?"

"You, mister, are not anypony's friend!" She poked her hoof in my face. "You'd better get out of here before I call Anon to turn you into a pincushion again!"

"Oh, Pinkie, you wound me," I said. "If only you and I could have seen eye to eye..." I snapped my
eyeballs out and had them hover directly in front of Pinkie's, touching them. To Pinkie's credit, she continued to glare into my now much more closely proximate eyeballs. I pulled them back to my head with a rubberband snap. "I would have made you my Queen of Chaos!" I said, slithering around her.

"I don't want to be a queen of chaos, you big meanie!"

"Ah, but think of it, Pinkie. Chocolate rain, every day!"

"You'd just forget the whipped cream, like you did every single time!" Pinkie shrilled in my ear.

"Not now that you've reminded me!" I made a gigantic glass, twice as tall as Pinkie herself, appear in front of us, with a cotton candy cloud raining chocolate milk into it and a giant swizzle straw bent down so Pinkie could reach it, with large dollops of whipped cream floating on top. "But that's not all. Imagine flowers that turn into cupcakes!" I handed her one. It was a pink tulip that opened to reveal a pink-frosted cupcake inside. "Playgrounds made of peppermint!" With a bit of space-bending I made a full, adult-pony-sized foals' playground appear, where the supports for the swings and the slide were peppermint sticks and the chains on the swings were licorice. "Gingerbread houses that are edible!" We were now standing outside of Sugarcube Corner. I broke off a piece of it, took a bite and handed her the rest. "Want some?"

She took the gingerbread and munched it. "Mm, not bad, but I think it needs more molasses," she said. "And anyway you can't eat Sugarcube Comer! I work here!"

"But you'd have no need to work here if you joined me," I said. "Everypony in Ponyville would have all the sweets they could imagine wanting, for free! And you wouldn't have to do any of the work--"

"But I love baking!"

"--unless you wanted to! I could make you into an army of Pinkie Pies, able to bake up a thousand cupcakes in a night!"

"That does sound like a good idea..." Pinkie murmured, and then frowned. "Oh, wait, no, Anon told me about that. No, that's not a good idea!"

"Oh, you're so hard to please. What do you want, Pinkie? Anything you can dream of, and you could have it."

"I want you to go away, Mr. Meanie!" She poked me in my nose again.

I sighed theatrically. "But why, Pinkie? How can you break my heart like this?" I took my heart out of my chest to display its brittle and multi-sectioned condition to Pinkie before putting it back.

"Because my heart belongs to Anon, silly billy!"

Well, at least I had graduated from "big meanie" to "silly billy." "Why?" I asked plaintively. "How did he win your heart?"

"Because he's fun!"

"I'm fun," I pointed out.

"And he's nice," Pinkie said pointedly. "And goofy! And silly! And kinda wacky! And he has a lot of energy, and he gets my jokes!"
"I get your jokes..."

"And he's friendly, and he likes to make ponies laugh, like me, and he likes to play funny pranks, and one time! One time he got this rainbow taffy --" She pointed to a jar of paper-wrapped taffies on the counter -- "all in Dashie's hair, and we had to eat it to get it out of her hair!" Pinkie's expression went dreamy again. "Dashie hair... and taffy... mmm..."

"But Pinkie, he sounds exactly like me! How can you spurn me and savor him, when all the things you love about him are things I have as well?"

"Because he's nice! And you're not!"

I coiled around her again. "I think we've gotten off on the wrong footing, my dear," I said. "I can be quite nice. Unfortunately, when we met... I was trying to keep you six from wielding the Elements against me, and I'm sorry to say that meant I had to attack you. But I truly regretted doing that to you, Pinkie. Laughter has always been special to me."

"Not falling for it," Pinkie growled. "You're just a big meanie."

Back to this? The repetition was bothering me; I had had dealings with Pinkie before, and she'd been both funnier and less mindlessly repetitive. This was Anon's doing. Anon, who she loved for being funny. From my interactions with him I couldn't actually imagine him being humorous in the slightest, except for unintentionally.

"I mean it!" I said. "You were the only pony who appreciated any part of my chaos, and I had to destroy that to try to protect myself from the Elements. Believe me, I regret that very deeply. But I meant no harm to anyone else. I gave them chocolate milk rain and fields of popcorn!"

"You made those little bunny rabbits into mutants!"

"If you'd ever been as small as a bunny rabbit, you'd appreciate getting to be taller than most of your predators for once."

"And the dancing buffalo?"

"Oh, buffalo. Such Noble Warriors, such humorless archetypes of macho bravery. Don't you know I can't put anything into anyone if it's not there to begin with? Deep within the hearts of some buffalo, I sensed a longing for grace and beauty. Am I wrong to bring it out and let them experience their heartfelt dream, just because society will judge them harshly? What's wrong with being a buffalo ballerina, if that's what the buffalo secretly desires?"

Pinkie looked torn. I thought to myself that I might actually be getting somewhere with her. Then she scowled. "But you made me a mad meanie pants! I'm not really secretly angry at everypony! So you did put something in me that wasn't there!"

"Oh, Pinkie. You mean to tell me you've never had an angry thought? Never been resentful that your friends don't take you seriously, that they're too busy laughing at your antics to see the true you inside?"

"I'M NOT LISTENING TO YOU! LA LA LA LA!"

"You've never had the slightest resentment that they don't understand you? That they treat you as some sort of freak?"

She pulled out cymbals from her mane and started clanging them. But two could play at that game. I
snapped up a pair of black anti-cymbals and clanged them in time with hers. The anti-cymbals produced a sonic wave form designed to be precisely the opposite of Pinkie's cymbals, thus canceling out the sound entirely. A bit more heavily ordered than I like my tricks to be, but it works on a principle of pure disharmony, so it's good enough.

However, it's really unpleasant to listen to if it's not canceling another sound out. On the last cymbal crash, Pinkie faked me out, and at the last moment did not clang her cymbals. I winced as the sound of a cymbal's exact opposite rang out through the air. She smirked at me as if she'd just won something. "You're not gonna get me this time, Discord. I know better than to listen to you!"

"Yes, but if you'd--"

"LAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

Oh, the lungs on that mare. She meant it, too. She had decided she wasn't going to listen to me, and she was going to make silly noises to enforce it. For a moment I thought of taking her mouth... but what good would that do me? I was here to get her to tell me about Anon, not really to convince her that she would be better off leaving him and joining me in creating chaos... right?

Oh digitize me and put me in an array. I realized I had lost track of my true mission... because I was angry that he'd taken Pinkie. Not that she, personally, had ever been mine... but while I'll let Harmony's claim to Magic stand on the grounds that it's harmonic magic that the Element wields, Laughter should never have been Harmony's. It's mine. Laughter depends on chaos. And Pinkie was one of the rare ponies who was actually a chaos wielder. If Pinkie had to be my enemy, she should at least have been an enemy who could sympathize with me and who fought me for her friends' sake, not out of personal hatred. She should have been the Talia al Ghul to my Batman, the Rogue to my Magneto. (It suddenly occurs to me that you ponies have no idea what I'm talking about. Why do your comics have so very few examples of heroes and villains separated only by the ties of friendship or family, and loyalty?) I'd been trying to seduce Pinkie -- not sexually, though I certainly wouldn't throw her out of bed for eating cupcakes, but I'd sincerely been trying to convince her to come over to the chaos side of the Force. And as long as Anon was around, that was simply not possible.

I sighed. I could amplify Pinkie's desire for fun and laughter, but she was so resistant to me right now, she was halfway to discording herself into a state of wholly unwarranted rage, simply because I was the one trying to coax her to embrace her fun-loving side and her sense of compassion and forgiveness. Perhaps I could take advantage of that, lean on her harder to make her turn herself into a ball of oversensitivity and rage and then let her go take it out on her friends, or Anon... but I hadn't the heart for it. What I'd said to her hadn't been a lie -- I had regretted destroying Laughter. And while the whole Queen of Chaos thing had been a joke intended to open her up to telling me about Anon... it hadn't been without a grain of truth to it, either.

But right now she wasn't funny and she wasn't fun. She was just annoying, and it was his fault.

Her mind wasn't open to me, so I brute-forced my way in to erase the last ten minutes or so of her memories. I hadn't gotten anything I wanted from this encounter.

I suppose I need to tell you all about my dealings with Fluttershy, embarrassing as the story is. Who knows what information might turn out to be critical in defeating Anon, if I fail?

I always underestimate that little yellow pony. I wish I could chalk that up to Anon making me stupid, but I'm fairly certain I was more or less in my right mind when I went to her. I thought that getting the information I was looking for out of her would be easy, and that breaking her emotionally would also be easy. I wasn't expecting to turn her jealous, like I did Rarity; no, my intention for
Fluttershy was to make her feel unworthy of Anon, and push her into turning him away out of a feeling that she doesn't deserve him. Failing that, if I could rile up some feelings of jealousy or anger, I was certain I could tie those in to Anon's actual, demonstrated behavior, which let us not forget had involved attempting to kill me with his sword (and cutting off my tail, but that hadn't happened yet), and convince her that he was cruel and violent and mean to animals (I am, technically, quite a few animals.)

This is... not how it worked out.

The first time I encountered Fluttershy in person... well, the very first time, I was actually behind a stained glass window, so I'm not even sure that counts as "in person". I was free, but offset dimensionally -- I was too weak to feel confident of taking on Celestia at her full power right then. I needed to wait for the chaos I'd started to snowball. And little Fluttershy had flinched away from my image, without even knowing that I was really behind it. Possibly this is part of why I underestimated her... the first time.

The second time, in the maze, she shocked me (and frustrated me like you can't believe) when she actually resisted me. Hard as I tried, I couldn't persuade her to open the door to my corruption. So I had to kick it in, so to speak, and unbalance her by force.

The next time I had one-on-one time with her, in the afore-discussed second go-round in the maze, she tried to use her Stare on me, and demanded that I release her friends. I pretended to be cowed by her, pleading with her not to use her disapproving eyeballs, before breaking down in hysterical laughter and telling her I just couldn't take how funny she was. And when I saw her face fall, when I sensed the disharmonious energies of disappointment, fear and rage sweep over her, I struck, using that moment of weakness to force the door open again and turn her cruel.

This time, I'd decided, I wouldn't cheat. I wouldn't use brute force, I wouldn't even try making her cruel -- it wasn't my goal, after all. If I could get her to open a door, I would amplify her, so she'd perceive Anon's behavior toward me as cruel, or I'd turn up her natural negative feelings. Making a pony's dark side, the negative impulses they fight all the time, come to the foreground was actually easier than completely inverting them, just not as much fun.

She was outdoors, feeding an incredible assortment of unruly and unpleasant-smelling small animals, when I dropped in on her and gave her pets wings, and a compulsion to fly. It was hilarious watching them flit around incompetently (I didn't magically grant them knowledge of how to fly, just the overwhelming desire to attempt it), while Fluttershy, only slightly more competently, flew around eeping and whimpering and pleading with them to slow down and let her catch them and oh no you're going to hurt yourself and so on and so forth.

Eventually she managed to catch them all, panting, and had personally chastised each one for attempting to fly without knowing how to avoid crashing. Much as I love chaos, I knew that if I let them get off the ground again I wouldn't actually have any opportunity to talk to Fluttershy, because she'd be entirely occupied with the status of her flying pets, so I snapped the wings away and slithered down the nearest tree, clapping. "Bravo! Bravo! An excellent piece of animal wrangling there, my dear!"

I expected her to eep and back away from me. She did flinch, but then looked up at me resolutely. "Discord, that wasn't very nice," she said, a slight tremor in her voice but no other evidence that she was frightened of me. "One of my animal friends could have seriously gotten hurt!"

"Oh, relax." I teleported over to her and stretched around her, with my tail on one side of her and the rest of me circling her, my face even with hers. "I wouldn't have let anything happen to your cutesy-
wutesy pettie-wetties!" I pinched her cheek with my furred fingers, claws retracted -- I wasn't trying to hurt her, just annoy her. "You're just so adorable when you think you can tell me what to do!"

She tilted her head down, mane falling over the side of her face that I'd pinched, as she pulled away. "Um, please don't do that..."

"But you're just so squizeeable!" I picked her up and pulled her to my chest, squeezing her in a mock hug. "How am I supposed to resist?"

She winced again. "This really isn't very comfortable..."

"I bet you'd have no problem with it if Anon was squeezing you," I said, peering down at her upside down.

"It's, um, called hugging, if you're not doing it to be mean, and Anon would let me go if I asked him," she said.

"But you haven't even asked me!"

"That's true... I said I was uncomfortable, though, so Anon would have let me go already. So would you please let me go? Or... at least don't squeeze quite so hard? I mean... if you really need to hug a pony I'm okay with being hugged, I guess, but this sort of hurts a little bit..."

I put her down hurriedly. I wasn't particularly fond of being seen as someone who needed to hug a pony, as if I were desperate for affection or something. "Oh, if you insist. But tell me more about this Anon! I've only met him the once, and we didn't exactly get off on the right foot, but you girls seem to think he's positively the bee's knees."

"Oh, he is," she said dreamily. "He's so sweet and gentle and kind..."

I manifested a glass of pineapple juice just so I could do a spit-take. "Kind? Are we talking about the same creature here?"

"Um... I think so, unless you're talking about someone else named Anon?"

I glared down at her. "Madam, that lout is anything but kind. Did you not see how he murdered all those changelings? Or did you possibly fail to notice how he attacked me with a sword and tried to cut my throat?"

She bowed her head. "It's true... I wish he hadn't done those things. It's... I don't think it's the right way to solve problems, using so much violence like that. Especially not killing." She looked up at me again. "But you have to understand, he's the Element of Protection. He just... gets very upset when his friends are in danger. He's not normally like that. If you're his friend, he's very, very kind to you, but if you hurt his friends..."

"Then he terminates you with extreme prejudice?"

"He's a human," Fluttershy said. "They're obligate omnivores, and dependent on predation for part of their diet unless they're very, very careful to eat the right mix of vegetables, and there's no one place on their homeworld where all the vegetables they need grow naturally. I have to feed him fish, like I feed my bear friends. So they're naturally more violent than ponies, just like griffins and dragons and Diamond Dogs are. Anon's better at killing and violence than ponies are... but he uses that ability to protect us. So he is kind."

I stared down at the little yellow pony, trying not to let fury overwhelm me. A creature who kills for
food and to "protect" others is a hero, and I'm a villain? I remember a winter of my childhood, before I'd come into much of my power, when I'd nearly starved to death because I'd refused to kill to eat. Oh, yes, darling Fluttershy, I know all about being an obligate omnivore, and yet I have managed to never murder anything for my dinner in twenty-five hundred years of existence (approximately... I've done a lot of world-walking, so I really have no clear idea how old I am, but it's somewhere around that). I've eaten meat that others have killed when I had no other choice, and once or twice when I was truly desperate I may have granted a mercy killing to a creature that another predator had fatally wounded, and then eaten it, and of course since coming into my full power I've been able to conjure meat for myself without having to kill anything for it... but I have no sympathy whatsoever for the argument that any creature needs to be violent because it's biologically a predator. I'm biologically a predator, and I spend most of my time eating dairy products and sugar.

Well, okay, I eat crabs sometimes, but they're really really stupid. And occasionally spiders, because it's funny, and spiders have no sense of humor. But this animal that Fluttershy is making justifications for has almost certainly eaten cows. Cows on the human world don't talk, but neither do any of Fluttershy's animal friends. She's the last pony I'd have thought would make excuses for an omnivore predator.

I didn't say any of that, because being visibly offended isn't funny, but I went for the jugular, perhaps prematurely. "Oh, well, perhaps that explains it," I said, sighing. "I was wondering how Anon could say such terrible things about any of his friends, and I'd wondered if Pinkie misunderstood somehow..."

"What do you mean?"

"Ah, well, I'm sure Pinkie didn't mean anything by it. You know how she babbles sometimes!"

"It's okay, you can tell me," Fluttershy said. "I won't be offended."

That's what you think, I snickered to myself. "Well, I was having a little chat with her about Anon, just like we're doing now, and I asked her what Anon thought of the rest of you girls. You know, just making small talk. And she told me that he'd told her that you were a... well... " Large blue eyesblinked up at me. "I believe the words she quoted to me were 'pathetic wuss'?"

I expected some sort of declaration that Anon would never say such a thing, or to see tears well up in those baby blues. I never for a moment expected Fluttershy to nod. "I'm sure he does," she said. "Just like I wish he could be kinder sometimes, even when he goes into battle... I'm sure he wishes I could be tougher."

"Wait a minute. The fellow you supposedly love calls you a 'pathetic wuss', and all you do is agree with him?"

"All pathetic really means is that you feel sorry for somepony," Fluttershy said in that completely annoying, quiet, calm voice of hers. "I'm sure Anon does feel sorry for me because it's hard for me to stand up for myself. I did try to be less of a doormat one time, but I didn't like who it turned me into, and Anon knows that. So it must be hard for him, knowing that I could be stronger and tougher and I choose not to be, but that's not who I am. And I know he accepts who I am, even if some parts of me frustrate him."

Some parts of her were certainly frustrating me. "I can't believe you'll just roll over for an insult like that, from your supposed love!" I ranted at her. "Don't you have any self-respect at all?"

"Not really," Fluttershy said, while I attempted to not let my jaw actually fall off my face. "I mean, I do know that I'm worthy of respect, in my mind, but in my heart... well, I've been fighting these
feelings all my life, really. Some part of me feels like I'm worthless, and that little part of me always feels sad and always wants to hide away from the world, so it's been very hard for me." I hadn't even unbalanced her to make her more honest or forthcoming. She was just telling me these things. "I think I do a pretty good job of hiding it most of the time, though. Don't you think so? I mean, you'd be the expert..."

I was discombobulated enough to fall for that. "What do you mean, I'd be the expert?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, but it's just obvious to me. You're hiding it too, aren't you? Every time you're near ponies you want attention, but you spend most of your time alone. You don't seem to have any friends, either. Maybe you had some once and you lost them? Or maybe you never did have any? But I can tell you must feel very lonely and isolated, and it must hurt a lot. You do a very good job of hiding it, though! I think you must be much better at hiding it than I am, so that's why I say you must be an expert."

"I don't have low self-esteem!" I raged at her. "I have tremendous respect for myself! If ponies have a problem with me, that's their problem, not mine. I have a perfectly healthy ego, thank you very much! What, do you seriously think that because ponies despise me that's going to affect my feelings about myself in the slightest? Why should I care what ponies think?"

"But you do," she said. "Because if you didn't, you could go create chaos someplace else, somewhere that there are no ponies, and no Elements of Harmony, and you'd be safe. You must want to be with ponies, and care about what they think of you, at least to some extent. I know you feel like it's ponies' problem and not yours, but at the same time... it must really not feel good to need something to survive that everypony is afraid of, I think."

"What are you talking about?"

"Your chaos." She put a hoof on my chest. "You're the spirit of chaos. You can't live without it. But ponies are afraid of chaos, and they hate it, and that must make you very sad deep down inside. It's like... manticores need to eat meat. They don't have a choice about it, they're carnivores. Nopony wants to have a manticore for a pet or be friends with one because they have to kill to live. And not just little things like fish; they kill rabbits and squirrels and even big animals that talk... even ponies, sometimes. So everypony's afraid of a manticore, but the manticore doesn't want to be mean or cruel; it just wants to live, and what it needs to live is the death of other things."

"That's where your analogy breaks down, my dear," I said with my best snide tone. "Chaos doesn't have to hurt or kill ponies. Yes, I need chaos... but so do all of you, you just don't realize it. I have never used chaos to kill ponies unless they were actively trying to kill me at the time, and even then not in two thousand years. So ponies have no reason to be so afraid! It's your problem, not mine!"

"But it is your problem, because it hurts you. You feel like chaos is wonderful, and you want to share it, but nopony wants it, and that hurts. Just now, when you're telling me that chaos doesn't have to hurt ponies? You want ponies to like chaos, I can hear it in your voice." She turned her back on me and took a step away, then looked back. "But... part of the reason they don't/is that you do mean things with it, Discord. You made my animals fly around when they didn't know how to fly, and they could have gotten hurt. You made Granny Smith want to dance, and she was laid up in bed for nearly a month after that with her back hips thrown out because she's too old and fragile to dance the way you made her want to. You embarrassed poor Plains Thunder so much he tried to leave his tribe and go off into the desert by himself because several of his tribe saw him ballet dancing. You didn't ask anypony if they wanted to do the things you made them want to do, or if it would be a problem for them if you did it. If you want ponies to learn to love chaos, you need to show them that it doesn't have to hurt them. So far all you've done is embarrass or frighten ponies or break their hearts and
make them miserable. If chaos doesn't have to hurt ponies, it's up to you to prove that."

"This is ridiculous!" I teleported in front of her, since it seemed as if she was preparing to walk away from me, as if she were in control of this interview. "You think you know everything about me. You know nothing, little pony!"

"I know when a creature is hurting," she said. "And you're a creature, just like a pony, just like a rabbit. I would try to help you with that, if you would be okay with it, but... I don't think you're ready to ask for help yet. Because you'd have to stop being mean to everypony and just doing anything you want anytime you want, and I don't think you're ready to give that up, and that's why we have to fight you... also you still have Princess Luna hidden somewhere, and the Elements. But I really don't want to fight you, Discord. I will if I have to... but I'd rather be kind to you, if you would let me." She smiled up at me. "Maybe that makes me a pathetic wuss, but I'd rather be a pathetic me than a strong, tough pony who isn't really me at all."

I growled in frustration and reached out to her with a claw. That made her shrink back, showing fear for the first time. "Are you going to discord me?" she asked. "Please don't, I hate being mean..."

"Oh, for the love of... I refuse to be that predictable. No, I am not going to 'discord' you, I've done that twice now and it does me no good whatsoever. I'm erasing your memory of this conversation."

"I don't think you're going to do that."

"Why not?" I snickered at her. "Am I supposed to be afraid of your disapproving eyeballs again?"

"You shouldn't do it because it's wrong and it's mean. I don't want to lose my memories. But I know that right now you don't care about that."

"And I suppose you have a reason I do care about?" I said in a bored tone, blowing on my fingers.

"Yes, I think so," she said, and looked up at me. "You don't really want to. You're scared of a pony understanding you because you're afraid I might use it against you somehow... but you like the fact that I care enough to try to understand, and part of you hopes that I could understand you, that maybe you wouldn't have to be completely alone and there would be at least one pony who could feel sympathy for you. If you take my memories away... you'll be totally alone again."

She was looking up at me, her eyes fixed on mine, and I couldn't pull my eyes away. There was no anger or fear in them, no demands. When she'd used her Stare on me before, it was anger and dominance and the imposition of will, and of course I'd laughed at her, because who can dominate chaos? I pour anger onto my breakfast cereal and eat it with milk. No one dominates me, no one controls me, nopony's anger at me can ever bother me or cow me.

This was worse. I saw Celestia in her eyes, confident that I could control my power, that I wouldn't hurt her, from back in the time when I'd have rather died than cause her pain. I saw her father, the last time I'd seen him, when he'd asked me to protect his daughters if he didn't return -- and he didn't, and I had, at least until Celestia got stupid and trusted when she should have known better, and Luna and I had known better but we didn't stop her because we wanted to believe, too. I saw Luna, squealing with delight and exhilaration rather than fear as she fell, because she believed I would catch her, and I had.

I saw my mother, urging me on, promising that if I kept going despite my exhaustion that we could have a real bed in a real house for once, certain that I could make it if I wanted to, and I had.

I'd betrayed them all, though only Celestia and Luna had lived to know it. I wasn't a good
draconequus. I wasn't a protector. I wasn't the best me I could be, the me they had believed in at those moments, and yet here was this pegasus who had no reason whatsoever to trust me and her eyes was so calm and certain. She believed I'd do as she asked. She believed I'd be good.

*How wrong you are,* I thought, and I tried to reach out again, to kick open the door and take her recent memories, but I couldn't. Those blue eyes paralyzed me. A small part of me realized she'd found a way to make her Stare work on me. I laughed at the anger of ponies... but I cringed at their trust, because I'd broken it so often, and I didn't even *want* her to trust me, I wanted her to think I was the villain, I wanted to shatter her belief and make her suffer... but damn her, she was right. She'd said the first kind words to me I'd heard from a pony in centuries, the first indication that any pony anywhere could see me as something other than a sealed evil in a can unsealed, something other than a demon of pure evil.

I *couldn't* erase that.

And she'd known I couldn't, not after she pointed it out. Damn that stupid little pony and her stupid eyes that see too much and her stupid belief and her stupid kindness.

I snarled in frustration and teleported away, leaving her memories intact.
Not A Letter to Hostler, I Swear

Well, dear readers, something extremely strange has just happened, and I'm not entirely certain how I feel about it. You see, I went down to Baltimare to reclaim my Element of Rage from the Kraken in Mareland Bay, and... well, under the circumstances I'm not sure the phrase "I got lucky" is actually entirely apropos, so let's be a trifle blunter.

Your Humble Narrator just got laid.

No, no, this isn't turning into Letters to Hostler. (I prefer Playcolt anyway. Although I assure you I only read it for the articles.) I promise you this is relevant. While I haven't seen a lot of action down south since breaking loose, either time, and obviously being a statue puts a serious damper on one's sexytime fun, I'm not the sort of draconequus who feels the need to share his exploits with the entire world. Believe it or not, I actually like my privacy in that regard. But this is in fact an example of the horrors Anon has inflicted on the world, which I suspect is why I feel so ambivalent about it. On the one hand, I must admit I enjoyed myself; on the other hand, I'm well aware that if I hadn't been me, if I actually had been the unicorn stallion I was impersonating... well, I suspect I wouldn't have had nearly as much fun.

You see, reclaiming my Element of Rage from the Kraken in Mareland Bay was actually very anticlimactic. I was expecting some sort of epic battle, some opportunity to make it rain exploding cream pies underwater, but the moment the Kraken saw me, he swam off in a giant cloud of ink, leaving all his stuff behind. I drew smiley faces on some of his ancient relics and animated a chest of gems to nag him like a housewife, but with him absent I couldn't do most of the marvelous things I'd planned. So I picked up my Element, teleported it home, and decided to explore the city. I'm still having fun learning all about what the world's become while I was stuck in stone, after all, and I feel obligated to gather as much information about what Anon's done to the place as I can.

So I took the form of a unicorn, a gray fellow with a tornado cutie mark, and went into Baltimare to get a bite to eat. As I mentioned yesterday, I do like to eat crabs occasionally, because they're too stupid to have any fun with otherwise, and Baltimare's famous for them. I left the extremely touristy Inner Harbor and went searching for a crab shack someplace along the waterfront, and found myself in the oh-so-hipster and entirely misnamed region of Foals' Point. (I am assured that the name actually has little to do with foals, or only tangentially anyway; an earth mare by the name of Foals Plenty built a massive home on the waterfront for herself and her twenty-seven children, who then grew up and spread out throughout the area. Depending on who you talk to, Foals' Point is either named after Foals Plenty herself, or named for the truly inordinate number of children and grandchildren she had running around the place.) Foals' Point is now the sort of place where the artists who think Canterlot is too bourgeois and Manehattan is too commercial congregate to eke out a meager living selling to their fellows, and if a trend becomes trendy, it's already passe for the forward-looking ponies of Foals' Point. In other words, a place where ponies create, and demand from each other, constant change and variation in their furniture, their art, their clothing and their food. My kind of place, inasmuch as anything ponies ever create is.

I was looking for a crab shack, but I found something different. Literally. The name of the restaurant was "Something Different" and their shtick was that their menu changes every day. Though they do make a nod to commercial viability in that they have crabs all the time, during the appropriate season. The place was owned by a middle-aged earth stallion with a delightfully incomprehensible cutie mark, a circle of gradient rainbow shading that he assured me represented constant change within defined parameters. Perhaps I'll steal it for my next pony form. My waitress, a light blue unicorn with a golden beehive hairdo, wore roller skates as she served me crabs, peach nectar, and linguine in
mint alfredo sauce with pine nuts. She informed me, at length, that she was single, that her fellow
waitresses were also single, that the proprietor had a herd of mares his own age and no interest in his
employees, and that this was a subject of distress to her. I made up girlfriends, a white unicorn and a
dark blue pegasus in Canterlot who were sisters and worked at the Palace, to dissuade her from her
obvious intentions. (I'm sure Celestia and Luna wouldn't mind being anonymized and used as part of
my cover story.)

When I'd paid my bill, she brought me out another drink, compliments of the house, she said. This
one was a hard pink lemonade, which was something of a novelty for me -- in my day nopony
thought of making lemonade alcoholic. Now, generally speaking I don't drink alcohol, because I
enjoy the natural chaos of my thought processes and don't find that consuming something which
dulls my senses actually improves my experience much. I like the effect the stuff has on ponies, but
unlike ponies, I'm already uninhibited. I decided that this time I'd make a partial exception, to
experience the flavor, and turn it non-alcoholic after I'd already drunk it... and discovered when I did
so that there was a strong sedative in it, and another potion I didn't recognize. Maybe two.

This intrigued me. Why was this waitress drugging an ordinary unicorn customer off the street? Did
she have some notion of who I was? Had I fallen in with an organized crime ring? Was she planning
on selling me for body parts? I decided to pretend the drug had taken effect, to see what she would
do.

Now, under most circumstances, potions intended for ponies don't work on me. Unless they don't
use harmonic magic, which I tend to disrupt simply by existing, and they work on virtually every
vertebrate species, it's very unlikely that they'll have the same effect on me as on a pony, since quite
aside from being the avatar of chaos I'm also a completely different species. But when I'm
 impersonating a pony, I can... how to put this... I can model pony biology when I'm in pony form, so
that I can feel the effects of potions that would normally work on a pony, but override those effects if
I decide I don't like them. There are certain exceptions -- nothing that will shut down pony magic
will work on me because my magic works on different principles, for instance -- but generally that's
how it works.

So I let the effects of the potions through, while blocking the alcohol (alcohol, by the way, does
work on every vertebrate species in more or less the same ways, and most certainly does not rely on
harmonic magic, so it would affect me in the same way as it would a pony if I didn't know how to
block it.) What I found was that they caused dizziness and an overwhelming need to use the
bathroom. I let both of those sensations continue, mostly for the novelty of it; I can count on the
fingers of one paw the number of times I've felt dizzy since coming into my full power, and jokes
about the chaotic destruction of bathrooms aside, I don't normally bother with the more revolting
parts of biological existence. I eat because I like to eat, and I sleep because apparently my brain
needs me to, but normally I use my power to avoid needing to use a bathroom unless there's a
particularly funny joke or pointed commentary to make by doing otherwise, which makes the feeling
of actually having to go unusual for me, and I relish unusual sensations.

After I was done with my business in the bathroom and was washing up, I felt the dizziness increase
dramatically. The potion was attempting to put me to sleep. That, I blocked. I fell to the floor and
feigned unconsciousness, waiting to see what would happen.

The waitress came into the stallions' room through a separate door, presumably a cleaner's access,
and levitated me onto her back. She then carried me down a set of particularly rickety and broken
stairs, which would almost certainly have been entirely unsafe for the earth pony proprietor, by
levitating temporary steps into place over the broken ones. Around this time I began to feel twinges
similar to, but at the same time very different from, the previous need to use a urinal, and I started to
have some sense of what might be going on here.
She'd dosed me with an aphrodisiac.

I'd be lying if I claimed the idea wasn't, mmm, exciting in and of itself... but I was also deeply curious. This was not normal behavior for an Equestrian. There are places in the world, and certainly there are other worlds, where this behavior might not be so very unusual for a pony, but Equestria is not one of them.

I continued to feign unconsciousness while she brought me into the basement, dropped me on a simple wooden bed with a somewhat uncomfortable hay-filled mattress, tied my legs to the four legs of the bed, and put a magic-blocking ring on my horn. This didn't actually do anything to block my magic because I'm not really a unicorn, but since she didn't know that, I was getting the distinct impression that her intentions for me were not particularly friendly.

Now this whole thing was quite a novel experience for me. I'll admit there have been times, during my adventures in world-walking, where I've found myself low on magic and in the custody of a local potentate with more puissance, at that moment, than I'd have been able to muster up, when I've found it convenient to engage in romantic activities I'd have otherwise have been uninclined toward. When you're trying to stall for time until you can build up enough magic to get home, and someone more powerful than you are at the moment finds you to be an exotic attraction to add to their collection of unusual bedwarmers, you don't say no. Well, unless their particular fetish is biting off your head and laying their eggs in your corpse, but as long as that's not on the table, you don't say no.

These experiences weren't always the most pleasant, given that they were aimed at the goal of pleasing someone else and not my personal enjoyment, but when most of the creatures you might potentially find attractive either turn up their nose at you or run away screaming because most ponies have no taste whatsoever, it turns out that being wanted that badly is an exciting sensation in and of itself. Besides, I'd be a poor excuse for an avatar of chaos if I wasn't able to rapidly adapt to the unexpected.

At other times, I've engaged in a bit of role-playing with a willing partner, or a few such. When you're virtually all-powerful, the fantasy of having control taken from you can be an intriguing one. But the thing about a role-playing fantasy conducted with consenting partners is that everyone involved knows it's a fantasy, and knows where the power really resides. And when I've actually had less control over the circumstances than I might have liked, as mentioned above, my enthusiastic cooperation, whether real or feigned, has usually been enough to keep me out of any sort of restraints, or at least, any sort of restraints I couldn't easily slip out of.

So I'd actually never ended up a "prisoner" of someone who sincerely believed me to be a helpless victim, while in reality retaining all of my power. I was enormously curious as to how far she'd go with this. Also, well, it had been a while since I'd actually been with a partner. Over a thousand years, honestly. Just because I have access to full-tactile illusions that are almost indistinguishable from the real thing doesn't mean I don't relish the unpredictability of a partner who isn't a puppet I'm running with my powers. And it turns out that the fantasy of having no control is improved when the other party sincerely believes that to be the case.

But the fantasy would have been utterly ruined if I hadn't played the part, and besides, as I said, I was curious. Would an Equestrian pony from the home of love, friendship and harmony really do what it looked like she was planning to do? So when she woke me up, I stayed in character. As enjoyable as this was for Discord, Lord of Chaos, I was quite certain that Twister, ordinary unicorn stallion, would have had a different opinion, and I played my role to the fullest. I threatened, demanded, struggled, pleaded, and even blushed quite prettily with feigned humiliation when she made rather stereotypical remarks about the incongruence between my verbal and my physical reactions, along the nature of "Your lips say no, no, but your heart says yes, yes" (it was much
cruder than that, and made reference to bodily parts far less unisex than the heart, but you get the idea.)

Then after she was done having her wicked way with me, her friends showed up. Apparently I'd arrived near the shift change for the waitresses. I'm really trying to avoid letting this turn into an unrealistically-sounding pornographic fantasy, so let's just say a fun time was had by all, though I did my best to make them believe I wasn't included amongst the ranks of fun-havers there, except possibly in the purely biological sense.

After they were all satisfied, and they began discussing what sort of memory erasure spell the ringleader was going to use on me (there was another unicorn in the group, plus one earth pony and one pegasus, but apparently my original kidnapper was the most magically adept of the bunch), I expressed disappointment that the experience was over, snapped my bonds off, reverted to my true form, and delighted in their looks of utter horror. You have never seen four mares flee as rapidly and desperately as those four did. And none of them were even willing to give me an address for a thank you card or a place to come calling with a future invitation! Mares today, they're so uncouth.

But of course that's exactly the problem.

You see, given that I am the spirit of disharmony and I have a fairly good ability to detect events which generate it, particularly when I'm trapped in stone and have little else I can perceive, and given how much disharmony the act of rape wreaks on the majority of its victims... I know exactly how common rape used to be in Equestria. Which is to say, not common at all. There were maybe ten rapists a year, and usually all of them involved a romantic partner deciding that they were displeased at the slowness of their courtship and doing something unpleasant to correct the situation in their favor. In the rare years when a stranger rapist might be operating, he (stranger rapists were usually stallions) might claim three or four victims in one year before getting caught, at which point the Royal Guard would often have to be called out to keep the locals from lynching him, and he'd end up in a Canterlot dungeon for the rest of his life. The ones of both genders who'd misuse their own lovers might do so for a more extended period of time, given that the Equestrian drive toward harmony tends to lead such things to get swept under rugs, but generally the truth would out eventually and the guilty party would be punished or forcibly "reformed" by spell.

The type of event I'd just been through, where a group imprisons, restrains, and gang-rapes a stranger, never happens in Equestria. Well, never say never, but outside of wartime, it might have happened once or twice a century during my millennium of imprisonment, and it inevitably resulted in the perpetrators being caught. Even during my reign, when I regret to say that crime in general was significantly higher than during Celestia's spell-backed rule of enforced harmony -- the price one pays for freedom is inevitably that some misuse it -- rape wasn't overly common. I have no numbers for that time period because I was at war with math in those days, but my gut feeling is that there might have been a tenfold increase during my period of unrul... -- a hundred ponies or so a year might have gotten it into their heads to decide that no meant yes rather than ten -- which is still not a lot by the standards of other nations and other worlds I've visited. Equestrian ponies just don't tend to think that sex is something they're entitled to because they want it, or because they're more powerful, or whatever. Murder is more common than rape most years (mainly because it's a lot easier to murder a fellow pony in a sudden and immediately regretted burst of rage than it is to suddenly commit rape.)

And yet my assailants had behaved as if they were practiced at this. Which meant that, since I'd gotten out of stone, the gang rape of strangers had gone from something that happened twice a century and was immediately caught and punished to something that was common enough that I could accidentally walk into it during one of my few excursions into pony society, and unpunished enough that the same group, operating out of a restaurant, could ravish more than one victim.
So, out of curiosity, I tried going to the police with my complaint. I was laughed at. And informed that mares can't rape stallions. Given that in several of the cases of ongoing marital rape that I mentioned above, the perpetrator was a mare and her victim was her husband, this had not previously been the general opinion of Equestrian jurisprudence.

I've visited the human homeworld enough to know that there, rapes are extraordinarily common, stranger rapes are greatly feared even though they're relatively rare in comparison to acquaintance rape, gang rapes are far from unheard of, and the vast majority of rape involves males victimizing females, despite which neither males nor females can typically get justice, because it's assumed that males can't be raped by females and that any male who'd commit rape is a demonic monster easily detectable for what he is and so any female claiming that an ordinary, friendly-looking fellow raped her has to be lying. I knew exactly who had imported stranger rape into Equestria, and who was influencing the legal system to ignore it to such an extent that gang rapists could victimize customers of the restaurant they worked at without getting caught (memory spells are far from perfect; even mine can only erase the last twenty minutes or so before they turn seriously erratic, and unicorn memory spells are worse. One of their victims has almost certainly remembered something, and yet they're still operating.)

Human power fantasies are unbelievably irritating. Human sexual fantasies can be downright horrifying.

One might think I'd be happy with this circumstance. Rape is pretty much concentrated, packaged disharmony, rather like a bite-sized, single serving war in a package, and unlike war, it leaves the majority of its victims alive. But... it's just so jejune. While it's rare in Equestria, it's not nearly so rare in other nations, and it's just such an easy, predictable means of breaking a victim. I believe the terms the video gamers use is a "cheese move"? Those who engage in it because they want sex are just proving themselves to be pathetic losers that nopony actually wants; those who engage in it because they want to prove their power over somepony or harm them emotionally have no creativity and are generally massively insecure about their own power. It's dull and predictable and more than a little bit disgusting. War has more creativity and strategy to it, and I don't like war because the end result is generally quite a lot of death, and I don't find death entertaining.

So here I am back at the Chaos Cave (Grotto of Disharmony? Oh, decisions, decisions), and I'll confess, this entire incident has left me somewhat troubled. I feel as if I ought to be pleased, because on a personal level there are no downsides to this.

My enemy has just ensured an even greater supply of energy for me. As the chaos avatar, I have the ability to manipulate raw magic, which is generated by change and transformation, as I mentioned above; but disharmony is special to me. The emotions of sentient beings produce their own magic, in and of themselves; what's commonly called "dark magic" is magic fueled by what are normally thought of as negative emotions -- hatred, fear, anger. Changelings draw energy from the emotion of love -- as does Princess Pinkness, but changelings drain individuals, whereas Cadance draws from either individuals or the overall available pool of love in the local thaumosphere. Well, I do the same with disharmony. Conflict, strife, dissent, my namesake, these things feed me directly in a way that even chaos doesn't; chaos stirs up raw magic that anyone can use, and I'm better at using it than they are, but disharmony specifically feeds me. I could live without it, unlike changelings, but ugh, what a boring existence that would be.

So due to Anon's actions there are now small suitcase nukes of disharmony going off all over Equestria, unless there's something special about Baltimare, which I doubt. I should be pleased with this. I don't personally approve of rape, but I do very much approve of me being more powerful, so from a selfish perspective this is a good thing for me. And, well, I had a lot of fun in Zebrica and a lot of fun in Ponyville when I first broke free, but I haven't had this sort of fun in... you know, I don't
even want to count up the years, because that would just be depressing. So again, from a personal perspective this did me nothing but good. Sure, rape is a fairly pathetic way to stir up disharmony, but I'm not the one committing it, and the proximate causes are being influenced against their control, and the ultimate cause is an entity I've already sworn to fight and I've already recognized as a pathetic loser with too much power, so this really shouldn't bother me at all.

I'm really having some difficulty figuring out why it does.

Anyway! You don't want to hear about my personal dilemmas, and being that you undoubtedly don't draw energy from disharmony and would probably have significantly greater objections than I do to being kidnapped, tied up, and used as a pleasure toy, I've conveyed what I needed to here, which is that Anon's reign is even worse than I thought and even if you were okay with stallions being turned into mares you are probably not okay with those that remained stallions being gang-raped, so you should agree with me that Anon is totally evil and needs to be stopped. Right? That is the point I was trying to make here, right? I mean, yes, it is (why am I asking you what point I am trying to make? You're not even here, and odds are, if you're reading this, I'm dead, so it isn't even as if I'll get to meet you and ask your opinion of my writing.)

Back to my interviews with the Elements of Harmony, then. I decided to talk with Rainbow Dash next, after my abject failure with Fluttershy. This time, I thought, I'd go in with the explicit purpose, not just of gathering information, but of using Dash's loyalty to friends against her loyalty to her lover and driving a wedge straight down the center of her brain. Mentioning the terrible things that Anon had supposedly said about Rarity and Fluttershy should stir up some righteous anger against Anon, and playing on Dash's enormous ego might give me an excellent opportunity to make her jealous of her friends. We'd see what direction she'd fall in.

Predictably, I found her sleeping in a tree. It was going to be either that or a cloud, I'd guessed. I hovered above her, snapped up a cotton candy cloud, and made it rain chocolate milk all over her. (If I'd been thinking about what I was thinking, this might have tipped me off, but I'm not good at thinking about what I'm thinking even when I'm not being mind controlled into a predictable idiot.)

She rolled over and glared at me. "DISCORD!"

"Hahaha, look at that face! What an expression you have! Simply delightful! Excuse me." I stuck a glass under the cloud and let it fill with chocolate milk. "What's the matter, Rainbow Dash? I thought you liked pranks!"

She just growled at me. "How wonderful! Come on, give me that 'grr' face!" I chortled. I drank the glass and tossed the chocolate milk to the ground, where it exploded. "Growl for me, Rainbow, let me know you still care."

I dispelled the cloud and hovered above her, just a bit to her side. It was a bit surprising to me that she hadn't said anything, aside from shouting my name. "Well, you're certainly talkative today," I said. "What's the matter? Cat--"

Before I could finish the sentence, she lunged at me. The illusion dropped only seconds before the Element of Protection nearly skewered me. I dodged backward, genuinely startled to see that it was Anon in the tree. "This is different!" I said. "Can't say I was expecting--" He lunged for me again. This should have resulted in him ignominiously falling off the tree, but did not. A human shouldn't be able to just lay back in the top of a tree anyway -- they're great at tree climbing, but it's because of their monkey arms. They can't twine themselves around a branch like I can and they can't use magic to treat the top of the tree as a solid object like pegasi can. I flew backward, and Anon followed me, floating in air. For a moment I was going to say something outraged about the unfairness of him
suddenly developing more random superpowers, but then I realized I recognized the magical aura around him.

I looked down. This was almost a mistake, as taking my eyes off Anon for even a moment nearly resulted in my losing a limb, but I saw Twilight Sparkle down below, her horn glowing. So she'd been responsible for the illusion, and she was levitating Anon.

"Did you think we wouldn't get wise to your tricks?" Anon shouted at me. "After what you did to Rarity, did you really think we wouldn't be prepared for you?"

"Honestly, given that you haven't found Luna yet, yes," I said. "You don't seem to be all that bright."

'You'll tell us where she is, monster, if I have to beat it out of you!"

With Twilight moving him telekinetically, I had no hope of evading him indefinitely. I could have run for it, but maybe he was affecting me... or maybe I was just being my usual self, assuming that he couldn't really hurt me because usually nothing could. He'd gotten in a lucky shot in our first encounter, but surely I could protect myself from a jumped-up human with a magic sword. I summoned another cotton candy cloud and connected it to Twilight, so it would follow her around. Without her being able to see me or Anon, she wouldn't be able to guide him toward me.

"Anon!" Twilight screamed. "I can't see you!"

"I'm up here still! I'm fine, but we need to get Discord!"

"But I can't see him! I have to bring you down, or he could hurt you! You can't fly on your own!"

I started chuckling. "She's got a point, pal. If you can't fly, you can't very well stick me with your overgrown butterknife, now can you?"

"Laugh while you can, Discord," Anon snarled at me as Twilight brought him down to the ground. "But we will defeat you!"

"How are you going to do that when you can't reach me?" I asked mockingly.

"Like this!" a voice said above me, as something crashed into me with enormous speed and force. I felt the magic of a pegasus flight field shoving me down out of the sky, but dazed as I was from the blow of the pegasus slamming into my back in the first place, I couldn't concentrate. It only took seconds -- I hadn't been all that high up -- before I slammed into the ground, hard, a triumphant Rainbow Dash hovering over me.

"Plenty more where that came from, Dipcord!" she shouted down at me.

I was on the ground. Where Anon and his sword now were.

The phrase that went through my head was slightly less polite than "Oh dear," but you get the idea.

I tried to get up, but Rainbow Dash kicked me in the head. In my tumble back to the ground, I was able to see that Anon was running straight for me. This wasn't good. I was too dizzy to teleport, and if I went up Rainbow would likely attack me again. I needed to buy time.

For some mysterious reason I thought the appropriate way to do this was to summon a sword.

TRUE CONFESSION TIME: I am not a master of the art of swordsponyship. In fact I am fairly sure I'd never used one in my draconequus form for anything other than a prop. (When you walk the
worlds, and sometimes find yourself in a completely different body shape in a different world, and your magic doesn't quite work the way you want it to, or possibly at all, sometimes it's convenient to have a weapon. But even then, most of my skill with a sword consisted of being able to keep myself from being skewered long enough to find a good direction to run away in.) So it was a mind-numbingly stupid idea for me to think I could take on anyone with a sword. Admittedly Anon's skill with the blade was fairly crappy, and looked mostly like moves that look good in human movies but that human swordsmen would laugh at (I said I can't use a blade well myself, not that I can't recognize good technique when I see it, and his was not good technique.) But this had to be an improvement over never having used a sword in combat while in my natural form.

Surprisingly, it was not. At the time I didn't question it. Now I realize that Anon's power must have wanted a dramatic fight. Because for a short while, I was golden. I wasn't using my chaos magic, but I felt as if the sword flowed from me as naturally as my claws might have. Like my talon extended into an invulnerable, insensate extension that wouldn't be harmed if Anon hit it with his sword, unlike my actual talon. I do have some natural aptitude for such things -- I'm good at detecting weaknesses in someone else's defenses, at identifying patterns and disrupting them to my own advantage, and I'm extremely flexible and graceful. My arms weren't much longer than Anon's and I had to manage extra body parts that he doesn't have, keeping them out of his reach, but I could bend my body in ways he couldn't match, and the principle of taunting your opponent into an ill-conceived lunge and then taking advantage of his exposure is one that translates very well from combat with claws and teeth.

In fact I thought I would easily overpower him. Then my sword broke. More precisely, he sliced it in half. I might possibly have been taunting him at the time, and his sword might have started glowing just a trifle brighter, because what I felt was harmony magic slicing through the magic of my creation, fatally weakening it in the same moment as the two physical objects clashed. His sword went through mine like mine was a butter stick. (Which might be a more effective weapon against him next time, because if you wield a butter stick just right, you can ensure that when the opponent parries and slices through your butter, the giant pat they've just sliced off goes flying into their face.)

I spent one too many split seconds staring at the broken remains of my sword, and very nearly got skewered. As it was, his sword shaved some of the thicker fur on my belly and sides. I went sideways, rolled, and conjured a shield... which cleaved in half as easily as my sword had. The only thing that saved me then was my ability to do the limbo -- I was still on the ground, and when his sword went through my shield, it would have at the very least sliced my arm off and possibly gone through my face as well if I hadn't bent my body back flat against the ground. I then uncoiled my bottom half and whacked him with my tail while he was overextended, knocking him flat to the ground.

I went straight up -- only to come straight back down again as Rainbow Dash plowed into me again and Twilight Sparkle dropped a rather large rock, somewhat reminiscent of Tom, on my lower back, below my wings but not quite to my tail yet. I do not actually have the extraneous padding that ponies, or humans, have at that particular junction, so the portions of my anatomy on the front of my body that were directly under this part of my back were crushed quite unpleasantly into the ground by the combination of the rock and my own weight. Yes, draconequui keep sensitive bits in a sheath with a bit of draconic scale covering and protecting it, under the fur, but that does not mean it was pleasant to have my hips and everything between them stomped into the dirt by the weight of the falling rock.

"Now who's laughing, Discord?" Anon shouted as he came at me again. I didn't have time to shake the rock off me and run, and I knew he could cut through anything I manifested from pure chaos. So I shaped the dirt under my paw into another shield and lifted it just in time to save myself from decapitation. The sword hit the shield... and made it fall apart into dirt again, thankfully taking some
of its momentum and blunting it with mud globs so that when it hit my raised wrist, it hit like a hard, heavy stick and not like a blade. Hurt terribly, broke the bone and made me scream, but it didn't cut my arm off.

He had to take a moment to clean his blade off (on his shirt... really, this fellow is uncouth.) This gave me a chance to turn the rock on my back to butterscotch pudding, allowing me to twist away from the mad human again. I healed my broken arm, just in time because there he was coming for me again. I couldn't summon a shield made of magic, his harmonics would cut right through it. I couldn't make a quick shield out of a substance that didn't naturally want to stay in the form of a single solid object, the harmonics had disrupted the magic that held the dirt in the form of a shield. I needed something that would stick together naturally, preferably something that would slow his sword and make it encrusted enough that it couldn't disrupt my magic when it hit me.

I teleported the taffies I'd seen on the counter in Sugarcube Corner, in total desperation, and made them form into a shield just in time as he swung at me. A very thick, globby, taffy-ish shield. Much like Applejack's hooves had when she'd bucked me and I'd made myself partly taffy, the sword sank into it, and then Anon couldn't pull it back out.

"Discord! Damn you, what have you done with my sword?" He was waving it around with a gigantic glob of taffy stuck to it, making it useless as a sword.

"I fixed it!" I cackle at him. "In the sense of animal husbandry. Go ask Fluttershy what that means if you don't understand. Meanwhile I am terribly late for my clawcure at the spa! Toodles!"

I'd finally gotten my head together enough to be able to teleport. So I did. And then I started writing this journal, because it had really sunk in for the first time that I could actually die at this bozo's hands. The fact that a shallow slice against my chest had been enough to disrupt my magic temporarily the last time I'd fought him, and that his sword could go through my chaotic creations so easily by using harmony magic to destabilize whatever I created, meant that there was no guarantee I'd survive it if he actually managed to cut off my head or stab me. I was so badly shaken, in fact, that although my intent was to describe my opponent well enough that if I should fall in battle someone could pick up after me, that first journal entry actually said next to nothing about who this guy is or what form our fight had taken.

So I've come full circle, finally caught up with the start of this journal, and I should really be going down to South Amaerica to retrieve my Element of Greed from a dragon down there, but for some reason what happened in Baltimare is still bothering me tremendously and I cannot for the life of me figure out why.

I enjoyed myself. I could have stopped it at any point, and I didn't, because I wanted it. There is no sense in which anything bad, traumatic, unwanted or even embarrassing happened to me. I shouldn't be dwelling on this... oh for the love of chaos, is this because something bad happened to my character?

Let me backtrack a bit. While I was imprisoned, I would, on occasion, make up imaginary ponies. Some of them, in fact most of them, were just there to be an audience or for me to taunt, but some were... hmm, I believe the term is "self-insertion characters"? They were, essentially, pony representations of some part of my personality. I had quite a few of them, but Twister was one of my favorites, because I actually came up with a lengthy backstory for him. See, I gave him a tornado for a cutie mark (hence his name, also there have been those who have called me "the Twister" or "Mind-Twister" for what should be obvious reasons), as a representation of chaos, but then I wondered what would a unicorn do with a weather-related cutie mark. So he's a weather-working unicorn, a delightfully contradictory concept in and of itself, who grew up in Canterlot but lives in
Las Pegasus, where they have a lot more facilities for non-pegasi than Cloudsdale does. And, apparently, now he has two girlfriends who work at the Palace.

Yes, I know this is pathetic. I was trapped in stone. Don't judge me.

Nothing terrible happened to me, Discord; I quite enjoyed myself. But Twister was kidnapped and gang-raped. I feel very odd about this. I allowed it to happen, because he was nothing more than a fictional character I was playing, but... now I feel as if I've done something to hurt a pony that I actually care about, my own creation. It's ridiculous; I'm well aware he's fictional and I've made him up. Nothing terrible happened to him, either, because he's not real.

But he's an avatar of me. My ponysona, if you like (one of them, anyway). If I had truly been Twister, if I'd been a mere unicorn and not the magnificent draconequus that I am... I'd have found the incident horrifying, not arousing. I like to pretend I'm not in control, or to set off enough chaos that no one is in control, including me, but to be dominated and controlled by someone else... by a pony... the very thought sickens me. And while I am hardly renowned for my empathy, I do know that this is something that most ponies don't like either, which is one of the reasons it's so much fun to inflict it on them... so why is it bothering me that these mares are doing this to stallions I don't know and don't care about, when I myself enjoy a spot of terrorizing ponies by taking their control over their lives away from time to time? My objection to rape is that it's pathetic, not that I have some sort of morality to adhere to... dear me, how could I live down the shame of subscribing to some sort of arbitrary control structure of the type ponies order their lives by? I'm completely amoral. I judge everything on whether it is fun for me or not, and whether it increases chaos and disharmony or not, and whether it does so in the long run or short run. I don't kill ponies because dead ponies aren't funny and they don't cause chaos. I don't eat meat because the same is true of all animals, whether they can talk or not; I got just as much fun out of my long-legged bunny rabbits as I did from my beautiful buffalo ballerinas, despite the fact that buffalo talk and bunnies do not.

Maybe because I've been thinking in terms of protecting ponies, being outraged that this creature from another world has warped them so thoroughly and they don't even have the freedom to know it. Maybe I'm bound to be contrary, and when my enemy is a paragon of kindness and goodness, I must be cruel, but when my enemy is wicked I must develop some virtue. I don't know. The whole thing is confusing me utterly, making me wonder if this is more of Anon's work... but Anon has no interest in turning me into some sort of hero. Whatever it is I'm feeling, it's coming from me. Somehow.

Well. Eventually perhaps it will be clear why I feel this way, or it won't, but the important thing is getting this out of my mind and following where my whims take me. And my whims are telling me that the situation with those mares is quite untenable and I will be restless unless I do something about it. So I think I'm going to go introduce a little chaos to the lives of some ladies in Baltimare, and then I'll go get my Element of Greed.
Catchup: It's Not Just For Hayfries Anymore

Chapter Notes

This chapter talks about material that may be triggering for some readers, beyond what we've already seen; specifically rape threats, male on female; explicit gore.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

That really wasn't hard at all! I had quite a bit of fun with it, too.

It wasn't hard to identify the waitress who'd kidnapped me -- while all the waitresses at Something Different wear beehive hairdos (it's a Baltimore thing), I'd spent quite some time looking at this particular pony, from all the angles. I'm not entirely sure which of the other waitresses were the specific three who joined in the fun -- sometimes ponies all look alike to me, you know? But this one, I'd studied.

I followed her home. Mostly by flying slowly above her, invisible. Pegasus generally fly above the buildings -- it's why Manehattan and Canterlot are the only pony cities dominated by tall structures. Baltimare's a port city, and ports live and die by the whims of the sailors coming to trade, and with their weather control abilities pegasus make up more than their fair share of sailors. (For some reason, earth ponies don't appreciate being out on the water so much. Can't imagine why not.) So if you hover two average pony-heights in the air, the only pony you're likely to run into is Celestia (that mare has amazing legs.) She lived alone, in a small apartment, presumably so that if she got lucky and found a boytoy she didn't need to drug into submission, she wouldn't have to arrange matters around a roommate's schedule. All the better for me.

I waited until she'd taken her skates off (can you believe she skated all the way home? But then, skating's also a thing in Baltimare), washed off the travel dust, and poured herself a drink. Hard cider. My my, our little friend liked to live it up in all kinds of ways, didn't she? I waited until she had a mouthful of cider and then appeared directly next to her (or, more precisely, most of my body curved over her back, part of my tail behind her, and my face next to hers. Pony language actually is rather poorly designed for describing what I do with my body easily.) "Well, hello there!" I said to her cheerfully, as she spit out most of her cider and dropped her glass on the floor. "You ran off so quickly last time, you didn't even give me a calling card! How did you expect me to contact you for another date?"

The unicorn tried to step backward, backing away from me, which was silly because I was draped over her. I lifted my tail and twined it with hers so she wouldn't step on it. She shrieked and tried to lunge forward, which only brought her head and neck slamming into my neck, as I'd just circled her head with my neck so my face was now on her other side. "Oh my!" I said. "In a rush, are we? That's quite all right, though, I remember how quickly you wanted to get down to business last time!"

She tried to shriek, but what came out of her mouth was a word balloon, a jagged one with the word "AAAHHH!" written on it. "Ah-ah-ah," I said. "Don't want to disturb the neighbors. Now I wanted to make sure that we're communicating properly, because I feel as if we might have fallen down a bit on that last time, but we won't get to have any fun if your landmare calls the cops. So I thought this would be a great way to make sure we can talk, without you being loud about it." I leered at her
deliberately. "Maybe later I'll go with a traditional soundproofing spell. If I recall correctly you're quite the screamer!"

More word balloons spilled out of her mouth. "Please," they said mutely, in that kind of all-caps bold italic writing that you mostly only find in comic books. "Please, I'm sorry, please don't hurt me..."

"Hurt you? Now whyever would I want to do that?" I grinned at her. "We had so much fun the last time. All I want is a repeat engagement! But this time it's my turn to be on top. Don't worry--" I dangled a set of four leather cuffs, hoof-sized, with fur lining, in front of her. (These were conjured, of course -- nothing died to provide this leather or fur -- but I knew the mare would be able to smell that they were, actually, leather and fur. Maybe it's a bit overkill to be three times the size of a pony, with claws and teeth, and be the god of chaos, and taunt the target with goods made of leather, but I was hankering for a bit of overkill, actually.) "I made sure to bring my own gear!"

She actually managed to toss me off her and run for the door. I teleported in front of her, grinning. "Oh! Is this the game we're playing?" She spun and tried to run again, and I intercepted her again. "This is fun! Tell me, did you ever do this with any of the stallions you loved and left down in your basement, or am I the first one you've ever played tag with?" She blasted me with magic, quite uselessly as her harmonic spell simply unraveled against my chaos field. Then she picked up a coffee table and threw it at me. I turned it into an ordinary, rain-bearing cloud and let it fall apart around me, leaving a puddle of rain on her apartment floor. "Mm, refreshing." She started throwing everything her magic could grab at me. I turned all of it into flowers. "My dear, you don't have to shower me with gifts," I said. "Just your presence is enough for me!"

At this point she fell to her knees and started crying, which was funny, because the word balloons were coming out with "*sob* *sob*". I picked her up in my tail and lifted her to my face again. "Crying? Just because I said you didn't need to give me flowers? You're definitely a high-maintenance sort of gal, you know that?"

The word balloons were coming out so fast they were falling over each other, as if she was babbling. More of the "please let me go" and "please don't hurt me" variety. I laughed. "Oh, you little minx. You're getting me back for how I played the part last time, aren't you? One would almost think you didn't want me." I pulled her even closer, turning her slightly so I could breathe against her ear. "Of course we both know that's not true. After you drugged me, and dragged me off, and tied me up, there isn't any question about you wanting me, now is there?"

"You're a monster!" the next word balloon said.

"How rude! If you preferred the stallion form I wore last time, you could have asked nicely. Now I don't feel like switching into it. So there." I murmured directly in her ear. "Don't worry, though. I assure you, even in this form I'm completely compatible with ponies."

She sobbed harder, shaking her head back and forth. As amusing as this had been, I decided to bring the little charade to a close; when they start crying like that, you're not going to get much more variety in reaction out of them no matter what you do, and obviously I had no intention of doing what I was pretending I was going to do. "Wait, wait," I said. "No? You're saying no?" She nodded her head vigorously. "Oh, good, you're actually saying yes. I was worried--" More frantic headshaking, and word balloons saying "No, no, I don't want this, please," came falling out of her mouth. "You don't want this?" She didn't fall for it this time; instead of nodding or shaking, she went with the word balloons saying "I don't, I don't want it, please don't touch me, please" and that sort of thing.

So I dropped her. "Well, that's a surprise," I said. "After you wanted it so badly last time... oh. Oh, I know what your problem is." I nodded knowingly. "It's too soon, isn't it? It must be intense, playing
rough like that. Well, I can see how a mare might need some recovery time after being with me. I'm sure you're quite exhausted." I winked at her.

She stared up at me from the floor, a wonderful look of total confusion on her face, fear leavened by just a touch of hope. That's really where I like them to be, teetering just on the razor edge between despair and relief, when their minds are alive to all the possibilities their future might hold, and they don't have the slightest idea which way it will go. "I tell you what," I said. "To be honest, this no-safewords play is a little bit edgy for me. It's fun, don't get me wrong, but I personally would feel just a little bit better if we had a signal. Something that doesn't interrupt the roleplay or ruin the immersion, but that makes it clear what we both want. Hmm."

Again she backed away from me, so I teleported to her and coiled around her again. "I have the perfect solution! I want to hear what you think of it." I snapped my talon, so she could talk again. She opened her mouth and tried to scream, but nothing but a hoarse croak came out. "What did I say about bothering the neighbors? I want to hear you talk, not yell. Sheesh, my ears are right here."

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, please let me go, if I'd known who you were I wouldn't have gone near you, please..."

"Oh, my dear, if I believed that it would break my heart! To think you'd reject me so cruelly for my true appearance, after all we've meant to each other." I nuzzled her neck slightly, and she shuddered. "But I know you don't mean it. You're just playing the game! So let me know what you think of this for a signal."

I looked directly into her eyes. "I come back to your restaurant," I said. "I'm wearing a different form. Maybe I'm an earth pony this time. Maybe I'm a pegasus. We'll mix it up! I know, my true form is a little bit intimidating for mares, they can't quite handle so much concentrated sexy, so I'll downgrade just like I did before. Be more approachable." I leaned in close. "And all you have to do to tell me you're ready for funtime is to do exactly the same thing you did last time."

"...What?" she whimpered.

"Just that! If you're feeling kind of sore, if you're tired, got a headache, not in the mood? Just leave me alone. Take my order, bring me my food, and nothing extra. But if you'd like me to tie you up and demonstrate exactly what I can do with this tongue--" I waggled it at her-- "just drug me or cart me off like you did last time! Hold me at knifepoint, hit me over the head, however you want to do it. The important thing is the verisimilitude. You'll play like you're overpowering me, and then I turn the tables on you and ravish you the same way you did to me, last time. Won't that be fun?" I grinned at her. "Though I'll probably take this form back once I've got you in my power. Hooves are all well and good but you don't know what you're missing if you've never experienced fingers." I did a little air piano in front of her to demonstrate.

"...please..."

"Yes, I can see how eager you are! But you're right, we don't have to play tonight, I'm sure I thoroughly satisfied you yesterday." I leered at her again. "So the next time I'm in the mood, I'll come by, and if you're feeling frisky, just take me captive! And if you're not, then just treat me like an ordinary customer, no Happy Ending down in the basement, and I'll know you mean you're not up for it this time and I should come back another day. Sound good?"

"H-how will I know it's you?"

I laughed heartily. "You won't! Think of how gloriously unpredictable that will be! Any fella you decide to show a good time to might be me! Or any lady--" at this point I released her and took the
form of the model Fleur de Lis. "I can be quite a sexy mare if you decide your door swings both ways." Back in my own form, I leaned forward. "Hey, listen. I didn't get the addresses of your pals, but do let them know the offer's open to them as well. If you decide you're not up for it but any of them want a bit of fun, same deal -- they can just take me captive and try to sex me up, and that'll be a pretty unmistakeable signal, don't you think? I mean, hard to misinterpret that one." She started whimpering again. "Oh, cheer up, my dear, it's not every day you catch the attention of the god of chaos! Do you know, you were my first in a thousand years? Not by my choice, of course, it's just hard to get action when you're a stone statue. But believe me," I leaned even closer and murmured in her ear, "you were very, very, very memorable." (Side note: she wasn't. She was surprisingly vanilla for a rapist.) She shuddered, her eyes closing tightly and tears leaking out. "I'd wait for you for twenty years if that's how long it takes, dear heart. You could be an old, old lady, and all you'll have to do to get some fun is conk some fellow you don't know over the head... and it'll probably be me."

I let her go and teleported, half of the flower-strewn room between her and me. "In any case, since you're not in the mood tonight, I'll take my leave. But do remember me the next time you want to get wild with the date rape drugs, won't you? I'll be looking forward to it!"

And then I came back here.

I could be wrong -- I am not always the best judge of pony behavior -- but I feel safe in saying that that is a mare who will most likely never attempt to rape anypony, ever again.

But all good things come to an end. I've had my fun today; it's time to bite the bullet and tell you all the sad, sordid details of my de-tailing. (Which I am fully recovered from, thank you for asking. It doesn't even ache when I curl it tightly anymore.)

So if you were paying attention, and I'm sure you were because how could you not be riveted to every word I write?, you certainly must remember how I talked about being consumed with a red-hazed hatred and desire to go charging off to wreak some nefarious vengeance, at the end of my first entry in this journal. I knew that I had to do something villainous, or the role Anon wanted to force me into would drive me into it, and if I was pushed rather than going of my own free will it was likely to be far stupider, and more dangerous for me, than something I chose to do.

I chose to check up on Woona. Because really as a good little villain I should be gloating at her, and giving her the opportunity to say "You'll never get away with this!" so I can say "On the contrary, my dear, I already have... muwahahahaha!" and suchlike. More seriously I wanted to talk to her about Anon. If she hadn't broken free of the dreamworld I inceptioned her into by now, then either Anon made her seriously, seriously stupid, and pointing out her own incapacity to her might get the wheels turning... or she was eager to remain in a dreamworld and wasn't fighting hard to return to reality, which sounded like either a weakness I could exploit, or a subconscious awareness that she was being screwed over in real life.

By this point it had been nearly two weeks since my first confrontation with Anon. I was frankly astonished Luna had remained imprisoned for so long. I mean, I know I'm good, but that good? I impress even me. I was also rather shocked that nopony (or human) had bothered to check the Castle of the Two Sisters. Really, how does that level of stupidity even survive?

Luna was still asleep on the floor of the castle. I had provided her with a bed, and an adorable blankie, and a lacy, frilly nightgown so ridiculously long that it would have dragged on the ground if I'd worn it, mostly because I'd wanted to see Luna try to jump to her feet in a battle posture, get tangled in her nightgown, and faceplant. But all of these accoutrements had vanished, either because of the general impermanence of chaos magic and the fact that it had been two weeks, or because one of my narrow escapes from Anon had disrupted it. However, this had not woken her up. She was
still lying peacefully on the castle floor, her chest rising and falling and the eyes behind her lids moving about jerkily, but no other movement. It puzzled me. I knew she was quite all right -- an alicorn in a magical sleep won't need food, water, or a potty break any more than a sleeping dragon would -- but I was surprised that she was still under. I'd half expected the moon to awaken her on the first night, let alone this far in.

Carefully -- I'm not completely incautious -- I stepped into her dream.

The quality of the weave amazed even me. I'd built this dream for her, but she'd taken it over at some point, making it rich and vivid to the point of hyper-reality. It wasn't hard to see why she hadn't broken free of it, either, as the very first thing I saw in the dream was an evening parade in Luna's honor, revering her for a military victory against the caribou. Soldiers and freed slaves marched in the parade, ponies threw white lilies and moonflowers in front of her chariot, and the air was filled with the sound of laughter and cheering and marching bands and excited foals shouting at each other, "Look! Look! It's the Princess!"

Luna has issues.

The similarity to what Anon had done to the world did not escape me. As I observed the dream further, however, I recognized that Luna made a much better god than Anon did. Her heroic exploits were actually in character, very similar to things she had actually done in her existence. The evils she spent her time challenging were mostly real, societies that Celestia had chosen to leave alone and self-ruling out of realpolitik, and I was sure the inability to crush slavers and topple tyrants as she'd done in the past, now that Celestia had created such a peaceful, orderly society, was grating to Luna. She didn't take on the sort of threats that brought out the Element Bearers; in the dream, she had become good friends with Twilight Sparkle and was engaged in teaching her some of the things Celestia had not, such as battle magic and shadow weaving and how to safely use dark magic. (This might have been questionable in real life. Celestia's opinion was that the only way to safely use dark magic was to never do it, and the fact that Luna herself had fallen didn't make the best argument for Luna's perspective on the matter.) Luna fought armies, at the head of armies of her own, and there was blood and there was sacrifice and there was death aplenty, and the fact that Luna always returned in triumph to the cheering of crowds didn't change the fact that at least it had been a hard-won battle.

I also noticed, interestingly, that Anon wasn't anywhere in the dream.

I waited until Luna was ready to retire for the morning, and popped into her bedroom. "Nice blackout curtains! With soundproofing, no less! These are nice digs, Luna, I can see why you slept right through my first little jailbreak."

"Discord!"

She snarled at me and fired a bolt of moderately dark grey magic, which had it hit me might have even done something, but I swung my tail up with a baseball bat in it and hit her magic with a good thwack, causing the bolt to fire off at the wall instead. The wall became encased in thick webbing. "Ooh! Bondage! Luna, you minx, you." I snapped my talon and covered her horn with a magic-suppressing party hat, unleashed a storm of confetti, and blew one of those roll-out noisemakers at her. Luna wasted several minutes pawing uselessly at the rubberband holding the party hat on her head, attempting to bring her hoof to bear against it in the absence of magic. Which would almost certainly have worked if I hadn't glued it to her coat, but without the dexterity of magic (or hands!) she couldn't budge it. "Now, now, Luna, I came here to party! Or was that parley? I always mix those words up."

"I have nothing to say to you, monster! How can you even be alive? I saw Anon destroy you!"
"Yeah, funny about that. Where is our favorite monkey with the hairtrigger temper, anyway? I haven't seen him around here, have you?"

She scowled at me. "I recall a rumor that you can restore yourself from the dead. Perhaps your time in the Shadowlands kept you from noticing, then. Having destroyed you, Anon returned to his own world, for it was you who were holding him here."

A rumor? Luna knows I can come back from the dead. She's seen me do it. Of course, Luna also believes that the first time I did it, I wasn't the same being when I came back -- literally, she thinks I'm some sort of dybbuk of Chaos running around in a copy of the original Discord's body. And to think, she's never actually read the X-Men's Dark Phoenix saga! But she shouldn't be thinking of my talent for cheating death as a rumor. (At this point, you are no doubt wondering, "But Discord, if you're so fantastic that you can restore yourself from the dead, why are you even afraid of Anon?"

And the answer is, when he attacks me with that sword it disrupts my magic, and my ability to come back from the dead is very much contingent on my ability to die with my magic intact. I've never tried it, for obvious reasons, but I strongly suspect that if I die without magic or with my magic in more disarray than it is usually, I'll stay dead. And the Shadowlands are a very, very, very, very, very boring place. Admittedly slightly more entertaining than being a statue, but only slightly.) Also, the notion that I'd be keeping Anon here is laughable. But it was very interesting that Luna had kicked Anon out of her dream, in a way that made sense within the story he'd turned all of Equestria into, and without rejecting the high opinion of him that had been forced on her, but conveniently ensuring he would not be around so Luna could be the hero instead of Anon. Luna has a greater talent for seeing through illusions than any other pony I know, far better than Celestia's. Maybe some part of her was subconsciously seeing through Our Hero's facade?

"Well, now, that's just a silly idea. Why would I have wanted to keep Anon here?" I remembered then that Luna hadn't been awake when Anon had disrupted my power the first time. "He's so stolid! Maybe he needs to grow a beard."

"Cease your nonsense and leave, Discord!"

"Ca-an't make me," I caroled at her, swishing my hips in a little dance. "But let's talk about Anon." I flashed her onto a psychiatrist's couch, with myself in a chair next to it. "Zis 'Anon' fellow, he is gute friend of yours, ja?"

The chair came to life and grabbed me, its "arms" turning into clawed hooks that clamped around mine, and straps snapping closed around my middle. Impressive! Of course, Luna has more control of the environment within a dream than I do, but I hadn't realized that that would be the case even if she didn't know it was a dream.

"I have been practicing, Discord," she said. "Honing my magic, fighting against the enemies of Equestria, the enemies of friendship and justice. I believe I am much closer to a match for you than you remember me."

This was actually not very good. Not only did Luna have more control over the dream than I did, but she had made up an excuse for herself why she could warp reality. And when I tried to free myself of the dream, I felt her will bearing down on me, holding me in place. In the past I'd run around fairly freely within Luna's dreams, over a thousand years ago when I was in stone but she wasn't yet on the moon, because I'd known about her dream powers and kept moving so she couldn't affect me with them. But I'd made the mistake of assuming she couldn't use them when she didn't know it was a dream. Apparently that wasn't the case.

"How splendid for you," I said grumpily. "Here I come just to have a friendly chat with you, and you repeatedly try to tie me up. Why, Lulu, if I didn't know better, I'd swear you were propositioning
me." I waggled my tongue at her. "Or are you?"

"Keep thy tongue in thy mouth, foul beast, or I shall remove it forthwith!" she said furiously, charging up her horn... which meant that, since she was preparing to blast me in the dream and not manipulate the dream itself around me, my bonds were probably weaker. I proved it by teleporting out of them.

"Luna, Luna, Luna. This is getting us nowhere. I just came to chat with you about Anon."

"What doth he matter to thee? I shall tell thee nothing!"

When Luna goes all thee and thou, she's really riled up. She's a lot better about using modern parlance when she's calm. "Oh, just about the fact that he's not really gone, you're only dreaming that he has, and in the meantime he's warped all Equestria into some twisted theatre for a play he's putting on about what a big hero he is."

"What? Anon has been gone many a year! How dare thee speak such a transparent lie to me!"

"Now Luna, when have my lies ever been transparent? You're in a dream, Princess. You've been in one for nigh-on two weeks of real time. How do you think you got so much more powerful than you'd ever been before? Seriously, the fact that you can challenge me for even a moment should tell you I'm telling the truth."

She stared at me. "I cannot be in a dream, Discord; you lie, still. I am the Princess of Dreams; I surely would have noticed."

"Nope! Because I'm better than you are at making a realistic dream, and your mind just ran with it. You've been in here for several years, haven't you? And you haven't noticed anything strange?"

"No, and that is proof of your lies! I would never be deceived into thinking a dream is reality!" She blasted me -- I should have seen it coming, she'd been holding the charge in her horn for some time, but frankly I'd assumed she wasn't going to do anything because Luna isn't known for her patience. I went flying through the wall, which actually hurt, though in reality it probably wouldn't have. Much.

"Nice one, Lulu." I picked myself up. "But how do you think you managed to do that if this is real?"

"We have struck blows against you before, foul monster."

"With your sister's help, yeah, but on your ownsome, you're not all that, sweetheart." Luna has a sophisticated range of very unusual magics that the average unicorn simply cannot do no matter how hard they train, while Celestia has, basically, straightforward unicorn magic. But Celestia has a lot more raw power than Luna does. Celestia alone can do me some damage, sometimes, if I'm not paying attention, but Luna alone cannot, a subject of incredible frustration to her over the centuries.

"You assume that Luna is alone," a voice that sounded very much like Luna's, but deeper and strangely affected, said. "I assure you, she is not."

Great. So because this was a dream, Moonie was able to show up in it as an independent entity. She strode forward out of a conveniently placed shadow. "Hey girl!" I said. "Long time no see. You look fabulous. Have you been getting underage female humans to style your hair again?"

"Be quiet, insolent whelp!" She fired another bolt at me. That one actually hurt, too.

"Luna, did it ever occur to you that Nightie there shouldn't be running around in an extra body if this isn't a dream?" I pointed out.
"'Tis but another thing that happened whilst thou wert dead." She smirked. "Anon brought out Moon's soul e'en before thou and I battled, and reformed her, and after thy death, he and Twilight worked together to grant her a new body so she need not reside solely in my head."

Right. Anon reformed Nightmare Moon. And I'm a turnip. And Luna speaking like a time capsule again suggested she was under some sort of stress that she hadn't been under moments before Nightie appeared, when she'd been managing to remember her you's. Methinks some part of Luna doesn't truly love Anon nearly as much as she thinks she does.

"Now, prepare yourself to return to the Shadowlands once more, base creature! And this time, don't return!" Nightmare Moon snarled, and she and Luna both charged up their horns.

This was going to be a bit of an ow, I thought. "Go ahead, girls, make my day." I put up a mirror field, one that in real life would have sent their magic bouncing in all kinds of crazy directions.

Instead it cut through my mirror field like a watergun through paper. "Oh, pooh," I said, and then the combined force of the beams turned me to ice and shattered me.

And then I opened my eyes, still sitting on the floor of the Castle of the Two Sisters, while Luna smiled in her sleep, no doubt doing a happy dance with her alter that she had once more heroically destroyed a threat to Equestria. The thing about dying in a dream, contrary to many bad comic books and plays, is that it doesn't kill you; it wakes you up. The humans' fiction eventually figured this out, which is funny, because humans really can't walk in dreams not their own, whereas ponies actually can and yet this myth that dreamwalkers can die in a dream persists.

I was obviously not going to get anywhere with Luna as long as she was dreaming. On the other hand, if I woke her up, then I'd have to go to all the effort of holding her prisoner. Feeding her, keeping her locked up, making sure she didn't try any clever escape tricks, oh, it's all so boring. I never held a prisoner longer than a day or so because I just couldn't be bothered. I needed leverage. So I picked her up with my magic (what? I wasn't going to do it with my arms, alicorns are heavy. It's not like I lift or anything) and carried her outside, into the Everfree Forest.

Then I re-entered her dream. "That hurt, Luna," I said.

She was in the middle of preparing for some speech, to give at evening's fall to a crowd of adoring citizens, when I popped in on her. She whirled on me in fury. "WHY WON'T YOU STAY DEAD?!" she screamed, and blasted at me multiple times. This time I was ready for her, and dodged all of them.

"Because you never killed me in the first place," I sneered at her. I snapped my paw and collected her horn and wings; it was repetitive, but in this particular case I was consciously choosing the repetition. She'd have a much harder time lucid-dreaming her way out of one of my stunts if it was one she fully believed she couldn't counter in real life. "Luna, I am tired of this. I came here to talk to you, but since you refuse, I've brought an ultimatum." I sensed Moonie preparing to ambush me, and snapped, making her reappear in front of the both of us as a small foal. "And you! If you want to have an independent body so badly, how about you do it the way the rest of us have to? It's hardly fair. If I had to live through awkward years of being a child, then so do you."

The small foal stomped her little hoofsies in rage. "How dare you treat me this way? I am NIGHTMARE MOON!"

"Yes, yes, Moonie, the grownups are talking here," I said. "Luna. You are dreaming. I have taken your body from the safe place I'd stashed it in and I've dumped it in the Everfree Forest, sleeping. If you don't want to wake up in a manticore's gullet, you will shut up, sit down and listen."
"You wouldn't dare," she snarled at me.

"Oh, try me. You've used up all my patience, Lulu, and you know well I never had much in the first place."

"You are bluffing!" squeaked Goodnight Moon. "This isn't even a dream!"

"Can you take the risk?" I ignored the Mooninite and hung down upside down next to Luna, my head upright and speaking in her ear. "If I'm lying to you, and you fall for my bluff, all that happens is you have to listen to me. But if you try to call my bluff, and I'm not lying, you could end up as hydra chow. Can't very well defend yourself if you're asleep, now can you?"

"Very well, then, miscreant." Let it never be said that Luna is not liberal with the use of the classy insults. "Speak, and do not further try our patience."

"Did you know that when Anon came to this world, two thirds of all the stallions in Equestria were transformed to mares, and none of them remember it?"

Luna glared at me. "If you have something serious to speak of, then do so!"

"Oh, I'm quite serious, believe me. Census records, newspaper archives... there's actually evidence that what I'm telling you is true. Once you wake up you can check it."

She snorted. "And of course 'twould never be your way, to fake the evidence."

I laughed. "Of course 'twould, had I but the power to make such a thorough, detailed, orderly change," I said, mocking her archaic speech. (Yes, I talked like that once too, but I was around in Canterlot Gardens listening to ponies talk while the language was evolving. Also I've always been better at adapting to change than Luna is.) "But I don't. I don't even have the power to change the sex of millions of ponies, let alone alter the memories of every pony in Equestria. I'm good, but I have limits. Apparently Anon does too, but his are above mine, as much as it pains me to admit it."

She stared at me as if I had three heads. Which occasionally I do. "Discord, you're madder than ever before. Anon has no such power. He bears the Element of Protection, that is all."

"Luna. Focus. What Element of Protection? You've been to the Tree, you've seen the markings on it. Was there ever an Element of Protection there?"

"The Element of Protection is the lost Seventh Element. It was not on the Tree when Celestia and I went there to defeat you."

"But all the Elements have to work together! How could you have defeated me if you were missing an Element?"

Little Moonie laughed. Amazing how obnoxious that laughter sounds when coming from a knee-high filly. "Oh, poor Discord! Are you troubled by something that doesn't make sense to you?"

I was about to make an undoubtedly devastatingly witty comeback when I felt a certain sense of unease. I broke the dreamwalking spell and opened my eyes, just in time to see Anon rushing at me, howling a battle cry, with his sword over his head.

"Yeep!" I teleported straight up. (Don't try this at home, colts and fillies; I was in the thick of the Everfree Forest. A unicorn who tried that stunt would have quickly learned what it was like to be a tree.) From the safety of a branch a good bit over Anon's head, I peered down. "You finally bothered to come looking at the castle? Finally? On the one day I come here to check up on Woona? This is
completely unfair!"

He sneered at me. "You just think it's unfair because you're not winning!"

"Well, yes, of course, me not winning is the very definition of -- oh, how are you even climbing that tree with a sword?" It hung at his side, making "ting" noises every time it struck against his armor (did I forget to mention he was wearing his armor? Obviously, he was prepared for me, but how? I hadn't even known I was going to check up on Luna until the moment I decided to do it.) It was large and unwieldy and should definitely be preventing him from making his way up a heavily vine-overlaid and bush-crowded tree, and if the sword wasn't getting in his way, the armor should have.

I floated off the tree, out of his reach. Under the canopy of the overgrown trees, I was fairly confident that Rainbow Dash wasn't going to be able to appear out of nowhere and barrel into me. "I suppose I shouldn't be shocked that you can climb trees under these conditions," I said. The thing I intended to say right after that was, "You've warped everything else in the world to your convenience, why not give yourself magical tree climbing powers?" What came out of my mouth was "I suppose they teach you this sort of thing in monkey kindergarten, right? Do you all start shimmying up trees as soon as you can walk?"

"Is that supposed to be an insult?" he snickered at me, as I blinked, trying to figure out why I hadn't said what I meant to say, and for that matter remember what I had meant to say. "Tree-climbing is one of humanity's talents." He jumped down from the tree, at a height that really should have gotten him hurt given the armor he was wearing, but it was as if the armor was as light as his clothing -- it didn't seem to be impeding him at all. "So is making use of tools." Abruptly there was a large rock in his hand -- I hadn't even seen it get there -- and he flung it, with uncanny accuracy, directly at my eye.

I reeled back, but kept enough presence of mind to keep levitating. How had he just taken me by surprise? How had he hurt me with an entirely non-magical missile? "Oh, you think you're clever, don't you, Anon?" I snarled down at him. "Any ape can throw a rock. But I'll bet you can't hit what you can't see." I summoned a cotton candy cloud and made it rain chocolate milk on him, drenching him, as I lay down on top of the cloud. It was dense enough that I knew nothing he could throw at it would penetrate through to me, not before I sensed it coming at any rate.

He started climbing a tree again, plainly trying to get above my cloud. Now he really should not have been able to climb the tree, because the torrent of chocolate rain should have made the tree far, far too slippery, but this didn't seem to faze him. "Oh, persistent," I chuckled. "I'm sure they'll make a movie of your exploits. They could call it--" I had planned to finish that sentence with "the Man with No Name", but instead I found myself saying, "The Best Tree-Climber In Equestria."

Frustration boiled over. "How are you doing that?" I shouted at him.

"Doing what?" he smirked.

"Blocking what I planned to say and making me say something else," was what I wanted to say. Instead I said, "Climbing that tree! The chocolate milk should have made it far too slippery!"

"Like I said. Humans are great at climbing trees."

Instinctively I backed away from him (though I left the cloud in place). Now that this had happened three times in rapid succession, I was starting to be able to remember the things I had wanted to say. Enough about them that I was picking up a pattern. Deliberately I opened my mouth to say, "Why do they call you Anon, anyway?" and instead said, "Fortunately for me you're not very good at flying."
This time I remembered, and in remembering, I was able to recognize the pattern. I couldn't make a comment about Anon's name. I couldn't talk about his powers. Any time I tried, even if I concentrated on what I wanted to say, something completely different, but relatively apropos, would come out of my mouth. It wasn't that these weren't things I would say, although some of them were lame enough that my internal is-this-actually-funny censor would have cut in and blocked them had I chosen to say them. (The Best Tree-Climber In Equestria? Really?) It was just that I hadn't planned to say them. And it was disorienting every time it happened, and hard, very hard, to remember what I'd actually been planning to say.

Anon tried leaping at me, from the tree. This didn't do him very much good; I was well out of his way. He landed, with no sign that jumping down from that distance had done him the slightest bit of harm. Ponies could fall from that distance without injury but ponies were infused with magic; I'd thought a human would be more fragile. But of course, I kept forgetting. Anon was infused with magic, the magic of twisting events so they went the way he wanted them to.

"Discord, you coward!" he shouted. "Come on down here and fight like a man!"

"Oh, you mean with no magic, and pointy sticks that I don't have? That certainly sounds fair. Tell you what, why don't you toss that sword into the bushes? That would make it much more fair. No magic for you or me, just bare fists and claws. Oh, wait, your claws aren't very sharp, are they?" I toss him down a nail file. "You want to work on that?"

"If you weren't such a coward, you wouldn't be afraid to face me!"

I felt a burning rage, entirely out of proportion to his taunts, and an overwhelming desire to make him eat those words. Call me a coward, would he? I'd show him!... but I managed to cling to just enough of my rationality to realize what a terrible idea it was to let that rage consume me. Anon, or more precisely Anon's power, wanted me to attack him. And more specifically it wanted me to attack him in the most bone-headed of comic book villainous ways. I didn't care if he thought I was a coward; in my experience that taunt always means "Come fight me in a way that gives me the advantage over you!" I mean, earth ponies used to taunt unicorns and call them cowards for using magic in combat instead of their hooves. Chew on the stupidity of that for a moment.

I freely admit, if wanting to fight from my own advantage and not my enemy's is cowardice, call me a lily-livered chicken then. I have no interest in fighting fair; I am all about the fights that are totally unfair and in my favor. When I'm not fighting for my life against a more powerful opponent, I do give out handicaps to make the games more fun, but as soon as there's some chance an opponent might hurt me, well then, no more Mr. Fair Play Draconequus. So his words should have been meaningless to me, along the same lines as "You monster" and "What in the name of the seven rings of Tartarus are you supposed to be?" and "But if you do that, there'll be total chaos!" (Actually that last one is meaningful, it just means the exact opposite of what the pony saying it thinks it means. Since they usually think it's supposed to dissuade me.) And yet, I felt a disproportionate fury, and I was barely able to restrain myself from dropping to the ground and inviting him to do his worst.

Instead, I decided that if this was a fair fight, his ability to harm me should be counterbalanced by me actually harming him, not just taunting him or twisting reality around him. So I made it rain baseballs.

The result of this, while hilarious, was less damaging to my opponent than I'd have hoped. Anon started using the flat of his sword as a bat, smacking baseballs out of the air. Some of them, he even managed to make fly toward me, though I dodged fairly easily. With him fully occupied, I descended closer to the ground so I could see his face better, which improved his ratio of smacking balls toward me, but I easily redirected them into curve balls that curved around me. "Swing, batta batta batta! Swing batta!" I chanted at him, laughing.
It was hysterically funny to watch him swinging a sword around as if it were a baseball bat. Also a little unnerving; he moved too fast. It was almost as if he had extra arms -- I don't mean he actually did have extra arms and they were just invisible or something, I just mean that the speed he was hitting these things gave the impression that he was in multiple places at once. So, since I was getting bored with watching the baseball game, I turned him into an octopus, dispelling the baseball-dropping cloud as I did so.

I completely lost it and fell over on the ground laughing as the octopus -- we're not talking a giant octopus here, we're talking a perfectly normal octopus, like the size of a pony's head -- attempted to lift the now-massive sword with its small tentacles, glaring at me with all the fury a small octopus can muster up. It was easily the funniest thing I'd seen in days. Even now, knowing that my reaction to the sight might have been influenced by Anon's power, I still think it was unbearably funny.

What happened next was not so funny. Anon the octopus leaped at me, still somehow holding his sword, and because I was down on the ground in hysterics, I didn't see him in time. He latched onto my head with most of his tentacles, the rest of them attempting to maneuver his sword into position that he could stab me or something, though it was so large and unwieldy for a small octopus that he couldn't quite manage. I shrieked, my first reaction being to attempt to pull him off my face with my talon, but octopi have some grip to them. I flew up, fast, straightening as I went, but Anon's grip on my head only tightened, and since he was lying on top of my nostrils and his tentacles were wrapped around my muzzle, I couldn't breathe. In an utter panic, I turned the octopus into a bunny rabbit.

Octopi have a very, very powerful grip. Bunnies, not so much. He fell off my face easily, his sword dropping from his paw and plonking to the ground with a crystalline "tink" noise, looking even more enraged than he had when he was an octopus. I burst out laughing again at how ridiculous he looked.

"Who's a cutesy-wutesy bunny-wunny? You are!" I said, giggling. "Oh, Fluttershy! Here's a new pet bunsie-wunsie for you!"

He hopped around infuriated, glaring up at me, making chattering rabbit noises. Then he hopped up on top of Luna, who was still sleeping (honestly, how does that mare sleep through a fight going on around her, with chocolate rainstorms no less? She was drenched and lying in a puddle of soggy mud and still asleep), and tried to use her as leverage to leap up to me... which was even more enraged than he had when he was an octopus. I burst out laughing again at how ridiculous he looked.

And then I decided to float down and boop his nose. "You are just the most adorable--"

This was the part where he leapt up onto the top of my head and bit me, hard.

I yelped and swatted at him, but he'd wrapped his paws around my antler, so it proved to be surprisingly difficult to dislodge him. I landed, no longer able to focus on levitating, and shook my head wildly, pulling at the rabbit at the same time. He shouldn't have been strong enough to stay latched on through all that, but he was.

After a few moments of flailing, I did what I should have done first -- I snapped my talon and teleported him off me, simultaneously changing him into a hamster and sticking him in a wheel. For a few moments he tried to escape by running, which of course is exactly what a hamster wheel is for. I'd healed the rabbit bites on my head by then, of course, so I was fully free to point and laugh at Hamsterman.

Then he did something blatantly impossible. He leapt up to the top of the hamster wheel, grabbed its spokes with his tiny paws, swung his lower body hard enough to fall out of the hamster wheel (it wasn't fully enclosed, only the bottom portion), and then, as I gaped at him (people who are not me
are not supposed to do completely impossible things), he picked up the wheel and chucked it at my head.

I hadn't made him into a super-strong hamster, and yet, he was demonstrating more strength and flexibility than a hamster body has. I admit, I was stunned enough (and probably, impaired by his powers enough) that I simply stood there, staring at him, until the hamster wheel hit me directly in the eye.

Just because I can regenerate injury doesn't mean that getting hurt doesn't hurt. I reeled back with a startled scream and reverted my magic. This disintegrated the offending hamster wheel, but allowed Anon to pop back into his human form.

He wasted no time. By the time I'd healed my eye and looked back down, I didn't see Anon. I turned my head, and he was behind me, running straight at me with the sword. Under most circumstances, my instinctive reaction when someone is charging to attack me is to teleport, or dodge, but somehow every time I'm in danger from Anon, I seem to forget I can teleport.

Instead of doing something sensible like teleporting, and instead of doing something like what I'd done last time and teleporting taffy or something into the way, and instead of grabbing Luna and using her as a living shield (which I might not have wanted to do anyway, because he might not have been able to stop his charge, and I'd really rather not see wittle Woona dead), I swung my tail at him, planning to grab his sword arm and wrench the sword away from him, and possibly the arm as well. I think. I think that's what I was thinking, anyway.

I'm used to having the fastest reaction time of all the creatures I know, when I'm actually in combat and not, well, laughing at my enemies too hard to realize they're actually a threat. Against any other opponent, that trick would probably have worked. But Anon was faster than me.

For the first split second I didn't even feel pain. I felt unbalanced, literally -- I'd been in the middle of swinging my tail toward him and then something had happened to throw off my balance and wait I hadn't elongated or warped it so why was my tail all the way over there?...

And then the pain hit, and I started screaming.

There was blood, everywhere. Blood pouring out of the piece of my tail that was lying on the grass a few heads away from me. Blood pouring out of me, in giant irregular spurts. Anon's sword, covered in blood; his face and armor, spattered with it. "Who's laughing now, Discord?" he said -- laughing at me, so obviously the answer was him. "Is it funny now?"

I couldn't levitate. I twisted around to grab the half a tail I had left -- and screamed, my paws burning as I touched it. It was glowing white. Still spurting blood everywhere, but now it was burning with the paradoxic heat that the energies of Harmony inflict on me every chance they get, the sensation of being freezing cold and burning hot at the same time. I was terrified, thinking I was turning to stone again, and I ran a few steps on all fours, stumbling, as if I could somehow run away from it, but of course it was attached to me. The sensation was growing worse. I looked over at the severed piece of my tail and became even more frightened. It was glowing, even more brightly, and flaking, crumbling into shiny bits of light and flying away in the breeze. When I looked back at the part of my tail that was still attached to me, I saw the same thing was happening to the very edge of it, and the glow was slowly burning its way up my body.

I wasn't turning to stone. I was disintegrating.

Up to that point I'd just been screaming in pain. When I realized what was actually happening, I started screaming the word "No!", over and over again. And Anon was laughing at me darkly, and
Luna was finally starting to wake up, and it hurt so much and there was so much blood and the glow crawling up my tail was going to hit certain portions of my body before any others and I'm sorry, I realize this is darkly comic in afterthought, but if you don't feel a special surge of horror at the thought of a burning disintegration ray crawling over your genitals, you are probably a golem, or a tree. And I kept trying to run away from it, like a dog trying to escape cans tied to his tail, or smack at it to put it out, but when I touched it with my paws it made my paws burn too. I... may well have been sobbing by this time. I have a surprisingly good memory given what I am, but this particular event comes back to me as a collection of incredibly vivid snapshots, each one full of all the things I was feeling at the time, but nothing connecting them.

I remember Anon still laughing, saying, "Poor baby. Why don't I put you out of your misery?" and coming for me with the glowing sword again. I remember screaming something (it was probably "no" again). I remember being back in this cave -- I don't remember teleporting, but I must have -- with control of my magic back, but no matter what I did with my magic the glow just kept burning up my tail. I remember sitting on the floor, sobbing, watching my tail burn and realizing what I had to do to save myself. I don't remember summoning a sword of my own, but I remember swinging it down before I had a chance to have second thoughts or flinch at what I was about to do to myself. I remember that it hurt much, much worse than the first cut Anon made, but the pain was flesh tearing and bones breaking and the shock of impact. Not burning.

I remember watching the piece I'd just severed myself sizzling into nothingness on the floor. I remember hyperventilating, watching the attached part bleed, waiting to see if it would start burning again, and breaking down in tears of relief when it didn't.

I remember looking up from the floor, disoriented and in more pain than I could easily remember, wondering why I was lying there and where did all the blood come from and then I remembered. I must have passed out from shock on the floor. Try as I might I couldn't regenerate the injury. I struggled up to a sitting position (sort of; actually sitting was incredibly painful), and summoned up bandages, which was much harder than it ought to have been, and tied them around the end of my tail as tightly as I could, trying to tourniquet it. If I couldn't stop the bleeding I was going to have to cauterize the wound and I really, really did not want to inflict any further injury on it.

I had very little magic, and very little energy, and I wanted to just collapse back on the floor and sleep, but I was afraid that if I did I wouldn't wake up. I couldn't restore my lost blood magically, either, and I was really, really cold. Fortunately, being the creature of luxury that I am, I already had a sizable assortment of blankets, a fireplace, and all the equipment I needed to start a perfectly mundane fire to warm up beside. I figured, what I needed to do was eat raw meat, drink a lot of liquid, and stay awake long enough to confirm that I wouldn't die in my sleep from shock and blood loss. To that end, I started writing my journal entry above, and now we're all caught up.

Edited to add: this first version of this was a lot shorter. This was an exceedingly humiliating and painful episode so I really just skidded through it at high speed with "and then I did this and he did this and I did this and he cut off my tail and you know the rest." Since you have the luxury of reading this in order, you haven't gotten to the reason why I bothered to revise it to add so much gory detail, yet. That'll be next chapter, same Discord time, same Discord channel!

Well. That was stressful to even think about! Now I know why I put this off for so long. Sheesh, I have no idea how Daring Do manages it.

Time I went down south to collect my Element of Greed, I think. That ought to be fun. And then maybe I'll drop in on Celestia. After all, Anon doesn't know I'm collecting the Elements of Disharmony, so I have to make some sort of villainous appearance so he knows I haven't forgotten
about him, right?

Chapter End Notes

The line about "he's so stolid" is a paraphrase of a Q quote.

"Have you been getting underage female humans to style your hair?" My daughter has been running around all day taunting her brother with a Nightmare Moon toy, that says, among other things, "I would like it if someone would style my hair. My star barrettes are fabulous!" This is a joke that just does not get old around here.
I Am The Champion, Dragons Are Losers Cause I Am The Champion

Well, dear readers, once again your humble narrator returns with a tale of narrowly escaping death by the skin of my teeth. (You think that's an expression, but frequently I do have skin on my teeth. It's oh-so-helpful in keeping them warm when I decide to turn a haystack into a giant pile of scoops of ice cream and then eat the whole thing.) There is, however, an important difference between the tales I've told thus far, and this particular story, which is that I WON! Haha! Stupid dragon, to seriously think he could kill me? The Avatar of Chaos? I really wish you could all see my dance moves here, because I think this particular dance of triumph is, dare I say it, one of the more graceful and inspiring of my spontaneous dances from over the centuries. (No, I'm not going to try to describe it. Writing about dancing is kind of like painting about music.) Oh, this was balm to my soul. I won, he lost, haha, I've still got it! When I'm up against a dangerous threat that is not Anon and his inexplicable reality warping powers, I am ze winnah! Discord rules, dragons drool. (And cry like babies when you take their hoard from them.) Woo-hoo!

I'm glad I can be cheerful about this, because the truth is, I am actually in quite a bit of pain. That was hard. I've managed to get all my body parts knitted back together and healed, mostly, with the exception of the fur on my goat leg... but I burned a lot of magic with this fight, and I've had to regenerate even worse injuries than the one to my tail (though thankfully injuries that weren't impervious to my powers, so I was able to heal them quickly.) Everything aches, and I'm exhausted. I need to spend a few days resting and recuperating. So I've got my Panauricon up and running to allow me to listen in all over Canterlot, Ponyville and a few other strategic locations, I've got my gigantic pile of pillows (I'm not joking, it's the size of a shed), I've got my fluffy blankets and my endless glass of mushroom cola and a good supply of snacks... and painkillers. There are actually potions that do work on me, for which I'm deeply grateful because I'm not sure I can spare the magic to ease my aching bones right now. I'm not stupid enough to give you recipes, but I will say this: poison joke liniment feels wonderful on formerly severed body parts. I laid in a supply of it after the tail incident, and now I have it slathered all over my midsection, and I cannot tell you what a relief it is to actually have treatments for my injuries on hand that don't require me to burn more magic.

And, of course, I have this journal to pass the time with. So I'll get some rest, and tell you all about the fight THAT I JUST WON, oh yes, in your face Winnie, or should I now call you Losey? "Eternal gold" my shiny red tail. How about "Eternal Loser?" How do we say that in llama, Winnie?

Yes. I went down to Southern Amareica and got my Element of Greed. The ease with which I retrieved the other two Elements of Disharmony were apparently just fate compensating me for how hard this one was going to be. Trust me, I had no idea how difficult this fight was going to be when I set out to retrieve my Element, or I quite possibly wouldn't have bothered.

If you've never traveled to Southern Amareica (or Drakonia, as the locals call it, but that hardly seems fair – the dragons aren't native, whereas the llamas and alpacas are, and while technically the quetzalcoats are a native draconic species, I find it hard to care about the opinions of a species that used to sacrifice draconequui in rites of necromancy in an attempt to control the sun), you really should go sometime. The Andalusian mountains, capped with snow and full of resentful churning magma just waiting for the opportunity to spew out, rise up from a thick, teeming jungle containing such lovely creatures as swarms of fish that can devour a pony within a minute, and killer bees.

Killer bees! I love this place. Too bad it's swarming with dragons.

Admittedly that's my fault, to at least some extent. I certainly did do my level best to make the lives of the Neighropan dragons in Neighropa miserable, and apparently some of them fled here, where the extinction of my people and subsequent northward migration of the quetzalcoats up to the border
of pony lands left the territory largely empty. It was populated by llamas and alpacas, but neither species are any match for dragons, and the Andalusian mountains are a rich source of tasty treats for dragons and shiny objects to hoard. Nowadays, most Equestrians are unaware that dragons originally came from Neighropa (hardly surprising... nowadays most Equestrians seem barely aware that Neighropa exists. They have some vague idea that there's a country named Prance somewhere and in the vague vicinity there might be griffins and there's a city called Trottingham over there somewhere.)

The far south of Southern Amaerica has actual dragon civilizations, in the nations of Chilly (yes, it is, quite), Auren, Argent, and Draguay, but where I was headed was the region where the Amarezon River comes down from the Andalusian mountains. Here, dragons who can't handle co-existence with their brethren live in anarchic solitude, each dragon creating its own den and staking out its own hoard.

Even by draconic standards, however, Wiñaypaqori takes the cake. Firstly there's his name. Now, Equestrians are accustomed to dragons having simple, easily pronounceable names. This is not the case in much of Southern Amareica, where the languages of several lost civilizations meet and rifle each other's pockets looking for spare nouns. Many dragons who spawn in the south have names such as Smeáthor or Angorad or something like that, names from the old dragon languages of Neighropa (unlike the north-spawning dragons, who have names like Garble. I am not making this up). In the zones of anarchy, however, dragons tend to borrow languages from the quetzalcoatl or the llamas because they spend so little time with each other, they lose the knowledge of dragon languages.

In the tongue of the llamas, Wiñaypaqori, who I shall henceforth call Winnie, means "Eternal Gold". This is because Winnie was sitting on a pile of gold that was quite literally the size of a mountain. He'd hollowed out the mountain he lives in, and had filled it with gold. The parts that weren't gold were him; he's the size of Ponyville. Greed makes dragons grow, and our pal the Winster has been a very, very greedy boy. If he had had any interest in power within dragon society, or indeed in creating a dragon society, which he doesn't because all he cares about is more gold, he could have done so easily; dragons instinctively submit to whoever has the biggest, best hoard. In fact dragons used to make pilgrimages to see Winnie's hoard and try to fight him for it all the time. Most of them weren't serious about fighting him for it; they just wanted to see it, but of course being a dragon and approaching Winnie automatically makes for a fight. Some few did seriously try to challenge him. Winnie found them crunchy and good with ketchup.

I know all this because Winnie was holding, and actively wielding, my Element of Greed. The Kraken didn't really use the Element of Rage, it was just part of his collection of shiny things. Winnie, however, would have been a perfect candidate for an Element of Greed if I had felt like handing out bearerships, which I didn't. In order for someone to bear an Element, the avatar needs to consent. The Tree of Harmony has been known to actively withdraw its support from former Bearers it considered corrupted, and ponies – or anyone, really – can't become Bearers unless it allows them to be. (Its standards are pretty terrible. Can you imagine, once it actually offered me Elements? Even funnier, one of them was Loyalty? But then, given that Rainbow Dash is a self-centered braggart and the last bearer of loyalty turned on her own sister, her nation, and her species itself, quite spectacularly, the Tree of Harmony doesn't appear to be so good at picking candidates for that one.)

Likewise no one actually gets to be a true Bearer for an Element of Disharmony without my permission, and since I've always thought the things are kind of laughably stupid, I've never chosen Bearers before. However, this doesn't prevent someone whose mind and personality resonate well with the Element from using it – I've seen some very interesting stunts pulled with the Element of Magic in the past, and the Elements of Disharmony are intended to grant power to individual users, so they're even more usable by non-Bearers. And when someone uses an Element of Disharmony,
this generates disharmony, and I know exactly what they're doing. If I'm paying attention, which, when I was a statue, I most certainly was.

So I knew all about Winnie. The real question was, did he know about me? The Kraken had, and ran for it the moment I showed up, but krakens hoard for fun, not a biological compulsion like dragons have, and the Kraken wasn't using his Element. Winnie was. So this, I thought, might very well turn into a fight.

Now you ask me, "But Discord, you are so obviously superior to pathetic dragons with your vast magical resources and cleverness and creativity in using them. How could a dragon possibly stand up to you?" I find the vote of confidence inspiring, but there was a reason I had to drive the dragons insane rather than just turning them all into small cute puppydogs. (I kind of did make something that did that, but it was a portal to another realm, which by necessity translates Equestrian species into something compatible with the other world, and I thought the idea of turning dragons into dogs was downright hilarious.)

Those of you who are extensively familiar with the foundations and theory of magical lore, including the belief systems of the ancients and how they shape magic today, would know of this (and would also be Twilight Sparkle. Hello, Twilight! Tell me, did I have a lovely funeral? Please tell me at least that Pinkie catered it!) For the rest of you, let me explain the concept of the Chthonic Elements, also called the Base Elements, the Worldly Elements or the Elements of the Fundament. These elements, unlike the Elements of Harmony, do not refer to traits carried by sapient beings, but rather to the substances that make up the world – earth, air, water, fire, and life force (which can also refer to spirit, or to magic, but raw magic, not the overly harmonic kind that Twilight uses most of the time.)

Dragons and draconic creatures are aligned with between two and four of these elements, generally. Draconequui, being wielders of magic, had air, water and magic/spirit, mostly due to the fact that this is one of the most common combinations for the Neighsian dragons we descended from. Some Neighsian dragons have fire rather than water, and a rare few have all but earth. This is because dragons aligned with earth are Neighropan dragons. Most of them carry earth, fire and air, with a rare few also carrying magic. The most fundamental difference between Neighsian and Neighropan dragons, aside from the fact that we are graceful, svelte and sexy and they are huge, clunky clods, is that we align with water and they align with earth. To the best of my knowledge no dragons align with both water and earth.

Of the five elements, four are actively chaotic. Earth... isn't immune to chaos, exactly (although unleashing my powers on Earth would tend to cause massive earthquakes and volcanoes, so I only do it when I really need to raise islands and level mountains), but it is highly resistant to it. There's a reason the Elements of Harmony turned me to stone, after all. Of all the chaos avatars, Ar the dragon is the only one I know of whose shape barely changed – she got three pairs of wings, and that was it. Coyote and Loki became shapeshifters, Pan the goat turned bipedal, Anansi the zebra grew another four legs, not even I know what animal Set was in the first place, and Eris the ikaros apparently transformed in much the same way I did, acquiring a lot of animal parts she hadn't been born with. But all Ar got was extra wings. This is because the body of an earth-aligned dragon resists transformation except along the lines that it is designed for. Earth dragons can change their size, if they're very talented, and many of them don't grow wings until they hit adolescence, so Ar growing extra wings was something that an earth dragon's body allowed her to do. But I can't change a dragon into something completely different. Not without something like the magic of the differential between dimensional planes powering the transformation, anyway.

I can only alter the size of a dragon within a certain range, and a dragon as full of greed fulfilled as Winnie would be hard to turn into anything smaller than a house. I can take their wings, but I can't take their fire, or their scales, and with their scales I can't do much more than humiliate them. I've...
I'll admit it. I've killed many dragons. It was a war and I'm not sorry I did it; it was them or it was ponies, and I decided I liked ponies better. But it wasn't easy – not just in the sense that I'm not exactly a natural born killer and snuffing out sentient lives has never been my idea of fun, but simply in terms of technical execution, it's not easy to do. Driving them mad was both more entertaining and more accessible as a strategy, but turning a greed-grown monster dragon into a mindless frothing beast wasn't actually likely to get me my Element any more than strolling in the front door would. I had a plan, but it wasn't going to be easy. Though I had no idea how hard it would turn out to be in the end, really.

The Element of Greed grants its bearer, or wielder, abilities pertaining to gaining, keeping, and defending whatever they consider most valuable, usually some sort of worldly object (gold and other forms of wealth are common, but one notable greed-wielder, a pony named Carmine Sand who lived about eight hundred years ago, stole monuments and statues... including me. I nearly did make her a bearer for that; she came very, very close to being able to free me.) It can act as a channel for some nifty spells as well. The most famous of these was probably the Midas Touch, the spell Eris placed on the Element of Greed when she made the minotaur king Midas its Bearer. The children's stories that recount that particular piece of history soften it considerably; Midas didn't give up his Touch in order to eat. He'd have fine-chopped vegetables mixed into a slurry with goat's milk and poured into his mouth with a golden funnel. Actually, Midas transformed thousands of centaurs, goats and his own subjects into gold before renouncing the Element after accidentally turning his daughter. Eris, who was every bit as fond of turning sentient beings into static objects as I am, released the beings who'd been turned to gold (well, aside from those who'd already been melted down for ingots), in exchange for an entire orchard's worth of apples that Midas had changed. You can probably guess what she did with the apples; the one she used to start a war between Minos and Taurus a century later was only one of the entertaining stunts those apples led to. Too bad Ar is probably sleeping on the rest of them, they'd be fun to play with.

Winnie would have heightened abilities pertaining to the keeping of his hoard. And since he was a mere wielder, not a true Bearer, I assumed the Element would have warped his mind, accentuating his greed to a ludicrous extent. Bearers, being duly appointed agents of Disharmony, have the ability to control the trait that their Element links them to; bearing the Element of Greed doesn't make the bearer more greedy any more than the Element of Generosity has led Rarity to give away her house. But wielders... rarely fare so well. Carmine Sand's obsessive need to chase after statues and monuments led eventually to Celestia's police force finally figuring out where in the world she was, resulting in the highly disappointing outcome that I was installed back in Canterlot Gardens. And my pal Winnie had been a dragon to begin with. So most likely, negotiation was going to be off the table, I thought.

Can you say "understatement of the millennium?" Wonderful. I knew you could.

But before I begin telling you all about this incredibly dangerous and challenging fight THAT I WON, I must digress shortly to explain some things about the distinctions between Order and Harmony and how they affect Chaos. This is relevant, trust me.

As much as I dislike Harmony, I dislike Order more. They're superficially similar, in that they both produce structured, predictable patterns, but Harmony arises when multiple independent entities choose to work together for a common goal; Order occurs when a single entity imposes its will on others and causes them to work together toward the single entity's goal. Ponies may mindlessly follow the patterns taught to them as foals like brainwashed sheep (Neighropan sheep; the Aggies of Agland are actually quite intelligent and independent, but Neighropan sheep... well, let's put it this way, a lot of them still live in Griffonia, where mutton is a food. If you need to look up that word, go ahead; once you're done, assuming you've found this journal in my Grotto of Disharmony and are still there, the bathroom's through the pink paisley curtains past the eel pond, and I've thoughtfully
left you some mouthwash for when you're done vomiting. And now you know precisely how stupid Neighropan sheep are.) But at least they are mindlessly following those patterns of their own free will, and doing so gives them pleasure. Under a system of Order rather than Harmony, it doesn't matter how free-thinking and independent you are, the leaders of the system will break you down and force you to obey, or you will suffer.

However, there is one good thing about Order. Although its power to impose a pattern on reality and force it to stay that way is more inimical to Chaos than Harmony is, it requires much more energy. If you've ever tried to keep a foal's bedroom clean, you probably already know that attempting to impose Order on a naturally chaotic system requires constant, endless effort. Systems of Harmony are self-maintaining, as are systems of Chaos, because in systems of Harmony every component knows the intended pattern and voluntarily follows it, and in systems of Chaos almost any action will fit the pattern, such as it is. But systems of Order require perpetual vigilance. Order is more inimical to Chaos than Harmony is; because Harmony depends on free will being exercised to maintain a pattern, Harmony has to have a lot of room for potential variation within it. Order maintains itself by stomping out Chaos wherever it finds it. Harmony controls Chaos; Order destroys Chaos. But Chaos destroys Order; the moment the energy being put into ordering the system falters, the slightest variation will cause the entire pattern to fall apart.

In terms of magic, Harmony is supported by the collective unconscious, Order is supported by will and energy, and Chaos is supported by imagination and independence. Magic channeled through Order can make changes that calcify, becoming impervious to other magic, at which point Harmony can't touch it and quite a lot of Chaos would be required to undo the calcification, and usually what you'd get there would be the destruction of the object. But to do anything with Order involves using absurd amounts of power, and if the power falters before the change is made permanent, the entire magical operation fails completely.

Back in the days when I unruled Equestria, I discovered that the Avatar of Order, Matrisse, which was located near Saddle Arabia, Camelstan and the Taur nations, was attempting to transform the world such that there would be no more magic. I'm not entirely sure why Matrisse thought this was a good idea, given that it was put here to help regulate magic, but then asking me to try to guess why the Avatar of Order would do anything sounds like an exercise in futility from the getgo. In any case I thought it was a spectacularly bad idea, so I went to stop it. Matrisse could not be reasoned with (not by me, anyway), so I had to destroy it. It used to be a crystal mountain; now it is a whole lot of individual smaller crystals distributed all over the world. They are all still the Avatar of Order – even I know better than to think reality can do without Order – but they're no longer put together enough to come up with a plan like destroying magic. (Put together enough! Ha! Did you see what I did there?)

Breathing the dust generated from smashing Matrisse paralyzed me, froze my magic, and gave me a horrible racking cough that took nearly a year to clear up. Having small bits of Matrisse wired to the base of my horns (and therefore right next to my brain), courtesy of ponies while I was sick and helpless after saving magic thank you very much, turned me into a drooling, spastic near-mental vegetable indistinguishable from a stroke victim, and only the fact that Celestia is so easy to manipulate that I could do it even while I could barely move, talk or think saved me from a fate worse than being turned to stone. The body of Harmony can paralyze me, but the body of Order can kill me. It goes the other way too; my blood can restrain the Tree and eat away at Matrisse's crystals, but, you know, the fact that I have to bleed a lot to have a large quantity of the blood of a Chaos avatar available to do these sorts of things makes attempting them significantly less attractive. But while Harmony can do some fairly terrible non-lethal things to me that actually stick when it's not touching me anymore, Order has to be directly exerting itself against me; Matrisse's crystals can only do me damage when they're in contact with me. (Which was why the dust in my lungs was so terrible; I had to expel enough of it by coughing to have the magic available to remove the lungs and
wash them out before I could fully heal, and it takes a very long time to cough out most of the dust in your lungs when they're full of it.)

This is going to be important later. There may even be a quiz.

I teleported into Winnie's cavern with a very, very large mug of extra strength coffee, and a flugelhorn. "Wake up, Winnie! Rise and shine!" I caroled, and blew on the flugelhorn. For extra decibels I had amplifiers set up all over the cavern.

Wiñaypaqori was, of course, asleep on top of his gold; where else would you expect to find a dragon? I may have been exaggerating when I said he was the size of Ponyville, but not by much; at my full height, counting tail, I could hover on his lower eyelid and barely reach the top of his eye with my antler. When it comes to dealing with dragons, though, it's not size that matters, it's technique. Specifically, the magical technique of annoying them into submission.

He was close to a golden color himself, possibly a bit shaded more toward the yellow part of the spectrum. Mustard, perhaps. His undercarriage, like most dragons', was pale, almost white. Unlike most dragons, he was actually shiny, glittering almost in the light of the fire sconces all over the various walls. It almost looked as if he'd coated himself with the gold, with perhaps some platinum for his underside. "Wakey wakey!" I shouted again, and, armed with a massive squirt cannon, fired a cannonball of strawberry syrup directly at his eye.

Winnie was just opening that eye when the strawberry syrup caromed into it, splattering. He roared, swiveling his head so he could see me with the non-syrup eye, which was very red and, as I might have mentioned earlier, was slightly bigger than me.

"See, Winnie, you've got something that belongs to me," I said. "And if you'll be a good little boy and just hand it over, we can—"

He breathed fire on me.

Dragons usually telegraph this. An intake of breath, a scrunching of the face, the head rearing back. Winnie didn't. The fire was intense enough to instantly vaporize me, not that that was going to do Winnie any good. What was of more concern to me was the spell being transmitted in the dragonfire. As you may know, if you know Spike The Tiny Dragon, or are him, dragonfire isn't just good for burning things; it can be a transmission medium for spells. The only one Spike knows, so far as I can see, is teleportation, which he uses mostly to send Twilight's overblown missives of her deep, important research into friendship to Celestia. This one was a literal spell of destruction, entropy wound up in a magical package and delivered via dragonfire.

Given how entropy is closely related to chaos, you might think this would actually be helpful to me. And if it had been aimed anywhere else, it probably would have, since the disorder of entropy fuels my magic as well as the disorder of complexity. However, you might by now have noticed that I am a living being, and much as I hate to admit it, living beings are complex systems that don't work nearly so well when they are disordered. Just as your chair is information, so are you, and so am I, and degrading the information that happens to be a feeling, thinking being tends to result in death. Unless you're me, because I'm very, very talented.

In my younger days there were times I actually died, and had to go to all the trouble of resurrecting myself. Oh, I can still remember Celestia and Luna's faces the first time they actually saw me do it. Celestia had been distracting me with a magnificent display of fire, plasma and highly excitable protons, and while I was turning her sunfire into dragonflies, Luna sliced off my head. I was very surprised to find myself suddenly freed of my body, a shade on the astral plane like any other dead
being, but having restored myself once by then, I knew how to do it. It took me a few days, though. So Celestia and Luna reclaimed their old castle, declared me dead and proclaimed a new era of order, harmony and rebuilding, and were awfully startled at the swarm of bees that invaded a few days after they retook the throne... not nearly as startled as when the bees reformed into me, though. Oh, the hilarity of that moment. Almost makes me regret that I gave up dying for Winter's End (the holiday of weeks of starvation and deprivation that used to come before Winter Wrap-Up. Can't imagine why Celestia did away with that one.)

Dying's pretty darned inconvenient, though. You're in the middle of a wonderful joke and then swoosh, your head is on the ground and your body isn't attached to it anymore, which really just kills the joke. So nowadays, I turn myself into pure magic the moment I start to feel the tiniest bit of pain. Actually before I feel the pain, because I've gotten it down to a reflex. Turning into pure magic is an ability others have, of course; alicorns and powerful unicorns have demonstrated the ability, most recently when Woona came back from the moona and turned herself into black mist, a thorn, lame ripoffs of the Wonderbolts, etc. But only I have the ability to turn into pure magic that's being maintained in the form of myself. In other words, you can't tell whether I'm made of matter or magic because I look the same either way.

So Winnie's fire vaporizing my body wasn't a serious issue for me; my body was simply a construct made by my magic that I happened to be living in. It was destroyed quickly enough that it didn't even really hurt. The real issue was that the spell contained in the dragonfire attempted to disrupt the magic I was made of... which could have killed me permanently, since it's my magic that allows me to pull stunts like returning from the dead. Of course the day I actually fall to an entropy spell is the day I hang up my hat as Lord of Chaos, take my pension and retire; they do fall within my area of expertise, after all. I turned the spell in on itself so it ate itself and died, made a copy of my body made entirely of ashes aside from comically big eyes, and let the ashes crumble in mid-air, eyeballs falling to the ground last, in front of Winnie, while I teleported and re-formed across the cavern.

I could take any number of hits from dragonfire, and laugh. Entropy spells, not so much. While I could use my own chaos to unweave them, invert them or turn them on themselves, any part of the spell that I missed could do me extraordinary damage in my pure magic form. So I was going to have to avoid the firebreath as much as possible.

As soon as I reappeared I said, "How rude! Do you always greet your—"

He slashed at me, forcing me to vanish again. That was disconcerting; when I'd teleported he hadn't been anywhere near my new destination. The moment I reappeared, giant claws raked at me. I attempted to dodge through the claws – they were huge, and thus had a great deal of space between them, certainly wide enough for me to eel through – except for the part where I hit some sort of magical forcefield that gave me a tremendous zap, enough to stun me for a moment. His paw closed around me; I teleported again, and barely managed to avoid being lunch as his vast maw lunged at me.

Somehow he knew exactly where I was going to reappear before I did it. That wasn't a power granted by the Element of Greed. The speed with which he moved in defense of his hoard came from the Element, but the ability to see a teleportation end point before the port was done? I hadn't expected that.

For a few minutes I dodged him while I tested his limits. When I made three of myself and had us all reappear at different points, he couldn't tell which one was the real me, but when I teleported objects (mostly, his treasures), or manifested things that weren't me, he could tell. Somehow he could see me when I was discorporate, or maybe he could see the shape of my magic tunneling through the spaces between. He had rings on all his fingers, one of which had to be responsible for that force field web
between his claws, and a golden chain around his neck, attached to which were numerous items of various magical properties.

I didn't see my Element anywhere. I knew it was on his person somewhere, but it wasn't on his fingers or his charm necklace, so where--?

He managed to hit me again, sending me flying into the wall with an enormous gash through my middle. I healed that more or less instantly and turned to mist, planning to cloud his eyes.

He slashed through me.

In my mist form I should have been impervious to his claws; they ought to have done me as much damage as you'd expect a dragon slashing at a mist would be able to cause, ie, none. Not only could he see me when I was magic, he could hurt me. I recorporated and let myself drop upwards, inverting gravity – not for Winnie, but for every object in the room that wasn't Winnie, causing his hoard to start to pour down on him. He shrieked in rage and flailed at it, beating his wings, while I curled up inside a large umbrella and floated down, which was now up.

The damage to my magic, to my essence, wasn't anywhere near as severe as what Anon had inflicted, but I can't regenerate damage to my magic. I have to wait for it to heal. It heals a lot faster than, say, pony bodies do, but I was stuck with it for at least a few hours.

Possibly I should have backed off then, having recognized that Winnie was actually capable of harming me, but I was angry. I was the Lord of Chaos, and this jumped-up fool of a dragon thought he could deny me what was rightfully mine just because he'd been using it for a while and had collected a few other magic items in the process? Ridiculous! Losing to the Elements of Harmony is one thing but I wasn't going to lose to a dragon.

As Winnie dug himself out of his pile of gold, I reverted the gravity, so the whole thing started falling on him again. And as he screamed in fury and flamed his own gold to teleport it away from himself, I let the air fill with the sound of my voice.

"Do you even realize who I am, Wiñaypaqori? I am Discord, Lord of Chaos and Disharmony. I've killed more dragons than I care to count, and driven even more of them mad. You have my Element of Greed, and I want it back."

"I will give you nothing!" he roared, bursting out of the gold pile finally. He breathed flame at me again, but I was expecting it, and dodged – and as I dodged, I transformed the top layer of his gold coins into dragon-mites, the creatures I created during the Dragon War. Dragon-mites are like parasprites, except that the only food they desire is dragon scales.

Winnie shrieked as my horde, made from his hoard, descended on him to eat his scales away. He flamed himself with such intensity, the dragon-mites – which, of course, I'd made to be impervious to dragonfire – burned. Normal dragonfire couldn't do that.

I decided to finish this quickly. I teleported to Winnie's head and tapped it lightly with a talon, focusing all my strength on tearing down his defenses and unbalancing him. I've successfully done this to Celestia, Luna and Starswirl the Bearded; it's cheating, so I dislike it, but sometimes winning really is more important than how you play the game.

I got in without much trouble – dragons are resistant to mind control, but I'm, well, me. However, when I tried to tip his mental apple cart, I found it impossibly resilient. I was trying to make him less greedy, or more apathetic, or frightened of me – something, anything to make him quit fighting me and hand my property over. Nothing I did worked, and I could feel some sort of strange pressure
against my power, pushing hard against it in an opposing direction every time I tried to unbalance Winnie.

When I realized what was going on I became even more furious. My own Element was working against me! This kind of thing never happens to Harmony, because for fairly obvious reasons Elements of Harmony always work in Harmony, but being that I am Disharmony I could see how it was possible for an Element of mine to turn against me. But it shouldn't have! Winnie wasn't a true Bearer, he shouldn't have the ability to turn an Element of Disharmony against the spirit of Disharmony! Apparently it had been with him for so long, while I was in stone, that it had bonded with him as if I'd authorized him to bear it.

And just as I figured that out, Winnie grabbed me and squeezed me to a pulp.

Just because I'm made of magic doesn't mean I can't feel pain, and I assure you, having my bones smashed and my flesh crushed was excruciating, if brief. It didn't kill me, but it infuriated me even further. I turned myself into grape jelly, oozed through his claws, dripped onto his nose, re-formed and swung my tail into his eye, hard.

Dragon eyes are not nearly as impervious as the rest of them. You can't kill a dragon by shooting it through the eye; the bony plate behind the eye keeps you from having a straight shot to the brain, and dragon bone is even stronger than dragon scales. But you can cut a dragon's eye, and my tail is covered in dragon scales and spikes; just a thought, and my body's magic shifted, strengthening the dragonesque aspects of my draconequus form.

He howled and grabbed for me as blood spurted from the narrow slices my spikes had made in his eyeball. I shot upward and sideways, neatly evading his grab... and nearly ran into his wingclaw, aiming straight for me. Which wouldn't have been a problem, really, except for what the wingclaw was holding.

He had the Godslayer Hammer. Which I'd thought I'd gotten rid of by dumping it in another universe, a millennium and a half ago.

Dodging the Godslayer brought me into the sweep of his wing, which caught me and threw me back toward his tail, with enough speed that I was slightly stunned by the blow. Though not nearly as stunned as I was when his tail whiplashed against me with speed that should not have been possible for something so massive, smashed every bone in my body again, and flung me toward his front. I hit the gold pile and skidded. Ever try to regenerate your bones when you're flying through a pile of gold pieces at high speed? I don't recommend it.

I had to take a moment to get my breath and repair myself. This was almost my last. Winnie had switched the Godslayer from his wingclaw to his paw, and he brought it down at me with enough speed that it would have splattered me if it hit. Not that what it could do to my physical body was my biggest concern, when dealing with the Godslayer. There's a reason it's called that.

I needed a moment to gather my magic before I could teleport, and I didn't have a moment. So I rolled out of the way, frantically enough that I didn't pay much attention to what direction I was rolling in.

Turned out to be the direction of Winnie's mouth, as it dived down at me and closed around me.

He attempted to swallow me, of course, but swallowing works by using a tongue to push food toward the back of your mouth, whereupon it falls down your throat and the muscles of your esophagus grab it and push it down. I created a very large, realistic plushie me (well, as realistic as you'd expect from something with buttons for eyes and suede fabric for a head), levitated out of the
way of Winnie's tongue and let him swallow that. Oh, did I forget to mention I'd filled the plushie with high explosives? Because I did.

Satisfied by the weight and shape of what he'd just swallowed, Winnie returned his tongue to its normal position, leaving me room to float comfortably above the back of his throat and start tossing grenades down. When the first one exploded, the shockwave set off the plushie. I stuffed my ears in my pockets (you didn't know I had pockets, did you? Well, now you do), since the explosions were rather loud. Winnie started throwing his head around, groaning and moaning, which was actually louder than the explosions, but if he expected to dislodge me that way he had another think coming.

I smelled the sulfur of raw dragonfire before it exploded upward, so I had time to turn myself into a scale on the roof of Winnie's mouth, as impervious to the heat as any of the other scales would be, before he filled his mouth and the air in front of him with a blast of fire. And then, as soon as the fire had passed, I made a wheelbarrow filled with frozen vodka – much colder than frozen water, given the freezing temperature of alcohol – and poured the whole thing down his throat. Then I thought about Winnie's size, and made a river of near-freezing vodka start running along the roof of his mouth (didn't know if dragons can get brainfreeze, but why not try to do it anyway?) and down his throat, with fish made out of gelignite and nitroglycerin swimming in it.

Winnie roared, and tried to make fire, but so much icy cold liquid pouring onto his flames made that a trifle difficult. I teleported out, because once he did get that fire restarted, I really didn't want to be around for the combination of burning alcohol and the explosive fish I'd filled the river with. Winnie's large red eye, still decorated with strawberry syrup, glared at me as I popped into existence right in front of it. "Hi, Winnie!" I said. "Hope you like free booze – but of course you do! Everyone likes free booze!"

Again he tried to squash me with his paw, but I flew away from him, laughing. "Having a bit of flame impotence there, Winnie? I hear they make potions for that now!"

Winnie growled, and grabbed something off his charm necklace, throwing it at me. I dodged quite easily, and then realized that he hadn't actually been aiming at me.

True fact: if you're a necromancer, and you know the right spells, and you have a supply of giant rainforest ants and dragon's teeth, you can imprint the spirit of one of your ants on a dragon's tooth and create a Myrmidon, a faithful slave-warrior ant-dragon. Myrmidons look like dragons with ant heads. Even I think they're creepy. I doubted Winnie was a necromancer himself, or that he could possibly have done such delicate work even if he was, but plainly he'd gotten one to do him a favor, because yes, those were Myrmidons rising up from below the gold pile's surface. The things Winnie had thrown at me had been dragon's teeth; Winnie had certainly killed enough of his fellow dragons to have a good bit of them lying around.

While Winnie worked his jaw, obviously trying to get his fire back (without a great deal of success), the Myrmidons attacked me. Myrmidons are not as impervious to my power as full dragons are, but there were ten or twelve of them or something and while they didn't have toys like Godslayer on hand, they could possibly wear me down and make me more vulnerable to Winnie. They were animated by magic, so turning one of them into a pile of egg noodles just meant I was being attacked by magical egg noodles. Instead of breathing fire, they spat acid, in large quantities. I dropped custard on them, flung gold into them hard enough to break their carapaces (Myrmidons aren't truly alive; they're magical constructs, so I had no problem with the idea of destroying them), turned gold into quicksand, transformed one's head into an anvil, that kind of thing, but they just kept coming. Like zomponies. They didn't feel pain and it looked like I would have to completely dismantle one to keep the magic animating it from continuing to attack me.
Still, I thought, they couldn't seriously hurt me, and there was no way I was backing away from this fight, not now that I knew Winnie had subverted my Element. Each individual Element of Disharmony has about a fifth of my power. (When you put all seven together it adds up to the power of one chaos avatar; the reason that combining seven fifths makes one is the fact that Disharmony doesn't work together, so a lot of the power is lost as waste.) I was not going to let this stupid dragon run around with an object that gave him a fifth of my own magical strength, no matter how many ant dragon golems he threw at me. I made tentacles with razor blades and sliced them up, I teleported above them and dropped grenades down their mouths when they looked up at me, I made small glass tornados to shred them and disperse them. I was down to five Myrmidons when I suddenly felt the strength go out of my limbs, and I wobbled like I'd just turned myself into an egg noodle, an overcooked one.

I hadn't been paying attention to the thaumics around me. Now I did, and realized I'd just walked into a rune circle. Made of Harmony Violets, in amber.

The Harmony Violet grows along the west coast of the Americas, in rocky, mountainous territory. It "purifies" raw or malign magic, which is to say it harmonizes it, pushing what is left over down into the dirt for its symbiotes to feed on. A tea made with Harmony Violets can cure nearly any magical ailment a pony might suffer, though with the possible side effect of addicting them to the things. Petals trapped in amber, a magical resonator, have much the same effect as leaves from the Tree of Harmony; they can be used as a power source for harmonic rituals or magic circles. At some point, probably while I was in his throat, Winnie had laid down a rune circle with ambered Violets. It wasn't a closed circle, so I wasn't trapped, but it was rapidly weakening my magic and if he charged it with dragonfire, he could actually turn me to stone. Temporarily, but since he had Godslayer, temporarily might well turn into permanently. The Godslayer Hammer shatters souls and magic; it could break my stone form, and kill me.

I looked up, and saw Winnie grinning viciously down at me. "Chaos creature, even you cannot steal from Wiñaypaqori," he said. "Those who steal from me take into their paws only death."

Then he belched.

I was fairly sure he hadn't intended to do that – that his plan had been a more controlled blast of dragonfire, charged with a spell to activate the rune circle. But he'd gotten his flame started, and just as I'd planned, my bombs went off in his guts, causing pure flame, sans spell, to roar out of his mouth in a giant deadly burp. I didn't stick around for it – I dove down through the gold, using what magic I could muster up and also my ability to dig, which is fairly amazing if I say so myself, as above me the gold melted in the heat of Winnie's flame, trapping the Myrmidons and the Harmony Violets.

I dug down at a sharp angle, and then up at a steeper one, planning to come up somewhere nowhere near where I'd last seen Winnie, but I sort of forgot about his ability to see me when he shouldn't have been able to. I had other things to worry about. While I was digging, I could feel some sort of force – not my Element, not the Violets, but something far more inimical to me – pressing against the magic I'd performed. The gold I'd turned to dragon-mites would have reverted on its own, except that Winnie flamed the dragon-mites to ash. See, if I turn a pony into cheese, and don't keep up the transformation spell, it's chaos' nature to be transient, so it'll revert naturally and the pony will be unharmed. But if mice ate the cheese while it was cheese, then the spell releasing will do nothing. The cheese was changed into something else while it was cheese, in this case mouse poop, and the additional change prevents the chaos from reverting. The new form stays. So when Winnie burned the dragon-mites, he destroyed his own gold.

Except he was somehow undoing it. He couldn't do that with the Element of Greed, for the reasons I just explained. He couldn't do that with Harmony, because all Harmony can do to spells of Chaos is
make them fail and revert. Very powerful alchemy could turn ash into gold, or specific Chaos spells like the one Eris had once used on Midas, but what I was feeling was not ash turning into gold but ash reverting into the gold it had been before it had been dragon-mites. There was only one power I knew of that could do that.

And then Winnie's paw drove down into the gold, plunging through layers of coins and jewelry, and grabbed me, yanking me up before I could react.

Winnie had Godslayer. He had rings of power. He had my Element of Greed. He had Harmony artifacts. And apparently he had a shard of Matrisse, because only the power of Order can re-order reality the way he just did. And if he had a shard of Matrisse, or if his other paw was holding Godslayer, I really didn't want to stick around in his paw to find out.

I looked down at him as he pulled me up, studying the charm necklace. There. That thing looked like a piece of Matrisse. It was a jagged crystal, colorless but with that kind of whiteness crystals get when they're colorless but thick, roughly shaped like an obelisk but with lots of sharp edges and bits sticking out. For something that had come from Order, it was certainly irregular in shape. I chuckled to myself. If Matrisse was capable of consciousness anymore, it was probably furious that it had been reduced to such a state. It would probably prefer to be polished to smoothness.

And there, half-buried within the scales of Winnie's neck, I saw my Element of Greed.

Harmony loves its crystals. Crystals are orderly. Harmonious. They're good storage batteries for magic, but they're useless for channeling chaos. For that you want metal. A substance that's hard and unyielding, but can flow and become soft, or even liquefy, and become any shape you want to bend it into. And of course, the metal that the Element of Greed is made of is gold – what else would it be? It's a golden ball, with a crystal in the center like an eyeball. The last time I'd seen it, the crystal had been colorless, as one would expect since the Element had no bearer. It was now red, like Winnie's eye.

This utterly infuriated me. Just like the Elements of Harmony change to match a pony bearer's cutie mark, the crystal within the Element of Greed changes to match the bearer's eye, because the eye is the symbol of greed. I see, I want. Winnie was not a bearer, but the thing had changed to match him, as if he actually was a bearer, as if he had any right to be a bearer when I hadn't granted it to him. A thousand years in stone had damaged me at a fundamental level if some dragon could bond my Element to himself against my will. He'd obviously been wearing it at his neck for so long, and so closely, that his scales had started to grow around it; I'd have to pry it out of him.

Given the life I've led, the powers I have and the force I represent, I've never been much for material objects, but I suppose I'm dragon enough myself that on the rare occasions when there's something that belongs to me, it enrages me that someone would try to take it for their own. The Element of Greed was mine. Admittedly I hadn't really cared much about it in two thousand years but that wasn't the point! It was mine to give away, not Winnie's to take.

So at this point it didn't matter how many potentially-deadly-to-me toys Winnie brought out. This wasn't just about my plan to distract Anon anymore, this was about preserving my office as avatar of Chaos. I wasn't going to back down for any reason whatsoever.

I brought his hoard to life.

Gold coins sprouted wings and flew. Gold bars grew legs and tried to flee. Gold statues ambulated in whatever means the statue had been granted, and if none then they just rolled.

Winnie roared with rage, and swung Godslayer at me. I turned myself to liquid and poured to the
ground, reforming. He swung it down again, and I teleported, at the same time turning the gold where I'd been standing as soft as melted chocolate. When the hammer slammed into the soft gold, I hardened the gold, embedding it. Godslayer might be able to slay gods, but it couldn't melt gold.

I didn't expect that to buy me much time, because I knew Winnie could melt the gold himself. Instead, Winnie pressed a claw to the Element of Greed and took on a look of concentration... and all of the gold that I'd sent running away from him came back. That didn't surprise me; I'd never seen the Element of Greed used to literally summon one's possessions back, but it was hardly a shocking application of its abilities.

This wouldn't do at all. My will bore down on the Element. Perhaps it had a fifth of my power, but that meant I was still five times more powerful. I was trying to wrench it away from Winnie metaphysically rather than physically, breaking his connection to it.

He didn't like that so much, and took a swipe at me. Because I was concentrating on the Element, I didn't dodge in time, and he tore two huge gashes through me – and through my magic. I collapsed, which gave me an opportunity to see the underside of Winnie's claws descending on me. Yes, one of those rings on his digits was the Ring of Shadow Slaying – significantly stronger against dark magic constructs than chaotic ones, but its entire purpose was to rip constructs of pure magic apart.

I rolled, just slightly, to let Winnie's palm slam down on me instead of his claws, squashing me flat, which crushed my body but did no further harm to my magic, so I turned myself into a paper version of myself and re-inflated the moment his paw lifted. His jaws snapped at me again. I teleported straight up, and spent another few minutes dodging various slashes and bites and fire blasts. At one point I threw up a shield, but his claws went right through it.

While I was dodging, I was continuing to re-animate his hoard to run away. He kept having to stop to use the Element of Greed to summon his stuff back, and I guessed, correctly, that no mere dragon could multitask as well as the Spirit of Chaos, so I had moments where I could focus. On his charm necklace I finally located the Eye of Odin (it is not really, that's just its name), a magical object that allowed the user to see what could not normally be seen. So that was how he was tracking my teleports. He also had a shard of Matrisse, as I mentioned, and gold wire woven in the shape of a heart the size of a pony, and a bunch of other stuff that I noticed at the time but which didn't turn out to be relevant so I've forgotten them. Hey, fight for your life and see how many of the small details you remember afterward.

Up to this point I'd mostly been fighting defensively. I didn't want to kill Winnie – well, okay, maybe I did a little bit, but that was my temper talking and I try not to listen to it too much. I'd killed dragons in wartime, but this wasn't a war, this was an upstart trying to unseat me and take my possession, and killing him, aside from being against my principles, would make me look weak. As if I had to kill him to defeat him. I take great pride in the fact that I am so powerful, intelligent and generally amazing that I don't need to kill my enemies, and I wasn't going to let a mere dragon take that from me, no matter how mad I was. But he'd resisted most of my casual attempts so far, so if I actually wanted my Element back I was going to have to get serious about terrorizing him, at least. Maybe even causing him pain. I didn't like to do it – causing psychological torment is much more interesting and classy than physical torture, and has longer-term effects – but dragons are very, very stubborn creatures.

I was still deciding on what to do when he pulled the gold wire heart off his charm necklace and blew flame on it. It lit up, and in the sudden blaze, a quetzalcoatl with black and orange feathers and silver scales appeared, like a phoenix in the process of being reborn.

In the ancient language of the quetzalcoatlts, from before ponies from Espoña took over most of the
"Destroy the draconequus," Winnie growled.

"Now that is just rude," I complained. "You steal my Element of Greed, you refuse to give it back, and now what, you summon a servant to try to kill me? You are off my Hearth's Warming card list, mister."

The quetzalcoatl's eyes narrowed as he looked at me. "Mayhem?" he said, uncertainly.

I goggled at him for a second. "How old are you?" I asked. "Because seriously, if you're mistaking me for Mayhem? You're senile. What, were you swimming in the primordial soup in day care?"

"You are no mere draconequus," he said, which was of course true. "The avatar of Chaos is no longer Mayhem? You look like him."

"I do not! Everyone with brains says I take after my mother, but I suppose yours crystallized over the ages." He was a lich. Had to be. And Winnie controlled his phylactery. A true immortal, like an alicorn, couldn't be enslaved by a creature like Winnie, and if he was both old enough to remember who Mayhem was, and had spent enough time out of circulation not to recognize me, he had to be ancient but asleep most of the time. But he was a quetzalcoatl, not a spirit of some kind. Quetzalcoats were mortal. He wasn't, but he wasn't ascended either, and that plus his servitude suggested strongly that he was a lich.

Above our heads, Winnie was using his Matrisse shard to undo the things I had done. It was going to take him some time; I'd transformed a good half of his hoard by now, and I may have mentioned that his hoard filled an entire mountain.

I decided to go for broke. A lich was less likely to be able to hurt me than Winnie himself, so I could afford the distraction, I figured. I turned Winnie's entire hoard into butterflies.

While he roared in frustration and tried to zap the flying insects with his Matrisse shard, the lich fired a bolt of power at me, and since turning an entire mountain's worth of small shiny objects into butterflies is a trifle draining even for me, it actually hit.

It was a spell of intense cold. In a second, all the heat had drained from my body, and I started shivering uncontrollably. Irritated, I used my own power to warm myself... only to have the cold intensify.

A moment too late I figured out what was going on. Quetzalcoats were master necromancers, or had been during the time period this fellow grew up in, but what this guy had done was impressive even for a species that managed to raise a second sun and feed it with the blood of the innocent. He'd actually managed to kill a windigo and bind its essence into a spell – made all the more astonishing by the fact that windigos are spirits and generally, killing a spirit involves destroying it completely. But no, this guy had converted a windigo into a spell, which meant that he had a spell that fed on disharmony and generated cold. I wondered if he'd engineered this thing to use against Mayhem, and the irony that would have been, given that Mayhem brought the windigos in the first place.

It left me in a bit of a pickle, though, since my magic is based in Disharmony, which meant that almost any spell I could possibly cast, the thing he'd just wound around me could eat. Also, draconequi don't like cold. At all. The only reason I enjoy snow activities is that I use my powers to keep myself warm. Neither do quetzalcoats, of course, and for the same reason – our bodies aren't built for it – but this guy was a lich, so the cold wouldn't kill him. Cold couldn't kill me either.
normally, but if all my magic was being devoured...

Memories of exploring with Celestia and Luna and finding caverns full of draconequus skeletons, where my people had huddled to try to share warmth before the cold the ponies brought killed them, came back to mind. I was getting colder and colder, dodging physically, with wings and legs, as the lich fired bolts of pure cold at me, and my own shivering was making it harder to move fast enough.

I flung an enormous amount of power into a spell on the swarms of butterflies I’d made, giving them ant heads that spat aqua regia rather than formic acid. The dead windigo spell ate a lot of the power and converted it to cold, pulling the very water vapor out of the air and freezing me solid. If you've ever been turned to stone, and been conscious during it, you can probably imagine how deeply unhappy I was with the concept of being frozen into a block of ice. But this was a gamble; I thought I'd be a lot more successful at undoing the windigo spell if the lich would just stop firing bolts of ice at me. And the whole reason I'd used so much power on the spell was so that enough of it would get through to accomplish the transformation.

I then cast a mental manipulation spell at my hordes of gold-corroding ant-butterflies, telling them to be very, very attracted to the heart made of gold wires and very, very hungry for whatever might be inside it.

Chaos and Disharmony aren't the same thing. Mobs, in particular, are a construct of chaotic harmony. Every individual member of a mob, in harmony, decides to accomplish the same task, which is generally beating the stuffing out of someone or something. Direct a mob at an object, which has no emotions and cannot feel panic, fear or pain, and there's no disharmony component of the spell at all. Normally you'd have to stimulate a mob into existence with negative emotion, which is disharmony, but not if you're dealing with a species that swarms in nature. And butterflies swarming and attacking something isn't exactly normal for butterflies, but it is completely normal for ants. There was a lot of disharmony in the spell that gave them ant heads and the ability to spit acid that would eat through gold, but there was none in the spell that made them want to swarm and eat the shiny golden heart, because that is very compatible with, and harmonious with, the nature of ants. So the entire spell got through without feeding the windigo-spell any more power.

Winnie didn't even notice – he was still engaged with turning the butterflies back to gold. When they swarmed on him, they were too close for him to easily zap them, so he concentrated on zapping the back of the swarm – not the ones near his charm necklace. The lich figured it out a minute or two before Winnie did. He'd been preparing a spell that I think he'd intended to shatter me, figuring, I suppose, that I was down for the count just because I was trapped in a block of ice. And then he realized what my butterants were doing (anterflies?), and started screaming, "No!" He tried to fire his cold spell at the anterflies – but they were swarming Winnie's neck, which made it look to Winnie as if his lich was attacking him, so he breathed fire at the lich – and coincidentally me, which began the much-desired process of melting the ice that held me. And meanwhile my anterflies were busily eating their way through the golden heart.

You probably know that a lich is a being who has placed his life force in an object, such that his body cannot be killed no matter what damage is inflicted on it, so long as the object is unharmed. You might even know about the quetzalcoatl obsession with hearts as a symbol for life force, though you probably have no idea how many thousands of ponies, llamas, alpacas, draconequui, and even other quetzalcoats had their hearts torn out to feed the magically-generated second sun the quetzalcoats created, during the days when the windigos were killing everything and the unicorns were playing games with the sun to harm their fellow ponies. And you know that I saw Winnie cast a spell on that golden heart to make the lich appear in the first place. So you can guess how I figured out exactly what Quetzy's phylactery was.
His actual heart turned out to be inside the thing. Aqua regia's a highly unstable acid that's known for melting gold, but the truth is, it isn't any good for quetzalcoatl flesh, either. My swarm hadn't even eaten their entire way through the gold shell by the time their acid, dripping into it, had done so much damage to the living heart within that the lich shrieked and crumbled to dust. (Yes, I know, destroying a lich either counts as killing something, thus decreasing Chaos, or restoring a dead thing to its proper state, thus increasing Harmony, but I was kind of fighting for my life here. There's a time and a place to stand on ideology, and when you're being frozen to death by an ancient lich, that isn't it.)

With him down, I could focus on unweaving the windigo spell. Winnie wasn't the only one with entropy spells; the destruction of anything by disordering it into noise is part of my basic toolkit, after all. There's no disharmony in it either; entropy is natural, a fundamental part of the harmony of the universe. Spells falling apart are actually more "natural" than spells holding together, after all. I'd undone the majority of the spell and almost melted myself free by the time Winnie decided to turn his attention to me again.

He happened to be holding a shard of Matrisse in his paw. I happened to still be largely paralyzed with cold, shivering violently as I melted my prison, and paying entirely too little attention to Winnie. So my first realization that I might actually be in an extraordinary amount of danger came when I saw the glitter of crystal headed toward my chest, and by the time I understood and thought of dodging, it was too late.

Winnie slammed the jagged obelisk of a shard of Order directly through my abdomen, and out the other side.

It is literally impossible for me to describe the pain this caused me, because a pony unfortunate enough to endure something so antithetical to her very selfhood being shoved through her would probably be dead, and therefore anyone reading this account has almost certainly never gone through anything similar. First imagine the pain of having a jagged crystal obelisk shoved through you. Now imagine that it is simultaneously white-hot and ice-cold, so it is burning you and freezing you at the same time. Now imagine that it's like a lightning rod conducting electricity into you, so you're paralyzed, limbs splayed, unable to move while your extremities go numb. Now imagine that you can feel it eating you from the outside in, raking your innards and your magic apart into strands and reweaving those strands into basic, boring stripes rather than the tapestry of complexity that makes you, you.

It was actually worse than all of that, but that can at least give you a vague idea.

I fell, on my back, staring up at Winnie's huge face and giant evil gloating grin above me. I couldn't move, I couldn't talk, and the pain was so horrible I could barely think. It actually felt rather like Anon's sword effect burning my tail had, and I was sure I was disintegrating from the inside out, but I couldn't even move my head to see. To be completely honest, I don't think I was afraid; I remember being angry, that helpless, sick anger you feel when someone who absolutely does not deserve to win this one has gotten one over on you. I don't think it had sunk in that I was about to die; I was mostly just infuriated that Winnie was going to be the one to get to kill me.

"Chaos creature, where is your laughter now?" he asked mockingly. "I told you. Those who come to steal from my horde come away with death in their paws. Would you like to plead for your life? To beg?"

It wouldn't have mattered if I'd wanted to (which for the record I didn't); I couldn't talk. My mouth was frozen open because I'd been screaming when the paralysis swept over me. You think bizarre, stupid things at a time like this; I remember hoping that none of my anterflies decided to land in my
open mouth because I was already in enough pain without having to deal with aqua regia on my tongue, and that thought frightened me more than Winnie's large head and sharp teeth above me. I knew I was going to die -- my blood would eventually eat through the crystal obelisk, but it would take long enough that I wouldn't be alive when it was done. Yet I was more afraid of acid in my mouth than the obvious fact that I was paralyzed and doomed.

At the time I didn't think of it -- I was too busy feeling what I was feeling to analyze it -- but now I find it interesting that when I've faced death at Anon's hands, I've felt terror, yet lying on Winnie's gold pile with his head and teeth and claws above me and a shard of Order stuck through my guts, all I felt was rage and humiliation. I mean, I'm not some heroic type to laugh in the face of death, but I'm fairly sure that if I could have talked, I would have made wisecracks rather than begging.

He lifted me with his paw. "I am curious to know what chaos tastes like," he said, chuckling. "When I swallowed you before, I had no opportunity to savor the flavor. This time I will be sure to taste your blood."

I'll admit that when he opened his mouth and lowered me halfway into it, I started wishing desperately that I could close my eyes. I was actually successful in making some sort of noise, a tiny high-pitched whine, not exactly the full-throated screaming I really wanted to be doing but it was something at least. With Winnie holding me up, I could see that there was in fact a large hole through me where the shard of Matrisse had gone in, larger than the shard itself, which was suspended eerily in the center of the gaping opening. The hole was growing, my flesh turning ashen gray and then crumbling to powder. I decided this would be easier for me to accept if I blamed my imminent death on Matrisse, who was after all one of my two great, eternal nemeses, not Winnie, who was still pretty much just an annoying dragon who'd gotten lucky. Winnie lined up his teeth with the existing large hole through my middle and chomped down. I'd thought I wouldn't be able to feel it, given how much pain was radiating from the wound itself and how numb my body felt at the edges, but I was wrong.

I couldn't feel anything where the hole was, well aside from the pain Matrisse was causing me, but my body was still in one piece rather than two because the hole hadn't spread to my sides yet. Winnie's teeth slicing through those sides, severing my lower half entirely, hurt badly enough to weaken the paralysis; I managed to spasm and scream. Winnie opened his mouth, grinning at me, letting me see the bottom half of my body lying on his tongue. Then he swallowed it.

Without a bottom half, the hole inside me didn't have a bottom half either. Gravity pulled the shard of Matrisse down, falling loose to the gold pile below.

I told you there might be a quiz.

As soon as the Order crystal was no longer in contact with my body, my power, and more importantly my ability to use it, started coming back to me. I knew I wouldn't have gathered enough strength to heal myself, teleport, or free myself in any way before Winnie finished me off, but there is one thing disharmony is exceptionally good at doing, and that is breaking bonds that should naturally clasp together. Such as the links of a large gold necklace.

I concentrated everything I had right then on Winnie's charm necklace, and it snapped. All sorts of wondrous magical items tumbled to the gold below us.

"What -- No! My jewels!" Winnie shouted in frustration, and threw me down, rather hard, so he could start trying to gather the magical items that were rolling loose on the gold pile. His outrage, not to mention the hilarious way he was slipping and sliding on his gold and scattering the very objects he was trying to catch, fed me with just enough magic to pull myself sideways, into the spaces between realities.
A small alteration to physics made the blood that would have been pouring continually out of me start looping back up to travel back into my body. I drew in a few ragged breaths – my lungs are in my chest, when I don't feel like rearranging them for amusement, so I still had them – and concentrated again, summoning the lower half of my body.

You probably don’t realize this to look at me, but I’m actually covered with scales from my ribcage downward. It's just that, until they get to just below my hips, they are tiny, and allow fur to grow between them, so the fur I’m covered with hides them. Dragons can eat each other, but it takes them more time to digest dragonflesh, because of scales. So I had no fur left, and my poor goat leg was more or less destroyed, dissolved in the raging fury of a dragon stomach, but my other, dragon-scaled leg, my tail, and my midsection were all more or less intact. Fortunately for me the parts I'd have liked losing even less than losing my leg are actually stashed inside my body where the scales protected them as well, and my wings were on my top half so I hadn’t lost them either.

Creating new matter from scratch takes a lot of magic. It's normally magic I have available to burn, but right then I was very, very weak. Organizing existing matter into the form I wanted it in takes almost as much magic as creating new matter. But taking a more or less intact structure and gluing it to another more or less intact structure, fusing them together, takes almost nothing. Teleporting my lower half to me, out of Winnie’s tum-tum, took more energy than fastening it back on myself.

Of course as soon as my pieces were all back together I started screaming again, because my mostly-dissolved goat leg hurt like you would not believe, and just because dragon scales provide some protection from dragon guts doesn't mean I wasn't badly burned all over. I spent several minutes screaming and swearing at Winnie in every language I know, which is almost all of them, while I waited to be able to gather up enough magic to heal the damage. Enough injury had been done to my very essence, to my magic itself, that I wasn't going to be able to fully heal the damage, not for some time. I put muscle and a thin layer of skin back on the goat leg, but I couldn't manage a full epidermis, a hoof, or my fur back, so it was still in agony when I tried to use it, and I could suppress the pain somewhat but I could neither fully heal my burns nor grow my fur back. I looked really, really stupid. Also naked. It's a lot more obvious where I'm hiding my naughty bits when all my fur's been burned off my lower body.

It would have been incredibly stupid to return to the fight right then, before I was fully recovered. The smart thing to do was obviously to return to my grotto, relax, lie around on my fluffy pillows, and come back once I was fully healed.

You can probably guess that I did not do this.

I was angry. I don’t get angry often. I don’t like me when I’m angry. Chaos has two faces (well, at least two; technically I'm sure there are a lot more) – the creative, funny, tricksterish side I prefer to show, the form of Chaos that makes me happiest... and destruction. Air burning, seas roiling, earth turning to glass or erupting underfoot. War. Plague. Annihilation.

These things have their own horrible beauty, but I do not like their aftermath, so I avoid them. But just as users of harmonic magic who tap into their own rage and hatred can draw on the well of dark magic and amplify their own power tenfold... so can users of chaos. And I was very, very, very angry.

Warnings: Using dark magic can cause eyeball leakage, spontaneous transformation into magical shadows, unexpected color changes, and severe constipation. Pregnant mares, foals, the elderly, and anypony who isn't near-suicidally stupid should avoid the use of dark magic. Ask your local thaumaturge if dark magic is right for you.

Foals, don't try this at home.
I made myself a pair of soft velvet pants to hide how stupid my naked, tiny red dragon scales looked, and a fancy ruffled shirt and velvet vest to match the pants to hide the fact that I was hiding something. And then I teleported back in.

Winnie looked up, saw me, roared, and breathed his fire at me. I turned it to liquid plasma and reflected it off a shield, bouncing it back to splash against his face. Dragons are impervious to fire, and lava, but the heat of the sun does actually set them back a tad. He screamed.

I snapped my fingers and made everything grow, warping space within the mountain cavern. Size is relative, after all. I grew enormous, dwarfing Winnie, and I enlarged the cavern and his gold as well. My power couldn't transform Winnie and alter his size, but there was no reason I couldn't affect the size of everything else.

Winnie flew at me, shrieking a challenge. I made a cloudball bat (it's a griffon game, it involves having opposable thumbs and being able to stand upright so you can swing a bat at a ball without magic) and swatted him with it, hard. Then as he went flying I stretched my talon out ludicrously and grabbed him by the neck, reeling him in toward me.

He attacked my talon, quite viciously, tearing at me and making me bleed, again, but I was beyond feeling pain. I bit down on his wings, pinning them together with my teeth, twisted one of his forelegs behind his back with my lion paw, and used my talon to tear the rings off his other foreleg. His tail swatted at me, cutting my chin, making my beard darken with my own blood. Right then I didn't even feel it. I ripped the rings off his talon and threw them at the far wall of the cavern, then did the same with his other talon. While I'd been gone, he'd managed to repair his charm necklace and restore at least some of his magic items to it. I choked him with it until the soft gold gave against hard, sharp dragon scales and snapped again.

Then I reached to the spot on his neck right above his collarbone, and tried to use my talons to pry the Element of Greed out of his flesh.

He bit me. Hard, as in tearing-fingers-loose biting. And then breathed another spell of rot onto my hand. Contemptuously I pulled my arm off and hit him with it, then made myself and the cavern grow even larger as I regenerated a non-rotting arm to replace the one he'd breathed on.

"One chance to correct your mistake, little dragon," I said, my voice booming through the cavern. "Give me my Element of Greed now, or I will show you how I broke the Dragon Empire and drove your ancestors to madness."

I could have done this all along. That was the thought that burned inside me, amplifying my rage. I could have done this any time, but no, I tried to be reasonable, I tried not to let my temper run away with me, and what did I get for my trouble? Almost murdered, and all the fur on my lower body burnt off. It had been so long since I'd been in a real fight with a powerful opponent – aside from the battles with Anon, where I was operating at a handicap anyway – that I'd been taken by surprise by his ability to hold his own against me. I'd let him put me on the defensive. No more.

I'd pay for this later, but right now, I had the floodgates open and the dial set to 11. He'd obey me, and return my property, or I was going to crush his spirit so thoroughly he would live every day of his long life weeping at his own foolishness in trying to stand against me.

"I'll give you nothing!" he screamed, and I smiled. In that mood, I actually wanted him to give me an excuse.

He went for my face again. I swatted him, with my lion paw this time, smashing him into the ground. He grabbed something off the gold pile and came back up. Startled, I realized he was carrying the
Godslayer, which of course hadn't enlarged when everything else did – the magic items had all stayed at original scale. But I was fairly sure Godslayer was potentially deadly to me no matter how much bigger I was than it.

I couldn't change the size of Godslayer, I couldn't destroy it, and I couldn't make it less deadly, but that didn't mean I could do nothing to its properties. I snapped my fingers and turned it into an inflatable toy hammer, like the kind they sell at carnivals. Of course, inflatable toy Godslayer would still theoretically be able to kill me, except for the part where Winnie was clutching it so tightly in his claws, he popped it.

Oops.

If Winnie had been very, very smart, he might have realized that smacking me with the floppy, uninflated plastic remains of Godslayer would actually have the same effect as smashing me with it in hammer form would have, but Winnie wasn't that smart. A hammer, to him, was useless if it couldn't be a hammer. He dropped it with an expression of rage, and then flew at my face so quickly I couldn't swat him away in time, and went up my nostril.

It is very unpleasant to have a dragon in your nostril. It is even less pleasant to have a dragon breathe fire inside your nostril. He'd tried to embed another entropy spell in it, but that, I unwove with ease. The actual fire, however, hurt like – well, like a number of words that I'm entirely too classy to use here, though if truth be told I said quite a number of them at the time. I reeled back, my changes reverting, everything returning to normal size, and I automatically teleported away from where I'd been hurt, leaving a full-size Winnie where I'd just been.

He lunged at me – the Element of Greed was responsible for his absurd speed in defense of his ill-gotten gains, and that was the only magic item I hadn't gotten off him – but without the Eye of Odin, he couldn't tell the difference between me and the giant Discord squeaky toy I left in my place when I teleported again, except when he got his teeth into it and it squeaked. Meanwhile, I was tearing off the top of his mountain. It was nighttime, Luna's stars glittering in the sky; we weren't high enough to see the True Stars, but I decided that might change for Winnie very, very soon.

I stripped his wings with a snap of my newly-regenerated talon, and then I inverted gravity. Winnie, and his entire hoard, fell into the sky. I reset gravity to normal on anything that wasn't dragon, so his hoard fell back down into the mountain, mostly (some of it on the mountain, and there'd be small dragons in the days to come who'd be pleasantly surprised by their explorations.)

Once, when I was a kid, I'd solved the problem of falling to my death (I wasn't a very strong flyer back then) by inverting gravity, whereupon I discovered that the most terrifying experience possible isn't falling to the ground; it's falling away from the Earth, into the endlessness of sky. I had my wings at the time, though I wasn't the best at using them, and I had magic sufficient to revert the change I'd made. Winnie had neither, right now.

I heard him shrieking in rage and, dare I say it, terror, and I laughed. Then I put him on a loop, so he'd fall into the sky some distance, reappear at the bottom (or, given the direction gravity was pointing for him, the top) of the loop, and fall into the sky again, et cetera. Of course it wasn't a true loop, I can't stand mindless repetition. Each time I let him fall a little farther before pulling him back to the start.

Dragons have a great deal of pride. It takes a long time to break them with fear. So while Winnie was falling into the sky, I was ostentatiously strolling around, picking up his gold and rubbing it against my face like a snuggly cat, or zapping it into birds and bees and other living creatures that would promptly fly away, so he could watch his hoard vanishing or being taken as mine. "I can do this forever, dragon," I said – which technically wasn't true, since I couldn't wait forever before taking on
Anon again, but he didn't know that. "Return to me my Element of Greed, or learn how to eat wind and rain as you fall endlessly."

"I'll surrender it," Winnie finally snarled. "I'll surrender it! I'll give you the Element of Greed! Return my wings to me!"

I did, backwards. And dropped him so abruptly into his gold pile he bellyflopped. Dragons are tough, but I suspected that was a bit of an ow anyway.

His wings shifted back to normal almost immediately – dragon magic fights chaotic deformation, as I mentioned earlier, and while missing wings are a normal stage for dragons, backward wings are not. With obvious great reluctance, he began digging under his scales for the Element, prying a scale up so he could pull it free.

I stepped closer so I could watch him – I was very, very eager to have it back in my paws, now that I had bled so much for it. So I was watching the claw pulling at the scales, and not the claw holding a very large golden idol approximately six times bigger than I am, until said claw slammed said statue down on me and turned my body to pulp like he was smashing a cockroach.

Which hurt, but did me no long-term harm, because the idol wasn't magically active and his Ring of Shadow Slaying was gone, so he couldn't damage my magic. It did, however, seriously torque me off. Winning always put me in a good mood, as does watching my helpless enemies scream in terror, so some of the rage I'd been feeling earlier had actually dissipated. It came back.

"That was a mistake, Winnie," I said as I reformed.

He was raking through his gold, plainly looking for something, when I appeared. The moment I began to speak, he looked at me and snarled... and then lunged for me, with the shard of Matrisse in his paw. And as he came at me, I liquefied his gold and made it crawl up him, running over his scales – and under, prying them loose wherever it found a weak point. I'd attacked Winnie with dragon-mites and ant-butterflies spitting aqua regia; he had weak points in his scales. And the gold flowed into them, and under the scales, running along his skin.

I could feel him trying to use the Element to counter me. But I was giving his hoard to him. The Element of Greed cannot protect you from being harmed by what you're greedy for. I made gold flow into his ears, his eyes, his mouth. He screamed, and struggled, and beat his wings, but I'd turned this entire hoard into butterflies earlier. Turning it into liquid? This was nothing.

And then, as it built up under his skin and began pushing his scales upward, I went up into the air and spoke into his rapidly gold-filling ear.

"I can kill you, Wiñaypaqori. Don't think I can't. I've killed many, many dragons." I made the underlayer of gold, the part of it up against his skin, sharp and poky, pushing it into his flesh. Under their scales, dragon skin isn't much tougher than a pony's. He wrathed, and tried to scream, but I'd sealed his mouth shut with gold. "I will burrow your hoard into your flesh and make you bleed. I will pour it in your eyes and ears so you see and hear nothing. I'll fill your throat and lungs with it. And when you are dead, I'll let all the local dragons know, and they'll come running." Sharper, deeper. I saw blood start to ooze out from under his scales in some places. "They'll take your hoard, Winnie. You'll be part of your own hoard by then, filled to bursting with gold. They'll rip your body apart to take the gold from it. You'll die, and everything you own, everything you are, will be taken by young upstart dragons and llamas and ponies, even your flesh, your skin, your bone. Your eyes will be covered with gold and displayed in a museum for the amusement of ponies. Your ribs will be used to make golden beds for dragon cubs. And I will still take my Element." I made the gold tighten all along his wing, enough pressure that he'd fear the bone would crack. "You can hand it over to me.
now, and live. Or I'll take it off your corpse when you die. Your choice."

With a muffled sound that reminded me very much of a sob, Winnie reached his gold-covered claw up to where the Element was stuck in his scales again, and pried it loose, throwing it as he did. The moment it was loose from his body, I teleported it to myself. "Thank you, Winnie, you've been an enormous help. Let me repay you by taking this burden off your hands." I let the liquid gold run off him, pouring off his body... and running in rivulets up the side of his cavern, to the large open hole in the top where I'd ripped the ceiling off. More of his gold liquefied and joined it in shallow rivers of liquid metal.

"I gave it to you! Give me back my gold!" Winnie screamed.

"I said I'd let you live. I never said I'd let you keep your gold."

He shrieked in rage and slashed at me with the shard of Matrisse, still in his paw. I dodged and opened a vortex on one side of the cave, sucking the gold over there in with the roar of vacuum. Still screaming, Winnie dropped the shard and flew to the vortex, trying to block it with his body and grab the pieces of gold that were flying toward it with his paws.

I opened another. And another. And another. And intensified the current flow of the golden rivers running up the side of the cave and then down the side of the mountain.

Winnie must have realized he couldn't block them all, and the only way he could keep his gold was to kill me somehow or stop me, so he launched himself at me again. I used telekinesis to smack him down again, brutally hard. Gravity quadrupled under him and my power held him flat, pushing down on him so hard that if dragon bone weren't as tough as it was, it would be snapping.

"We could have done this the easy way, Winnie," I said. "You could have given me my Element to begin with. It's mine, you know; just because you kept it warm for me while I was trapped in stone doesn't mean it was ever yours in the first place. But no. You had to try to hold on, you had to try to kill me, repeatedly." I floated over his eye and looked down into it. "I thought of killing you, and I would have if you didn't surrender finally. But I'm glad I didn't have to. Because taking your entire hoard from you and making you live with that will be much more entertaining."

"No!" There were tears welling in his eyes. "Don't take my hoard! Please! I – I'm sorry!"

"Would you like to plead for your hoard? To beg?" I said mockingly. "Oh, no, Winnie, it's far too late for you to apologize. I'm going to take everything."

I ripped off two of his scales with my telekinesis, drawing a choked scream from him, and wrapped them around the shard of Matrisse so I could safely carry it with my magic. Then I snapped my talon and emptied his cavern, teleporting all of it to random deserted locations all around the world. Treasure hunters were going to have so much fun, and I would so enjoy the chaos they'd make as they backstabbed each other, falsified papers, trespassed, and generally made nuisances of themselves.

I left Winnie at the bottom of his now-empty hollowed out mountain, crying brokenly for the loss of everything he cared about, and expanded my wings so I could fly with them. Then I flew the shard of Matrisse to the coast, and dropped it in the ocean. Just as rock binds Chaos, water binds Order, and the ocean, with its tides and its seething mass of life under the surface, is the most chaotic water there is.

And then I returned here, where I have been pampering myself for the past several days as I recover from that ordeal.
What? You were expecting that the use of dark magic was going to corrupt me? Turn me into what, Nightmare Chaos or something? Piffle. Unicorns and alicorns get corrupted by dark magic because they pen all their dark emotions inside for the sake of Harmony, and when they start tapping that for power, the floodgates roar open and they can't close them again. I don't pen up anything! When I'm angry, when I'm jealous, you'll know it. My emotions flow with ease... which is why I am able to tap my rage for power when I'm weak, and then let it go after I've achieved my victory and also my ironically fitting and calculatedly cruel revenge. I broke Winnie. I made him surrender and then I made him cry. And I could have tormented him to madness if I'd wanted to, but it was more fun to leave him sane, unable to escape into madness to relieve the pain of losing what had defined his existence for hundreds of years. Corrupted by dark magic? No. I used the magic to fulfill my rage, which is what it is for, and then I let it go.

Of course as soon as I let it go, the fact that my magical essence was damaged, and that my body had been broken and mangled in so many ways that I couldn't keep it perfectly regenerated, and there were hairline fractures throughout my entire skeleton and I still really couldn't use my goat leg and now I could feel the burns all over my body... well, it all caught up with me. Which is why I have slathered myself in poison joke liniment for several days, why I've been slugging down painkiller potions like they're raspberry cola, and why I've done nothing for several days except eat, sleep and write in this journal. But I'm feeling much better now, so I think maybe tonight, after the sun sets, I'm going to go have a conversation with Celestia. Why, I haven't had a chance to taunt her since the day I first met Anon! I can't have her feeling left out.

I can't
I don't even
can't talk about this I can't
she doesn't
he
i'm going to kill him i'm going to
where is my extra boost from dark magic now? i hate him i want him dead why does it make me feel so weak?
he's taken everything
she thinks that I
can't can't can't can't

Yes. Yes, I am crying. Yes I can barely see the page I'm writing this on. I was going to lie like I did before or just not even write in it right now but never again because now I know who I'm writing this for.

He took her memories, hers and Luna's, and he rewrote them and now she thinks
can't write this

I know now that this isn't for some mythical pony who might read this after I die. Maybe it is but that's not the only audience. It's for me. I have to write everything down, I have to do it honestly, because what if he takes my memories? What if he rewrites me the way he rewrote her the way he
rewrote all the stallions he changed except this wouldn't even be body, just memories and he might change who I think I am

I'm crying, all right, future me? I'm not actually a goatee-twirling monster who can't feel grief. I'm not crying over a ruined plan or the fear of death or losing my hoard like Losey or whatever stupid thing he thinks villains cry about. I'm crying about it's because

she thinks I killed her father

Our father

I can't do this. I can't do this right now. I can't write this

I'm going to get drunk. Very, very drunk. So drunk I can't use my powers, so I don't go staggering off into the night planning to kill Anon, because I want so very very much to kill Anon

I'm going to get drunk and make the whole world go away and then I'm going to sleep and sleep and sleep until it stops hurting and then I'll write about it

and from now on I have to tell the truth, the whole truth, ok it can have jokes but I need to be prepared in case future me doesn't remember who I really am I need to have this journal ready for that just in case

oh, tiaaaaa....
In Which I Meander Aimlessly Around Memory Meadow

So.

I've gone back and edited some things. (Hopefully none of you are complete morons who feel the need to go back and check. As I'm fairly sure no one has been sneaking into the Grotto of Disharmony to get a quick read in, all of you are reading the version that I already edited.) You may have been wondering all this time about precisely how candid I've been and whether or not you can actually trust that anything I'm saying is true, and if it's really in character for me to go into such gory and humiliating detail while discussing matters such as the severing of my tail or my near-death in Winnie's jaws or whatnot. The answer is yes. I don't give a donut hole about what you think. But I've come to the realization that I have to write this for myself. That evidence suggests that possibly Future Discord might have no recollection of having any redeeming features whatsoever.

I knew this was a possibility. I've just re-read this entire journal and it's one of the first things I talked about, the fear that I might somehow be turned into an Evil Avatar of Pure Evilness, and forget who I truly am. I knew what happened to those poor stallions (again, having just re-read this thing, I've realized that I never actually talked about my final findings – the last I mentioned it, I was unclear as to whether the stallions disappeared or turned into mares. Well, after my conversation with poor Cheese Louise, who I'm fairly sure was actually a stallion at some point in her past that she doesn't remember anymore, I'm now quite positive Anon didn't kill them, he just sex-changed them. That's... better than the alternative, I suppose.) I knew, intellectually, what Anon's power could do. But now I know. Now I've seen my own history overwritten in the minds of the only ponies who remember, and I'm the only one left, and... maybe he only changed the universe's backstory once? Maybe he doesn't have the power to do it again, and since I was in stone at the time, I'm safe? How I would dearly love to believe that... but I don't feel safe. I don't think I'll feel safe until he's dead.

I went back and added details that I'd originally excluded on the grounds of how embarrassing they were to remember, let alone write about, because I need to remember everything. The good and the bad. I need to remember who I am, and if that includes remembering sobbing and running around like a chicken with no head while Anon's perversion of Harmony magic ate my tail... so be it. I don't have a choice. I never had a choice about any of this. I never wanted this fight in the first place.

Maybe I am writing this for somepony to read at some point in the future and figure out what's going on and what they have to do to save the world from Anon... but maybe I'm writing this so that my future self can remember who I really am.

But I'm at a loss now, because I could go back and edit and add all the embarrassing parts in, but every time I try to start writing about my encounter with Celestia, I either start to cry, or I get overwhelmed with rage and I want to rush right out and take Anon on again. Which very nearly just got me killed, again, and I know there are better strategies. I have a plan. I just have to enact it.

It's just that this—

Okay. Okay, I'm going to try something slightly different. I'm going to try being just a little bit more abstract about this so I can get through it without weeping, getting myself killed trying to murder Anon, or drinking myself into stupidity again.

I'm going to tell you a story.

Once upon a time there was a little boy who lived by himself, in the woods, minding his own
business and not hurting anypony. Well, okay, sometimes he stole food from them, but it wasn't like they were exactly eager to shower him with baked goods and cheese when he asked. Besides, the faces they made when they saw that half their cart of apples was now apple cores were simply hilarious.

One day ponies decided that it was simply unacceptable to them that a creature who wasn't a pony could possibly be living a peaceful life out in the woods without being under total pony control – this was before the Everfree existed, and I'm sure you're all aware of the fetish ponies having for controlling nature – so they sent a team of pest control experts up the mountain to capture the little boy. Who had a bit of a speech impediment, due to having acquired a forked tongue on the same day he lost his family and every other member of his species, so he really hadn't had anyone to talk to since ending up with entirely new speech production equipment. Also, he'd never actually been taught how to speak pony, and the translation spells that everypony uses nowadays to speak to other sapient beings hadn't been invented yet. Still, while the boy couldn't communicate particularly well in pony language, it should have been immediately obvious that he was at the very least a speaking animal, a sapient being like ponies. Oddly, for some mysterious reason, the ponies didn't catch that. I'm sure it was just an honest misunderstanding and had nothing to do with massive hippocentrism, xenophobia, and financial incentives at all.

The little boy was sold to a circus, which was also perfectly capable of figuring out that he was a speaking being, judging from the fact that he understood their instructions well enough to do the complete and precise opposite, if it weren't for the fact that slavery was illegal and ownership of performing animals was perfectly fine. The boy made several attempts to escape his captivity, all of which resulted in beatings at the least and... well, let me put it this way, at one point they shot him in the tail with a harpoon on a chain so they could drag him back. I am far from the best at telling time but I believe he was something like eight or nine years old at the time. No one wants to hear stories of child abuse, so let's just skip forward a bit. Eventually the boy had actually become fairly good at performing – and had discovered that he'd have actually enjoyed it, quite a bit, if not for the part where he was being treated like an animal and all evidence of his sapience was being ignored, also if possibly there had been fewer beatings and more food. But the flame of freedom burns too hot to quench in some creatures' breasts, which is to say, he saw a potential opportunity to escape, he took it, he got several pony performers badly hurt in the ensuing chaos, and in response, once the circus owners recaptured him they put him in a cage to be displayed. He wasn't permitted to perform anymore; they kept him in chains, all the time. Despite the fact that at one point a veterinarian they'd had to employ to treat him had flat out told them he was sapient and should be freed or employed, with wages. But ponies are kind and harmonious and gentle stewards of all life, of course.

And then the circus was invited to perform for the king, and the king's daughter. And for some reason, when the boy was brought out in a cage to be displayed as a freak of nature, the young princess saw what nopony had been willing to see – that the creature in the cage wasn't a vicious, freakish animal, some sort of horrifying and nonsensical chimera-gone-wrong, but a child, just like her. (Slightly younger than her, actually, a fact which in later years she used to hold over the boy's head, frequently.) She demanded to be allowed to pet the creature, so the boy was pulled from his cage, in chains. The boy, naturally, decided that being in close proximity to what was obviously a very important pony was a potential avenue to get revenge on ponykind, take a hostage, maybe get free or maybe get himself killed but he was a bit beyond caring about that anymore, so he attempted to take the princess hostage. The mechanisms that kept him from using his own magic kept the magic of ponies from working well on him either. But despite that inauspicious beginning, the princess talked him down, persuaded him – despite the fact that he couldn't speak pony, or rather, by that point simply refused to, because if they weren't going to listen then what was the point anyway? – to let her go, and promised him freedom, and a home.

Then she talked her father into making this happen. I was there and to this day I do not know how
that filly managed to persuade a fellow (who'd been within moments of killing the monster that threatened his baby girl) to instead purchase said monster, provide it with a bath and a large meal and a bed to sleep on, and take it in as a fosterling. I mean, I have a very good memory, and the boy could understand pony perfectly well without being able to speak it fluently. So I remember what she said. I just don't understand why it worked.

And yet it did.

King Starfire gave me a room in the same wing of the palace as his daughters. I ate with the royal family, after Celestia persuaded me to stop raiding the kitchens, hiding the food in my room and using my magic to try to cook it. He gave me tutors, ponies who talked to me like I might possibly be a moderately intelligent being and who taught me how to speak. (I already knew how to speak, but try living on your own for four years as a small child after your tongue has mutated on you and see how well you can manage it.) I haven't admitted this to many beings, because it doesn't fit the whole concept of Lord of Chaos, but... I wanted to learn. I was desperate to know things. I wanted to know how everything worked (only partly because I wanted to take it apart); I wanted to see everywhere, meet everyone. Celestia and my tutors read me books, and I will never admit this to Twilight Sparkle while I'm alive, but... I love books. I hate trying to read them – I need to use magic to make them read themselves to me, because for some reason when I look at squiggly lines on a paper it hurts my head to try to make them resolve into meaning, probably a Chaos thing – but I love hearing them. I did torment my tutors, of course, because I had a rep to manage, and besides, they kept expecting me to wake up at a specific time of day and eat when ponies were eating and pay attention to what they wanted to teach me rather than what I wanted to learn about, but I loved them. I lived for spending time learning, and exploring. I dragged Celestia and Luna on numerous quests to ostensibly find their cutie marks (I may have pretended that a cutie mark was a thing a draconequus could get, but it wasn't as if it was even hard to persuade them). We were based out of what is now the Castle of the Two Sisters, in what was then the capital city of Equestria, Equuapolis... and occasionally we went as far as where Canterlot is now, on foot (mostly with Luna sleeping on my back, until night came, at which point she would miraculously wake up, demand all of the picnic sandwiches, and drive the two of us to keep going to wherever it was we were trying to find. Luna is a slave driver, I'll have you know.)

Starfire put up with all this. A bizarre chimera creature living with his daughters, dining with them, learning from their tutors, talking them into going on adventures for days at a time, and he accepted it. I never took that for granted. Never. Might have pretended I did, more than once, because who wants to get all emotional and sappy when you're a teenager dealing with adults? But I always knew his behavior was abnormal for a pony, and I was always grateful for how he treated me.

Everyone knew I was an absurdly powerful mage. He got Starswirl to try to train me. Starswirl knew nothing about chaos magic. He learned, though. He also learned to be less of a grumpypants. When I first met him he was very, very stern and strict and driven and almost a recluse. By the time I was done with him, he was playing pranks, traveling in time to deliver cryptic warnings to ponies, and experimenting with some really, really strange spells. I honestly think he learned as much from me as I learned from him, given how alien my magic was to anything ponies knew how to deal with. He was Starfire's right-hoof pony, the official court mage. Starfire told me I would have to take that position for Celestia, when she became Queen. I don't even understand why – Starswirl wasn't literally immortal but certainly wasn't dead when Starfire met his end – but he trusted me to do it. He trusted me to protect her, and the kingdom. And not only wasn't I related to him, I wasn't even a pony. But he didn't care.

I didn't actually have a biological father. Well, in truth, I did. I even know who he was, and met him once. (Twice, if you count the time traveling episode where he tried to kill me.) But draconequus
clans had, even before the Cataclysm that killed most of us, always treated fathers as secondary. A female draconequus goes into heat, she sleeps with whoever she wants, she lays an egg, and all the fellows who slept with her give her yummy treats while she's brooding her egg because firstly, that might be their kid, and secondly, she might be interested in fooling with them just for funsies if she likes them enough, and without the estrus hormones driving her, the fact that she liked them well enough to boink them while in heat doesn't count. Her household consists of her, her kids, and probably a brother or two, who will share a household with her the way pony husbands and wives do, and care for his niece or nephew the way a pony dad would, while running off to have sexytimes with his own loose network of ladyfriends. Or she might live with her sister, or her mom, or her bestest ever buddy. We weren't all creatures of chaos in the sense that I am, but we were, once, all much more chaotic about our interpersonal relationships than ponies are. By the time I was born, there were so few of us that the entire species was considered my clan, every adult male who wasn't my uncle or older brother was theoretically a potential father, and to be honest none of them really wanted to put up with me anyway despite this fact. I can't imagine why not. I was a charming little baby.

So at the point where I met King Starfire, I had no knowledge of who my father had been or that this fact might even have ever been important – draconequui just don't put much emphasis on the concept of father. My mother was dead, my brothers were dead, my uncles were dead... I wasn't really pining for a father. It took me quite a while to figure out that some part of me had begun to see King Starfire as that. (Didn't help that my feelings toward Celestia were never brotherly, if you get my drift.)

Oh, and there's another thing. I couldn't describe what my feelings for Celestia were until puberty hit because "friend" didn't seem nearly strong enough and "sister" felt weird somehow and "object of my obsession" isn't really one word until you go through puberty, at which point it becomes the word "love". Not to be crude about it, but, well, okay, I'm going to be crude about it. I had it bad for her. The first time I ever woke up with the blankets wet and sticky from something decidedly not chocolate I was hoarding, it was because of a dream involving Celestia's tail. When I learned how pony reproduction worked, I decided I was going to father all of Celestia's foals, until it sank in that draconequui aren't biologically compatible with ponies without magical assistance and also I don't want foals. I turned all the cheese in Equapolis (a very large city) into sculptures of Celestia. I was completely and totally obsessed with her, convinced we would be eternal soulmates, in both love and lust in that way teenagers get where the one they want for their special somepony becomes pretty much the only pony in existence. As I am completely awesome, it should go without saying that this was reciprocated on her part, but since I know most ponies have a xenophobic hatred and disgust for the bodies of beings that aren't ponies, I'll say it. She wanted me as much as I did her. In fact our first time together largely consisted of her putting the moves on me and me stalling for time, trying (and miserably failing) to hide how scared I was that we'd do this and then she wouldn't like it and she'd hate me (for the record this did not happen. Celestia was surprisingly patient with how incompetent I was my first time. Probably because it was her first time too. But practice makes perfect, they say, and we got in quite a bit of practice.)

And her father told her that she couldn't marry me, for political reasons, but she could have me for her concubine because that would keep her future husband on his toes. I am not making this up, I swear. Okay, so he never used the term "concubine", that was my contribution, but he told her that if she wanted me to go for it. Which she immediately proceeded to do. Tell you one thing about Celestia, she can be very, very decisive sometimes. (I sincerely hope Twilight Sparkle is reading this, because I do so hope the mental images of your precious perfect princess and me making the beast with two backs in her royal bedsheets are burning into your brain so deep it will go far beyond brain bleach to get them out, and may require brain hydrofluoric acid.)

He wouldn't let me go to war with him and his soldiers to fight the dragons, when it came to it, because friendly chaos isn't – I couldn't unleash the kind of chaos I'd need to win against dragons
and keep it from affecting my pony comrades in arms. It apparently never occurred to him to send me alone. Celestia thought of it. My lover was willing to send me out by myself to risk my life in combat, once her father was dead and she had taken the throne (though not the title – she refused to be coronated as Queen, insisting on being a Ruling Princess)... because she trusted me, and because she needed me, but also... because I wasn't her son. I didn't find this out until after he was dead. Starfire couldn't bear to let me risk my life alone, without pony assistance, because I was the closest thing to a son he had.

He's been dead for over two thousand years and still sometimes I hear his voice, laughing at one of my jokes, or that annoying overly patient tone he got with me when I turned a few chests' full of gems in the Royal Treasury into chests full of donuts, or what he said to me right before he went off to that final battle, the last thing I ever heard him say. I never married Celestia – wouldn't have if I could have, marriage is the ultimate triumph of orderly society over the chaos of love and I won't support it – but I consider him, at the very least, my father-in-law. Sometimes, when I'm not dwelling on the unfortunate implications of what it would mean for my relationship with Celestia... I do, truly, think of him as my father. He's certainly more of a father than the creature who actually knocked my mom up could ever have been.

Yeah, okay, those damp spots on the page aren't actually lemonade. Move along, nothing to see here.

So you may be saying at this point, "Well, Discord, it's true that you're enormously hot and I'd do you, but why should I believe that Princess Celestia ever did, when the two of you are sworn enemies? If you were lovers, how did it ever end up that she had to turn you to stone?"

Umm... mistakes were made?

It turns out that when you hate everything about the concept of government, and governing, and are ideologically opposed to any manifestation of law, order or control whatsoever, that maybe your best career path does not involve taking over Equestria and trying to rule it on behalf of your dead lover and her little sister, even if you are afraid that if you don't, the total idiots that are left behind will get all of ponykind killed by the creatures who killed them, and you. Also maybe you're not thinking your clearest right after returning yourself from the dead for the first time ever and ascending to the position of a godlike entity responsible for spreading and promoting Chaos and Disharmony so that magic will survive. Also possibly when it turns out they're not dead, maybe your response should be more like "Oh, how wonderful, you aren't dead! Yay!" and not "Well, if you hadn't run off and abandoned me I wouldn't have taken over and you totally deserve it for leaving me to think you were dead and finders keepers, I'm not giving you your ponies back."

So I have abandonment issues. Trust me, you'd have worse mental damage than that if you'd lived my life.

I've... sadly come to the conclusion that... ugh... ponies are somewhat better off under Celestia's rule than they were under mine. Don't get me wrong, first chance I get I'm still overthrowing her and Luna and taking over again, but I'm not as hung up on ideological purity as I was when I was a young fellow. I'll still let the trains run on time, mostly. Once I make sure the Elements can't be used against me ever again – this might be a challenge to pull off without actually harming the Bearers, but I'm working on it – I'll let Celestia and Luna continue to handle all the dull, boring aspects of government, instead of eliminating government completely. I'll just have a legalized veto power over anything challenging my decisions to cause chaos. And I don't think I'm going to lean as much on disharmonizing ponies as I did the last time, because, you know, been there, done that. I'll try to work out some kind of hybrid approach. I mean, I don't actually want ponies to be miserable, but I don't want them so dependent on harmony and order and boring sameness that they panic at a bunny
stampede. You know, in my day, ponies could handle a *hydra stampede* without panicking. Running away, certainly, they did that, but they didn't panic. They were a lot better at rolling with change and adapting to circumstance than today's ponies are... but today's ponies live longer, suffer from fewer violent crimes, and have better teeth. I... admit, in some ways I like the change, now that I've had a chance to be alive and free and walking around amongst them for a while.

At the time, though... rigid class system, much stronger racial prejudices than they have today, worse xenophobia, and the fact that Celestia and Luna had just been killed (I believed) for trusting in friendship and peace and honesty. I *started* by trying to run things the way Celestia would have run them, but after you have to terrorize your nobles and even kill a few unicorn assassins to make the point that you are in charge and would rather not be assassinated again, you're going to fall into a pattern of dictatorship unless you shake things up, and there was no way I was willing to turn into a dictator. So I tried to introduce the joys of chaos into the lives of ponykind, which they didn't appreciate, and, well, things happened. If Celestia and Luna could have been bothered to get a message to me somehow, maybe things would have been different, but I guess I can kind of see their point that they saw me die in front of them and had no idea I could come back from the dead. (To be fair I didn't either, until it happened.) It was really just a whole lot of misunderstandings and maybe now that we've all gotten older and wiser the three of us could sit down and hash things out so that I'm in charge but I deputize anything having to do with law and order to them, and maybe we can get something going with a balance between chaos and harmony. I don't have to have everything my own way all the time. Just most things, most of the time.

Of course this is all a pipe dream because Anon's going to kill me

Of course none of this will be possible until I find a way to defeat Anon and reverse the changes he's made to our world, but I'll figure out a way to do that. Somehow.

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You may possibly have guessed that I am stalling.

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I – just – this is so hard. How can I

*Every time I think about what she said* I

I'm sure you think I'm overreacting but you see, almost nothing hurts me personally. I'm the Lord of Chaos! If you manage to successfully insult me, and it's amusing, good show! If you do it and it's not amusing, I can laugh at you for how bad you are at coming up with insults. I don't stand on ceremony, I don't demand to be placed on a pedestal (in fact the thought of being placed on a pedestal gives me horrifying flashbacks), I don't insist on maintaining Dignity and Gravitas. If you think I'm a silly, trivial clown or a pathetic excuse for a would-be tyrant or hopelessly soft and stupid, that's fine, you can go right on thinking those things while I turn your home to gingerbread and set ten-head-long ants on it, or cast a spell on you so every time you open a door it leads to a completely random place and that includes the door you just went through. Almost everything in life is funny, if you look at it from the right perspective, and if you try to pull one of the few things that isn't funny on me, like say stabbing me in the gut with a shard of Order, well, I'm powerful enough to crush you like a bug and laugh while you cry about it. Things roll right off me like strawberry milkshake off a pegasus' wings.

This is the first time that – and it *hurts* because it's a lie but she *believes* it – and what it says about what she thinks of me now that she believes it -- and it means I'm the only one who remembers –

Okay. Okay, I'm wasting my time. I need to do this. Just, bite the wax tadpole and write.

Any minute now.
Soon as I finish fixing myself snacks. And walking the eels. And I do believe I have to dust the vestibule! There's not nearly enough dust in it.

All right, let's do this.

As I mentioned above, I'd decided to go taunt Celestia a bit, because why should she miss out on all the fun? During the time I unruled Equestria, it was one of my more entertaining pastimes – go annoy Celestia! She was so much fun to annoy.

See, even during the time period when we were, shall I say, intimate, I watched Celestia change from a fun-loving kid to a very, very serious mare. Heavy is the head that bears the crown, and when Celestia was first made Ruling Princess, there was no diarchy. Luna was her heir, not her co-ruler. I tried my best to keep her spirits up, but, well, one of the things that was bringing her down was the fact that she was sending me off to fight dragons and I kept having these, uh, episodes. I don't even know what to call them. I wasn't the chaos avatar then, just an extraordinarily powerful (not to mention sexy) chaos mage, but when I went into combat with the dragons, I was routinely using more power than I now know is safe for a mortal mage to wield, no matter how talented they are.

I'd been deemed by my fellow draconequui the Principle of Chaos before they all died. This sounds like a bigger deal than it is; a draconequus Principle is close to what a pony cutie mark is, in that it dictates how your magic works. I'm sure you've realized that most unicorns can't do anything interesting with their magic except to use telekinesis and cast spells that let them do what the picture on their rump says they should, but the unicorns who can wield the Element of Magic have cutie marks based on magic – or on objects in the sky, which somehow symbolizes magic, in some bizarre pony way – and can learn to do pretty much anything. The same was true for draconequui. I had an older brother who was the Principle of Speed; all his spells were built around going really fast. I'm sure Rainbow Dash would have thought he was awesome. My Principle, however, is Chaos – and as I mentioned earlier, chaos is magic. I'd had a connection to chaos ever since that day, one that just got stronger over time. But I was mortal, I had limits, and I kept pushing them. Routinely.

So I'd come back leaking magic, trailing stinging butterflies that came into spontaneous existence only to turn into glass snowflakes that fell up and then into marzipan keys that could unlock anything for the five seconds or so they existed, and... well, I'm informed that I kept saying things that weren't entirely rational. Such as "the world is a soap bubble, it would be so easy to pop it, don't let me pop it" and things like that. To be quite frank, I was losing my mind. I thought I knew how to control chaos, but I was a mortal chaos mage trained by a harmony mage, so obviously I didn't know what I was doing, and I was in a situation where I'd die or all the ponies I cared about would be conquered and eaten if I didn't push myself beyond safe limits. I was never much for safe limits anyway.

Anyway, I digress. So here's Celestia, barely out of her teens, still grieving for her father, trying to ride herd on a court of nobles all of whom were quite certain they knew more about how to conduct a war than she did, dealing with a sister who shouldn't have had magic at all exploring dream magic (did I mention they weren't alicorns then? They weren't alicorns then. Celestia was a unicorn, like her father; Luna was a pegasus, like her mother. Tell me this shocks you.), a coltfriend who was quite possibly going insane, a mentor who kept vanishing for weeks or months at a time (he was time traveling, but he couldn't be bothered to tell us that), and dragons who wanted to invade Equestria, take it over, and turn the ponies currently residing within into feedstock. I watched it change her. I watched her stiffen up under the weight. And after we had our little misunderstanding and I came back as the chaos avatar and she came back as an alicorn, I saw her grow harder, tougher, colder. Mostly that was my fault, I admit, but frankly I did her a favor. If I hadn't given her and Luna so much combat training, they'd never have been able to deal with creatures like Sombra and Tirek on their own.
I saw her deal with petty warlords who thought they could use my beautiful perpetual Chaos as a cover for small dictatorships where they enslaved the ponies within. I saw her deal with opportunistic quetzalcoatlts who thought chaos means never having to face the music for stealing ponies as slaves. I saw her set a raiding party of caribou on fire one time, mostly because what Luna would have done to them would have been crueler. Of course, when I was made aware of poachers attempting to take my ponies or ponies violating my Rule of Unrule, which is that no one gets to rule anything, I handled them myself, except when I felt like a really great show, when I'd arrange for Celestia or Luna to magically find out about the threat so I could watch them fight. Those mares are poetry in motion in battle, let me tell you. Also incredibly sexy. Which I'd never do anything about in Luna's case because euw, little sister, but Celestia... well. Fantasy is free, and it wasn't like I was telling her that I was still using her image in my personal-time fantasies. Well, not telling her very often, anyway. Though white coats do show the most amazing blushes.

The thing I found most delightful about watching my two dear ladies whale away on our mutual enemies (and occasionally my supposed friends, like the time another chaos mage bargained with me for power and knowledge, and I gave him some, and then I backstabbed him and sold him out to Celestia and Luna because his voice was annoying me) was the contradictory nature of their demeanor when faced with their enemies. Luna, alicorn of dreams and stars and cold moonlight, burned with fiery passion in combat. And Celestia, alicorn of the sun, was so very, very cold against those she despised, so very measured and calm and ruthless.

And then I'd show up and annoy her and she'd get so flustered and angry! Fighting dark mages who'd fought their way to the surface out of Tartarus and wanted to feed their magic with the blood of the living, she barely ruffled an eyelash against. Cold, calm, near-emotionless perfection. Fighting me, she'd yell, and paw the ground with frustration and anger, and sometimes descend to totally childish levels like using her magic to make mud pies and throw them at me when I pied her in the face. She'd turn red, and huffy, and when I teased her with particular types of innuendo she'd turn even redder, and sometimes she'd hit me. Like, with her forehoof. Sometimes I'd tickle her, and when she stopped writhing and laughing after I let her up, she'd start crying. Seriously? You lose a foreleg in combat against an Ursa Major, and you just keep fighting even as it slowly grows back, but you cry because I tickled you?

She never turned that cold face to me. Never. Oh, she tried, but I could always annoy her out of it. And when I was in stone, I watched, by walking in pony dreams, as she got even better. Harder. Stronger. Colder. She faced off against Sombra and the atrocities he committed and the things he did to Luna's heart without a ripple on her face. I knew she had nightmares about it, I knew she was terrified of many of the threats she fought, or grieved because she hadn't been able to save everyone, but in the dreams of the ponies who saw her, she was impeccable. Yet the moment I broke out of stone, she had a panic fit, paced around debating with herself out loud as to whether or not to wake up Luna, decided not to, called her highly trained crack team of six civilian mares barely past college age if that, and had a near-breakdown when she discovered I took the Elements. It's a point of pride with me. Tia can hide her emotions against any opponent but Nightmare Moon and me, and Moonie just made her cry a lot. She's like a perpetual motion machine of disharmony when it comes to me; the chaos roiling off her of conflicting emotions, the juicy feel of anger and fear and sadness and you know what, I'm pretty sure there's still a little lust buried in there somewhere, plus the humiliation I generally inflict on her, is so powerful she charges me up just by seeing my face. Luna's got negative emotions in her aplenty when she sees me, but not disharmonious ones – she hates me and she's angry and she wants to kill me. Negative, yes, but perfectly aligned and harmonious with each other. But Celestia...

I don't think I'm fooling myself. I'm very old, and very experienced, and I can sense emotion, and hers is raw even after a thousand years. I'm pretty certain part of Celestia still loves me. And the rest of her is utterly furious with me. And oh my, if I were talking about this under any other
circumstances, I might need a cold shower by now. Why, yes, ponies feeling powerful and contradictory emotions toward moi turns me on, I'm not ashamed to admit it. Besides, she's beautiful when she's angry.

Oh, my Tia, what's he done to you? All your beautiful disharmony gone, replaced with a ceramic mask of mindless happiness and that icy cold...

Right. Stalling again.

I went to see Tia, to taunt her and annoy her. I came in when I knew she'd be getting ready for bed – her schedule, sadly, is like clockwork – and found her wearing a nightgown and reading a book. For a moment I didn't even say anything, just absorbing the sight of her. So relaxed, free of the weight that burdened her, at least for a moment. So calm and peaceful.

Really, I couldn't have resisted spoiling it even if it wasn't what I'd come here for.

I teleported onto her bed and laid back, arms behind my head and both hoof and paw firmly planted on the silken comforter. "Oooh, this is nice," I said. "Perks of being a princess, huh?"

She turned – and what I saw in her eyes was the one thing I had never seen in her eyes when she was looking at me. But I didn't recognize it, yet.

"Discord," she hissed, coldly, but with venom. "You dare tread in my very bedchamber?"

"Well, it wouldn't be the first time," I said.

She fired a blast of magic at me. I hadn't been expecting it, and teleported out of the way just in time. Not that she could actually have vaporized me with the solar plasma the way she'd just destroyed her bed, but it would have hurt.

"Ouch! What's got you all riled up?" I asked.

"Insolent, monstrous creature!" She cast another spell, turning her head rapidly toward a stack of scrolls, the first one of which disappeared. "I've summoned Anon to deal with you," she said, "but I am fairly sure I can occupy your attention until he arrives."

She threw a teleport shield up around her bedroom and fired three more shots at me in rapid succession. I could break the teleport shield, but Celestia was crafty, and liked to plant traps; I had a suspicion that if I simply broke the shield without unraveling it, it would rebound on me in some unpleasant way. This was really shocking me. Was she that upset that I'd held her sister prisoner for two weeks? It wasn't as if I'd harmed Luna. But it seemed like Celestia was sincerely out to kill me, and in all the fights we'd ever had, I think that happened maybe twice, both times after I did something she considered particularly egregious, though I can't be bothered to remember what so it couldn't have been too important. What had I done recently to warrant this?

"Oh, you're angry when you're beautiful," I said, in between teleports. "Was it something I said? Or is it my breath? Oh, I knew that garlic kimchee in wine sauce was a mistake!"

"Surrender, Discord, and we will return you to stone," she said, in that loud declarative voice she used to challenge others on a battlefield, the voice she used to tell me of the Elements the first time she used them. "Refuse, and you will die."

"What the—" Keep in mind, the whole time this conversation was taking place, she was firing bolts of magic at me, destroying her own bedroom, but she wasn't working up a sweat doing it; her attacks
were methodical, fast but not panicked, powerful but not enraged. I had never seen her like this with me. Only with others. I wasn't retaliating, just getting out of the way. "Celestia, what exactly have I done to inspire such bloodlust? You never used to try to kill me!"

"You. Dare. Even. Ask." She cut off the end of each word, crisp and sharp. But while her voice certainly had decibels to it, her tone was still even. Cold. I realized then that this was the version of her that her opponents who weren't me, and weren't Luna, had always faced.

Why? I'd done nothing to deserve such hatred, I thought. Where was this coming from? Of course, I could have guessed the answer, but Anon was in Ponyville and Celestia was in Canterlot. Was there no limit to his area of effect on the ponies? I didn't want to believe he could exert such influence over her from so far away.

"Yes, actually, I do dare ask." By now I was getting angry. Celestia might be projecting cold rationality as she assaulted me, but she'd still forgotten who she was dealing with. I noted the spell to prevent me from removing her body parts, and summoned a tiny dimensional pocket – rather like a dimensional sock, actually – to put over her horn. I wasn't going to be able to get her horn off her unless I took the time to unravel the spell, but with all of her magic going into another universe, Celestia effectively had no horn. She put up her forehooves to try to rip it off, but see, a warp in space-time isn't actually a thing you can touch, even if I put an illusion on it to make it look like an orange and green striped sock. It wasn't coming off without magic.

"How dare you," she hissed. "You slaughter our father in front of us – with Luna a mere child – and wonder why I should want to destroy you?"

For a moment I was sure I hadn't heard her right. "I— what?"

"Murderer," she said, and it would have been a snarl if it had been less toneless. "How many ponies' blood is on your hands, Discord? How many did you kill in your chaotic games?"

I took a step back. This made no sense, and not in a way I liked. "I – I didn't kill ponies for fun. I didn't kill ponies at all! Celestia, the dragons killed your father, don't you remember?"

"Don't lie!" That one was a snarl. She charged me, apparently planning to gore me with her extradimensional horn – which was actually a fairly clever plan, since being outside of reality it would phase right into my body, but my natural levels of concentrated chaos could disrupt even my own spells, and it might spontaneously break down. Which would destroy her horn, but it would hurt me badly enough to disable me until Anon showed up. I barely managed to dodge out of the way. As she charged past me, I levitated, twisted and dodged away, so I was on the other side of the room.

"I'm not lying! Celestia, don't you remember?"

"I remember his blood dripping from your claws, Discord," she said. "I remember the mad grin on your face, and the sight of his flesh in your teeth. I swore then I wouldn't rest until I had stopped you, or killed you."

"That didn't happen——"

"Murderer! Liar! Monster!" She flipped up wingblades that apparently she kept stored conveniently behind the tapestry she'd nearly crashed into when she charged me, and flung them with some pretty painful accuracy at me. One of them even hit me in the shoulder. "Close your lying mouth, chaos lord, I won't listen to your poison."

"But Tia! Don't you remember our childhood together?"
"Your sick jokes amuse no one but yourself."

"No, you – This isn't just a joke! Don't you remember? I loved you!" I screamed.

She laughed, without any genuine mirth. "As if a monstrous thing like you is capable of being loved, or of loving in return."

But – she was the reason I knew I could be loved. The fact that she loved me was why it never hurt me when ponies mocked my appearance, because I like what I look like, and Celestia liked what I look like, and why should anything else matter to me? She was the reason I knew I could love. She was the reason I knew I hadn't always been a monster. Because yes, I know I'm not the good guy, I know disharmony will never be well liked by definition, I know I cause pain and I enjoy it and that makes me at least somewhat monstrous. But I've always known that that's not all that I am, that I made the choice to turn away from love and sappiness and being the "good guy", that it wasn't made for me. That I could go back, maybe, if I wanted to, which I don't, but the option exists.

I couldn't handle this. I couldn't handle the thought that she remembered nothing of our childhood together, nothing of the love we'd had once. And... I've killed some ponies, in self defense, and I've killed creatures that were not ponies, but never without regret, never with joy. I've never torn a pony apart with teeth and claws. (Or, well, anything really.) And Starfire was more of a father to me than the actual one, even if I never called him father and he never called me son.

The way she remembered him dying is the way he died. But it wasn't my teeth and claws that rent him apart, it was a dragon. And I was the one who scryed the battle and saw him die, not Celestia. And I never showed it to her, though I couldn't hide from her that the dragons ate him when they sent back his armor via dragonfire transmission and the claw scratchings in his breastplate said "DELICIOUS".

And in the end, I was the one who avenged him. I was the one who turned them to mindless animals and set them to tearing at each other in mad greed, I was the one who filled them with terror and made them dive to the bottom of lava pits, to be carried off by magma currents and stay buried for all time, I was the one who pinned them under the ocean to drown, I was the one who set mothers to eating their own eggs and then seeking out others' with an addict's desperation. So okay, yes, I was monstrous, I had blood on my paws, but it was to avenge him, not to kill him. It was to protect ponies, not murder them. And I paid for it, anyway.

"You're wrong," I said, my voice cracking, my eyes starting to burn, but I wasn't going to let her see it, I wasn't going to let her make cry in front of her, not when Anon had made her into his puppet – not by exerting influence on her in the here and now, but by changing her memories, making her believe that I who was her first love had never been anything more than a demonic enemy to her. All the centuries we'd fought, and she'd always remembered what we once shared, and I'd known that, every time I encountered her. Every time she turned red with fury or embarrassment, every time I flustered her, humiliated her, made her laugh or cry or throw mud at me, I'd known that our love was still in there somewhere, that I mattered to her. That I could still get to her.

And it was gone. Nothing in her eyes but the same ice cold she showed all her other enemies.

The only two creatures in existence who remember my childhood, who shared it with me, and it's gone. Some of the things Luna had said made more sense now. It must have affected her too. Neither of them remembered me as anything other than a bestial killer, when I'd never been either, not to them, not to ponies. Sure, I was cruel, but I wasn't that.

I wanted to hit her, to grab her by the throat and shake her and demand that she remember, but this wasn't her fault. I couldn't shake her senses back into her. It was his. Anon's.
And she'd summoned him to come kill me.

Her teleport shield hadn't been hardened against flight. I smashed open her balcony doors, running on all fours, and took to the air. A few pegasi Royal Guards chased after me, until I gave them 2-second chicken wings – stubby little wings that couldn't fly, for two seconds. See, even now I don't kill. Even when it would be so easy to be the monster she thinks I am, the monster Anon wants me to be, because I want to smash the world and everything in it, I *want* to watch ponies keel over and die because damn them, why do they get to have happiness, and friends, and love, and I get nothing, and what very little I have has just been taken from me? Nothing left but my own memories, nothing to tell me that what I remember is real. What if I *am* nothing but a monster, what if I made up a whole fake set of memories while I was trapped in stone so I could believe that once in my life, I was loved?

No. No, I'm not going there. I already tested to make sure this is reality, I'm not going to question my own memory. I have *proof* of the things Anon did.

And I'm not going to let myself be a monster. I'm not going to kill ponies. I'm not going to follow his false notion of *my own past*, that he's forced onto Celestia and Luna somehow.

But I am going to kill *him*. And I'm going to go do it now.
Why didn't one of you ponies stop me from doing that?

Well, obviously, because from your perspective all of this is happening in the past and I'm either dead or in stone, but really, if you actually cared, you might have found a way around that. It is so terribly, blatantly obvious when I reread my last chapter that I was mind-whammied into going and confronting Anon... I mean I started out by saying I knew there were better strategies than just rushing in to kill Anon, and doing that would probably get me killed, and I had a plan... and yet I went and did it anyway.

This scares me. Why am I recording this journal if I'm not going to bother to read it? If it never enters my head to check over my prior entries to make sure that they aren't advising me not to do the thing I've just decided to do, then how can I place a check on myself? That's not Anon's doing, I fear; I've always been impulsive. It's an occupational hazard of chaos. Twilight Sparkle should be the one fighting a mind-warper; she could make a checklist where the top item was to check her checklist and then her checklist could list all the things that she shouldn't do and everyone knows Twilight Sparkle will never undertake anything without checking her checklist first, so if she was in my position and writing on her checklist "Don't go kill Anon because it will get you killed and you have a better plan than that," and then she worked herself up into a rage and decided to go kill Anon, she would check her checklist first and there it would be, "don't go kill Anon." Whereas I don't check checklists. And writing a checklist to myself to tell me to check the checklist would fail at the first step because I wouldn't check the checklist that would tell me to check the checklist. So in other words I'm doomed.

Well. I managed to avoid dying this time. And if I start rounding up my gang of misfits to carry my Elements of Disharmony, they might be able to warn me the next time this happens. Elements of Disharmony don't work well together but there's no reason for any of them not to get along with me, I just have to keep them away from each other. Shouldn't be too hard. I'm going to start recruiting candidates as soon as I'm done writing about what just happened. Because after I write this down, I think that anypony who picks this up after I fall will recognize, beyond a doubt, exactly how awful Anon is and how badly Equestria needs to get rid of him.

Trying to kill me? Hah, as if any of you ponies would do different if you had the power to. Turning stallions into mares? You probably don't even believe me that that happened. (Check the census records. Do you have any idea how incredibly, unbelievably dull it is to read census records? Do you know I would rather be chopped into very tiny bits by Anon's sword and fricasseed while still conscious than attempt to forge an entire nation's worth of census records for multiple generations? Seriously I know it is going through your heads right now, "But how can we trust Discord? He could have forged the records himself!" No, I couldn't have, not and retain what I have that passes for sanity. My brain was melting out my ears just from reading a few of those record sets. Besides, I can't count, so you can prove it wasn't me by checking to see if the math adds up. If it does, then boom, I have an alibi.) Making mares into rapists? Can't prove that was Anon. Forcing the Bearers to fall in love with him? You're a species that's okay with the concept of love magic and love potions, so quite possibly you don't find this idea as repulsive as I do. (Which is why I'm better than you. When I break ponies and mess with their minds, I do it in a way that makes everypony convinced it's a change for the worse and should be corrected. Nopony wants to keep my violations of pony minds and personalities around permanently or treat them like they're real. Whereas you ponies with your
love magic and love potions think that magically compulsory love is just fine!) Messing with my history? You have only my word for it that it was the true history; certainly Celestia and Luna can't tell you differently.

But when I tell you what just happened, you'll realize that in his own way, Anon has caused as much disharmony as I did, breaking bonds as sacred as the bonds of friendship between the bearers, or even more so. You'd have to be a total xenophobe not to be moved by this story. It bothers me, and you all know what a callous bastard I am.

So as I'm sure you all recall from my last riveting chapter, I became overwhelmed with rage after writing down the details of how Anon erased Celestia's (and presumably Luna's) memories of our actual childhood together in favor of some horribly clichéd melodrama where I killed their father (who was the closest thing I had to a father, meaning I was just a trifle more upset with this turn of events than one might otherwise think), and decided to run off and kill Anon, despite having said to myself at the start of that same very chapter that I wasn't going to run off and kill Anon. To be entirely fair, it's possible I wasn't being mind-whammied; I was really upset, and I've been known to do things that were, shall we say, poorly thought out, when I get sufficiently upset.

Fortunately for me, I wasn't stupid enough to go challenge him openly to a duel or something like that. I suppose villains don't get to swell up with righteous rage and demand that the hero face retribution for his crimes; villains get to sneak around and come up with totally underhanded plans even when they're rushing off and being stupid. Thank chaos for that; I've never been more glad that I gave up on the heroic career path centuries ago. Whammied or provoked, either way I had still managed to retain enough of my cool to come up with a plan.

The library has served as the ladies' unofficial headquarters since they kicked Moonie's flank, so Anon's home is technically there, though on the principle that friendship is sharing they have him going over to the others' homes. A lot. Or several of them get together for a "sleepover" at the library, which seems to involve rather little actual sleeping. (Before you call me a voyeur, I should point out that I have been using the Panauricon to gather this sort of information, which means I can only hear the action, not see it. Thus I am technically an audieur or something like that.) My plan was fairly simple: slip into the library at night while they are all sleeping, cast sleep spells on any ponies around as well as the baby dragon, drag Anon out of bed (in his jammies or the altogether, however he likes to sleep), take him someplace safe (for me, not him) like the Everfree, and slowly strangle him to death. Preferably after breaking both his wrists so that if he could somehow magically summon the Element of Protection to himself, he still wouldn't be able to use it.

As a plan it had some merit. It wasn't an overly complicated deathtrap, it didn't require complex magic, it was fairly simple and it kept all of the innocent bystanders out of it. However, there were some obvious problems that I might have thought of, if I'd been thinking. Strangling someone to death is both slow and boring; if a plan was going to overcome my personal tendency to want to ditch the plan in favor of jazzing things up, it would have to either be exciting in the first place, in which case it would be complicated enough to fail, or I'd have to do it fast and efficiently. I can do fast, but I am not good at efficient. One swipe of my claws in his sleep and he'd have been done for, but then he wouldn't be awake for it and he wouldn't even know he was dying, let alone who was killing him. If my true goal had been his death, I could have just replaced his heart with a baked potato, or something else long distance. But no, I wanted him to know he was dying, and I wanted him to know why, because this was about revenge.

Revenge rarely works out well for me. Can't imagine why not.
Ponies are always very down on snakes for some reason. Why, they call other ponies snakes as if it were an insult. If you want to know the truth, I think they're jealous. See how far they could get without legs. Slithering is a wonderful form of locomotion when you're trying to be invisible without actually using magic to do it; with your body so low to the ground, there's very little contrast, and so you're very difficult to see. Particularly if you are not a bright pastel-colored pony, but colored in naturalistic and mostly dark earth tones. Oh, I'm superb at claiming the center of attention and making sure everypony's looking at me when I so choose, but I'm also one of the stealthiest creatures on the planet when I want to be.

I summoned clouds – perfectly ordinary, boring, pegasus-made clouds, full of water vapor, nothing to do with cotton candy or chocolate milk whatsoever, or in fact anything chaotic or unusual aside from the fact that they'd been scheduled for a small town north of Ponyville and I'd taken them instead – and used them to cover the moon, throwing Ponyville into dimness. Batponies, cats, and I can see perfectly well in the dark, but the more common pony types can't, so I had excellent cover as I climbed the Golden Oaks library tree, located a window, and slithered in through it. Twilight had wards around the place to block inbound teleportation, but left her window open. I don't actually think this was Anon-brand idiocy on her part; I think my dear little Element of Nerdiness would have made such an oversight under any circumstances. She doesn't think of ordinary pegasi or flying animals as threats, she doesn't expect wyverns or griffins or ikaroi to be coming in her window, ponies can't climb trees and she doesn't expect a threat from bears or minotaurs or cats, and she forgets that in addition to all my marvelous chaos magic, I'm incredible and amazing just on the level of my animal abilities. Twilight sees other mages as a potential threat, and compensates, but who besides Rainbow Dash is going to come in her open window?

Well, me, for starters. I ended up in a guest bedroom, which Anon was notably not sleeping in. Slithering, in addition to being barely visible when you're dark-colored and stick to the shadows, is also almost silent. Twilight's pet owl isn't much of a watch-bird; he spends most of the night hunting for food, since Twilight's too squeamish to catch live mice for him. I'd already confirmed he wasn't on the premises. Had there been a dog present, I might have worried, but Applejack's the only one of the group who has one; Fluttershy has ill or injured dogs recuperating on her premises frequently but no full-on carnivores actually live with her, for somewhat obvious reasons, and Twilight is barely capable of taking care of one pet. It sometimes surprises me that her dragon survived infancy. Checklists or no, Twilight hyperfocuses on things like her studies and really, any book she happens to be reading, and frequently forgets to eat, let alone feed the pets. So no creature in the library was awake, and none had sufficiently good hearing to detect me in their sleep.

Anon and Twilight were both in Twilight's bed, which was too small for a six-head coatless monkey to fully stretch out in, so he was more or less curled on his side, around her. One of his arms was under her neck, and one of her forelegs was under his. It might have looked adorable if I didn't know the monkey had no right to be there. Also, if I thought the sight of ponies being lovey-dovey and snuggly with each other was adorable, which I don't. Also, if I didn't totally despise Anon, which I do. Both were naked, with a thin blanket thrown over Anon's lower body and then Twilight's hind legs on top of that. Of course, ponies are usually naked, but humans are usually not, since they stand on two legs, unlike ponies, and don't hide their genitals inside their body, like me, dragons, minotaurs, and practically every other bipedal creature actually native to this planet, with the result that the male ones have really stupid-looking floppy things hanging between their legs when they're unclothed. (Let it not be said that I have no appreciation for male genitalia. Quite aside from my great appreciation of my own, I've found great enjoyment in the equipment of others, over the years. Sex is much too much fun to limit oneself to playmates of a single given gender. But like any sports or gaming equipment, genitals should be put away when not actually in use, otherwise they get in the way and look quite silly.)

I smirked to myself. Possibly because of how dumb they look without clothing, humans find it
humiliating to be seen that way outside of sexual, medical or hygienic contexts. Anon was the sort
who expected his death, when it came, to be heroic and noble. Instead he was going to die butt
naked and too busy choking to make any brave final speech, far from his friends, with my tail around
his neck, and then I'd leave him in the forest to be food for wild creatures. There are more ignoble
deaths, but they'd take more work to set up and run a greater risk of him escaping his fate.

Spike was sleeping in his usual bed, at the foot of Twilight's. I frowned at that. Exposing kids who
are too young to start having sex yet to sexual situations is just rude. Rather like eating cookies and
not sharing any, except that the person you're not sharing with is just as likely to be nauseated by
your cookies as to want any. Of course, dragons are infamous for being able to sleep through almost
anything, so perhaps they kept their activities restrained to his sleepytimes, but with an entire guest
room why hadn't they given the little dragon his own room?

Well, it wasn't going to matter soon, I thought, because I was going to remove the problem from both
of their lives, and solve everything.

For a moment – just a moment – I actually considered biting the three of them. If I haven't emptied it
for safety or changed what's inside it to some other substance, the venom sac attached to my fang
contains a potent hallucinogen. I use it so rarely I sometimes forget I even have it, as biting is rather
brute and animalistic – I am an intelligent, sophisticated creature of chaos, not a mindless, speechless
beast – and because I prefer to create chaos in pony minds through magic, not drugging them. I did at
one point have a cult who actively brought me gifts and showered me with attention in exchange for
my biting them with my fang – they called it the Mark of Chaos and did everything in their power to
persuade me to let them trip out on my venom as much as possible – but obviously they haven't been
around in a while. Normally the thought of biting my opponents never even enters my head. But ever
since making the decision to kill Anon without using magic, I'd been feeling very – hmm, how to put
this. Very much in tune with my animal nature. The thought of using my claws and teeth and fang
was appealing, rather than appalling as it usually is. And with my venom in them neither Twilight
nor her baby dragon would be in any shape to be able to fight me; they'd be much too busy cooing at
the green elephants in tutus morphing into baby carrots with giant eyeballs.

But no, I decided. I didn't like the idea of using something that many ponies (and griffins, and goats,
and minotaurs, and you get the idea) had considered something precious and desirable, and had
begged me for, as a weapon. Twilight and Spike and Anon wouldn't appreciate my hallucinogenic
venom, and therefore I wasn't going to give it to them. Nyaah. If Twilight and Spike woke up while I
was preparing to kill Anon, then fine, they could watch helplessly as I dragged him away to his fate.
Once he was dead, hopefully their heads would clear and they'd realize what a favor I'd just done
them.

First things first, though. The Element of Protection was still on a chain around Anon's neck, even in
his sleep. I examined the chain – not the element itself, it made me rather ill to look at it with my
magical senses, just the chain -- and determined it to be a perfectly normal, non-magical, soft gold
chain. The Element of Protection radiating its distorted harmonics so close to it would prevent me
from using the trick I used on Winnie's chain, and just making it snap with magic. But a gold chain is
soft enough for me to tear it with my bare hands. So I slithered over to the side of the bed, reached
up, very delicately took the chain from the back of his neck with my eagle talon... and yanked, hard.

This woke him up, of course, but I grabbed his free wrist, the one not pinned under Twilight, with
my lion paw, and yanked him off the bed before he had time to do much more than thrash. The
broken chain slipped off his neck, and the Element of Protection clattered to the floor and went
bouncing under the bed. I wrapped my tail around his neck and flew upward, giving me more
clearance to let his body dangle down without his being able to touch the floor. Of course he pulled
at my tail with the hand I wasn't holding, the one that had been under Twilight before I snatched him
off the bed, but my tail is covered in dragon scales and is significantly stronger than a boa constrictor. Pulling at it and digging his miniscule flat claws (I believe humans call them nails, but I can't imagine why – nails are supposed to be sharp, long and skinny, and human nails are none of those things) into it did him no good whatsoever. He also tried to get his other hand free from my talon. He was having a bit more success there – my talon is my more dexterous arm, but not my strongest one, and Anon might have actually been a bit stronger than me there. On the other hand, my talon has claws. Once I dug them into his wrist hard enough, he stopped moving his arm quite so much. He kept trying to kick me, but since he was hanging in front of me, and humans aren't designed so well for back kicks, he just kept hitting my tail or my dragon leg, which, again, dragon scales. I barely noticed.

Twilight, of course, woke up. Her horn lit up, at which point I snapped my fingers and collected it in my lion paw. "Ah-ah-ah, Twilight, you could hurt someone with that if you're not careful!" I said, and stuck it in a wall sconce I had just made for it. It was still alight with the magic she was trying to cast, and shone a dim purple glow in the darkened room.

Then something very sharp bit the back of my tail.

"Agh!" I yelled, and instinctively swung my tail at the thing that bit me, which resulted in me whacking Spike with Anon and sending him rolling across the room. (Dragon teeth can get through dragon scales, apparently.) This put Anon in a position where he was actually able to kick me in the ribs and wing, hard, but I didn't let go of him. Instead I snapped my talon (which for obvious reasons was no longer holding Anon's wrist), and suspended both Spike and Anon in front of me, rings of energy around their necks. Human necks being as weak as they are, Anon had to hold onto the energy ring I had suspended him by, or he'd have strangled under his own weight.

"Anon!" Twilight screamed, and tried to charge me, but I made a flicking motion and flung her backward, into the bed.

I had just had a much better idea than carrying Anon off and slowly strangling him, I thought, and grinned at the three of them. I was going to make him suffer before he died by making the pony he'd mind-controlled into being one of his six fillyfriends sentence him to death.

"How sweet," I said. "Even without your horn, you're still willing to fling yourself bravely into battle with the Spirit of Chaos to save your boytoy and your pet dragon. Tell me, Twilight, what were you planning to do? Stomp on my foot? Buck me in the leg?"

"Let them go!" she screamed at me.

"Mm, not yet. I have a fun game we can play first! It's called 'Who Does Twilight Truly Love?'

"Let them go now, Discord!"

Anon choked out, "Twi – E'men – unner bed!"

"Oh no no no," I said, chuckling. "Twilight, make one move toward the underside of that bed and you'll doom both of them. And you, monkey, be quiet. The grownups are talking." I tightened the energy ring around Anon's neck enough that he had to gasp to suck in any air.

"Please," Twilight said, her eyes starting to fill with tears. "Please don't hurt them."

"Well, that's up to you, my dear." I let the lights blaze up in the room and surrounded us with cameras, screens displaying the faces of my captives – Spike absolutely terrified, wide-eyed, digging into my energy ring with all the strength in his little claws (uselessly – an adult dragon actually might
have been able to cut through that ring, which was why I didn't bother using anything like it on Winnie, but Spike was much too young and weak to manage it), and Anon, gasping and turning purple. "It's time to play Twilight's Choice!"

In front of Twilight's face I manifested a doll, a smiling toy pony with button eyes and a floppy body made of rags. It was made to look remarkably similar to the one she'd made her entire town go mad about the week after she'd turned me to stone. (So many Ponyville residents had dreams about that doll and their own mad obsession for it, it wasn't that hard for me to figure out what was going on, even though I was once again paralyzed in darkness at the time.) I hadn't actually taken her doll or duplicated it perfectly, since to be honest, I'd only seen it in the dreams of ponies and had no idea what exactly the thing looked like or where it was, but it was similar enough that I hoped it reminded her. Another golden, glowing energy ring, just like the ones I had around Spike and Anon, held the doll up by the neck.

"Our contestant for this evening is Twilight Sparkle!" I said. "Now, Twilight, since you're new to our game, here is how it's played. You're going to pick one of these two fine fellows for me to let go. And the other one..." I made a pincer motion with my talon, and the energy ring around the doll's neck contracted violently. The doll's head popped off and went flying, shedding stuffing, while its ragdoll body dropped to the ground.

Twilight started shaking her head. "No, no," she said, starting to cry. "Please, Discord, please let them both go, please..."

"Sorry, no can do! Those are the rules. Two ponies enter, one pony leaves! Well, technically, neither of them are ponies, but you know what I mean." I let the spotlight fall on Spike, and the camera zoomed in for a closeup. "Who will you save? Will it be the dragon you've raised from an egg? Your faithful assistant, best friend, and errand boy? The little guy you hatched, who sleeps at the foot of your bed and treats you like his big sister?" The spotlight switched over to Anon. "Or the guy you just met that you inexplicably fell madly in love with and decided to share with all your best pony pals?" I left a spotlight on both of them, and closeups on two different screens, enjoying the look of impotent rage and helplessness on Anon's face as he struggled. I wasn't choking him hard enough for him to black out, just enough to make him very, very uncomfortable in his last moments. Cut my tail off, will you? Try to kill me? Laugh while your sword's Harmony energies disintegrate me? Oh, I was going to get my revenge. First I'd make him suffer helplessness, humiliation and pain, just as he'd done to me. And then I was going to make him watch as a pony who supposedly loved him gave him up to a horrible death to save the creature he obviously thought of as a worthless sidekick, given what I'd been hearing in the Panauricon.

I knew Twilight Sparkle. I'd been watching her since the day she hatched this dragon, after all. I knew how much she loved him. I'd observed her doting on him like a little mother when she was a little filly and he was barely hatched. I'd seen her dream of hand-feeding him tiny little gems and rocking him to sleep in her forelegs, or with her magic. Anon might be her boyfriend, she might even believe him to be her One True Love, but Spike was like Twilight's child, or at the very least like her baby brother. So I didn't doubt for a moment who her choice was going to be.

"Please," Twilight said. "Please, Discord! You—you're not a killer! Otherwise you could have killed all of us instead of just trying to discord us and break up our friendship! Don't do this!"

"Oh, but that's not what Anon thinks," I said, and shook him by his ring. "Anon thinks I'm a vicious murderer. Anon thinks I rip ponies apart with my teeth and laugh about it. And whatever Anon believes, apparently, that's what we're all supposed to be! I wouldn't be a killer, no, but it's plainly what Anon wants me to be, and far be it for me not to give Anon what he wants, just like everypony else does!" That was as close as I felt I could come to telling the truth — I knew I couldn't actually
explain that Anon had overwritten Celestia and Luna's memories to make them think I was a killer, or that Anon had been warping our reality to make everything happen the way he wanted it to. I was actually a little surprised I'd gotten away with saying as much as I had, but I guess it was cryptic enough that he, or his power, was too stupid to figure it out. "So today I can be a killer, Twilight. One of these two will live and one will die. Right here, right now, right in front of you. Which will it be?"

"Twilight," Spike whimpered – I wasn't choking him too hard for him to talk. "Please..."

I saw Anon mouthing "Save the kid" at her. Oh, how heroically droll. I knew he was only saying that because heroes are supposed to, and that he didn't think for an actual moment that she really would—

"Anon then," she said, and choked on a sob, her head lowered. I stared at her. Had I heard that right? "Excuse me?"

"Anon, then! Let him go! Equestria needs him – needs him more than, than... Spike..." She collapsed to four knees, crying. "Let Anon go and kill Spike, then, if you have to kill someone! Equestria needs him... I need him! Please, let him go!"

I didn't look at the screen that showed Anon's face. My eyes fell on the one that showed the little dragon's. His eyes so wide and horrified, filling with tears, the betrayal plainly crushing him. And then he squeezed his eyes shut and dropped his paws from the ring, his head bending forward as much as the ring would allow. I can sense disharmonious emotions. Usually, I enjoy them. Usually, when I feel such despair radiating from a creature because I pushed a family member into abandoning or betraying them like that, it gives me gleeful satisfaction.

But this stunned even me. I'd made pony mothers reject their foals before, but not to death. Not for the sake of their deep and profound mind-whammed love for someone they'd met a month ago. And not someone I'd been watching their entire lives, someone I'd seen love and care for the one they'd just betrayed.

For a moment, just a moment, I was about to do it. End the little dragon's life. Force Twilight Sparkle to live with the consequences of the choice she'd just made, for the rest of her existence. I was utterly disgusted with Twilight, and I wanted her to suffer for the choice she'd just made.

But I hadn't come here to do that. I'd come here to kill Anon, and my little game had just failed, and by the terms of the rules I'd set up I was supposed to let him go now, but I was more disgusted with him than I had ever been. It wasn't Twilight's fault she had never been strong enough to resist Anon's power. I wasn't strong enough to resist Anon's power.

I'd just been played. He was trying to turn me into a sadistic killer who'd murder a little boy, after forcing his older sister to sacrifice him. I'd said it myself, I was going to be a killer today because that was what Anon wanted me to be. And of course I couldn't kill Anon himself, the heroic narrative would never allow that. I was supposed to kill the baby dragon to prove what an irredeemable monster I was. And I'd have done it, too, if I hadn't been staring at his face in the screen at the moment Twilight betrayed him.

I remembered crying in a cage, begging for my mother to come back for me, to save me, and I remember the moment when I realized she never would. Now that I'm an adult, I know that she couldn't come back for me because she was dead. But at the time, when I was so desperate and alone and I needed her so badly, the realization that she wasn't coming felt like abandonment, the same as it had felt the night she died and they all died and I was left all alone, and no matter how much I called
for her she never came.

And Twilight wasn't even dead. She'd just abandoned Spike to die, in front of his face. I knew she was mind controlled, but he didn't.

I didn't want the baby dragon dead. The fact that I'd even thought for a moment of going through with it and killing him horrified me. And in that moment when I was stunned, reeling in my mind with horror, Anon twisted himself around, hanging onto the energy ring with both hands, and kicked me in the face.

Now I was really stunned. I dropped them both, the energy rings vanishing. You'd think Anon would need time to recuperate after nearly being strangled, but no, he grabbed me by my tail and swung me into the wall, hard. "You son of a bitch!" he screamed at me, repeatedly flailing me at the wall, first in one direction and then in the other, which led to my hitting a lot of furniture along the way too. I might have enjoyed the mess I was making of Twilight's room if it wasn't being made by me being flung back and forth. Half my antler snapped off, my jaw broke, and I ended up with whiplash, a horrible ache in my back and neck, and a concussion. "You fucking asshole! How dare you put Twilight through that! How dare you!" I was too dazed to fight back or even struggle very much, it all happened so fast.

"Anon! I've found the Element!" I heard Twilight say.

Anon dropped me. "Give it here. I'm going to end this fucker once and for all."

I lifted my head, and saw Spike staring at me. Well, actually I saw three Spikes staring at me and a lot of random blobs of darkness floating around the room. Twilight had gotten her horn back when I'd lost control of my magic, so my spotlights were all gone but the normal magical room lighting was on, and they weren't playing nice with the concussion I'd just acquired.

There was Twilight, still focused on Anon, bringing him a weapon to kill me with, paying no attention to her little dragon at all. There was Anon, full of self-righteous fury, entirely focused on beating and killing the villain and not at all on helping my victim. And there was Spike, all three of him, eyes still full of tears, looking at me with an expression I couldn't read. Sadness? Weariness? Emptiness?

Twilight's choice didn't surprise him, I realized. It had horrified and shocked him, but then when it sank in he'd decided that it didn't surprise him after all. Somewhere, somehow, he'd learned that he was worthless to the ponies he loved, or at least, not worth as much as Anon was.

I don't do empathy so I'm still trying to figure out why I reacted as strongly as I did. Maybe because he's a dragon, and as a draconequus I'm closer to his species than I am to ponies... though I'm pretty sure that can't be it, given how many dragon hatchlings I killed during the war. Maybe because I've never seen a pony foal abandoned and betrayed the way I was unless I myself caused it, and I'd done nothing to make Twilight choose Anon. Maybe just because I was so surprised at her choice. I don't know.

I was sick and dizzy and it was hard to concentrate on my magic, but I wasn't going to let Anon kill me. I wasn't going to leave the world in the hands of this creature that could make a mare give up her little brother to be killed and feel righteous about it. He thought Twilight's anguish from making that horrible choice was because I forced her to it, but it was his fault. His power had orchestrated this whole thing, and I had just nearly fallen for it.

He raised the small crystal to the air, summoning power as he had before. The gem lengthened into a sword; his armor materialized around him and I snarled at him, tongue thick with a concussion and
the fact that I'd bitten it several times while he was smashing my head into the wall, "This isn't over, monkey boy."

Then I teleported.

Okay, on writing this down I can see how ponies might take this story the wrong way. I do look pretty villainous here, don't I. I mean, if I'd stuck to the plan and hadn't involved Twilight and Spike, Anon would be dead and feeding the wildlife in the Everfree, Twilight would never have sold Spike out and the world might even be returning to normal right now, except for the part where I'd be coming in with my chaos. But no, I had to gloat, I had to try to torment Anon with being abandoned by his loved ones the way he made Celestia turn on me, and now boy don't I look stupid.

In my defense, I can't know that Anon made me come up with all those mustachio-twirling idiocies; I've been known to do some awfully dumb things in the pursuit of villainy all by my lonesome, like, um, standing around and putting a target on my chest for the Elements to fire at because I was so convinced they couldn't have pulled themselves back together that I didn't bother to look. And I'll confess it, the thought of making Anon suffer emotionally because his lover abandoned him to die was, and still is, much more viscerally satisfying to me than the thought of killing him. I mean, I'm the Spirit of Disharmony, not the Spirit of Death. Crushing love and destroying relationships is my bread and butter, and doing it to an enemy who didn't deserve that love in the first place (and who more or less did the same thing to me by retroactively erasing the one love I ever had) is a very, very attractive notion, even now. So, you know, it's possible that I did all of that on my own, from idiotically and impulsively charging off to kill Anon, to deciding to drag it out with a sadistic game so he'd suffer more.

But isn't it a remarkable coincidence that if I hadn't dragged myself away at the last second, I'd have ended up validating Anon's belief that I'm a monstrous killer, without actually getting to kill him?

I'm not the sort of draconequus who presents ponies with murderous Hobson's Choices. I'm just not. No-win choices, yes, but not murderous ones. So I, personally, am convinced that that entire incident was orchestrated by Anon, except for the ending, because he, or his power since I'm fairly sure he's not doing any of this consciously, didn't expect me to have any empathy for Spike whatsoever. (Still not completely sure why I did. Maybe because it was the only thing that could break me out of following the pattern some other force was pushing me into, and chaos is all about breaking patterns and defying expectations. Maybe my own power helped me resist by making me suddenly see myself in a baby dragon. Again, I can't know.)

The point is, regardless of whether or not I'm an irredeemable bad guy... you can see how awful Anon is, right? I mean, I'm correct in this, and making Twilight betray her baby dragon was beyond the pale? That is how ponies would perceive this, right?

Well. I'm not letting this happen again. I have three Elements of Disharmony now, and a few candidates to hand them out to. By using the Panauricon, and by taking the form of Twister or other random ponies and questioning the locals in Ponyville, I've identified several ponies (well, okay, one is actually a griffin) who've been in conflicts with the Bearers, and confirmed that three of them have such ludicrously overblown feelings of anger that it's obvious they're being controlled by Anon into being continuing antagonists. For one of them in particular, I happen to know he didn't feel that way between the time he was humiliated by Rarity and the time Anon entered the picture; Prince Blueblood is Celestia's nephew, and spends enough time in Canterlot Gardens that I had opportunity to observe him before and after.

I'm sure he was quite irritated and humiliated by Rarity's behavior during the Gala (oh, if only stone eyes could have seen! I was right there, listening to most of it, and it was gloriously chaotic... that
much chaos, and so much of it created by the new Element Bearers, so close to me, when the bonds
that held me had been growing steadily weaker for a decade... it warmed the cockles of my heart.
Quite literally. The immediate proximate cause of my first escape was that when I pushed
disharmony out at a group of foals, three of them responded by getting into a hoof-fight over moi and
what I represent, directly in front of me... but the reason that wondrous bit of disharmony got me
over the top and allowed me to break free had been all the chaos of the Gala. But I digress.) He
never brought it up, though. He continued to take his walks in the Garden and seduce his weekly
mare-toys and terrorize his servants with no reference to "that hideous peasant unicorn" until after
Princess Pinkness married her boytoy, and now he more or less bitches about Rarity constantly.

So I'm pretty sure that Rainbow Dash's former griffin pal and the unicorn showmare that Twilight
outshone once were probably not nearly as obsessed with getting vengeance on the Bearers before
Anon's power got hold of them. Not really sure how they match up to the Elements I have, though.
Blueblood's a shoo-in for Arrogance if I ever did see one, and the griffin's got enough anger issues to
qualify for Rage, but Greed doesn't quite fit the showmare. She'd be better for Deception, except that
I'm fairly sure Deception is not where I left it. Well, I have my suspicious as to where it might have
ended up, so maybe I should go find it, and meanwhile look a bit harder to see if I can find a good
match for Greed. I did find a pair of con artists who had a run-in with Applejack once, but it's hard to
split an Element between two ponies, and especially an Element of Disharmony. I'll have to
interview them, see if I can make them work.

Blueblood, though, is a definite. And now that I know Celestia has been corrupted and anything she
ever felt for me is gone, I feel no qualms at all about recruiting her nephew into my nefarious
schemes. He already hates Anon, apparently out of mindless racism, though it might just be Anon's
power ensuring that he makes a good antagonist. So I suppose I'm headed back to Canterlot. Wish
me luck, future ponies!

Chapter End Notes

"Head" as a unit of measurement is close to our "foot" -- it's a generic measurement
based on the size of pony heads, which are seriously oversized for their bodies.

We know that Anon is not responsible for Trixie's obsession, but Discord doesn't, since
it fits right in with what's happened to Blueblood and Gilda.

Updated the character list.
Blueblood, This Is Your Life!

I've alluded, a couple of times, to the fact that Blueblood is one of a group of relatively few ponies (well, few ponies and a griffon) that I believe would make good allies. The reason for this is so bizarre and freakishly twisted that... well, let's put it this way. Even if you never knew me when I was alive and free, the fact that you've read this far suggests that you know me well enough to know that if I'm calling something freakish and twisted, and it's not a compliment, it would probably be positively brain-breaking to a pony.

In Anon's world, we are an episodic film series for children.

I am not making this up. In fact I believe I alluded to it earlier.

There are a few things that have happened that I've forgotten to tell you about up until now, largely because "organized" and "Lord of Chaos" are not concepts that ever go well together. My trip to Anon's world was one of these things. When I first discovered that Anon could seriously harm me, my first instinct was to run for it. I've lived as long as I have by staying well away from anything I recognize as being able to suppress or counter my magic. On the same principle that traveling to Zebrica when I first broke loose was a good idea, I thought I'd go lay low in another world for a while.

It turned out that my travel options were very, very limited. The dimensional gates had been closed. The future was blocked. I could still travel to the past, but since the past is full of Chaos avatars and we have a bad habit of feeling that there can be only one when we meet each other, that isn't always all that safe. And some of the best time periods for me to travel to are time periods that I've already traveled to, meaning there are issues there. For instance, after Set died, his adopted son, the jackal prince Anubis, was possessed by the corruption of Apep as well, and he set himself up as a dark overlord, renaming Neighgypt to Anugypt and generally being the kind of totalitarian stick-in-the-mud that I really enjoy screwing with, so when my explorations of time periods without chaos avatars landed me there, I got caught up in a revolution led by a most attractive, but entirely too clingy and jealous, cat lady (by which I do not mean an elderly mare who collects too many cats, but a pony-sized sapient female cat), by the name of Baast. And because Baast, lovely lady that she was, had the flaws of being clingy and jealous... I really would like to avoid ever going back to Anugypt. Ever.

Most other time periods I can think of have similar issues. It takes enormous effort for me to go back to any time period when I was in stone; the power of Harmony that bound me also puts up a lot of resistance to me re-entering those times in person, and I can't stay long without being forcibly bounced back. I could travel in space, but my last spaceship has sort of been lost to the ravages of time, given that I last used it some twelve hundred years ago, and as brilliant and talented as I am my talents don't lend themselves to the orderly precision with which a spaceship must be constructed if you want it to go faster than light and not use wormholes and not blow up while you are in the middle of nowhere. Wormholes, being dimensional gateways, are also off limits to me right now.

The only place I could go was Anon's world. So I did.

I admit I had some mild hopes at the time that maybe I could find someone with similar powers to Anon, who I could maybe recruit to help me against him or shut him down. My hopes weren't high – I've been to worlds with humans before and I've extensively observed them while I was trapped in stone, because they're hilarious, so I knew that generally speaking humans don't have powers like Anon does. But hey, Anon had such powers, so maybe there were other humans who might as well.
I couldn't find any evidence of where Anon himself came from – Anon being quite obviously not a real human name (well, not given what language Anon speaks anyway), I had no luck tracking down family members or friends of his. (This was before I'd interrogated the Elements about Anon and found out that supposedly his entire family was dead anyway.) I did, however, find out... okay, first of all you have to understand that in Anon's world, while films in theatres do still exist, most of the population owns tiny box-shaped movie screens that light up from the inside rather than relying on a projector, which play films that are sent to those boxes via wires called "cables" or via energy beams from space. They're called "televisions". These films play all day long and there are numerous "channels" of them, so at any given moment an inhabitant of Anon's world could choose between anywhere from 3 to 400 different films to entertain themselves with. (We will not even get into computers and the internet. You really don't have enough background to begin to comprehend those.)

Our world and the events in it – specifically the events happening to Twilight Sparkle and her pals – are the subjects of an animated film for children that plays a new episode once a week for half the year. The part that is somewhat terrifying about this is how frighteningly accurate this cartoon is. It starts by dramatizing Twilight's mostly incompetent efforts to deal with Nightmare Moonah before her return, the discovery of the Elements of Harmony, the freeing of Luna from Nightmare's corruption, etc. I watched the episodes I was in, a suitably dramatic two-episode story that was originally played a year after the first episode, and was... disturbed by how accurately the guy playing me manages to capture my voice. (Most ponies are at least somewhat familiar with animation, but for those who've managed to never bother going to a movie, animation is a film made by drawing pictures and then filming them, very fast, so it looks like they're moving, kind of like one of those cartoon flip books for foals. Because only the images can be manufactured this way, actual ponies, or in the case of Anon's world actual humans, must provide the voices for the drawn characters.) I toyed with the thought that Anon's world might be a parallel, a world where most or all of the beings on our world have counterparts or "cognates", and considered the possibility that the fellow voice-acting me was my cognate, but when I did a bit more research I discovered that most of his career consists of playing bit parts in laughably bad programs and movies, and a lengthy stint on a soap opera, and my cognate wouldn't be caught dead doing such things. If I'd been an actor, I'd be one of great renown, not a B-movie actor with history doing soaps. (Don't ask me to explain what soap operas are or why they're called that. Just don't. I've digressed enough as it is.) I did rather enjoy his portrayal of a chaotic space god alien, but the few other things he'd acted in that I got the chance to watch were deeply disappointing.

So back to the cartoon we are all in. Of course I watched most of the series. In the time I was there I only had the opportunity to locate episodes from the first two years, plus the first three of the third year; there's more, and at some point I might go back for it, but it's clearly diverged from our timeline by this point and is just fictional, because Anon isn't present in it. Up to the changeling invasion of Canterlot, the episodes appear to be relatively accurate depictions of our reality – somewhat sillier, more foal-friendly, and obviously since we are characters drawn, it's caricatured. For instance, they're even more inconsistent than I actually am about what size I am, and my legs and wings are drawn to be smaller in proportion to the rest of me than they actually are. (I'll admit that in reality they're on the small side, but in the cartoon, they're tiny.) Most mares all look alike aside from their colors, manestyles and cutie marks, and there are even fewer stallions shown in crowd scenes than would actually have been there in real life, probably because the program is aimed at fillies – I'm sorry, they're called "girls" when they're human youngsters. But the voices are uncannily accurate, and while I can't speak to the accuracy of the dialogue in any of the episodes but the one I was in, my episodes were eerily true to life and the dialogue sounds like something my charming enemies would say, in most of the others I watched.

From the invasion of Canterlot onward, the story appears to diverge. Anon isn't in the Canterlot
wedding episodes, so Princess Cadance and her boyttoy save the day with the power of Lurve. The Crystal Empire returns, which hasn't happened yet in our world, and then Pinkie finds the Mirror Pool and duplicates herself... come to think about it, when she rejected my offer to be my Queen of Chaos she said something about Anon telling her that duplicating herself would be a bad idea, so that's probably him telling her about this episode. He may have seen more of them – as I said, these were the ones I could get my paws on during the short time I was there. But I'm not sure how much help to me they would be, because things are plainly going differently now that Anon is here.

I do not know how they have managed to so accurately depict our world. I do not know why the last name of the show's creator is the name of the goddess who created the world in several ancient religions that were old when I was young. I do not know how Pinkie Pie knows that the inexplicable characters "Y7" appear at the start of every episode, or what that even means, or why she was worried about losing them. I do not know how they seem to know at least some of our future (Anon would have had to see the episode with the Mirror Pool to warn Pinkie of the dangers of duplicating herself... but in the show, that happened after the Crystal Empire returned, which it has not done yet.) And the reason I do not know these things is I don't want to. If there is even the tiniest possibility that our world is in fact a fictional creation of some sort... don't tell me. I have a hard enough time with the fear that the world is my fictional creation and I'm still a statue, hallucinating. My preferred theory is that the creators of the show, consciously or unconsciously, are connected to our world in such a way that they can perceive what happens here, and then they write about it. If it goes the other way... I don't want to know.

In any case. I didn't find any humans with any abilities remotely close to Anon's, though it's possible that I wouldn't have been able to tell – were some of the celebrities on that world beings who'd warped their reality in order to become rich and famous? I can't detect Anon's power at work directly, only by inference, and there's so much chaos on his homeworld I doubt I'd be able to sense a rewrite of reality the way I did a week before my escape. However, if they exist and I can't find them, that's basically the same thing from my perspective as them not existing entirely... a dead end, and the magic of that world is strange and hard to use. On our world, chaos is magic; on that world, I can still feed on disharmony (of which there is plenty) and draw power I can use, but my abilities are very, very limited in comparison to what they are here. Simply maintaining the form of a human left me exhausted, too drained to perform much magic of any other kind, but taking my own form was out of the question – quite aside from the fact that there never were draconequui on the human world and dragons themselves only exist in their legends, humans are the only sapient species on their planet (that they know of and recognize as such, because the few others that exist don't use tools and there's no magic to make communication between species easier) and their attitude toward all the other creatures on their planet is that all animals were put on Earth for human use, and any that fall outside those parameters should be killed. And they have very, very, very sophisticated guns, much more powerful and dangerous than anything on our world, and with my magic as low as it was, I wasn't sure I could survive being shot. Which would almost certainly have happened if I'd taken my own form.

So I had no good reason to stick around there. But the information I acquired from watching that show about Twilight and friends may prove quite useful.

You see, some of the episodes deal with stupid minor disagreements between friends and the like, but some have actual antagonists. The major antagonists – myself, Moonie, and Chrysalis, and I suppose Sombra, once he finally comes to the party – were all defeated in some fairly conclusive way. Moona became Luna, I got turned to stone, Chrysalis was flung somewhere random with all of her troops and might actually have died, and Sombra pretty definitely died in the show. The minor antagonists, however, were mostly just humiliated and ran off. Which means they are still around, in our world.
I checked on Blueblood first, because I knew who he was already, and confirmed that he hates Anon. Then I went after the random griffin shown to be a friend of Rainbow Dash's, Gulla or Gilna or something like that. She spends her days bitterly complaining about ponies and her former friend and how much she hates Pinkie Pie, despite the fact that she lives among griffins and has no reason to dwell on one minor unpleasant incident in her past. She doesn't hate Anon, because she doesn't know him, but she's sworn vengeance on Rainbow Dash, Pinkie Pie and all of their friends. The showmare that bragged too much and was shown up by Twilight, Trixie Lulamoon, is also stomping around neighing about how much she hates Twilight and wants to destroy her, which is ridiculous because Twilight did nothing to her but save the town when Trixie herself couldn't. There are two unicorn brothers who attempted to put Applejack and her family out of business with a cider-making device of dubious quality, and they know of and despise Anon simply because of his friendship with Applejack. And there's a filly who for some reason is fixated with bullying and tormenting the little sisters of three of the Elements of Harmony, who hates Anon because he humiliated her publicly to protect the Bearers' sisters. Also, apparently, because he has a "stupid face", and because he has no cutie mark, regardless of how little sense this makes given that only ponies do have cutie marks.

All of these ponies (and griffon) were shown to be antagonists in the cartoon in Anon's world. All of them obsessively hate Anon or the Bearers or all of the above, while every other single individual who knows Anon seems to love him. Anon was clearly familiar with the program before coming to our world. Just as he makes me into as stupid and clichéd a villain as he can every time I get near him, I believe he's turned these individuals into caricatures of themselves who hate him or his friends far more passionately than their interactions would actually justify, because they are "villains" and villains exist to hate the hero so the hero can defeat them, of course. He's stripped them of much of their former lives and identities and made their lives revolve around finding some way to get revenge.

So, since he's cast me as the main villain... I'm going to help them.

All of this is a distraction. Smoke and mirrors. If I don't present Anon with a suitably villainous plot to foil, he'll make one up and force it on me. As I believe I mentioned earlier, the Elements of Disharmony are mostly kind of useless. Oh, they each have abilities that will enhance my "team" in their quest for revenge on Anon or the Bearers; the Element of Arrogance should allow Blueblood to escape Anon's mind control and allow me to shock him into becoming his former self, the Element of Greed will help whoever I give it to to acquire and keep whatever it is that they want (and if what they want ends up harming the Bearers or Anon, bonus!), the Element of Rage will enhance its bearer's fighting ability and maybe even make them a match for Anon... but they're hardly some sort of sure-fire weapon, and against something as powerful as Anon I'm fairly sure all they can do is create a nuisance of themselves. Still, that's better than anything else in my arsenal can do, right now.

I might have to go get a few others, because thus far, my best three candidates – Blueblood, the griffon and Lulamoon – don't match the three Elements I have perfectly, as I believe I mentioned before. Blueblood's a shoo-in for Arrogance and the griffon can probably hold Rage but Lulamoon would be a much better candidate for Deception than Greed. I'm thinking of tracking down those unicorn brothers and giving them Greed, but Lulamoon's even more single-minded than any of the others and it would be a terrible shame to waste her, so maybe I ought to go try to find Deception. As for the little brat, I'm not entirely sure I want to bother using a filly, but she's a very clever filly with a very wealthy and influential father, and being a filly it's going to be much, much harder for Anon to take her on directly. She can do things like start whisper campaigns against Anon or lean on her daddy to help her (of course he loves Anon, so this might be difficult, but with one of my Elements in her corner she might be able to get her dad back on her side). I'd need either Cruelty or Selfishness for her. I know where Cruelty is, but I don't relish trying to get it – not that those who hold it could be a match for me the way Winnie was, but they're really, really disgusting. Unfortunately, I have no idea where Selfishness is.
Well, I'll see how things go with Blueblood and Gilba. This is all a distraction to occupy Anon while I find a way to genuinely defeat him, after all, so maybe I don't need that many minions.

So here is something you probably don't know about Blueblood.

When Equestria was founded, the six founders agreed that intermarriage between the three races – previously rare and considered near-treasonous – would be a good way to speed up the progress of harmony and friendship and all that jazz. The way to most sapient creatures' hearts is through their genitals, after all, and nothing says "harmonious friendship" like giving your future harmonious friends mutual orgasms. (I'm joking, of course, but in fact this is a very potent brainwashing technique Harmony has employed for millennia, one that almost worked on me more than once, before I figured out that if I wanted to maintain my pure, independent mindset and not be unduly influenced by the opinions of ponies I'd had sex with, I needed to toss them out of bed in the morning and tell them to hit the road. Oh, the sorrow and gnashing of teeth and "But I thought we had something special!" that would ensue. Positively delightful. Almost as much fun as the sex itself, in fact. But I digress.) So pegasi, earth ponies, and non-noble unicorns proceeded to attend mixers, court, date, and bump uglies within the next few years after the founding. However, while reportedly the then-Princess Platinum fully agreed with the plan... she married a noble unicorn. Because unicorn prejudices, within the noble class, were just that entrenched.

Imbrium was the daughter of Commander Hurricane (quite a randy old goat by then – it was his third marriage, to a mare much younger than himself. As a randy old goat myself, I heartily approve) and an Earth mare named Apple Scone, herself the daughter of Smart Cookie (who became Chancellor of the Earth ponies after Puddinghead, and deserved the position rather more) and a fellow named Johnny Appleseed, who almost certainly is probably not related to any ponies you know, most likely, because what kind of pony would put Apple in their name?

Starfire, however, was the grandson of Queen Platinum of the unicorns, and the oldest of three. His mother and father were both noble unicorns. His father's parents were both noble unicorns. His mother's parents were Queen Platinum and a noble unicorn. Starfire's marriage to Imbrium was arranged out of necessity because the pegasus and earth pony tribes, for some reason, were getting fractious and objecting to the concept of being ruled by a monarch who apparently couldn't even be bothered to have sex with one of them. The idea would be that Celestia and Luna would thus descend from all three pony tribes, three of the six founders, and in particular the leadership of each of the three tribes. (Chancellor was a democratically elected position, rather like Mayor nowadays except ruler of the entire earth pony tribe rather than a town, and Commander was a meritocratic position earned rather than inherited, but it was pretty amazing how often the sons and daughters of Chancellors or Commanders found themselves elected to or appointed to their parents' positions. Ponies don't really have a keen grasp on the concept of not inheriting power. Even Mayor Mare is the third in her family to be mayor, after all.)

Starfire's brother, Celestia and Luna's uncle Goldenblood, was an idiot. Public support for Celestia being what it was, he knew he couldn't even realistically get away with being her regent after her father died; Celestia was young, but of age to be crowned Queen, even if she declared that she refused the title and would continue to be called Princess until she had defeated the dragons and earned her father's position. (I am not completely certain why she never actually did this after overthrowing me. It's not because she promised Luna a full diarchy; she and Luna could both have been Queens. For obvious reasons, I've never had the chance to ask her.) He did, however, stick his muzzle into everything she tried to do and complained about most of it, made numerous snide remarks about her pegasus sister and "that monstrous pet of hers", aka moi, and generally made a huge nuisance of himself... up until the point where he grabbed a sword I'd enchanted, intending to kill me with it, and caused himself to turn into a solid foam dodecahedron that I might or might not
have accidentally stepped on. What? I just said he was trying to kill me; it was self-defense. And possibly the defense of the entire pony nation, because if I'd let him take the throne as he'd been planning to after we all thought Celestia and Luna were dead, you would all be dragon droppings right now, most likely. Did I mention he was an idiot?

His and Starfire's little sister, however, idolized them both. I don't remember her name because she did her best to not bring herself to my attention. After I killed Goldenblood (I think... he might actually still be a hard foam dodecahedron someplace, that particular spell was built to last), she went underground. And after I was overthrown and turned into a magnificently attractive but enormously boring garden decoration, her descendants turned up, claiming to be the last unicorns of the line of Platinum. Celestia, who was very good at politics even then, embraced them as her long-lost "nieces" and "nephews", even though technically they would really have been many-times-removed cousins, and ever since then, the descendants of the line of Platinum hold the titles of Prince and Princess, and ostensibly consider Celestia their aunt. (And Luna, I suppose, nowadays.)

Now, keep this in mind. I ruled for maybe somewhere in the order of eight or nine centuries (I'm not good at keeping track of time, and in those days I made sure no one else was good at it either), and one thing I stomped out every time I found it was anything that resembled monarchy. Dictatorship, warlordism, or the inheritance of power... those things are anathema to the freedom of chaos and anarchy, and I crushed them wherever they appeared. (Usually not literally. The foam dodecahedron stunt didn't have to be repeated very often for ponies to get the idea to stop trying to kill me.) I did, at one point, find some unicorns claiming to be of the line of Platinum, attempting to rule a small territory up near Vanhoover, so I gave them all clown noses and hooves, drove half of them insane, and tormented the other half with public humiliation until they separated from each other, left their families behind, changed their names, burned their own cutie marks off with brands and painted fake replacements on their tushies, et cetera. Any pony attempting to rule over other ponies, particularly if they claimed to be authorized to do so by right of inheritance, was subject to the worst punishments I was willing to inflict, because that was my one rule under the rule of Unrule, the only law I held true to in the world of lawlessness I created: thou shalt not rule thy fellow pony, for their freedom is their birthright and to rule is to enslave. Ponies frequently claimed I ruled them, but this was never true; I unruled them. I enforced the rule that there should be no rule. Also I held lots of really amazing parties, but nopony remembers that part.

So the fact that there were scions of the Platinum line who managed to maintain records of their own genealogy, under my nose, for almost a thousand years, clinging to this clan memory of having once been princes and princesses in a world where those concepts had been made meaningless, for at least forty generations, when if any of them had revealed their identity to the world I would have mocked them into insanity... that tells you something. That tells you that this particular family is so incredibly, overbearingly obsessed with its own self-importance that they clung to their inherently meaningless "rank" for centuries, in secrecy, passing down the knowledge from parent to foal, until the day came that they could take their place in the monarchy once again as Very Important Sidekicks – hangers-on with no real power, toadies kissing up to the throne and being kissed up to by the populace in return despite their lack of any real power whatsoever.

This is the family Blueblood comes from.

I don't like his type. I never have. Obsessing over birthrights and inheritance, feh. I may – and I stress the "may" – have been a high-priority candidate for the power I wield due to an unfortunate coincidence of birth, but I became a much higher-priority candidate from the effects of events occurring during my life, and in the end, I was given a choice. Admittedly a choice between "become the chaos avatar" and "stay dead", but at the time, death seemed fairly nice. There's a difference between dying and being dead; when you're dying, death is usually terrifying, but when you're dead, everything is very, very calm, and can be quite relaxing. Oh, there's no end of unquiet
shades and terrified, confused spirits who don’t really get that they’re dead and anguished beings who
died by violence and with something they left undone in life, so if you’re looking for it, death is a rich
source of chaos and disharmony, but for obvious reasons that sort of thing isn’t exactly a downside
from my perspective. So yes, it was a real choice. I am what I am because I chose to be, not because
I was born to be (my biological father might have intended me to be born to be the chaos avatar, but
he knew as well as I do now that it’s a choice – chaos is freedom, chaos doesn’t force itself on the
unwilling.) And the idea of a creature who thinks it's better than others just like it on the basis not of
what powers or talents or accomplishments it has, but on what some ancestor had, simply appalls me.

So Blueblood and his snooty belief in the superiority of the unicorn nobility and his own great
specialness irritates me, and makes me want even so much to burst his bubble. However, he’s one of
the few ponies, or any beings really, that I could potentially call an ally, because he hates Anon as
much as I do. Anon has thoroughly mind-whammied him, mind you; in the past, while he certainly
believed himself the epitome of equine breeding and superior to more or less everyone but the
princesses, he did defer to any pony with both wings and a horn as his superior. Like most
Equestrians, he used to worship the water he thought Celestia walked on, and he was one of the
fiercest defenders of Luna after her return, because even if she did try to banish the Princess of the
Sun, and the sun itself, and rule over Equestria in an Eternal Night that would eventually have frozen
everyone to death, she was still an *alicorn princess* and that meant she should be slavishly kowtowed
to. Now he plots against his aunts, evidently planning to try to overthrow them and usurp the throne.
It'd be hilarious if it weren't Anon's work; the idea of Blueblood thinking he could rule or even
wanting to is nonsensical, but there it is. He also used to be quite willing to accept earth ponies,
pegasi and non-noble unicorns as friends, drinking buddies and bedroom companions, provided they
grew up in Canterlot and were rich, or at least could convincingly fake it. Now he refers to Twilight
Sparkle as a "peasant." Twilight Sparkle, chosen student of Celestia herself, greatest pony mage of
the era, national hero, sister of his former best friend Shining Armor, whom he seems to have
completely forgotten about, and long-term Canterlot resident from the upper-class districts. Methinks
he may have forgotten what the word "peasant" actually *means.*

But never let it be said that I can't learn from the good ideas of my enemies. I know how Twilight
Sparkle broke the unbalancing I inflicted on her friends. So I think I know how to wake Blueblood
up. He already knows who the enemy is; he's one of the few that Anon has allowed to hate him. All
he needs to do is remember who his friends are. And if the enemy of my enemy is my friend, then he
needs to recognize that he and I ought to be best buds, at least until Anon has been defeated.

The best time to screw with a pony’s mind is halfway between breakfast and lunch. Too early in the
day, and they’re bleary and tired and the whole thing seems surreal to them, or they blame it on not
having eaten yet; too late in the day and they blame it on something they ate earlier; late at night and
they think they’re dreaming; and ponies who start drinking in mid-afternoon can blame anything that
happens after that on being drunk. But between breakfast and lunch, they are usually alert and very
much reality-focused. So of course, that is the perfect time to upend their reality.

Blueblood was in his bedroom, looking at himself in a mirror in enrapturement as he mindlessly
adjusted fiddly little details of his clothing or manestyle or practiced different smiles in the mirror.
Now, it would be the height of hypocrisy for me to complain about ponies gazing at themselves in
the mirror, considering how much enjoyment I’ve gotten out of doing the same myself, but when I go
adjusting my appearance, I go big. Either I'm at the mirror just to get a good look at the best-looking
draconequus in the world to brighten my day, which takes me less than a minute or two because as
gorgeous as I am, I know what I look like and there's a whole world of things that I don't already
know what they look like to go see, or I'm at the mirror to adjust my own appearance, in which case
I am probably turning into a dirigible, or a sheep, or a dragonfly, or a tree. Why fiddle with tiny
details no one will notice? That's simply pure narcissism.
I popped in behind him, hiding myself from the mirror, with a pencil-thin mustache and a camera. "Oh, sir, simply *perfecto!*" I said in an outrageously overblown Roamish accent. (Or possibly Neighpolitan. I always get Roam and Neighples confused.) "Hold that pose if you would!" I managed to snap a couple of pictures of him looking hilariously startled before he managed to turn around.

He gasped. "*Discord!*" he shouted, and then, "Guards! Guards! Protect me!"

"You need guards to protect you from having your picture taken?" I asked. "Let me guess, a few run-ins with some overly aggressive paparazzi?"

"Guards! Where are you?"

"Exactly where you left them, right outside your door," I said. "Of course you're not inside your door anymore, so they can't exactly hear you, but it's not as if they're the ones who went anywhere."

Blueblood looked around himself in a comical double-take, realizing that I had shifted him to a pocket dimension. Or, probably, not realizing this, but realizing at the least that he was now in an eerily empty misty gray place and not in his room anymore. (I know, the whole misty gray pocket dimension thing is overplayed, and I was so tempted to put him in a room made of bees, or the inside of a seashell with the sound of the ocean roaring through it, or something, but I didn't want anything to distract him from what I had to say.)

"Return me to my room at once, peasant!" he snapped at me. My jaw dropped. I picked it up off the floor, dusted it off and put it back on, then shoved my eyes back into their sockets from where they'd been protruding by goggling at him.

"Do... do you have any idea what that word even *means*?" I asked, trying to stifle hysterical laughter. I failed. *Stifling* hysterical laughter isn't really one of my talents. Through my hearty guffaws, I managed to choke out, "I was the ruler of Equestria for a thousand years!" It was actually more like eight or nine hundred. No one knows exactly, including me; I'm terrible with telling time, and while both Celestia and Luna are very, very good at it even when I'm controlling their sun and moon, I managed to throw even them off with random time loops, tossing them into another dimension for a week or twenty, mind-expanding chemicals, and so forth. "I'm more powerful than every alicorn in Equestria put together!" True, but if there was a fourth they might give me a serious fight. "I'm the immortal *Lord of Chaos*, you prissy little fop, how *exactly* do you get the idea of calling me a 'peasant'? I mean, words *do* have meanings, right? And they don't usually change overnight?" I got my laughter under control. "As delighted as I'd be to discover that ponykind had taken up the pastime of radically redefining their language at random, I'm fairly certain that 'peasant' still means something like an uneducated farmer with only the most basic magic. Which, I assure you, is the antithesis of *me* in every respect."

"Very well, then, would you prefer I called you 'monster'? Or 'freak'?" I could smell the fear on him, but with the strength of either great courage or unparalleled stupidity, he was still standing up to me. I wondered if this was due to Anon messing with him, making him so single-mindedly certain of his own superiority that he couldn't recognize when he was outmatched, or if he'd always been like this.

"Oh, why not? As long as you don't call me Shirley. I hate that." I twined around him in air, not touching him – there's a time and a place to get huggy with a pony, but this wasn't it – with my tail near the "ground" on one side of him, my torso looping up the other side of him and over his withers, my neck bending around his and my face just slightly above his face, looking down.

"I know you held Equestria in your grasp for centuries, after usurping the throne," Blueblood said. "But you could hardly have been called a 'ruler.' My family has legends of you tormenting my
ancestors over those centuries!"

"I don't see how that's relevant," I said. "Sombra tormented the Crystal Ponies and he's still considered to have been their ruler."

"Sombra was not a usurper. You had no right to the throne of Equestria!"

"Which is why I built my own!" I said cheerfully, manifesting my gray and black antlered throne and plopping myself down in it. (True confession time: I use that thing to look impressive. When I knew Tia and Luna were coming for me, and I had reason to believe they'd taken weapons from the Tree of Harmony that could kill me (and if only I'd realized that the silly shiny rocks they brought instead were weapons from the Tree of Harmony, this would be a very different world), or when I was trying to intimidate modern ponies into not fighting me because I'd much rather play with ponies than have to hurt them to prove a point, I manifested that throne to sit on. It's actually not particularly comfortable so when I was secure in my dominance over Equestria, I was much more likely to sit on a beanbag, or a giant chicken, or a huge pile of fluffy leaves.) "As for your ancestors, I'm terribly sorry, but how did you expect me to resist such priggish self-importance? Their baseless certainty of their superiority for no better reason than the family line they were born to... it was like waving fish in front of a bear. I just couldn't help myself."

"Is that supposed to excuse your behavior? You drove my ancestors to madness!"

I leaned forward. "Did I? The rumors I hear today are that I used to kill and eat ponies. Did your ancestors tell you that?"

He visibly blanched – which is hard to do when you're already a white pony, but he managed it – and I might have been imagining it, but perhaps I smelled just the tiniest tang of urine. But he held his ground, which was actually somewhat impressive. Not that there was anywhere to run to, in a pocket dimension. "I'd heard nothing of the sort. We were told that you refused to grant your victims the mercy of death, that you even healed some who had tried to end their lives to free themselves of you, so that you could continue to torment them. Are the legends false, then, that they don't make you sound monstrous enough? The stories I've heard say that you've caused many a fate worse than death, but never death itself."

A knot in my gut that I hadn't even known was there relaxed. I could have hugged Blueblood, in the sudden rush of joy that swept over me. Anon hadn't altered the past. Just like the mares whose birth records still said they were stallions, just like the herd marriages where only one of the mares actually had legal paperwork for her marriage to the stallion and all of the others just seemed to believe they were legally married in a herd without any concrete evidence of the marriage. He'd left inconsistencies. He'd warped Celestia and Luna's memories to make them think I was a murderous beast, but Blueblood's opinion of me wasn't important to Anon, so he hadn't altered it. The bloodline that I actually had tormented had stories of my past deeds that were still true, and Blueblood still remembered them accurately.

I'd known Anon had limits, because of the paperwork that hadn't changed. But I myself couldn't have altered papers on that kind of scale, so up to now, I had no sense of Anon having limits that I could begin to approach. But this... this was carelessness. Anon could have altered Blueblood's memories of me the way he'd altered Blueblood's personality and memories of his own behavior, but he hadn't bothered. And no one knows better than I do how a much more powerful opponent can be defeated through their own carelessness. I had a millennium in stone and the mental scars therefrom to prove it.

I sprang out of my chair. "You are correct, sir!" I said, and pinned a small gold sparkle to his vest. "You get a gold star! And that means I chose correctly. You are the right one to bear my gift."

"Your gift?" He sneered. "Why would I want a gift from you?"

"Because you want power?" I said. "But if you're truly uninterested in a magical artifact as powerful as an Element of Harmony that can make others recognize your natural leadership qualities and follow you, I suppose I could go find somepony else to give it to... maybe the mayor of Ponyville or something..."

"That little peasant? How could she possibly deserve such an honor?!"

I waved my hand in front of my face. "Euw. Ever hear 'say it, don't spray it', Blueblood?"

"If you had an artifact such as you describe, and I'm hardly claiming to believe you, but if you did, why give it to me? Why not use it yourself, to take power?"

I laughed heartily at him. "Oh, you silly little princeling, you think I need trinkets to do that? I am power, Blueblood. But I don't seek to rule... to be perfectly fair, you were quite right. I wasn't a ruler to Equestria. I'm the Lord of Chaos; actually ruling anything is antithetical to my nature. I don't need ponies to follow me, I simply want total freedom to do as I wish. And there's really only one thing standing between me and my goal, and I think, given your opinion of him, that you'd make an excellent ally."

"My opinion of who?"

"Why, Anon of course! A little birdie's told me that you dislike the fellow almost as much as I do." A bird circled Blueblood's head, chirping "Anon is a disgusting dirty alien peasant! Anon is a disgusting dirty alien peasant!"

A broad, sneering smile spread across Blueblood's face. "Ah, yes. I do recall the rumors that he put you in your place," he said, chuckling slightly. "While he is an uncouth, classless interloper who does not deserve the attention he receives from the Elements of Harmony, let alone my dear aunts, the fact that he has shown himself capable of defeating you is one of the few positive qualities the fellow has. Why should I throw in with you, a known treacherous monster, simply because I dislike the alien freak? He's hardly more freakish than you are."

"Well, I could say, because I'm a native Equestrian, while he hails from a completely different dimension. The well-being of this world matters to me because it's my home. For him, it's a vacation spot, and he can choose to pack up and head back to his home any time he likes. Or, I could point out that I have wings and two horns, and therefore by the divine right of alicorns, I have far more legitimate claim to power than he does."

He scowled. "That law is for ponies. You are far from a pony, beast!"

"Ah, but I'm part pony. My wings are those of a pegasus and a thestral, and my head is a pony's. Anon is entirely 100% coatless ape."

"Your head looks more like a goat's than a pony's," Blueblood said snootily.

"Let's not get personal here. I could also point out that, unlike Anon, I have the power to transform unicorns into alicorns, if I should so wish." That got his attention. The old Blueblood would have found the implication that I could grant him alicornhood scandalous, even blasphemous; it's part of an almost religious faith among the nobles of Equestria that alicorns are alicorns because they themselves are such advanced masters of magic and so in tune with the fundamental forces of life and magic that it's their destiny to become alicorns. That's why, when Cadance first ascended, the nobles accepted her so easily as one of them, well, except for that one power-hungry witch who put
her to sleep for centuries out of jealousy. (Cadance actually does have royal blood, but it's Sombra she's related to, and the royals of the Crystal Empire, not Equestria, and it was far back enough in her ancestry that no genealogy that existed at the time could have proven it.) This new Blueblood, modified by Anon's power, was very interested in the concept of being made an alicorn rather than ascending on his own merit. But while the idea enticed him... well, I admit, I'm not famous for my trustworthiness.

"I'm sure you have that power, but why would I believe you'd use it on my behalf? After you spent centuries tormenting my family, I can't imagine why you would want to help me achieve power."

"Your family offended me by claiming to be nobility, when I'd outlawed the very concept of any pony being superior to any other pony on the basis of bloodline." I landed, my paws clenching, clasping to each other and twisting. "But I don't make the laws anymore, so I have nothing against your line now. And the reason I don't make the laws anymore is that a certain pair of someponies decided to turn me to stone!" I didn't actually have to fake being angry about that. No, it's not something I go around dwelling on; life is too much fun to bring myself down by remembering the bad parts of the past too often. But I admit it, I'm not over it. I say a thousand years, but ponies started keeping accurate time records as soon as I was sealed, and according to them, it was closer to twelve hundred. And either way... over a millennium robbed from me, unable to move, to speak, to see, to feel, to use my magic... trapped in total isolation and loneliness, helpless and paralyzed... no. I'm not over it. I expected nothing different from Luna, but I'm not sure I will ever forgive Celestia for it. "So, if circumstances were to lead a pair of alicorns to fall from power, and a new one to rise, one who'd personally done me no harm... let's just say I'd consider it deserved retribution. If I have to put another pony on the throne, to gain an ally who can help me topple Celestia and Luna in the first place... picking someone who ponies would follow and who hates Anon almost as much as I do seems like a good choice to me."

"Well... what you say does make sense. Of course, if you're seeking an ally against Celestia, Luna, Anon, and the Elements of Harmony, I am the most logical choice." He smirked, his demeanor returning to his former overweening self-confidence. "Do you plan to make me an alicorn now, so I might help you?"

I snickered. "Nice try, but no. Oh noo no no, that's not how we do this. First, I have to restore your mind to the way it was before Anon altered your memories. Then I have to —"

"Wait, what? What do you mean, Anon altered my memories?"

"Oh, now you ask," I said. "Well, it's quite simple, really. Anon's altered the memories of every pony in Equestria in order to change the world to his liking, and give himself power. Now, as I was saying —"

"How? The pathetic little monkey has no magic, except for that cheap, bit-store jewel around his neck!"

"If you would stop interrupting me, maybe I'd be able to explain it," I snapped, though I wasn't actually angry – Blueblood was reacting exactly the way I'd wanted him to. "Now, we have to restore your true memories and purge your mind of Anon's influence. Then, I can give you the Element of Arrogance and make you its bearer—"

"The element of what?"

"Arrogance."

"I'm not arrogant! I am a prince of Equestria, of the line of Platinum, rightful heir to the unicorn
"Call it the Element of Pride, then. Call it the Element of Cheese for all I care. It's a powerful magical artifact, akin to one of the Elements of Harmony, that grants its wielder both strength of mind – so Anon would be unable to influence you again – and the power of leadership. For ponies who already have qualities of leadership, the Element of Arrogance amplifies their charisma, making other, lesser ponies bow eagerly to their will. But I can't possibly give it to you while your mind is under foreign influence."

"And do you expect me to let you into my mind? How foolish do you think I am, creature?"

"Not at all, my dear little pony. I don't need to enter your mind; all I need to do is show you your own past, to unlock what you have lost and restore your natural personality."

"And you say Anon has been somehow... influencing me?"

"Not just you... every pony in Equestria was affected. Some worse than others. You were fortunate, Blueblood; many, many stallions were turned into mares, with their memories and the memories of all the ponies who know them altered to match. Fancy being Princess Bluebelle?"

"What?! Nopony has that power!"

"Yes, but Anon is not a pony. I don't even know how far his powers extend; thus, why I need an alicorn on my side." I laid down on air, floating just below the level of Blueblood's head, looking up at him with my head propped on my talon. "I'll be honest with you, Prince. My own powers are great... but I'm no match for Anon, or whatever entity lives in his head. He's entirely too stupid for me to believe that he himself is wielding this power, but I think something lives inside him, something that acts to fulfill his wishes and desires. But whatever it is, it's out of my league. It's not just the Element of Protection, although that thing certainly doesn't help. He can influence even my mind, lower my intelligence when I'm in combat and make me make mistakes. Three times now he's almost killed me. I need an ally whose mind can't be influenced."

The truth is, of course, I have no reason to believe that the Element of Arrogance will fully protect Blueblood. The Elements of Disharmony carry a fifth of my power; with the whole of my power I'm still vulnerable, so the likelihood that the Element can do what all my power cannot is slim. On the other hand... the Elements are each concentrated on a small portion of my repertoire of abilities, and focus a full fifth of my power into a range of abilities much tinier than that. Because Arrogance is hyperfocused on the two things it does – make the Bearer resistant to outside mental influence and strengthen his or her ability to influence others – it might actually do better at those things than I, with all my power, can, simply because I'm not monomaniacally focused on only a small pawful of my own talents. And regardless, the Elements are a distraction, so whether Anon can overwhelm Arrogance's power or not, either way it will occupy his attention and buy me time. I know now that whatever lives inside Anon and shapes reality for him doesn't just have limitations on the range of its power; it's sloppy. It makes mistakes. Deep down, I think I didn't truly believe I had any hope until Blueblood told me that he still remembers the stories of me roughly the way they actually happened. There are holes in Anon's new reality, and one of my greatest talents is exploiting loopholes.

I can't actually make Blueblood an alicorn, by the way. I could temporarily give him wings and expand his magical pool, but it wouldn't last, and even if it did last, he'd essentially be a supercharged unicorn with wings, not an alicorn. Alicorns represent Platonic concepts, underpinnings of magic, and while there are spells to enable them to ascend, they have to actually be worthy of it for the spell to work. But he didn't know that.

"What has he been influencing me to do? I despise the hairless monstrosity; if he were influencing
me, would he not compel me to think highly of him, as all the rest of the sheep in the palace do?"

"That would be telling," I said, grinning. "Come on, Bluenose, we've got a show to get to!"

"A – what? Don't call me Bluenose! My name is Prince Blueblood!" he shouted, as I dragged him
by one hoof to a stage, the smaller of two. I left him behind on the stage and teleported to the MC’s
station at the edge of the stage.

"Prince Blueblood, This Is Your Life!" I said into the microphone, as the words "THIS IS YOUR
LIFE" flared to life above the stages. The audience I had thoughtfully provided started stomping their
hooves wildly. "Yes, today we have a very special guest with us, fillies and germs. Prince Blueblood
of Equestria! Let's hear it for useless, inbred hereditary nobility!" The crowd stomped even louder,
almost but not quite drowning out the sound of Blueblood saying, "I say! How dare you speak of me
in this manner!"

I ignored Bluey's outrage. "Now, Prince Blueblood, do you remember your last year at Celestia's
School for Gifted Unicorns?"

He snorted. "Of course I do. Full of studying and trying to impress the old bag, the same as all the
other years."

"Then you'll certainly remember this fellow!" A spotlight shone on a replica of Twilight's older
brother.

Blueblood blinked. "That's the captain of the guard... the one who married Princess Mi Amore
Cadenza. Shining Steel, wasn't that his name?"

"Shining Armor, but of course you must know that, considering that he was your best friend."

"He what? Nonsense!"

"Let's roll the clip, shall we?"

I wasn't around for any part of Blueblood's childhood, of course, and he was never the object of any
of my more thorough studies. But Twilight Sparkle was. And that included researching her brother.
Still, I hadn't known about most of this before I went time-scrying through Blueblood's life; I can't
easily travel to a time I've already lived through, particularly a time when I was in stone, but I can
read the past like a book. Or rather, I can watch it, like a movie, because reading is terribly boring
when you can have audiovisuals instead.

Princess Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns isn't actually a school. It's a program that happens at
a school. Canterlot Academy is a boarding school for children of the wealthy and powerful, regardless
of race or in fact species – there are often youngsters whose parents are diplomats from places like
Zebrika or Griffonia attending. The Gifted Unicorn magic-training program focuses entirely on
magic, but that doesn't change the fact that the young'uns need to learn reading, writing and
'arithmetic. As well as science, history and how to make a crayon drawing your parents won't
be embarrassed to hang on their refrigerator. Blueblood and Shining Armor were both in the program,
though both dropped out after getting their cutie marks, so they were never in it at the same time as
Twilight. Of course, neither of them had close to the sort of talent Celestia was looking for in a
personal student, but that's why Twilight got the shiny tiara with the purple gem in it and they didn't.

I pulled up images of the past and put them on display, letting Blueblood see himself palling around
with Shining Armor. They had had the sort of relationship where Blueblood thought he was in
charge and Shining Armor humored him.
"But – this is – he isn't even a noble!" the Blueblood of today sputtered.

"Oh, but it gets worse, mon petit cheval." I grinned at him as the images from the past continued to play, in which Blueblood was excitedly telling Shining Armor about confirmation he'd gotten from Celestia that the legendary lost princess of love really had existed, and his theory about where she was, and his plan to sail out to the island where he thought she was trapped. Shining Armor, quite sensibly, pointed out that this was an amazingly stupid idea for two colts without cutie marks to undertake alone. After a bit of brainstorming, the colts solved their problem brilliantly by bringing a pegasus filly named Daring Do in on their plan. And by brilliantly, I mean "still amazingly stupid, but now the children no longer thought so, thus ensuring that they'd carry out their idiotic plan."

"She – she's a pegasus!" modern Blueblood wailed. "How could I – this can't be! This can't be my past! You're lying!"

"Search your feelings," I told him. "You know it to be true."

We continued to watch – or rather, he continued to watch, and I continued to watch him – as the three foals hopped the train to Manehattan, purchased a boat and supplies with Blueblood's money, and sailed northeast, having all sorts of heartwarming adventures and bonding experiences that I really don't care about, though several of the moments where they almost got themselves killed were hilarious. Blueblood's primary motivation here had been his belief that as a prince, it was his destiny to awaken the lost princess with True Love's Kiss, or something like that; Shining Armor's motivation appeared to be to keep his friend out of trouble; and Daring Do's motivation was purely the desire to explore, as, not being nobility, she didn't exactly have the funds to go buy her own boat. Over the course of their adventures, Blueblood and Daring Do both discovered natural talents for exploration and orienting themselves, resulting in remarkably similar cutie marks, while Shining Armor discovered his specialty in shielding magics.

Then they got to the island, disarmed various traps, and found teenage Cadance, trapped in magical sleep, where she'd been stuck for the past four hundred years after a jealous noblemare, angry that Celestia wouldn't agree to engage Cadance to her son, had gotten hold of a dangerous magical artifact, bespelled her, and hidden her away. (Celestia had sent out several expeditions to try to find her, and none of them had succeeded. The reason Blueblood knew where she was was that, to no pony's great surprise I imagine, the noblemare who bespelled her was one of his ancestors, and on her deathbed had repented and confessed to her son where Cadance had been hidden. Her son, being a fine, upstanding citizen of Equestria, had written down his mother's dying words and then promptly hidden them away in the vaults so Celestia would never find out it had been his mother's fault Celestia's adopted niece was lost. Blueblood, on an exploring expedition through one of his family's older mansions, had found the document, and instead of telling Celestia had concocted a plan to find and marry the lost princess himself. To be fair, he was probably more motivated by romantic notions and fairy tales than scheming for power.) Much to Blueblood's shock, he had no luck whatsoever awakening the princess with a kiss, but Shining Armor just shook her by her withers to try to wake her, and it worked.

Afterward, we watched as Blueblood's distraught mother pulled him out of school, hysterical that Celestia hadn't prevented her son from endangering himself, and demanded that he continue his education from one of his family's estates, more or less under lock and key. So Shining Armor found his calling and his future wife, Daring Do found her special talent and her destiny, and Blueblood got locked up by an overprotective mother who wouldn't let him see his friends again until he was an adult, by which time they had drifted apart. Funnily enough, the whole time we were watching Blueblood and Friends' entertaining adventures, Blueblood continued to insist that nothing like this had ever happened... it wasn't until the end of the story, when he saw the fate his mother inflicted on him, that his memories finally came back.
He knelt on the stage, reeling with shock, simultaneously trying to deal with the fact that all his recent memories and attitudes and beliefs had been warped beyond his recognition, and the realization that his adult life was completely empty and hollow because he'd been denied the chance to exercise his special talent. As tempted as I was to giggle hysterically at his inner turmoil, I refrained. I was trying to win him over as an ally, after all. Besides, despite my best efforts to remain completely callous, I did feel slightly sorry for him. Attempts not to exercise my own talent have never worked out well for me, and I knew what it felt like to have two childhood friends you went adventuring with where the friendship was broken entirely by time. Anon had taken Celestia and Luna's memories of that time, but left mine so I could grieve the loss; now I was returning the favor, giving Blueblood back the memories of his own lost friendships that Anon had taken, so he could fight Anon for me.

Blueblood looked up at me, eyes wet. "How – how long have I forgotten myself?"

"That depends on what you mean," I said. "If you mean how long since Anon got his hooks into you... probably it happened right around Shining Armor's wedding. If you mean how long have you been leading a meaningless shell of a life devoid of purpose, don't ask me, ask yourself."

"I turned on my aunts. I was plotting to destroy them. What have I done?"

"So far? Not much. You probably never had a chance against them, you know, but you'd have destroyed your relationship with Celestia and ended up cooling your hooves in a dungeon for years."

He sighed. "I suppose... I owe you a debt, then, for restoring me to myself." He got up onto his hooves. "What gift do you have for me, then? And how do you expect me to fight a creature that warps minds?"

"I don't. I expect you to occupy his attention. Make his life miserable. Stir up the nobility against the human interloper, accuse him of taking advantage of Equestria's fair maiden heroes – which would be completely true, by the way, they didn't all spontaneously decide to fall in love with him on their own – turn Luna against him, that sort of thing."

"Luna? Not Princess Celestia?"

"Celestia's probably a lost cause, but I know for a fact that Luna subconsciously wants to get rid of Anon. Maybe you can convince her that Anon is a threat."

"I'm... not very close to Aunt Luna, I fear."

"No, but you stood up for her when she came back from the moon, and I suspect that counts for a lot, with her." I reached into my pocket and withdrew the Element of Arrogance. "Do you choose to bear the Element of Arrogance, then, and protect yourself from Anon's mind-manipulations?"

Blueblood nodded. "I do. I'm no great fan of that uncouth pack of mares that ruined the last Gala, but they are Equestrian heroes, and the thought of some monstrosity from another dimension mind-controlling them to love him disgusts me. To say nothing of what he attempted to do to me." He snorted, stamping a hoof in anger. "I'll take it. But once Anon is done with, we will no longer be allies, creature. I do not do this for the sake of my own power – I remember, now, that I'm more than content with what I already have. I do this because Anon needs to be stopped."

"That's all I need from you." I grinned, and snapped my talon. The Element of Arrogance appeared, a platinum circlet on his forehead. In the center of the circlet there's an ivory cameo of a pony, made from the horn of a long-dead centaur. The image, a generic unicorn, shifted to become Blueblood's silhouette as I concentrated, bonding the Element to him. It was a good fit, not that I expected
differently. Tiny gems all around the cameo, representing (and storing) magic, changed from clear diamonds to a pattern of white, gold and blue, matching his colors, and the pattern itself shifted from a circle to the compass rose shape of his cutie mark.

"I don't feel any different," he complained. "Are you sure it's working?"

"Of course it's working. It's bonded to you perfectly."

"Do I need to wear it all the time for it to work?"

"No, but it helps."

"I don't think Aunt Celestia will be happy with me wearing a royal circlet," Blueblood pointed out.

Also, she might possibly notice that that's the same artifact that was stolen from the Canterlot Museum. "Oh, very well." I snapped a talon, and the circlet changed to a chain around his neck, supporting a pendant that held the ivory cameo and gem insets around it. "Wear that under your clothing if you must, but it should simply look like a rather egotistical ornament at this point, and you can claim that one of the many mares who typically throw themselves at you gifted it to you, or something. Most likely, any story you make up will be believed as long as it's not outrageously implausible."

"And what happens if it's discovered that I'm carrying a magic item you gave me?" The idea was obviously occurring to him for the first time, his eyes starting to go wide as he realized how much trouble he could get into by throwing in with me. "Will you give me some means of contacting you if I need your help?"

I put my arm around his withers. "Blueblood, Blueblood," I said in my best patronizing tone. "Chaos doesn't work with a safety net." I let him go. "I'm all about freedom of choice. You're the bearer of the Element of Arrogance now, and you can do whatever you want with it. Go sniveling to your aunt to tell her all about what I said? Lay down and lick Anon's feet like everypony else does? It's all up to you. You can choose to use this to fight Anon, or you can choose to use it to demand higher taxes for the peasants and bigger swimming pools in Canterlot. Either way, bestowing the Element is all the help I can give. So no. You don't call me, I call you, and I probably won't."

Blueblood glared at me. "So if I'm caught carrying an Element of Chaos—"

"They're Elements of Disharmony, actually."

"Oh, I'm sure that would make it better," he sneered. "You've recruited me as an ally and yet you'll do nothing to help me?"

"Correctamundo," I said. "Believe me, I've got my paws full dealing with Anon already. You've got experience in the political intricacies of Canterlot, the indulgence of Princess Celestia, and now, the power to make almost any pony believe you and want to follow you. If you end up getting yourself into trouble with all those advantages, you're entirely too dumb for me to risk myself saving you."

And, rather than get into another round of arguments about why I should make an exception to the rule of "chaos helps those who help themselves" for Blueblood the special snowflake, I vanished.

One down, two to go from the supply I've got, and I've got up to three others I could go looking for to bring into play. (There's seven total, but I'm not using Hatred. I've seen what that thing does.)
Losing My Religion

I have very mixed feelings about my trip to Griffonstone.

Oh, I succeeded in my goal, never fear. I now have a bad-tempered lionbird on my team, such as it is. She is, in fact, living here in the Grotto of Disharmony, because she couldn't exactly stroll back into Ponyville, or thinks she can't anyway. I have mixed feelings about that, too; I like my privacy and independence, so it's more than a trifle irritating to have this annoying bird taking up space in my personal sanctuary. Besides, she mostly just scowls at my jokes. On the other paw... it's actually surprisingly pleasant to have someone around to talk to. I haven't been able to have a simple conversation in...

...yikes, that's depressing. Even before I was turned to stone, few of my entourage ever wanted to talk with me. Oh, when it's time to beg your old Pizza Sundae Discord to smite bandits, or provide food to your village or make it rain potatoes (ok, that only happened once), they had no trouble talking to me, but let me try to start a conversation and I swear I've heard more talkative clams. There were a few, but they were rare... and if I exclude the ones who wanted to sleep with me, the number gets even smaller.

It's not quite the case that I haven't had a decent conversation with a vaguely friendly being since Celestia and Luna left me... but you know what, it's closer than I like to think about.

Okay, enough of that! Who wants to think of depressing things anyway? Certainly not me.

So now that I've given away the spoilers that my trip was a success, let me tell you about it.

In my day, Griffonstone didn't exist. Well, it came into existence during my reign, and I kept meaning to go there, but there was so much fun to be had in Equestria that I just never got around to it. Besides, the griffons of those days were boring. All that ferocity, all that natural weaponry, and they wasted it on precision engineering and weapons-crafting. They didn't even go to war with the weapons! Though, to be fair, they had other threats to worry about.

See, back when I was younger—and earlier, for that matter – griffons lived solely in what is now called either Gryphonia or the Gryphon Empire, depending on who you talk to. With centaurs, ikaroi and minotaurs to the south of them and dragons to north, griffons weren't nearly as close to the apex of the food chain as they wanted to pretend. Ikaroi are flying lion chimeras much like griffons themselves, except with stronger grips and a greater likelihood of using magic. Centaurs are powerful magic users, minotaurs are ferociously strong, and dragons are, well, dragons. Take it from me and the rare few occasions I've had to try to fight dragons paw-on-claw rather than with my magic – griffon talons and claws do nothing against dragon hide. Well, not nothing – they can deliver a good scratch, which I'm grateful for every time my tail itches. But in combat? Not so useful.

Against opponents like cows, sheep and yaks, griffons are scary beasts, being chimeras of two of the world's most successful predators. Against dragons, they needed an edge. So thousands of years ago, they invented guns. Yes, Pinkie Pie owes the existence of her party cannon to griffons who wanted to defend themselves and their possessions from dragons. (Mostly possessions. Dragons aren't much on the taste of other predators' meat, but griffons are almost as greedy and materialistic as dragons are, so there were a lot of conflicts over resources, which is a polite way of saying a lot of mutual theft going on.)

With opposable thumbs, natural predator ferocity, and a willingness both to work in groups and to argue with each other a lot while doing it, griffons were able to perfect weapons such as swords and
throwing-knives, and invented cannons, muskets and other implements of throwing hard objects very, very fast. Dragons are hard to kill, but diamond fletchettes fired into the eyeball will ruin any dragon's day.

So the Dragon Empire of Neighropa, while it existed, had learned better than to mess with griffons. This, in fact, was why they invaded westward, crossing the North Pole and the Marelantic Ocean to get to Equestria. Griffons were too tough; they were looking for easier prey. And while there are certainly some ponies powerful enough to kill a dragon, the fact that ponies tend to rely on magic and special talents, that they're big on harmony and try to avoid killing, and that the invasion happened long enough after the uniting of the three tribes that most ponies who were veterans of that war were dead or too old to fight, and martial ability had been discouraged in the younger ones... it may seem to you laughable now to imagine ponies overall weaker than griffons, but there weren't any alicorns then, and the population of ponies was a lot smaller.

But I digress. All that changed when I got through with the Dragon Empire. The dragons that lived, and didn't flee to South America, were no longer in a position to care nearly as much about self-preservation as they had when they were sane. And just because a dozen trained griffins with the right weaponry can bring down a dragon doesn't mean they necessarily want to be doing that constantly, nor do griffon mamas and papas really want to be raising cubs and chicks in an environment where feral dragons might swoop down and carry them off for a quick lunch.

So a lot of griffons emigrated across the ocean. They didn't move to Equestria, since, like most of the boring races on this planet, they weren't great fans of chaos. But I'm not a big fan of the North. The closer you get to the pole, the more powerful the pull of Yggdrasil's root system on the planetary ley lines becomes. The North is highly inimical to chaos magic. Even harmonic magic is hard to cast free-form up there; it's why reindeer and caribou rely on runic magic and sacrifice (reindeer employing willing sacrifices, caribou not so much.) Your average unicorn can cast telekinesis up there, aaaand that's about it. Celestia's heavily impaired, and Luna relies almost solely on mental attacks when she's fighting in the far North.

The Crystal Empire was really about as far as ponies can go to have free and flexible use of their magic... and it had that deeply annoying fruit of Yggdrasil protecting it. While the Crystal Heart can amplify any kind of emotion (or could back before Sombra took his entire kingdom, Crystal Heart included, on a long road to nowhere), and therefore can be used by dark magic as well as light, it's harmony either way – everypony feeling despair and fear is as bad for me as everypony feeling love and cheer.

So the griffins moved to what would have been the western edge of the Crystal Empire, outside the range of the Heart, but since mostly all that lived up that far were Diamond Dogs, caribou, and yaks, I'd already more or less written the entire area off as too uninteresting to be worth my time. (Oh, I had a few yucks with yaks, but yaks are just So. Damn. Easy. It's like trying to play chess with a three year old. The slightest bit of chaos, the tiniest deviation in exactly what they expected, sets yaks off into destructive frenzies, which generally leads them to wreck everything they own, which then leads to glorious feuding and brawling, and really if their territory weren't so annoyingly cold I might have gone there for a quick pick-me-up more often... but come on. There's no artistry, no challenge. The predictability is downright mind-numbing. I get more mileage out of unbalancing a few into being relaxed and easy-going, and then watch the total confusion ensue as the other yaks can't figure out how to respond.)

But I was talking about griffons, not yaks. So! Griffonstone, settled by griffons more peaceful and less willing to spend their lives murdering crazy dragons than the ones they left behind. Griffonstone griffons made alliances with the Crystal Empire while I was unruling Equestria, and Equestria afterward, so in deference to their pony allies they entirely renounced beef, pork and mutton from
their diets (go look the words up if you don't know, and then be grateful you are not a cow, pig or sheep living in Gryphonia), replacing them with earth-pony-grown fruits, grains and vegetables. Yes, griffons are omnivores, though like dogs, they need and prefer meat. (They didn't give up chicken or fish. Omnivores gotta vore omni, after all.) Also sometimes they'd fly down into Equestria to raid my meat trees. I caught a few, and was shocked, shocked, to discover that griffons squawk a lot if you miniaturize them and put them in bird cages. Who knew?

From what I gather from the books I stole from Twilight (the books were for catching up on the parts of world history I missed during that rocky period of my life; the stealing from Twilight was just to annoy her, I admit), I get the impression that Griffonstone shaped up to be something special. A center for commerce and learning, a source of precision instrumentation that didn't have to travel across an ocean to get to Equestria, iron mines (since the loss of the Crystal Empire, Equestria apparently gets all its iron from Griffonstone)... a shining beacon of civilization in the mountain wilderness... in other worlds, the kind of place I'd love to wreck. Precision instruments! Made to nanometer tolerances, in factories! Chaos preserve me, why? For the love of all that's holy, tell me, who would want such an abomination? Well, besides Twilight Sparkle.

When I got there, though, I found that someone had gotten to it before me.

Everything in Griffonstone is a total disorganized mess. Homes are ramshackle huts made from Yakyakistan-imported straw or rocks poorly mortared together. Or rubble. There were a lot of ruins of what had been large, fancy buildings once, with griffons living in the ruins. There's no real government to speak of – no king, no mayors, just a bunch of doddering oldsters that everygriff ignores. Oh, and organized crime, though it's hard to call it crime when it's the closest thing Griffonstone still has to a government.

Simply being there, doing nothing but soaking in the disharmony, made me feel like I was Pinkie Pie in a cookie factory. The griffons of Griffonstone, as it turns out, don't believe in friendship or harmony. They have a saying – Everygriff's out to backstab you except your mama, and when you're grown, watch out for her too. Griffonstone griffins pay about as much attention to the concept of fathers as we draconequui once had; norgiff trusts that a particular egg was sired by a particular griffon, so griffons turn to maternal family if they need it – and they try not to need it, since blood, though thicker than water, is considerably thinner than gold.

Capitalism reigns supreme, or it would if gangs of thieves didn't keep wrecking things and stealing bits from those who managed to get fairly wealthy. The disparity between the haves and the have-nots is huge; most griffons live in squalor and ruin, while a small few surround themselves with a mini-army to keep their wealth from being stolen. Mercs are usually fairly trustworthy, but griffons rarely believe what other griffons tell them, in Griffonstone – they don't gossip because they barely socialize. So if a merc betrays her employer for bits, it's rare for anyone to find out.

I have no idea how, exactly, it got this way. Legend claims that it was always like this until some king or other found a golden idol that instilled the griffons with pride, which spontaneously made them start behaving in socially acceptable ways, until said idol was lost. I call shenanigans. Disharmony like this takes work. I should know. My guess is that something in the emotivore food chain was allergic to that idol, and swooped in to cook itself a buffet of negative emotion as soon as it was gone. Whatever it was, it isn't around anymore, but disharmony's a gift that keeps on giving; once you do all the work to wreck a society, it usually stays at least partially wrecked unless you have alicorns trained in governance with no sense of humor around to help rebuild. Though my hat was off to whatever had done this, because this was a level of persistent disharmony that even I would have found a challenge to create.

One thing wasn't fully disharmonized: the griffons do have a strong sense of family honor. Families
may not like each other, but they will band together to avenge a family member who's been murdered, raped or betrayed (so if mercenaries do want to sell out their employer, they either need to never get caught or they need to make sure the whole family goes down.) This is the only thing preventing the society from falling from anarchy into a murderous free-for-all. Griffons have an excellent sense of smell, so they rarely need to bother with anything remotely like a trial to determine guilt or innocence; family believes each other over non-family, and it's rare to find a griffon who didn't draw blood fighting back in the course of being murdered. (The Griffonstone griffons did not bring the guns from the homeland over, recognizing that guns would have been worse than useless against me and their existence would bother the ponies the emigrants were depending on to help them get established. This is possibly the only reason they are all still alive.) So unless the murderer destroys the body or disposes of it so well that it's never found, griffons will be able to detect the killer's scent on the victim. Of course, this doesn't work out so well for griffons who are forced to kill other griffons in self-defense; justice by lynch mob has little room for nuance. Disposing of the body doesn't always save the murderer, either; family honor often demands that the family pool their bits to hire a pony with a specialty in forensics to find the killer. Said ponies are usually quite horrified to discover that the results of their detective work are used to let the entire family, plus trusted business associates, go after the killer as a pride and tear her apart, but then, ponies are easily horrified.

Aside from that, almost any other violence is fair game. Griffons fall in love, but they don't trust their lovers, most of the time, so most relationships are nasty, brutish and short. No griff uses the term "friend"; it's considered a ponyism nowadays. They cheat each other in business a lot, exploit the exploitable, and leave the weakest to starve to death. I should have loved it. I've never encountered such concentrated disharmony that I didn't make myself; even dragons, hardly the most harmonious of creatures by nature, only live together when they've figured out how to do so without fighting all the time, and those that can't manage that live alone, thus no disharmony. Every griff out for themselves! Paranoia, mistrust, interpersonal violence! It should have been marvelous!

But it wasn't.

Even Pinkie Pie will probably get too full, and bored enough with the fare that it nauseates her to even look at a cookie, if she eats too many identical products in the aforementioned cookie factory. In my few days exploring Griffonstone, I realized after the initial rush was past that the place was interminably dull. Utter squalor and ruin is disorder, all right, but it isn't chaos. It's stable, unchanging in its degraded state. The endpoint of entropy, almost homogeneous and decidedly static.

There was no art, no creativity, no variety. The food was terrible. The clothes, where they existed at all, were generally utilitarian and dull, also poorly made. No music was allowed. Nothing was in bright or varied colors. And there was no humor to be had anywhere. Pure bullying, physical violence without even the most rudimentary of clever insults, ran rampant. No clever pranks, no witty repartee, just crude brutality. There was no heartbreak, no passion, because no griff trusted any other enough for that. Interpersonal dealings were terribly predictable, no variety, no complexity.

I'd always thought I was needed to unrule Equestria to prevent Order or Harmony triumphing through ponies spontaneously forming governments. The condition of Griffonstone suggested that my unrule had also been necessary to keep the chaos fresh, to keep entropy from claiming the society. But I'd always thought the role of disharmony was to prevent chaos from becoming entropy. Keep the restlessness churning, keep them on their hoof-edges, keep conflict going in the system, and you'll keep the energy flowing. Keep society on a constant disharmonious boil, and the bubbles of chaos will rise to the surface and make the environment roil and change.

But what happens when the "water" all boils away?

Don't get me wrong. I haven't lost my belief in the value of disharmonony. I'd better not; I have no idea
what would happen to my powers if I did. The Chaos Avatar doesn't have to also be the Spirit of Disharmony; most of us are, but there have been chaos avatars who had no real interest in promoting disharmony. So it might not do anything to me to lose my connection to disharmony... or it might cripple me. Anansi and Coyote, the two I know of who didn't handle disharmony as well, never demonstrated much more power than alicorns. Was that them holding back because too much chaos is bad for harmony, or did the loss of disharmony as a power source make them that weak?

So no, I still believe in disharmony. I believe in individualism, and freedom of thought, and checks and balances. I believe in fighting the static world, the pleasant perfection without conflict, savor or meaning to existence that harmony would condemn us all to if it could. I believe in agreeing to disagree, and in the value of selfishness, and escaping the ties that bind.

But too much disharmony – too few ties that bind – resulted in Griffonstone.

Argh! I'm arguing against anarchy! How did I come to this? I don't want to philosophize or question my beliefs, I want to destroy Anon and have fun! Too much time spent with this journal is a bad idea. Gilda's not much of a conversationalist, though; I tried talking to her about it, just as a sounding board for my thoughts, since I'm basically undergoing a crisis of faith here and it's honestly her fault, and she said "Whatever, dweeb," and flew off.

Well, maybe I ought to follow her example. I know a few reliable methods for distracting myself, after all.

Ah, I feel much better now. The reasons for which are honestly none of your business, have nothing to do with Anon, and are exactly what you think they are. There's a charming little nightclub in Manehattan that caters to xenophiles, and, well, that's really all I need to say about that, isn't it? I mean, I have needs, just like most ponies do, and just because my fantasy life is capable of being much more elaborate and well-realized than yours doesn't change the fact that constructs from my imagination are completely predictable. And being able to split my consciousness into two or three bodies is loads of fun sometimes, but a draconequis can't be expected to stick with temporary clones all the time, sexy as they are.

Now, I hear you saying, "Discord, aren't you being the sort of complete idiot who thinks with his nether regions here?" Yes, I'm currently a well-known wanted criminal of very distinctive appearance and one of my opponents can teleport with her companions and one of her companions can kill me. But no, I'm not a total idiot. I went in the form of a griffon – had them on the brain anyway, and if I can't be me, at least griffons are slightly less symmetrical than ponies and their limbs work the same way as my forelimbs do, mostly. (A real griffon has less dexterity and sensitivity in their lion hindlimbs than I have in my lion forelimb, but I don't downgrade my hindlimbs in griffon form, so I just end up as a griffon with slightly funny looking back feet that are as dextrous as my foretalons.) I generally prefer having lips to a beak in an intimate situation, but you can't have everything. I mean, I may be the master of the impossible, but right now I'm trying to be the master of not blowing my cover.

Actually, I did find out a thing that pertains to Anon's Brave New World. Apparently, discrimination against homosexuality and xenophilia are now actual things in Equestria... for stallions. Mares are free to screw whatever they like, but stallions are supposed to stick strictly to mares, and pony mares at that – society doesn't even look kindly at pony stallions looking for some zebra lovin', and zebras are equines. This is new, in the sense that I know things weren't like this before Anon, but none of the poor stallions of such inclinations remember that, so they're all laboring under crushing levels of guilt and stress for having such "disharmonious" desires, given that there are not enough stallions to go around for all the mares who want one.
So I struck a blow for freedom and generously performed a good deed for a poor fellow with a passion for male griffons, helping him to express his true nature and relieve some stress at the same time. There would likely have been other types of blows involved, except, well, beak. See above. Still, there were no complaints. He wasn't new to this, but I may have been the first "griffon" to bother to reassure him that his desires aren't actually perverse, sinful or particularly disharmonious in the slightest, or point out the contradiction between the pony belief in destiny and the primacy of the true self vs. the life as a lie that he was being forced into. So I might even have fired a spark that could lead to a movement against the horrible constraints Anon has forced onto Equestria, possibly even leading to some ponies recovering their memories of how things were before. See? I'm being a good citizen. And fighting for my cause! Why, this wasn't a selfish diversion from my true purpose at all. And if I enjoyed myself, well, who says that fighting for freedom has to be dull and unpleasant?

I just wish I could take the risk of being myself. Don't get me wrong, as a first excursion back into the world of fully mutual eroticism after more than a thousand years, I was quite happy with it. But it's like the first bite of a cake; as delicious as it is, all it does for your hunger is sharpen it and make you want to eat the rest of the cake. I want to be wanted for myself, for my own body, not an illusion I created, and it galls me that even among the ponies most likely to be able to accept me and want me, I still have to hide myself, because of Anon. Who's also stirred up enough prejudice against homoerotic desires and xenophilia in stallions that even if I could be myself, the overwhelming majority of my potential pony partners would be mares; not that there's anything wrong with mares, I quite like them, but I crave variety.

I have many, many reasons to want to destroy Anon. This is just one more. But I can be patient. If I survive, if I defeat Anon, I'll get everything I want. I can survive on what I can safely get, until then. And if I don't survive, then I won't have to worry about this sort of frustration anymore.

Anyway. Before I depress myself again, let me tell you all about my success in recruiting Gilda.

It wasn't actually hard to find her. Her residence was in the capital city of Griffonstone (called Griffonstone... such originality, these griffons.) I found her in a restaurant, working as a waitress. So I posed as a customer, using the griffon disguise I mentioned above. The dive was so tiny, Gilda was the only waitress. I was also the only customer, but this did not stop her from keeping me waiting nearly half an hour before she'd take my order, which I needed to pre-pay for. Out of curiosity, I ordered the chicken pot pie (there was nothing on the menu that did not contain meat) to see how badly they'd ruin it. The answer is, even more badly than my wildest nightmares. I took a single bite, and did a dramatic spit-take before Gilda even had a chance to walk off.

"Miss, this isn't a chicken pot pie, this is an abomination! How does this restaurant even manage to create something so awful without dark magic involved?"

"I don't care," Gilda said. "You bought it. Eat it or don't. No refunds."

"What happened to 'the customer is always right'?"

She laughed harshly. "You're not from around here, are you? That's not how we do things in Griffonstone."

"No? Well, then, perhaps we need a change of venue," I said, and snapped one of my talons. (It's actually rather disconcerting to have two, if you want to know the truth.)

In a moment we were elsewhere, on the side of a mountain, and I was back in my true form. Ah, to have six different limbs again! Bliss!

Gilda stumbled – creatures tend to do that when you shift them from a flat surface to a sloped one –
and flapped her wings twice to catch her balance. "Holy dragon shit. What was that?"

"Just a spot of teleportation," I said casually.

She sighed. "Like, whatever, dweeb. I'm outta here."

I raised an eyebrow. "You don't recognize me, do you?"

"Oh, yeah, sure, I know every single weirdo dragon chimera lameoid in the world. Just let me check my calendar to see whether I give a shit today." She pulled her waitress notepad out of her filthy apron. "Nope. Not planning on it tomorrow, either."

"Quite understandable, quite understandable. Ponies could hardly be bothered to teach their foals about me, when I was an integral part of their history, so why would griffons be expected to know me?"

"Don't know, don't care. I'm gone, lame-o."

She flapped up into the air. I followed her, ostentatiously not moving my wings. "And just where do you think you're going? Do you even know where you are?"

"I'll figure it out. We can't be too far from Griffonstone."

I laughed heartily. Gilda scowled, her keen griffon sense for when she was being made fun of kicking in. "Wanna bet?"

Gilda sighed, exasperated. "I shoulda known you had something to do with ponies. Rutting cockbarbs, all of them. Fine, creepazoid, where are we?"

"Guess." I grinned at her.

"How about 'no'?" She tried to fly off. I intercepted her, floating in front of her no matter which way she turned.

"How about 'not no'?" I countered. "Come on. Just guess."

She rolled her eyes. "Fine. We're someplace in pastel pony dweebland."

"That's Equestria, right? I'm having a hard time translating from the 'Repetitive-Overuse-Of-Insults-ese' dialect you're using."

"Yeah, fine, whatever. Equestria. Can I go back to work before I get fired, now?"

I had a buzzer sound off, and put us both on the set of a game show, with a convenient griffon studio audience. (Wait, you ponies don't know what a game show is. Never mind, then.) "Wrong! Best two out of three?"

"Listen here, freak!" Gilda shouted at me. "I have a job! It's not an exciting, glamorous, magical job like they have in pony princess land, but it pays the rutting bills and I need the bits, so send me back there right now before I mess up your face even worse than it is!"

Well, if I'd had any doubt before about my assessment that Gilda was a good candidate for Rage, that put them to bed in a jiffy. "Oh, very well," I sighed. "We're in the Griffon Empire."

Gilda actually squawked, flaring her wings out and fluffing them in the universal bird gesture of "what the heck just happened?" "You're shitting me."
I was fairly sure her language had been cleaner pre-Anon, though it could be that she'd been toning herself down for Ponyville. (I can view the past, so yes, I'm talking about her actual visit to Ponyville, not the version in the children's show. Not that there was a lot of difference, but the children's show is hardly a documentary, as close as it gets sometimes.) "Not in the slightest, my dear. Want to do some sightseeing and prove it?"

"No! I want you to send me back home, and then I want you to buzz off! Whatever you're selling, I'm not buying!"

"Such a shame," I said. "And here I thought you might like the power to get revenge for all the times you've been humiliated."

Her eyes narrowed. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means exactly what it says. I've chosen you, my dear griffon, to make an offer of power and alliance against certain mutual nuisances."

She took a step forward, shoving her beak upward into my face. "You talking about ponies here, or what?"

"How did you ever guess?"

Gilda stepped backward, raising her arms in the air in a double fist-pump and literally cackling. "I knew those prissy ponies were gonna piss off someone with power, one of these days!" she laughed. Then she sobered. "They ruined my rutting life, you know that? Screwed up the one friendship I thought I had, which just goes to show you, all their talk about friendship is a crock of dragon shit. When it comes down to it ponies stand with ponies, no matter what they tell you about harmony and all that crap."

I rather suspected Gilda's life had been far more ruined by her insistence on living in the collection of moldering hovels that was Griffonstone, but it certainly wasn't my place to judge. "Just to make sure we're all reading from the same playbook, so to speak... we are speaking of Rainbow Dash and her cast of brightly colored pals, right?"

"Yeah, those bitches. I'm gonna kill them, you know that? One of these days I'm gonna hunt down that pink thing that Dash threw me over for, and turn her inside out. Her and all her friends, and then I'm gonna rub it in Dash's face. Element of Loyalty, my cloc!" If you're unfamiliar with griffon slang, this is not a misspelling of a timekeeping device but a term that's short for "cloaca", and you can go look that up. Not that they actually have cloacas, having mammalian back ends, but the fun thing about vulgar slang is that it rarely makes sense.

I was a bit taken aback by her vehemence, and for just a moment, considered whether this was really a good idea. I didn't want the Bearers dead, or I could have done it myself some time ago. Hilariously ironic revenge on them for turning me to stone, quite possibly, once Anon was dealt with, but death isn't funny. Well, sometimes it is, if it's an incredibly stupid self-inflicted death like the time six ponies drowned trying to rescue a chicken from a well when none of them could swim and the chicken could; I've got to admit that's comedy gold. But the thing about hilariously stupid self-inflicted deaths is that they lose all their humor value if there's any part of them triggered by an act of malice or deliberate sabotage, which makes them found humor. You can't cause a pony to die in a funny way, because just the fact that you had anything to do with their death makes their death automatically not funny.

On the other hand, making her the Bearer of Rage might actually make her less likely to do something stupidly over the top in an Anon-inspired overreaction. The Elements of Disharmony exist..."
primarily to cause disharmony, as one might guess from the name. And the paradox of being an agent of either chaos or disharmony is that both are considerably less efficient at getting things done than their more boring opposing principles. Being a target of disharmony yourself makes you much less effective at inspiring it in others. So Bearers of the Elements are better able to resist the negative consequences of the trait they embody than non-Bearers who try to use them, or for that matter ordinary beings who embody the same trait. The Element of Rage gives its Bearers (and users) heightened strength and speed when they're angry, but for those who Bear the Element at the behest of the Disharmony Avatar (yes, that's still me; spirit of Chaos and Disharmony), it gives them the ability to think coldly and rationally during even the worst rages. (If you're wondering why the avatar of Chaos is carrying around things that make beings think more rationally... that's why they're Elements of Disharmony, not Elements of Chaos.)

Anyway, all the Elements of Disharmony confer a small degree of protection against mind control, which is strongest in their particular bailiwick. Being a Bearer of Rage wouldn't make Gilda more inclined to fly off the handle, but, if she was being influenced in her ridiculous overreaction by Anon, it would actually calm her, by reducing his influence. So no, I was right the first time. This was a good idea.

It was obvious to me that Gilda was influenced by Anon to be so overwhelmingly irritable that she hadn't even been startled by my transformation; she was too angry at me to care that I'd been a griffon one moment and a "weirdo dragon chimera lameoid" the next. She needed something to counter the wholly unwarranted and overwhelming fury at everything that Anon had saddled her with. Look at me, doing another good deed and helping out a poor griffon victim of Anon's! I'm just a regular saint lately.

"Yes, well, as it happens, that particular gang of ponies has done rather worse to me than simply break up a friendship," I said. "I could use assistance in keeping them out of my way."

"So you can what?"

"Pardon?"

"What're you after? What's your game? You want them out of your way; where're you going, then?"

I smiled broadly. "Chaos is the name of the game, my dear." I hung upside down, my face dangling in front of hers. "The name's Discord, Spirit of Chaos and Disharmony. I caused rather a stir in Ponyville a couple of years back, and in Zebrica more recently. Perhaps you've heard of me."

"Nope. In Griffonstone news costs money, and I'm not gonna spend my hard-earned bits finding out what's going on with the dweebs in Ponyville."

"Oh. Well, then you have no idea about the alien, and what he's been doing to Rainbow Dash."

That got her attention. "The alien?" she asked, and then caught herself. "Not like I care what happens to Dash anymore, since she made it rutting clear she doesn't care about me. Friendship is for losers anyway."

"Well, then. To answer your questions in order, my goal is to spread a little disharmony and a lot of chaos. Disrupt the pretty pastel ponies' perfectly boring lives, shake things up and make Equestria interesting again. Dash and her friends have a weapon that stands in my way, the Elements of Harmony—"

"Oh, yeah, those things I heard of. Like Dash joined some kind of dweeb superhero team."
"The interesting thing about that team is that its weapon is useless if they don't work together," I said. "As a matter of fact, Rainbow Dash had to choose her pony friends over you, even though she's known you for years and had barely just met them, as a matter of Equestrian national security. I'm sure Celestia has a dungeon waiting for anypony who does anything to disrupt the smooth functioning of the Elements of Harmony... and they only work if their Bearers remain best buddies."

"Wait." Gilda blinked. "You telling me that Dash threw me over because she can't make the magic weapon she and her buddies use work if she didn't? And she'd've ended up in jail if she messed them up?"

"Possibly she wouldn't have ended up in jail. She might have been banished. Or imprisoned in the place she was banished to." I shrugged. "When her own sister tried to disrupt them, Celestia sent her to the moon for a thousand years, but I'm sure she'd be more lenient with Dash than she was with her own sister and fellow princess."

"Dragon shit on a scone," Gilda breathed. "Wow."

"Of course, if something were to happen to any one of the six pretty pony pals, the Elements of Harmony wouldn't work anymore, and Dash wouldn't have to continue to sacrifice all of her other friendships and ambitions for the sake of her service to her homeland," I said. "And I have every intention of performing some act of major interference. Turning Pinkie Pie into a foal, maybe. She already acts like one."

"You can do that?"

"I can do almost anything."

She laughed. "That, I'd like to see."

"The complicating factor, unfortunately, is the human who's mind-controlled all six of them into being his maretoys."

"What?" Gilda practically lunged at me. "What did you say?"

I teleported out of her grasp. "I think you heard me."

"Are you – you seriously telling me Dash is being... mind-controlled? No way. She's way too tough for that crap!"

I sighed. "Toughness has nothing to do with it, I fear. He's powerful enough to mind-control the princesses. For that matter, he's powerful enough to get me every time I go near him, and I'm likely the most powerful magic user on the planet."

"You're shitting me."

"I'm afraid not. He seems like a wholly innocuous specimen to meet him – rather like an ape with a pony-like face and voice, though an even flatter muzzle than ponies have, and no coat, just bare skin. Rather hideous, really, but I don't judge."

"I never heard of a creature like that."

"That's because he's not native to our world. He's an alien from another planet, on the other side of a dimensional gate, and he's both enormously powerful and enormously stupid, to the point where he doesn't even seem to understand what his abilities are. He has the Princesses in his pocket, and Dash and all of her friends are mesmerized into being his lovers."
"That's... that's messed up." She took a breath, her face hardening. "But I don't see what it's got to do with me. Dash made her position pretty clear."

"Of course, I fully understand," I said. "Now that she's no longer either your chickfriend or your platonic friend, it's of no concern of yours that she's being compelled into frequent orgies with all of her friends, for the pleasure of an alien ape mutant who can't even fly. Surely it doesn't matter to you how terribly humiliated she would be if she were able to break free of the mind control enough to even realize that it's there. She's no longer your friend, so it's none of your business... even if the reason she's no longer your friend has more to do with her need to keep a mystic weapon operating for the defense of Equestria and less to do with you, per se, but still! She chose the safety and well-being of all the ponies in Equestria over her feelings for you, so how could you possibly be expected to still care what happens to her?"

Gilda glared at me. "Stop being sarcastic, dweeb. I hate that."

"What makes you think I'm being sarcastic? I am perfectly sincere."

"Fine!" she snapped. "So whaddya want me to do about it? Let's just say hypothetically I gave a shit, how'm I supposed to fight something that mind-controlled Dash?"

"With this." I snapped my talons, and the Element of Rage appeared in my paw.

The Element of Rage is a copper amulet, edged in iron, in the shape of a hoof, folded and pointed down in such a way that it looks like a forehoof on a pony rearing to attach. Small blood-red gems dot the edges of the hoof, implying blood. With a thought I shifted it to the form of a griffon talon, fingers outstretched to rake, the blood-colored gems decorating the clawed ends of the talon instead. "This is an Element of Disharmony, Rage. It can only be borne by someone who feels great anger. Bearers become stronger, faster, and smarter when they're angry, and they become more resistant to mind control." They can also perceive and manipulate the anger of others, but Gilda was too direct a griffon for me to think that would be a selling point for her.

"So wait. I get mad, and it makes me stronger? Like Saddle Rager in the Power Ponies?"

"Power Ponies?"

Her facial feathers fluffed with embarrassment. "It's an Equestrian superhero comic," she mumbled.

"Oh, I'm well aware, but Equestrian superhero comics don't seem like the sort of thing you'd be interested in."

"Look, I gotta have something to read for fun. Griffonstone's a shithole and there aren't any good comics with griffons in 'em aside from Red Sorena... hey, wait a rutting minute, I do know you! You're the villain in Red Sorena!"

"Really?" I must admit I blushed. "I had no idea! How marvelous, I'll have to track it down! Tell me, does the art do me justice?"

"I don't know, I don't have any of the early issues and you've just appeared in a couple of flashbacks in the ones I've got. This like old-time griffon warrior went on a quest to kill you because you turned her family into stone, except it turns out they aren't dead and you told her you'd turn them back if she becomes your agent. So she has to run around the world fighting things and causing chaos for you, but the whole time she's trying to find a way to defeat you 'cause apparently swords just make you laugh. Did any of that really happen?"

I shrugged. "Doubt it. I don't turn creatures into stone, griffons, ponies or otherwise." Of course I
would have been perfectly happy to blackmail some noble, heroic type into serving me by holding something over their heads, some service only I could perform for them; the only detail that sounded as if it absolutely had to be fictional was the part about turning the griffon's family to stone, specifically. I might have turned them into budgerigars. While I am strictly opposed to permanently transforming anything that lives and moves into something that doesn't, I've been known to derive a great deal of amusement out of changing things that live and move into something else that lives and moves. But I wasn't going to tell Gilda that... or reveal that my memory was shot badly enough after a thousand years in stone myself that I couldn't say for certain whether or not any of the story had happened. "Swords do generally just make me laugh, though. Unfortunately, Anon has one that actually works on me, hence my need to make alliances."

"Huh." She stared at me for a moment with that sort of disconcerting eagle gaze that griffons sometimes get when they're assessing you. "Well, in the comic, you're a total cloc who's obviously gonna sell Sorena out one of these days, but that's a comic book. I'm not gonna make decisions about my life based on a comic book."

"Wise of you."

"What are the disadvantages to this thing, and how do I know I can trust you?"

"You can't trust me." I smiled. "But you can recognize that I'm not trustworthy, and thus that you need to check up on my story, and when you do I think you'll find that I'm not lying. As for disadvantages, there are many disadvantages to trying to use this item without my permission. With my permission, however, the only real downside is that working with me would define you as a criminal in the eyes of Equestrian law, at least until I win."

"Pfft, they can't do anything to me," Gilda said. "I'm a citizen of Griffonstone, not Dweebland. Worst they could do to me is send me back here. Well, send me back to Griffonstone."

The worst they could do would be to kill her, I thought; I didn't know whether Anon's propensity for extreme violence would apply to the "minor" villains as it had to me and the Changelings. On the other hand, if Anon murdered Gilda in front of the Bearers, it would shock and horrify every single one of them. The only pony I could see being willing to accept the bloody murder of a creature as "normal" as a griffon, under most circumstances, would be Rainbow Dash, and Gilda had been Dash's friend specifically; she would not take it well at all if her supposed love killed her former friend. So if Gilda died at Anon's hands, it would actually be enormously helpful to me, maybe even an insta-win. I didn't tell her any of this; it seemed unlikely to me that Gilda would be willing to risk her life for Rainbow Dash at this point. "Then you have hardly anything to worry about," I said.

"Okay. I'll do it," Gilda said. "On one condition."

"Yes?"

"You're gonna need me in Equestria if I'm gonna fight this shithead. I don't want to go back to Griffonstone and be a rutting waitress if I'm gonna be your merc. And I can't exactly get a hotel in Ponyville. So you get me a place to live someplace ponies aren't gonna bug me, where I'm in position to do stuff."

I sighed. "I can't very well build you a palace," I said. "Or a hut, for that matter. Chaos magic is enormously powerful and flexible, but not particularly well designed for permanent structure."

"I don't care how you do it but this is a deal sealer. Take it or leave it 'cause I'm not changing it."

"I... suppose... I could put you up at my place until we find a better solution. I've had to keep the
chaos toned down so that Twilight Sparkle can't use her magic to find me, so you could probably tolerate living there for a while. I mean, it's vastly better than those hovels in Griffonstone, and I can supply meat, unlike ninety percent of the eating establishments in Equestria."

"Okay then, we've got a deal." She reached out to shake my hand, talon to talon. "Hey, don't you ever get weirded out by the fact that you've got a foot for a hand?"

"Don't you ever get weirded out that you don't have thumbs on your feet?" I countered.

And so that was how I ended up with a fowl-tempered griffin as a roommate. Or cave-mate, technically, since she doesn't share my living quarters. The Grotto of Disharmony is a cave, as I might have mentioned, and like many caves, it interconnects with other caves (and if it didn't, I could have just made it do so.) Mine is below ground level, with three air chimneys, allowing me to have a non-magical fireplace to take the chill off. I picked it because there's running water down here, in the form of an underground river, and a fantastically deep underground lake I enjoy swimming in. Gilda chose a roost higher up the mountain, with a tiny entrance that for some absurd reason she insists on stunt-flying into despite the fact that the tolerance for error is bare inches on each side of her. I provided furnishings for her – which is to say, since Chaos is impermanent and Gilda has no taste, we went shopping, breaking into various high-end establishments in Canterlot and Manehattan late at night when the proprietors had gone home, where she picked out what she wanted and I teleported it into a giant pile in her quarters. (I'm certainly not going to organize it for her.) Afterward, I replaced the items we'd taken with constructs of chaos magic that will reveal their true nature after they are sold, such as the cuddly blanket that will go in search of ponies to cuddle if nopony's actually sleeping in it, or the omnivorous table that will eat your breakfast, or the barking chairs.

It's... strange. I've lived with others – I lived in the palace with Celestia and Luna, and I had a fairly sizable entourage throughout most of my un-reign – and I've lived alone, but I don't think I've ever lived alone with someone else. There are parts of this arrangement I find surprisingly enjoyable. I've never had a companion I could share meat with, for instance; most ponies are unnerved by the stuff even when they know I'm creating it with chaos and not killing any animals for it. Gilda was slightly unnerved by the fact that I wasn't killing any animals for it, until I introduced her to steak and bacon, and now she doesn't question my food products anymore. She still complains endlessly about my cooking, continually informing me that pineapple, peanut butter and steak can't possibly be intended to go together or suchlike, but I frequently notice her taking seconds when she thinks I'm not paying attention.

Gilda can't cook – her Grandpa Gruff was apparently a renowned cook in his younger days, and taught her his skills, except that either he was senile when he did it, she's a terrible student, or griffons in general are horrible cooks, because she'd never even heard of baking powder. She also doesn't like the fact that I put food on dirty dishes, which magically cleans them, but she doesn't have to live with the Spirit of Chaos if she doesn't want to, and besides, I don't always pull that particular gag. I just like reversing the appropriate direction of entropy and disorder. It's hilarious. So there isn't much she can do for me – even if she were willing to do chores she just can't get it through her head that the idea is to increase disorder, so I'm not willing to let her – but she eats my cooking and she listens to me, and sometimes I even catch her cracking a smile at my jokes.

I told her not to tell me what she was doing with her Element of Rage – like Blueblood, she needs to be a more or less independent agent. She rolled her eyes at me. "What, you afraid they'll catch you and torture it out of you?" she sneered.

"No, I'm afraid Anon will catch me and compel me to indulge in a villainous monologue where I tell him exactly what I'm doing, in detail, with sidebars for my minions' activities," I said. "If I don't know what you're up to, he can't make me monologue about it."
"That's really a thing?" she asked skeptically.

"Believe me, he's made me do stupider things than that."

So I don't actually know exactly what she's doing. I think she's spying on Ponyville – after she nearly deafened herself sneaking into the Panauricon's observation center, she asked me if I could give her eyes and ears to plant around Ponyville for herself. So I gave her corn, a joke she didn't get, and eagle eyes, which she'll be much less enthusiastic about sticking everywhere when she realizes they are, in fact, her eyes, wired up to her nervous system with magic, and if a crow eats one it's going to give her a new understanding of pain. What? She should know to stay on her toes around me; I might feed her bacon, but I'm still the Spirit of Chaos. Anyway, she's a griffin, she can handle it.

Now that I've got two minions in play, I really want to find Deception and get Lulamoon into the mix. That mare is actually actively looking for an edge to help her beat Twilight Sparkle; signing her on will be a cakewalk, but she's just not a good fit for Greed. As I suspected, though, Deception is not where I left it.

I wasn't issued the seven of these the day I became the Chaos avatar; they remained in the hooves or paws of whoever had held them before my ascension. And as I've mentioned, I consider them to be mostly fairly useless. So I didn't go collecting them. Some of them, like Cruelty, Hatred and Selfishness, I've never personally held; I don't even know where Selfishness is.

Deception is the only one I've ever actually used. I got hold of it when I was summoned by a young seapony named Dazzle, who wanted me to make her its Bearer. The seapones have a somewhat different perception of me than other ponies do, since I made them. I'm... not proud of that, honestly; I think I'd feel better if I made them as an act of malice, rather than what I did do. The dragons were holding Marelantis, one of the largest cities in Equestria, and the entire large, swampy island it was located on, hostage, demanding that I surrender to them, back when Celestia ruled Equestria and I served her during the dragon war. So I sank Marelantis, and made the sky a wall so nothing could get out of the water, and transformed all the ponies on the island into seapones. The objective was to drown the dragons, since, being Western, earth dragons, they couldn't breathe water like I and other water dragons and dragonoids can. It succeeded. It also drowned every other living creature that wasn't a pony and wasn't already a sea creature. As someone who isn't a pony, and has always felt very strongly that hippocentrism is a huge problem in Equestria... well. I don't usually feel guilt over what I do, but that means I don't have a lot of experience dealing with it when I do feel it. I was devastated over what I'd done, and even after I became the chaos avatar, remembering it still hurt.

But the seapones, being hippocentric, didn't see it that way. Oh, at first they cursed my name, since I tore them away from Equestria; they couldn't live on land for long enough to send representatives to court, so they had to become their own principality, under self-rule, and that was quite a chaotic transition. If I hadn't killed so many animals, and any sapient non-ponies that had been living there, I might have been pleased with it, but honestly the cost was too high. After time had passed, though, and they'd developed a sense of pride in being seapones and a sense of nationalism, they came to honor me as their creator. As I mentioned earlier, I'm a demiurge, not a true god – I didn't literally create the seapones, in the sense of making new life. They were already alive when I turned them into sea creatures. But in a hundred years, such fine distinctions get lost. The seapones thought of me as their creator god and worshipped me. It didn't hurt that their new environment was far more chaotic than the one they'd come from, and the idea of accepting and propitiating Chaos as a principle worked better for them than the idea of trying to live in harmony with everything did anymore. Also, I didn't go down and play with them much, because I felt guilty and I don't like feeling guilty.
Anyway. So Dazzle wanted power for herself and her two little sisters, Blaze and Dusk (they were named for the times of day as they appear under water, where you can't tell precisely where the sun is exactly but you can tell the quality of the light.) She'd gotten hold of the Element of Deception, and she had the right idea – rather than just try to use it, she called on me, her god, to beg me to allow her to serve me as its Bearer. But I felt that the Elements of Disharmony were fairly lame, and I had a use for Deception that wasn't going to involve anypony being its Bearer, so I had a better idea. I made gems for her and her sisters that took power from disharmony and generated magic, which they’d focus through singing. It was an early experiment in contradictions, to see if I could focus harmony in a way that would spread and incite disharmony – the girls had to sing together to generate or feed on disharmony, and the magic made them actually good at it (seaponies don't sing, generally. There's a reason for this.) Of course, there was a price to be paid to allow harmony to serve disharmony, which was that the fillies had to turn into water-serpent-sized seapony monsters, and no longer looked much like seaponies, but on the other hand, they'd be immortal, so they weren't upset about it too much. (Well, Dazzle and Blaze weren't. Dusk cried endlessly about being ugly for half a century after that before she got over it. Personally, I thought the three of them looked much better in their new forms, and I even told them so, but this didn't console Dusk for some reason.)

Eventually, sometime after I was turned to stone, my beautiful Sirens got banished to another dimension by Starswirl, whose antics with time travel and de-aging spells allowed him to survive the eight to nine centuries of my reign to be around to advise Celestia afterward, and maybe after Anon's defeated I'll figure out which dimension and pull them back. Or maybe not. Dazzle had gotten rather big for her britches by the time I was turned to stone, and we’d had a bit of a falling out when she'd declared that I wasn't a god and was in fact rather lame, and it turned out her magic gems had taken on a bit of an independent turn and I couldn't destroy them, despite having made them in the first place.

Anyway. The deal I'd made with Dazzle had her giving me back the Element of Deception, partially activated. Chaos avatars cannot directly use the Elements of Disharmony ourselves; something about feedback loops, or pouring yourself into yourself, or something. You'd think we'd be able to handle a paradox like that, but trying to activate a Disharmony Element myself just gave me a headache so severe I had to remove my head and soak it in the ocean for more than a day before I recovered. The gems I gave Dazzle were linked to the Element of Deception in such a way that as she and her sisters used their power, it would feed through the Element of Deception to power the spell I was weaving through it.

Then I buried the thing at the site where my mother, and the rest of my clan, died. The spell I was tying into it was supposed to make ponies feel unease in the area and make it seem haunted. There aren't really any spirits of dead draconequui hanging around the place – I checked as soon as I had the power to, hope springs eternal after all –but I didn't want ponies doing something obnoxious like building a campground for foals at the place. It would be just like them and their cultural insensitivity to ignore the site's significance as a sacred draconequus burial ground. Also, I'm the only draconequus left and I never told anypony about the place or what it means. (Not telling you either. It's in the mountains someplace. Have fun with that.)

I doubt the spell held up for all that long after Dazzle and her pals were banished, but by then I was in stone so there wasn't much I could do about it. Recently, when I went to investigate and retrieve the Element if I could, I found that someone had dug it up, long enough ago that the ground no longer appeared disturbed, though not so long ago that ponies have moved in yet. (There actually aren't a lot of ponies living in those mountains. A lot of goats and deer, though, which is possibly why there are so few ponies there.) I have some pretty strong suspicions about who took it, though.

See, an authorized Bearer of Deception gets an enhancement to their power to deceive and the ability to detect the deceptions of others, without any increased need to deceive. They can continue to use
their talent when it's useful, not because they can't help themselves. Those who take my Element and use it without me granting it to them, however... their abilities at deception are enhanced, all right, but they can't see through the deceptions of others, and they become compelled to engage in deception, the way Carmine Sand was compelled to steal things.

This can take one of two forms. Either they become a pathological liar, compelled to try to deceive all the time. Or they become obsessed with committing deception in grandiose ways, proving their brilliance and general superiority to the world through huge, elaborate lies, where the goal ceases to be whatever they had intended to accomplish through the deception, and becomes the deception itself. This usually results in giving themselves away, because if your goal is to demonstrate how smart and powerful and overall amazing you are by pulling off an incredible lie and making everyone believe it, the fact that no one knows you lied becomes a problem. So at some point the grandiose liars have to reveal the truth, because otherwise how could they gloat?

Now, here's a fun fact about Changelings: ordinarily they never reveal themselves. Changelings feed on love; demonstrating their true identity, ever, disrupts the flow of love. Oh, grunts, soldier-lings, might reveal themselves, because usually they're interacting with ponies, or anyone else, in order to accomplish some more violent goal than the acquisition of love. But the harvesters, the Changelings who go out into a population and impersonate others, do not reveal themselves. Princesses, Queens who haven't fully matured yet, must harvest in order to mature enough to form their own hive, but once a Princess is all grown up and Queen of her own hive, she's usually too busy running things back home, also popping out eggs, to bother to go harvest.

A Queen who is harvesting, even from an incredibly powerful target like the older brother of Twilight Sparkle, is risking her entire hive. Princesses and Queens can both bear new Princesses (and Princes, the males who mate with the Queens and Princesses) the mammalian, viviparous way, by mating with ponies or other species; that's where they come from, in fact. But because they're actually getting pregnant and nursing, they can't make a new Princess any faster than one a year or so. Likewise, Princes can knock up a pony who will then bear a changeling (technically a part-changeling, but changeling hybrids who are reclaimed by the hive and fed love jelly will grow up to become full changelings), who would themselves be a Prince or Princess. But only a Queen can bear soldiers and harvesters and workers, who she pops out as eggs in clusters of a dozen or so every other month, more often if she's well fed.

A Queen who has a goodly number of well-placed harvesters, Princes and Princesses feeding her and a good supply of nursing workers could produce more than a hundred 'lings a year. A Queen who spends several months in harvesting, who does not bear any egglings during that time, is potentially endangering her hive. If she's caught and injured and it prevents her from bearing, her hive is dead. Her Princesses could theoretically spin up new hives, but Princesses don't inherit their mother's hive, they create their own, because a well-fed Changeling Queen who doesn't get hurt could live for hundreds of years. Also, the reproductive power of a hive is dependent on the harvesters and the workers; harvesters must bring in new love energy to feed the young as well as the rest of the hive, and workers need to train up the younglings. Soldiers are only good for fighting other hives or protecting the hive from, say, ponies, so most sane hives maintain a lower proportion of them than the other classes.

I saw the swarm of changelings that attacked Canterlot. (Well, heard. Stone at the time.) Either many of them were harvesters or workers, in which case Chrysalis was insane for spending them in battle, or she had massively imbalanced her hive's population in favor of soldiers when she chose what types of eggs to bear, in which case she was being profoundly irrational. Only a Changeling hive engaged in active warfare needs that many soldiers, and hives avoid active warfare because killing and maiming do not produce love. Most Changeling hives are very, very subtle parasites on the societies they live next to; doing anything to draw attention to themselves damages their ability to
collect love. So they carry off the occasional pony, usually a moody teenager or a young child, and bring them back to the hive to slowly drain them to feed the babies, and the harvester who replaces them never reveals herself, ever. If she feels like her supply of love is draining up, she stages the death of the pony she's impersonating and moves on. A given hive kills maybe ten ponies a year, at most, and the deaths never come to light, and the ponies never, ever find out that there are Changelings among them.

Ostentatiously taking the form of Celestia's niece in order to invade Canterlot and conquer it is not a sensible Changeling plan. It's just not. Everything about it is a terrible idea. And a Queen stupid enough to come up with such a terrible idea wouldn't have lived long enough to become powerful enough to ever take on an alicorn, regardless of how much love she'd harvested, because she just wouldn't know how to use her magic that effectively.

As terrible an idea as it was, however, it was an incredibly grandiose and elaborate deception to engage in. And it fooled Celestia, meaning that either Celestia is so stupid and unobservant that her supposed niece, an alicorn, could drain her Captain of the Guard, older brother of her protégé and former best friend of her nephew, to nearly mindless submission right in front of her without her noticing anything... or Chrysalis had magical assistance in making others believe her lies, assistance that only an Element of Harmony who also knew the target managed to overcome.

I am thus pretty sure I know where Deception was, a short while ago. The question is, after Chryssie got her chitinous rump so thoroughly handed to her, where is it now?

Well. I have a third Element in my paws that I can dispense, if the Flimsy Floozy Brothers can share one. This is likely to present technical difficulties, since for obvious reasons Disharmony isn't likely to work well between two. But I pulled it off with the Sirens, who are sisters, and whatever destroyed harmony so thoroughly in Griffonstone left behind bonds between family members. These fellows are twin brothers who have been apparently living in each other's pockets for nearly their entire lives. If any pair could manage to bond equally to an Element of Disharmony and work together in harmony themselves to cause disharmony in everyone else, I suspect it would be them.

And then once that's taken care of, it'll be time to track down Deception.
A Minor Setback, An Opportunity, And An Annoying Griffin

Testing, testing, three, ninety-seven, pi r square, gorgonzola, is this thing on?

Hahaha! It works! It's live! LIVE!

So you may have noticed that this document has abruptly changed from my lovely and graceful pawwriting to something that looks far more mechanical and less creative. [Editor's Note: No, you won't, because I've recopied the whole thing so it's all in my pawwriting, which is a lot easier to read than Discord's, trust me. –ed] The thought occurred to me that the structure of this document has a certain unfortunate degree of a likelihood of failure built into it. If I cannot write about a conflict I've encountered until after it's over and I've survived it... well, if the worst happens, and I do fall in battle, I won't have any opportunity to explain exactly what defeated me, which strictly speaking ought to be the most important thing I could possibly convey to a potential successor.

Well, I've at least partially solved the problem. Admittedly if I'm strolling along picking poison joke and minding my own business and Anon leaps out of the bushes and slices my head off before I have a chance to react, it's still not going to help. (Dear me, I have such a morbid imagination lately. I need to think happy thoughts! Flying rowboats covered with chocolate crustaceans utterly stuffed with broiled banana pudding laced with jalapeno peppers, marzipan, and antique brass. Mmm. More of a delicious thought than a happy one, per se, but I'll take it.) My solution is more useful for a conflict I see coming, I confess. But at least it's something.

I've etched a magical sigil onto my fang that, when I activate it, takes what I say and converts it to text in the pages of this document. This was not a trivial exercise, believe me; chaos doesn't handle symbolic magic very well, and if I hadn't had such extensive experience with casting spells that convert text to speech and read books to me, I might not have been able to manage it. The sigil's actually quite an attractive accoutrement if I do say so myself; it's etched in gold, and in order to get around the difficulty chaos has with static symbols, it actually changes as I speak, matching the pattern of my voice. I've spared you all the embarrassment of finding yourselves staring as if hypnotized at my gorgeous body art, however, and turned it invisible. Can't have Twilight Sparkle reverse engineering my sigil and figuring out how to eavesdrop on me, after all.

It won't just automatically pick up my speech and start randomly transcribing it; I do have to consciously turn it on. Since I have to compensate for the possibility that I won't have access to my magic, I've made it so that I can turn it on with magic, a paw, my tongue, or my lip; after all, if I don't have access to my tongue or lips, it's not as if I'm going to be able to speak anyway. It does seem to be working remarkably well. Not the best at punctuation, but, well, you may already have recognized that that isn't my strong suit either. [Editor's Note: If you're reading this copy, you won't have seen that because I put the punctuation back in, but Discord generally writes like capitalization and punctuation are optional and maybe just a way of adding emphasis. –ed]

Sadly, I have to confess that this particular revelation was not apropos of nothing. Yes, I've had another narrow escape, and barely avoided becoming draconequus cutlets, once again. Hopefully this will be the last time I need to regale you with the tale of how I dodged death by the barest of margins after it's all already over; admittedly it might not be advisable to try to narrate while I'm fighting for my life, but at the very least it might be helpful to whoever comes after me to know who I was fighting, if I fall.

...Do you have any idea how depressing it is to have to have contingencies for my own destruction? I've never needed such things before; quite aside from the unlikelihood that anything bad should have happened to me, why would I care about what happens after I'm dead or gone? Being turned to
stone twice has something to do with why I've changed my philosophy in this regard, I admit. I've had it proven to me both that I can be defeated and that I can be in a position to care about what happens after my defeat. If I'd just planted those vines a day earlier, for instance, they'd have almost certainly sprouted up and attacked the Tree a short while after I was turned to stone, freeing me; the only reason they didn't work is that I was turned to stone the same day I planted them and they had no chance to take hold (I'm guessing. They worked fine in the lab.)

I'd love to have something like that now – a deadpony's switch, a bomb that will go off if I don't keep shutting it down, vines that will actually bother to grow. Anything. Instead I have a document, a noble stallion, and a griffon. Not a lot to pin my hopes on there, and if I actually die then it's not going to do me any good at all even if Anon's defeated. I mean, I'm quite fond of the fantasy of everypony snapping back to their true selves after I'm dead and realizing how I was heroically trying to protect them from Anon and weeping over my grave, but realistically I'm well aware that no such thing will happen. No one mourns the villain, and even if I go down fighting a greater villain, that still doesn't earn me the accolades a hero gets. Only four ponies were ever willing to consider me any kind of hero, and two of them are dead and two of them locked me in stone for a thousand years, so that's that. And what good does it do me to be honored after my death anyway?

It's the desire for revenge that keeps me going, you know. I want Anon to lose. Even if I die, I don't want him to reap the rewards of killing me. He's the one that forced this conflict, he's the one that closed the dimensional gates so I can't run. He's the one who wanted to be a big hero and defeat the Big Bad. There are moments – flickering things, the single pulse of a reverse firefly wiping out the light in my heart for a second or two – when I almost wish I could just give up, when I'm so tired of being afraid all the time that I think about going out in a blaze of glory and letting it end, because frankly we all know that's how it's going to end anyway and my situation is hopeless. I mean, I'm putting all this effort into coming up with an elaborate distraction; none of my plans even come close to a means of actually stopping Anon. All I'm trying to do is distract him, and he still keeps coming dangerously close to killing me. Why am I trying so hard? Why not face reality and just give up?

Well, firstly, because facing reality is something I prefer to avoid at all costs anyway, and secondly, because I'm not going to let him win. Yes, I'm probably going to end up dead. Or in stone. And no one will mourn me, and I'll be forgotten, and he'll continue to parade around being a big hero and warping everything he touches, and no. I refuse to allow that. I can't.

So. Now the odds that I'll be able to tell all of you exactly what brought me down in the moments before my destruction are considerably improved, and hopefully that will make it more likely that one of you ponies will be able to learn from whatever mistake took me out, and actually defeat him.

...Oh, I'm being so morbid! Come now, life is too much fun to waste it moaning and groaning over the thought of impending doom. Particularly now that my immortality has been rendered moot and I might well be looking at a finite span, it's even more important to spend whatever's left to me having fun!

Too bad there is nothing fun on my current agenda. I need to finish writing this, and then... ugh... I have to spar with Gilda. I really don't see the point to this; even without my magic I'm three times her size and I've got all the same claws she does, but she's gotten it into her head that I of all creatures need to learn some fighting techniques that don't rely on magic. I'm only humoring her because she saved my life, if not my dignity.

I am promising myself some fun-time after this, I swear. First I'm going to get revenge on Applejack. Kick the stuffing out of me, will you, Apple Pony? Bet you won't like it when your entire crop turns into balloons and floats off! And then, I'll turn them back into apples... as soon as they're all floating above Rainbow Dash's house while she's sleeping. How are you gonna like them apples, Rainbow?
The kind that pelt down on you like delicious missiles and batter your home and your body until you're covered with bruises and your cloud home is peppered with more holes than Swiss cheese? Then just for good measure, I'll make it so that the moment a pony touches them, they explode into super-thick gooey ooze. No, I'm not the sort to send a pony to the glue factory, but I will be more than happy to bring the glue to the ponies.

Or I'll come up with something completely different, because planning too much in advance is a thing I prefer to avoid.

In any case, I suppose I need to tell you all about my humiliating experience du jour. I do so dearly hope this is the last time I have to slink home with my tail between my legs to write about how something terrible happened to me. Next time at the very least I'll be able to avoid the whole slinking home first part.

It seems to surprise many ponies that the areas directly north and northwest of Manehattan are major apple-growing territories, all up and down the Hoofson River. It really shouldn't, though; there's a reason why Manehattan is sometimes referred to as the Big Apple.

The Hoofson runs down from the northernmost reaches of Equestria (and the territories beyond), down through the Catbird Mountains (named for the small number of griffins living around there, immigrants from the Griffin Empire who came by water directly to Equestria, probably because Griffonstone was a collection of ruins and hovels by then, or who sailed down the Hoofson from Griffonstone because who would want to stay in Griffonstone?), all the way to Manehattan, and for most of that territory, it's farmland and small towns. Most of the towns in the Hoofson River Valley are essentially Ponyville without the Everfree. Bucolic little pony paradises, full of inbred, hidebound idiots who would likely panic and faint at a bunny stampede (after all, if they do it in Ponyville, which has to deal with creatures from the Everfree every so often, what chance do the ones that never have to deal with anything more horrifying than an industrial magical potion spill into the river? Admittedly nopony could fish in the Hoofson for twenty years until they cleaned that up, but then, ninety percent of ponies don't fish. One does have to wonder what the griffins in the Catbird Mountains ate during that time, though.)

Sandwiched in between the city of Ponypsie, the town of Newtown on the other side of the river, and the exceedingly small hamlet Coltspring, is a little place the locals like to call River City, mostly because that's its name on the map. Some years ago, a grifter moved into River City to scam the population into giving him money to set up a marching band, in order to combat the dangers of ponies playing pool. I am not making this up. For some reason the locals didn't run him out of town when they discovered the whole thing was a scam, and somehow he ended up actually responsible for a marching band, and getting married, like a parody of a respectable citizen. Two generations later his grandsons are continuing the family business, grifting their way into town to try to sell elaborate contraptions that usually don't work, but when they're not on the road running from their latest victims or running toward their future victims, Flim and Flam can usually be found at their family home in River City, hard at work inventing their new get-rich-quick scheme.

Most of these revolve around apples. Now me personally, if I wanted to come up with a get-rich-quick scheme, I might, I don't know, focus on something ponies perceive as rare and valuable, not something as utterly ubiquitous as apples. Heck, even old Granddad Con Hill picked on musical instruments, generally worth slightly more by nature than apples are. But River City, like the entire Hoofson River Valley, grows apples, and apparently this led to the two youngsters imprinting on apples as their destiny, or something. I'd have thought they'd have cutie marks related to inventing, or to running away from mobs with pitchforks, but then I never pretended to understand ponies' silly cutie mark system.
Their workshop was orderly. Very, very orderly. Every tool, every bolt, every screw put away neatly in bins and labeled with a picture and writing describing exactly what it was. Multiple clockwork-powered contraptions that weren't nearly Ruby Gold enough to justify their existence. A machine shop where the brothers made new parts for their new ideas, carefully shearing metal to millimeter specifications. Drafting tables, covered with neatly stacked gigantic pieces of grid-lined paper on which were carefully drawn blueprints. Oh, the headache I was getting just being near the place. Also, the unbearable itch in my claws to do something to disrupt all that order. What would happen if I moved one of those gears out of alignment by just the teeniest, tiniest...

No. I forcefully restrained myself (I actually wrapped myself in a straitjacket and zipped it, which didn't unfortunately keep my tail from preparing to snap, so I grabbed that and stuffed it in my mouth. Which was oddly soothing. I haven't sucked my tail on a regular basis since shortly after my mother died, which was a very very very very long time ago, but given the stress I've been under and what a bad idea it is to let myself get drunk too often, maybe I should do it more often.) If I ruined their workshop, they'd be distracted from the message I wanted to convey to them, plus they'd probably be in a bad mood and say "no". But I couldn't very well waltz into that workshop and enter negotiations under these conditions; I'd be keeling over with a migraine within minutes. (Just joking. I never actually fall over when I have migraines. I do, however, sometimes start randomly generating uncontrollable chaos, uncontrollable meaning that I can't stop myself, and I find this unnerving. I much prefer to be creating chaos because I decided, what this place really needs is some chaos, not because it starts leaking out of me without my consent.)

So I decided to send them a singing telegram instead.

I made three ponies, a unicorn, a pegasus, and an earth pony, in red, blue and yellow, with shaggy manes and beards in black, green and purple respectively, wearing cowboy outfits and carrying fiddles. Then I had the unicorn one knock on the workshop door.

Inside, one of the brothers – I can never keep straight which is which, so let's call them Mustache and No-Mustache, and this one was Mustache – said, "I say, brother mine, who could be knocking at this hour?" (Did I mention it was the middle of the night? I'm so bad at keeping track of time. But really, how could anyone possibly be good at it? It's so boring. The sun goes from east to west! Every day! Then the moon follows it! Seriously, could Celestia and Luna ever change it up a bit?)

"I wonder that as well, dear brother. Cover me, if you would?"

"With pleasure."

Mustache lit his horn and positioned himself so he had a clear line-of-sight to whoever was on the other side of the doors, and No-Mustache stood just out of that line of fire as he used his telekinesis to open the door. I wasn't impressed, precisely; it takes more than a bit of demonstrated combat awareness to impress me, but I was satisfied. These two were at least not completely incompetent when it came to the arts of self-protection. "Good evening, gentlecolts! What can the Flim Flam Brothers do for you on this fine night?" No-Mustache said.

My barbershop triplet sang their response.

"We've heard you like to deal

We've heard you have some style

We've got one that's a steal

Just come visit a while

Come on down to Everfree

We think you'll find it quite ideal

If interested you might be"
"An interesting proposition," No-Mustache said. "Flam, wouldn't you agree?"

"Absolutely, dear Flim. A very interesting proposition. But I do have to note the complete lack of any information about what sort of deal this might be."

"Agreed! A simple promise of fame and riches in exchange for a trip to the Everfree... to meet with who, exactly?"

"You see, we're very interested in fame and riches, but before we undertake such a trip, we'd need to know who we're negotiating with."

"Who's offering to back us?"

"It does make a difference, after all."

"And we wouldn't want to waste your boss' time if it's obvious we can't deal."

I had my ponies look at each other, shrug, and start singing again. This time, instead of staying in one place, I had them dance about. The brothers hadn't let them inside the workshop yet, so I couldn't have them circle the brothers as they sang, but they took positions to the left, right and directly in front of the two unicorns, and then danced about and switched positions as they sang and played their fiddles.

"We can't give you our patron's name
But there's something that he shares with you
Somepony cheated at a game
Although she's famed for being true
We hear you've had a sim'lar fate
Perhaps a little payback's due?
Don't you agree that it'd be great
If sweet li'l Honest Applejack
Paid back for what she did to you?"

"Well, color me intrigued, dear brother," Mustache, who I guess was really named Flam, said. "An opportunity for wealth, and for revenge on Applejack? It almost sounds too good to be true."

"It does indeed, dear brother," Flim, or so I assume, said. "And of course you know what they say about things that are too good to be true."

"Indeed! That they hardly ever are." He laughed. "Unless we're the ones selling them, of course!"

"You took the words right out of my mouth, Flam!"

I was beginning to think that it was a wonder they weren't speaking in word salad, given that they seemed to be thieving words from each other on a near-constant basis.

"You'll never know unless you try
And come on down to see
Will you really let this chance go by?
Are those the ponies you want to be?

My ponies were getting in Flim and Flam's faces, being just slightly aggressive as they went in for the hard sell. The brothers recoiled and backed away, which allowed my singing triad to get into the workshop and circle behind Flim and Flam, making the two stand flank to flank reversed, facing outward to both sides, heads and eyes flicking back and forth as they followed my dancing, singing telegram ponies.

"At Rambling Ridge, Tall Cedar Falls,
If you should choose to go this week
Our patron will explain it all
If you'll just listen to him speak.
Or you can let this moment pass
Remain inside your family home
If talk of riches seems too crass
Or it seems too dangerous to roam."

"I say! There's no call for such insults," Flim said.

"Quite right, brother mine! No one impugns the courage or the tenacity of the Flim Flam Brothers!"

"Why, to fulfill our dreams, we've faced down angry mobs!"

"Swarms of bees!"

"Timberwolves!"

"Royal Guards!"

"Gaggles of geese!"

"A bugbear!"

"And as little as we appreciate this transparent attempt to manipulate us—"

"—As if we'd go somewhere simply because you implied that we were cowards who would let the opportunity pass if we didn't—"

"—the fact remains that your offer is enticing—"

"Always assuming that any part of it is true—"

"And so we will be coming to visit your patron, mark our words!"

"But if this proves to be a waste of our time, he will most certainly regret it."

"I couldn't have said it better myself, dear Flam."

"Then brothers, we bid you adieu!
We're looking forward to seeing you!"

I had the unicorn take off his hat and bow to them, then toss it on the ground. The earth pony jumped into it and vanished, the pegasus made a flying leap, somersaulted in the sky, and dived into the hat, and then the unicorn picked it back up, tipped it to them, and set it on his head, where it promptly fell to the ground as he was slurped up into it.
Flim picked it up in his magic, tentatively, as if fearing it would explode. Ha! As if I would ever be so predictable! I had it stretch sideways until it was hardly more than a line in the air, then rebound elastically, springing into a single point, which then turned into a bird and flew off, tweeting the same tune my ponies had been singing.

Flim and Flam looked at each other in utter bemusement. "Well, brother, that was... a thing that happened," Flim said.

"My feelings exactly," Flam said. "Are we really going to go? Everything about this seems like a setup."

"Indeed it does." By themselves, I observed that the brothers didn't speak quite as quickly, or chime in on each other quite as much. Some of that was a stage persona, it seemed. "But what choice do we have? With our losses from the Super Speedy Cider Squeezy 6000, and the reputation of the debacle in Ponyville—"

"Oh brother, you know we're both well aware of our financial situation," Flam said. "Still, safety first."

"Why lure us into a trap? If Applejack or her friends are behind this... they have the ear of the very Princess herself. They can find out where we live."

"True enough, true enough. So what's the motive here?"

"My guess?" Flim said. "Applejack or all of the Elements of Harmony have made an enemy, who wants to exploit our special talents against what could be presumed to be a common enemy."

"Of course, and then betray us or cast us aside as soon as they have what they want."

"So I'm sure you're thinking what I'm thinking."

Flam grinned. "If 'take the opportunity and then run for it with the earnings before our patron betrays us' was coming to mind..."

"That was exactly it," Flim said, grinning back. "As always, brother, you and I are on the same page!"

I left at that point. The sheer harmony between the brothers was turning my stomach. If it wasn't for their plan to try to backstab me before I got to do it to them, before they'd even met me or heard my spiel, I might have had second thoughts about using them, with all that harmony in their interactions with each other. But their suspicion, cynicism and willingness to play dirty was disharmonious enough to the rest of the world that I still thought they could probably work. And who'd think I of all beings would use a harmonious pair to wield one of my Elements of Disharmony?

It was two days before they actually showed up.

As you've probably guessed – or as you actually know, if you're reading this document in the place where I probably left it – the Grotto of Disharmony (and the, and here I wince, Eyrie of Awesomeness – I'm fairly sure that you can figure out for yourself who made up that name) is near Tall Cedar Falls in the Rambling Ridge, which runs through the northeastern part of the Everfree Forest. I placed eyes and ears all over Tall Cedar Falls so I'd be alerted when they showed up (ponies might have wondered why potatoes were growing on trees or why there was so much corn abounding in a region that's too mountainous to grow corn, but ponies avoid the Everfree whenever they can.) I told Gilda what I was planning, and that she needed to stay out of my mane for the
moment – Bearers don't tend to get along well with each other, and I didn't need her screwing things up with the brothers. She groused at that but opined that she didn't want to involve herself in my negotiations with a nerdy pair of dweeb unicorns anyway. And then, while I was waiting, I snuck into Ponyville to taunt the Bearers and Anon.

I avoided any personal confrontations this time. I just amused myself by animating their possessions to stroll away. Or tried to stir up trouble by swapping possessions. I gave Spike Rarity's entire stash of gems in a basket with a note on it that said "For Spikey-Wikey", and he fell for it, believing that Rarity had somehow overcome Anon's influence and remembered her affections for him. The result was not pretty, when Rarity found out everything she'd set aside for her winter line was in Spike's belly. I kept moving pieces of Applejack's farm equipment, making her paranoid and certain that either Apple Bloom had lied to her about taking the stuff, or they had a thieving prankster of some kind in Ponyville. Fortunately but sadly, she never thought of me. I guess the prank was too simple for her to guess I was behind it. She blamed Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie a lot. I got Pinkie in trouble by swapping her ingredients, so baking powder was replaced with yeast, sugar was replaced with baking soda, bread flour replaced with cake flour, and so on, producing glorious culinary disasters for a couple of days. I made several clouds Rainbow was sleeping on evaporate while she was on them. And I reshelved Twilight's books. Not all of them, but enough to make her pull out her mane with frustration. Oh, the heights of rage Twilight Sparkle can climb to when she can't find the book she wants! This didn't do Spike any favors either, of course, but frankly if I tricked Twilight and Rarity into harassing him to the point where he stomped off and went back to Canterlot, I'd be doing him a huge favor.

It had been a while since I'd played such simple, understated pranks, but it was fun. It felt like a challenge I'd been missing from my life. When you can create the most spectacular of effects with a snap, it's easy to forget how sometimes the little things can generate the most splendid of havoc. After all, anypony who knows me is likely to suspect my hoof in it if ponyquins start talking or trees run away, but when they simply can't find their favorite set of scissors or that book they know they filed away yesterday... well, that's not chaotic enough to be blamed on little old me, is it? Most likely it's the ponies closer to hoof. And thus sweet, sweet disharmony is created as those who supposedly love one another set to arguing. The one with Twilight was successful beyond any hopes I'd had, as she was outraged enough to actually yell at Anon. Yes! O frabjous day! Of course, they made up half an hour later, which was significantly less entertaining and put me in a bit of a mood, but hey, I got through Anon's "everything's-about-me" armor by just the tiniest crack and allowed Twilight a fraction of a moment to be herself and not his puppet. Also, they both decided to resolve the situation by blaming Spike, which was both hilarious and sad.

In any case, the fun and games ended when the Flim Flam Brothers showed up in the late afternoon, riding on... I have to admit I stared a bit. They had modified a double bicycle so that it had an engine in the back, running on a small steam boiler fueled by coal and unicorn magic, and two extra stabilizing wheels sticking out the back where the engine was, supporting the engine and keeping the entire contraption from falling over... mostly. It was going a good bit faster than anypony but a pegasus adding wingpower, or maybe the earth pony bike racer Lance Hoofstrong, could probably have managed. Instead of pedaling, they were just sitting on the seats, Flim holding onto handlebars and steering, Flam in a swiveling bucket seat that allowed him to turn around and attend to the engine every so often, but which he seemed to have a hard time balancing in.

I like technology. I don't like the orderliness of the conditions required to create it, but I like it because it's leveling. A magical spell requires a unicorn to put in years of study to become an accomplished mage, and for some unicorn to have tested the spell and written it down, and for the unicorn casting it to study it. A piece of technology often merely requires a few days of training, or reading a manual. And when a power akin to magic can be shared around to far, far more ponies than there are unicorn mages... oh, you can get some glorious chaos then. I still get shivers up my
spine when I think about the wonderful, wonderful streets that run throughout the human world's equivalent of Manehattan, and the screeching, honking, cacophonous chaos of the self-pulling carriage machines they call "cars" navigating through tangled webs of others of their kind. Our Manehattan has its share of traffic jams and shouting ponies, but nothing like the human world's got. If this was the sort of thing Flim and Flam built in their spare time, I had to upgrade my opinion of them from "crappy inventors and con men" to "inspiredly crappy inventors and con men". Their self-powered double bicycle was deeply silly-looking, and this is coming from me, but it was the sort of technology that had the potential to spread and cause wonderful chaos. Maybe they'd be better for my plans if I didn't use them against Anon, if I just let them go do their thing and create things that would make Equestria a far less predictable place.

But no. I couldn't do that, sadly. No matter how much chaos was stirred up within Equestria, it wouldn't give me enough to fight Anon unless it was at the level of a war or a revolution, and the invention of a motor-assisted bicycle wasn't going to do anything like that. Anon had to be taken out of the picture or I'd never be safe and neither would Equestria.

The place I'd invited them to was a small clearing within the forest, on the banks of Pine River, which would be more accurately called Pine Creek if it wasn't for the fact that it went over Tall Cedar Rock to create the aforementioned Falls, and was quite deep and turbulent right here. I waited until the brothers had dismounted and looked around themselves a bit. "Do you think we've got the wrong place, brother?" Flim said.

"Surely not," Flam replied, checking the map. "Tall Cedar Falls, in the Rambling Rock Ridge. This is exactly the place we were told to be. Though a week is a rather long range for a rendezvous appointment."

"Quite! Perhaps our mysterious host simply isn't aware of our arrival."

"Or perhaps I simply wanted to make a dramatic entrance," I said, popping in. To the brothers' credit, widened eyes, stepping back a hoof or two, and short gasps were the most reaction they gave me – no screaming, no running away, no threats or attacks. Good, these were ponies I could negotiate with. "Please allow me to introduce myself. I'm a stallion of wealth and taste." You see, that's funny because it's a reference to a song from the human world, which is supposedly sung by their legendary embodiment of all evil, though actually it's sung by a human man with big lips who was pretending the song was being sung by the embodiment of evil, and... you know what, forget it. You had to be there.

They laughed nervously. "Well, we can certainly appreciate a fellow with those traits, can't we, brother?" Flim said.

"Indeed, brother! But, and I mean no disrespect sir, I do believe you have misspoken slightly by calling yourself a 'stallion.'"

"Not that my brother is impugning your masculinity in the slightest!"

"Not at all, that is correct! I'm sure you are a very masculine specimen of... whatever you are."

"My brother merely means to say that, in short, you are not a pony," Flim said, shooting glares at his brother, who was too busy gawking at my magnificent form to notice. "If it would be proper for us to ask, might we inquire what you are?"

I folded my arms and gave them my most haughty offended look, making them both scramble backward again. I wasn't actually offended at all, but this was just too funny not to play along with. "Oh, so my species, my race if you will, is more important to you than my name, or the purpose for
which I've invited you here?" I said, deliberately mocking the formality level of their speech.

"Oh, no, not at all!" Flim said frantically.

"It was never our intent to give offense," Flam said, apparently finally realizing that a lesser draconequus than myself could have potentially taken offense to his statements earlier. After all, if I say that male draconequi are called stallions, the way that the caribou refer to their females as "cows" even though they're not bovines at all, who would they be to tell me that's not correct? I do believe I'm the world's premier authority on draconequi, after all. "Simply a matter of idle curiosity, that's all! Your appearance is most... exotic, sir. Truly, I've never met somepony so unique. Have we, brother?"

"Definitely not," Flim agreed. "Forgive us our amazement, if you would; we're perfectly prepared to be professional, now. As I'm sure you know, we're the Flim Flam Brothers. He's Flam—"

"And he's Flim—"

"And if you are the gracious host who's invited us, then if you'd kindly tell us your name and what sort of opportunity you're suggesting, we're ready to get down to business!"

"Because if you're looking for ponies with inventive, entrepreneurial spirits—"

"—Creativity—"

"—Talent and skill—"

"—And a good bit of experience in the art of salesponyship—"

"—Well, then, the Flim Flam Brothers are the ponies you've been looking for!" They both took off their hats at the same time.

I have to admit I was getting just a little bit cross. I'm not used to ponies not allowing me to get a word in edgewise. I'm supposed to be the one putting on the show, not the one watching as two stallions do a song-and-dance routine in front of me. Not that they had gotten to that yet, but I could see it coming. "I knew all that already," I said a bit snappishly.

"Well, of course you did!"

"Obviously! Why else would you have extended us your generous invitation?"

"Clearly you can see that we—"

"Talk too much," I said, snapping my talon and making both their mouths disappear. Their expressions went from anxious and excited to horrified. "Oh, don't look at me like that, I'll give them back. I'd just like to get in a few words of my own, if I may." I paused to give them a chance to object, but since both of their mouths were still sitting in my paw, neither of them had anything to say.

"To begin with. I am Discord, spirit of chaos and disharmony, and for the record, I am a draconequus, yes, not a pony, very observant of you boys." I let them see my teeth when I smiled. They cringed. "I do indeed have an offer for you, involving joint action against a mutual enemy and her pals, and as a side effect the ability to make yourselves wealthy beyond anything you ever truly believed you could achieve, though I imagine your wilder fantasies might have touched on the subject." I snapped again, restoring their mouths. "Now, can we discuss matters like civilized businessfolks, and not have the two of you breaking into song every three minutes or whatever it is
"Your offer certainly sounds generous," Flim said.

"Most generous," Flam said. "But I do wonder. We've heard of you and your magical prowess, of course—"

"—Of how you turned Ponyville into your personal playground of chaos—"

"—Captured Princess Luna and held her prisoner for weeks—"

"—And of course we remember the day you moved the sun and the moon at your personal whim."

"Very impressive magic," Flam added. "So I must wonder, what use would two lowly inventors and businessponies have to you?"

"It's not that we're not intrigued."

"Of course, of course! It's a fascinating offer!"

"But my brother makes a good point. With all the power at your disposal, why would you need us?"

I floated above their heads, making them crane upward. "What do you know about the Elements of Harmony?"

"Well, Applejack is one of them," Flam said.

"And the ponies that assisted her—"

"Which was base cheating, you understand, the rules had allowed for family members only—"

"If I recall correctly there were five, weren't there, brother mine?"

"Aside from Applejack? Quite right, dear brother! So six, in total."

"Very good!" I clapped. "You can both count to six! Have a cookie." I materialized chocolate chip cookies (with hot pepper and garlic to spice them up) in front of the two.

They glanced at each other. "I'm sure they're delicious, but Flam and I just ate," Flim said.

"We partake on the road. It's an old habit."

I clapped once and made the cookies go away. "As it happens, you don't deserve those cookies after all," I said. "Because there are seven, now. An interloper from an alien world, a creature called a human who calls himself Anon, has entered the picture, and he has a seventh Element of Harmony." I couldn't quite keep from rolling my eyes. "The six original Elements of Harmony, when used in concert against me, have the power to turn me to stone." This was public knowledge; everypony in Ponyville knew it, at least, so it wasn't as if I was revealing a weakness they couldn't have found out about anyway. The next thing I said made me considerably more anxious, though I believe I hid it quite well. "But the Seventh Element of Harmony has the power to disrupt my magic." No, I wasn't going to tell the ponies who'd already admitted to each other that they planned to backstab me first chance they got that Anon's stupid sword could kill me.

"Oh, dear!"

"A dire predicament indeed!"
"I can certainly see why you'd want help with that!"

"But why help from my brother and me? We're great inventors, it's true—"

"And talented salesponies—"

"But we're not _fighters_, per se," Flam finished.

"I don't need—"

I was about to say that I needed distractions, not fighters. And then I would have explained about the Element of Greed, and offered it to the brothers, and after I explained to them how it would aid in the getting and keeping of filthy lucre, they would be delighted and eager to join me, and then I would have bonded it to them and marked the day a big success. But that is not what happened, because at this point, Anon, Applejack and Rainbow Dash came charging out of the forest, followed by Rarity and Pinkie.

Rainbow Dash reached me first, almost before I had time to realize I was under attack, which was probably the main reason why she was able to bodyslam me to the ground. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Applejack chasing the Flim Flam brothers, who were running off, abandoning their motor bicycle. I didn't have time to pay a lot of attention to that, though, because Anon was charging at me, sword drawn.

As usual, I didn't have the presence of mind to teleport myself, but at least this time I thought of teleporting a weapon... such as it was. I summoned a tree branch, a fairly sizable one with a heavy, thick body and lots and lots of smaller branches extending outward like gnarled fingers, if gnarled fingers were covered with leaves. Anon swung at me, I blocked with the tree branch, and while the sword went straight through the branch and sliced it in two, it was slowed enough by the impact that instead of gashing me open it just nicked me. However, being nicked by the Element of Protection had never been a walk in the park for me either; immediately my magic turned unusable.

I didn't notice this at the time, of course, but now that I've undergone this particular issue twice – three times if you count the magical disruption I suffered when my tail was cut off, though as I've said I remember that more in snapshots – I have figured some things out about it. I described it the first time it happened as "disrupting" my powers, which sounds vaguely like you just disordered chaos, which is a paradox and not a particularly entertaining one at that. But now that it's happened again, I think it's more like – well, imagine that everything is made of strings. And the strings are trailing off into the ether all willy-nilly, but I can reach out and pluck the string right at the place where it comes off the object I'm trying to modify, so it doesn't really matter. When the Element of Protecting Absolutely Nothing From Anything hits me, it's as if I'm trapped in a mesh, and many of the strings can't even extrude through the mesh, and those that can could be coming from practically anywhere. It's as if some sort of filter has been dropped on me, some sort of constraint structure that has nothing whatsoever to do with the ways my powers work and therefore works counter to them has been placed on my power. When I was frantic and terrified because the power of harmony was burning me alive, I managed to pull the right strings, or muster up the panicked strength to tear enough of the mesh that I could access some power, but without that impetus, even being afraid for my life isn't enough to let me reliably do anything. As long as I'm more frightened of the consequence of utterly random magic that might do literally anything, and therefore is highly unlikely to be useful and might actually aid my enemies or destroy me, than I am of my enemies' attacks, I can't really use magic after Anon's hit me with that thing until the effect wears off.

Without my magic, I was a sitting duck. Frantically I grabbed the fallen part of the tree, the part with branches. As Anon swung at me again, I blocked with the thick piece of tree, which was still held in my lion paw. And then I followed up with a sweep with the branches. Anon was overextended and...
the branches, though a lot less capable of causing unconsciousness or death than the big thick piece now missing from their base had been, were a lot more capable of causing massive irritation and recoiling. With twigs thwapping him in the face, Anon recoiled, lost his grip on the sword, and the branches grabbed it. As soon as I realized what I had, I wasted no time; I pivoted, swinging, and flung the sword into the river.

"Oh, shit!" Anon screamed. "You'll pay for that, Discord!"

I grinned and was about to say something witty when Rainbow kicked me in the head again. By now I was getting very, very irritated with this. Also a trifle dazed, because without my magic it hurts quite a lot to be kicked in the head. I lunged at her – only to be caught in the side by a buck from Applejack.

In the meantime, the Flim Flam Brothers had fled, quickly enough that Applejack had lost them, which was why she was now helping Rainbow whale on me, and Anon, Pinkie and Rarity were trying to recover the lost sword. Which was probably hilarious. From the audio recordings I got from the Panauricon, later, it was a comedy in which Rarity, who can sense gems but couldn't grasp the thing strongly enough with her telekinesis, given that there was basically a waterfall on top of it, trying to guide Anon and Pinkie to finding it. Except she wasn't willing to get in the water, and they were, but couldn't hear her underwater – or all that well above water, either, since waterfalls are loud. All I picked up at the time, though, was that they were off trying to recover the weapon that could kill me, and if I didn't pull myself together and get out of here before they found it, that was probably exactly what was going to happen. Unfortunately for me, I had two ponies who had nothing better to do than beat me up preventing me from getting any significant distance in any direction, since whatever way I ran or I twisted, they kicked me back the way I'd come from.

Let it not be said that I didn't fight back. You'd have thought that would have done more good. I'm three times bigger than a pony, I have claws, I have sharp teeth, yadda yadda. Problem is, without magic, you can't have every kind of physical advantage at once, because physics is annoying like that. I'm extremely flexible, with cartilaginous bones throughout most of my skeleton, and highly compressible, which has served me well while trying to squeeze out of the grasp of, say, a sea serpent who's trying to constrict me to death. But flexible, cartilaginous bones ending in claws, or even ending in a fist, don't hit nearly as hard as strong, solid pony bones ending in a hoof. Most of my strength is in my body and my tail, and I admit, boa constrictors have nothing on me; if I'd been able to grab either Applejack or Rainbow, the fight would have been over. But see, ponies can use their extremities to hit with, and channel all their strength through. I've got a lot of extremities, but while they can all do some damage, my real strength is located in my body, and bodies, without magic, can't be moved into position to grab an opponent nearly as fast as extremities can. And these two ponies were particularly fast. I'd lash my tail at Applejack, but she'd do a barrel roll to get out of the way, jump up and buck me in the ribs, while meanwhile Rainbow Dash was divebombing my neck again.

So I writhed, and I thrashed, and I slashed at them with claws, and even tried to bite them because seriously, pain and I don't get along all that well, while meanwhile they broke most of my ribs, my antler, my feathered wing, my goat leg, and cracked my horn and probably my head. I'm pretty sure I landed a few good slashes on Applejack, because I saw blood on her flank, and I think I did manage to hit Rainbow Dash with my tail once, but only once. I was dizzy, and the pain just kept getting worse and worse as they kept pummeling me, and eventually I stopped fighting back and just started struggling to reach the river, because if I could just get into the water I could use the current to help me get away. I have gills, ponies don't, and even though Anon and Pinkie were apparently able to swim, nothing but an actual water serpent can outswim a draconequus under water.

And then I heard a familiar harsh voice. "Hey, dweeboids! Why don'tcha pick on someone your own
Gilda tells me a tale of how she heroically dive-bombed my assailants to save my life, how Rainbow Dash was too slow to intercept her as she plowed into Applejack and slashed her up good with foot claws, how when Rainbow did slam into her Gilda gave her a good beak to the ear and raked her side with talons. I have for myself noted the large assortment of bruises Gilda is sporting, and the black eye, and a couple of broken talon fingers, so I strongly suspect the fight was not nearly as one-sided as Gilda tries to make it sound. However, I have to admit I was beyond noticing at the time. I knew Gilda was fighting my attackers, drawing their attention, but I had no awareness of how the fight was going; all I knew was that I needed to get to the river, fast, while the ponies were distracted. This wasn't easy with a broken leg, or broken ribs, but I had three other legs that hurt a lot but weren't broken, so I managed it.

Once I was in the water, the chaos and turbulence of the water, generated by the falls churning just a short distance away from me, restored me. I was carried with the current for some distance, at first because I was too weak to fight it and then, as my magic returned, because it was too much fun to let it pull me whatever way it would. I was halfway to Dodge City by river by the time I decided, somewhat reluctantly, that I'd had a long enough bath; the river had widened to the point where it wasn't nearly so chaotic anymore, and the current wasn't as fast. With my magic restored and my body healed, I teleported back home. As an afterthought, because it occurred to me that she'd be less helpful to me in the future if I let Applejack and Rainbow Dash beat her as badly as they beat me, I summoned Gilda as well.

Gilda complained quite a bit about her rescue. "I could've taken 'em! Those dweebs were goin' down! They barely knew what hit 'em!"

"I'm sure," I said dryly, making pointed looks at her various bruises. "Why, I'm sure you could single-pawedly take down the entire Equestrian Royal Guard."

Gilda scowled at me. "Are you being sarcastic?"

"Guess."

She flopped into a chair that was made of furry, purring cushions held up by four very large stickbugs. "You could say thank you any minute now, you know."

"Thank you, Gilda," I caroled, in the same tone of voice small children use when saying, "Good morning, Miss Feebleminded Babyjaider!" or whatever their teacher's name is. "How did you know to look for me anyway? Were you following me?" I pressed my paws to my chest and made big eyes. "Oh, Gilda! I had no idea you felt that way about me!"

"That you didn't deserve to get your ass handed to you? Maybe I'm reconsiderin' that," she said. "I was trying to figure out how to work those eyes you gave me, so I went into the room with all the noise, 'cause I knew that's where you keep your own spy equipment stuff, so maybe mine was in there too."

"The Panauricon?" It was a wonder she hadn't deafened herself. "I told you where your eyes feed into. It's that box in your quarters with the glass side on it, the one I called a TV, remember?"

Gilda shrugged. "Sue me for not being an egghead. I forgot. Anyway, I heard Dash's voice in that mess, and when I listened close, I heard that squealing little pig who threw that crap party and kept getting in between me and Dash, 'cause it ain't like I'm ever gonna forget her voice. And then I heard you. Screaming."
"I'm fairly sure I wasn't screaming."

"Yeah? How do you figure I heard your voice in all that crap, then? It sounds like a hoofball stadium in there."

"Not a baseball stadium?"

"Naah, it's obviously ponies and not griffins. Not enough screeching and cawing." I might have mentioned before that baseball is a game primarily played by creatures with opposable thumbs – so griffins and minotaurs mostly, though I've seen teenage dragons play a pick-up game using a whelp of their own kind as a ball. Ponies can play, and some do, and when my former apprentice in the ways of chaos went insane, tried to destroy the world, and then reverted to a childlike persona, she took up playing and actually got a cutie mark in it. (She's had three in her lifetime. It's not the cutie pox, it's chaos. Don't ask.) But it's not nearly as popular a game among creatures that don't easily stand on two legs and can't easily grasp a bat. It's amazing what ponies can do with their hooves, but given a pony holding a bat with hoof magic and a griffin holding a bat with claws, the griffin's got a better grip, better control, and will probably win every time. Hoofball, on the other hand, is a pony sport if there was ever a pony sport.

"Well, I wasn't screaming. I might have been shouting. You know, in anger. War cries and the like."

"Dude, you were screaming. I heard one or two nice cuss words in there too. What are fewmets?"

"Dragon droppings. Fine, so you heard me cursing at my attackers, loudly."

"So I figure, generally I'd expect you to take care of yourself, but you were screaming and cursing awfully loud for someone taking care of themself, so I figured I'd check it out. And soon as I got outside the caves and into the air, I heard it. You're lucky you were so close by; I'da thought you'd be in Ponyville."

"No." I curled up on the floor with my upper body upright, folded my arms tightly, and did not sulk. "I scheduled the meeting for right here precisely to prevent what just happened. How did they even know? Are they spying on me?" The thought occurred to me then that Twilight Sparkle hadn't been there. What had she been doing? "I'll bet you they are! I'll bet Twilight has a scrying spell set up to watch me!"

"Then wouldn't they know where you live?"

"Okay, maybe to watch the Flim Flam Brothers, then."

"Maybe, but today she's in Canterlot. Dunno why, her princess said show up so she did."

"Hmm." I decided to find out from Blueblood what Celestia's business with Twilight was. Maybe it was simply for a relaxing catch-up and tea party, but I doubted it. "And I suppose they left Fluttershy out because the plan involved violence."

"So. How come they were clobbering you like that?"

I glared at her. "Did you fail to notice that they're my enemies?"

"Really, 'cause I thought you were best buds with them," Gilda said, proving that her intellect is slightly superior to the dullards she'd lived with in Griffonstone, because she's actually capable of recognizing and of employing sarcasm. "I actually meant how come you were losing. You've got all that weird magic, I wouldn't've thought two ponies would be able to take you down."
"They wouldn't. Normally." I sighed. "It's that damn sword. When Anon actually manages to cut me with it, even if it's just a nick, it disrupts my magic. I can handle that when it's just Anon – I beat him off with a stick. Literally." I snickered. "I smacked the sword out of his hands with a tree branch and threw it in the river, and I'd have done him some serious damage as my next move if it weren't for Rainbow Dash kicking me in the head." My head didn't hurt anymore, but I rubbed it anyway. "She has some hooves on her, I can tell you."

"Isn't like she got less awesome fighting just because she betrayed me and acted like a total cloc," Gilda said distantly, staring at a random location in the cave. "But, I mean, you know. You're like practically a dragon! Small for a dragon, yeah, but still. You're bigger than any griff I've ever met; you're bigger than any minotaur I've ever met. Well, taller anyway. They got a lot more going on in the pecs than you do, generally."

"It's not exactly as if I've had time to work out," I snapped at her.

"Shit, dude, I'd have thought you could take a minotaur, though. I've seen some of those poses you twist into. Unless you're doing that all with magic, your abs have got to be, like, godly awesome."

"Of course," I said, smirking at her. "I am a god, remember?"

Gilda rolled her eyes. "I mean without your magic. You're taller than anything I've ever seen except a real dragon, and you're at least as wide as a mare or a hen griff, and you've got a foot for a hand so there's all that backleg power in your foreleg, and one of your real feet is a dragon's. Or at least a really big lizard with really sharp toe claws."

"It's a dragon leg, yes." Technically, my lion arm is a lion foreleg, not a lion backleg like griffins have, which just proves that Gilda doesn't know what she's talking about. I'll admit that that arm is very, very strong, though. Not a match in punching damage to what a pony leg can do, but in a foreleg wrestling match with a pony I'll win hooves down. (Hah! Their hooves! You see what I did there?)

"So how the flying clochole do you lose to two mares? I mean, shit, I know Dash can hit like a train, and I figure that earth pony bitch she was teamed up with probably makes a mule look like a granny in a walker, but still!"

So I attempted to explain what I talked about above, as to why the structure of my body isn't actually ideal for fighting back against two ponies tag-teaming me (although I'd still be amazing against a human if neither of us had weapons, because humans are not nearly as fast as ponies and don't hit nearly as hard. The human advantage is in the opposable thumbs giving them much better control over most kinds of weapons, an advantage I share.) Gilda laughed at me.

"You're so full of shit," she said, chuckling at my expense while I glared. "It's so fucking obvious what the reason is, if it were a tree spider you'd be covered in bites by now."

"Well then, o mortal, limited griffin who has spent approximately 200% less time alive on this planet than I have," I said, "do please enlighten me."

"It's because you don't know shit about fighting." Gilda got up, wings flapping as she repositioned herself on a perch. "I mean, I'm gonna admit, I'm not the baddest badflank griffin there ever was alive, otherwise I'd've been workin' as some kinda merc and not in that crappy dive of a restaurant. But you don't get ahead in Griffonstone without learning to fight. And griffs don't have magic, so it isn't like we can all do woo woo with our paws and zap." She gestured by doing woo woo with her paws and failing to zap. "You, though... you've been alive a zillion years, sure, but how much fighting you ever done without magic? Seriously?"
Seriously, I considered the question. As a child, I'd had magic, but little understanding of how to use it effectively, so my primary fighting strategy had been to run away. Or occasionally chase after whatever it was that thought I'd make a tasty snack with a torch. When Fire is your friend, few forest animals want to mess with you. In the circus, my magic had been blocked, and most of the "fights" had consisted of my foes yelling at me and beating me, and me trying to curl up small enough that it wouldn't hurt, because I was generally chained down and couldn't run away. Fighting back under those conditions had been... ill-advised, the few times I tried it.

As an adult, but a mortal one, I'd had magic, and I'd known how to use it, but I was capable of exhausting it. There were claw-to-claw contests I'd gotten into with dragons because I didn't have the magical strength to teleport and hadn't managed to be fast enough to evade them. In a physical fight with a full-size Western dragon, when you're a mortal draconequis and not the near-omnipotent chaos avatar, "winning" consists of surviving it and getting away, and in that sense, I'd won all my fights... but squeezing out of a dragon's grasp, or taking advantage of the fact that I was so much smaller to pry up a scale or two with my own dragon leg and then rake the flesh underneath so the dragon would recoil in pain and toss me away, are not exactly the kinds of moves that will work so well against ponies. Then there was the time I'd been poisoned by inhaling Matrisse's dust and couldn't use my magic, but the fact that they took me when I was still barely conscious and turned me into a drooling, spastic idiot by fastening bits of Matrisse to the base of my horns meant that I really never had a chance to fight until I persuaded Celestia to have the crystals taken off my horns. Then I tricked the pony bringing my food into coming too close, took him hostage, and walked out the door riding him because he had foals and didn't want to die, and I have sharp teeth and the ability to bluff. Then I ran away.

And there were times, while worldwalking, that I'd ended up without access to my usual reserves, and then run afoul of the local authorities, or local ne'er-do-wells, or someone who simply wanted to pick a fight with me for no good reason whatsoever. In some of those cases, I'd been in the same shape as one of the locals – for instance, in human worlds, it's generally advisable to be a human – while in others, I'd been in my own body. In any case, I generally found it the best idea to run away, or else trick my opponents into fighting each other and then run away, or else draw others into the fight as a distraction so no one would notice as I ran away... all right, seeing a bit of a pattern here.

Okay, maybe she's right. I've never fought in paw-to-hoof combat against ponies and won. Ever. Unless I was redefining "won" as "got away", in which case I won today... but today doesn't feel like much of a win, so I guess not.

"Yeah, I can see from the look on your face that that's a big 'zero',' Gilda said.

"I never said that," I said, not pouting. I was glaring. And scowling. Not pouting. There's a difference. Gilda, stop reading over my shoulder or I'll rotate your eyeballs backward so the only thing you have to look at is your miniscule birdbrain.

Anyway. To make a long story slightly shorter, this is how I got talked into agreeing to spar with Gilda, on the grounds that, according to her, I obviously don't know how to fight with just my bare claws, and I'm helpless without my magic. The nerve! If it weren't for the fact that it really is bugging me how easily two ponies overpowered me just because my magic was on the fritz – I mean, maybe that was Anon in effect. Probably was. It's good for his personal story if Discord without magic is pathetically easy to beat up, right? Except for the fact that he was looking for his sword at the time, and normally, everything's about him. If it was his power screwing with me, wouldn't it have been him who beat me up, not his marefriend flunkies?

The point is, I can't rule out that it's for the reason Gilda says it is unless I spar with her and demonstrate that that was a one-off and I'm actually remarkably talented. So... I'm going to be
sparring with Gilda, after I finish writing this. (Gilda accuses me of dragging this out to absurd lengths to avoid sparring, and complains that I really didn't need to tell anypony about the geography of the Hoofson, but I disagree. This account is for me, in case Anon makes me lose my memories of who I am, so I'm going to include anything I think might be relevant to me, and, well, lord of chaos. It's not like I have an outline or a deadline or a page limit or something. So I meander sometimes, sue me.)

Oh! And before I forget – I've sent a message to Blueblood, asking him to try to find out what Celestia summoned Twilight to Canterlot for. So there's that.

Ugh. I suppose I'm done. Time to go find Gilda, I suppose, and get this over with.

That... did not go well.

I made a dojo in a region of the lower cave that previously no one had bothered to dig the mud out of, and rearranged the stalagmites and stalactites so they were ranged around the combat area like spectators. Since we'd be flying, I also warped space to accommodate flight. Given that I still didn't know how Anon, Background Pony and Ego Dash and their pals had found me, for certain – spying on Flim and Flam was a good theory, but I'd done exactly no research to see if it was the truth or not, and I knew Anon was capable of showing up at places where I had arrived when there was no logical reason to assume he might be anywhere near there – I thought it best if we didn't go outside. Also, this was supposed to be a test of physical combat. Both of us are capable of weather manipulation simply because we have wing magic, though in my case my chaos magic is such an integral part of me I'm not sure I can do weather manipulation without chaos getting into it. But the goal here was to see how well I could do without using any magic whatsoever.

I created a magic sensor that looked like a giant green disk. If magic was used aside from flight magic, the disk would turn yellow and then red. It was calibrated to account for the amount of ambient chaos magic already around, given that I'd just made the arena with chaos magic and that we were in the same cave system as the Grotto of Disharmony. And no, I didn't cheat.

Obviously there was no one to referee us; I did suggest creating extra selves to act as referee, but Gilda just gave me a dirty look, so I tabled that. I wasn't overly concerned about either of us getting hurt; I had my magic and could use it in an emergency. And it didn't seem to me very likely that Gilda would cheat, because aside from "don't use magic" and "don't actually try to kill the other one", there were no rules, and Gilda doesn't have magic aside from flight and weather-working and there's not much weather to be worked in a cave. So I wasn't particularly hung up on the lack of referee. We agreed we'd count down from three in unison and then say "Go" and that would be the start of the match. After a couple of snafus (zero is an important number and belongs in countdowns, I don't care what Gilda says), we managed to get it together and start.

Gilda's fast. Not as fast as I am – even without my magic, I can eel out of the way of a blow very, very quickly. I had little problem dodging her. The real issue, though, was that she kept dodging me. This was totally unfair; I have more limbs than she does, considering that my tail is prehensile and my neck is flexible enough to use my head itself as a weapon (there's a reason I have an antler and a horn). But while the strength and agility of my core body made it pretty easy for me to dodge her divebomb attacks, her smaller size and greater flight ability could get her out of the way of my tail, and I had a hard time getting my other limbs close enough to grab or tag her. Yes, I admit it; without my magic I can barely fly. You must have noticed how small my wings are; if I knew I'm going into a situation where my magic isn't going to be easily accessible, I can grow out my wings ahead of time, but I never know when Anon is going to come at me until he does.

We went some time with neither of us being able to successfully tag the other one, until my wings
were tired enough that they were actually starting to hurt. I declared that I wanted to end this because I was getting tired and bored. Here's where a referee would have come in handy, because Gilda's response was, "Yeah, you think Anon'll let you get away with that one?" and stepped up her attacks. Apparently, she'd been holding back, hoping I'd get tired because, in her words, "You're a total whiny baby about pain; I knew as soon as it got hard you'd try to give up," which I think is totally unfair and I wouldn't even have included here except she's reading over my shoulder again and I thought I told you to stop that. Go hunt harmless small animals or bully some ponies or steal fruit or something. I've suffered a lot of pain in my life; I wasn't always near-omnipotent, and on some occasions, like the one I mentioned above with Matrisse or several incidents I've described in this very journal, even my powers couldn't save me from going through awful experiences. Just because I don't like pain doesn't mean I can't push through it if I have to. I just don't think I should have to if the stakes are just a friendly sparring match.

I could have teleported out of the arena, or turned Gilda into a grapefruit, or any number of things to stop her, but she was taunting me. Telling me she just bet I was going to cheat, that there was no way I could hack it without my powers. And, well, I got mad. So I did exactly what she wanted me to, and kept fighting after I was too tired to stay in the air. With a boundary on my third dimension, cutting off some of my maneuverability, I wasn't nearly as good at dodging. She got first blood – and second, and third. I whacked her with my tail once, which sent her flying into a stalactite, but she rebounded far faster than I would have expected... which, come to think of it, was probably shortsighted on my part. Gilda's a stunt flyer, like Rainbow Dash. Of course she can handle crashing into something. It seems to be what stunt flyers spend most of their time doing. I landed a few claw strikes myself, but I must admit, I am far, far faster at dodging than I am at hitting. Hitting's just so... barbaric. Now, turning a pony into a sapient, mobile mushroom and demanding that they sing "I'm A Little Teapot" before you'll turn them back? That's civilized violence. But hitting? With claws, and fists? Animals can do that.

It ended when Gilda, purely by luck, managed to dodge away from one of my tail strikes and land on the back of my neck. Immediately I felt her talons pressed up against my throat. "Tag," she said. "If this were a real fight you'd be dead now."

I shook her off, along with a large quantity of blue snowflakes that ended up falling on her and making her a snow griffin for a few moments. "If this were a real fight I'd have used a lot more power in my tail strikes," I snapped at her. "Just because I thought it might be a bad idea to break every bone in my beloved ally's body—"

"Oh, stop being a sore loser." She shook the snow off. "I beat you fair and square. You weren't holding back anything at the end."

"Except my magic."

"Yeah, and in real life, if I had to go up against something as big as you with dragon scales on part of its body, I'd've gone for your eyes and then flown away fast as I could, but this wasn't a real fight, this was to see how you do without using your magic. And the answer is, terrible."

"If I'm so terrible why are you covered in bloody claw marks?"

"What part of 'three times bigger than a griffin' are you not getting? I should've lost, and lost bad." Gilda strutted over to where I'd left a very large bowl of potato chips. Lavender potato chips, to be precise. With honey mustard and pickled banana relish salsa. She stuffed a fistful in her mouth. "Isn't your fault," she said, through a mouthful of potato chips.

"Didn't your mother ever tell you to chew with your mouth closed?"
"Nope." She took another pawful of chips. "You're like a unicorn. Having fancy magic means you end up depending on fancy magic, because why wouldn't you? I mean, I don't carry plates with my tail, because my tail's terrible for it and I've got forelegs. But if my forelegs were broken and I had to carry plates with my tail, maybe I'd learn how, or maybe I'd break all the plates."

"I'd love to see that. How about I take your forelegs – temporarily, of course – and watch you trying to learn how to carry plates with your tail?"

Gilda rolled her eyes. "Stop being a dipshit, I'm trying to help you here. You wanna get skewered by some freak monkey with a sword or you wanna learn how to bite him in half?"

"Neither. He probably tastes awful."

"Okay, how about actually grabbing him with your tail and twisting his head off? That sound good to you?"

I sighed. "Yes, obviously, that sounds wonderful, but I'm failing to see how you're going to help me with that. You don't even have a prehensile tail. Which makes your offer to carry dishes with it even more absurd."

"That wasn't an offer, you moron, it was a metaphor!"

"A metaphor? From Gilda the Griffin? Careful, I think I see steam coming out of your ears. Are you sure you're not overtaxing your meager brain?"

"Look, if I'd known you were going to be such a big shit about losing I wouldn't've suggested this. Point is, you suck. You do everything with your magic and when you don't have your magic all you wanna do is dodge. Which you're good at, don't get me wrong, but you're never going to beat the monkey man with dodging, and if he screws with your head so you don't use magic even when you can, and his sword screws with your magic, you have got to learn how to fight with your claws and shit or you're gonna end up as diced dragonthingy."

"Draconequus."

"Whatever. So if you decide to stop being a shithead about it, come talk to me and I can start teaching you some crap. Yeah, I don't know from dragon tails, but your arms are the same as what I've got, sorta, if we overlook that that's a foot on your arm, and we've both got wings, so I can probably teach you something. Or, you know, just keep being a sore loser and pretending you're awesome at claw-to-claw when we both know you suck, and one of these days you're gonna get a crystal sword stuck in your gut and I'm not gonna cry about it." She flapped off. "I'm going upstairs. You can come see me there, or not. Whichever."

Well, I'm certainly not going to go crawling to her begging for fighting lessons. The nerve of that griffin!

Okay, this is very, very interesting.

I had a little chat with Blueblood, as Twister, in a café in Canterlot, with a spell running to make anypony who overheard us think we were talking about hoofball, and an illusion spell on Blueblood so he looked elderly. He wasn't happy, and pestered me for some minutes for a more flattering illusion spell, but I pointed out that no one was ever going to imagine that an old stallion they saw was Blueblood in disguise, and if he didn't stop whining about it I could always make him look like a filly instead, and then he shut up.
He's been spreading a little bit of fear, uncertainty and doubt – one of my favorite dishes, a FUD sandwich on lie bread with a garnish of truth – amongst the nobles, about Anon in particular and humans in general. Humans are mythical monsters, and yet we're allowing one of them to have the virginal flower of our heroic maredom as his herdmates! Humans eat meat, all the time – including pony meat! (Humans actually consider the flesh of ponies to be unappetizing and reject it as a food source. They feed it to their dogs, though. Maybe I should get Anon a dog and then spread rumors about humans feeding ponies to dogs.) Humans are predators! Humans come from a world where every human carries a gun, and they shoot each other with it – including foals! Humans can turn into dire wolves when the moon is full, and then they go berserk and eat any creature in their path! Humans built Tartarus! Humans rape their own young! Humans eat their own young! Humans explode mountains! Humans have magical super strength, speed, and the ability to fire energy bolts from their eyes, and they're indestructible unless you confront them with special green crystals that only come from their world! Humans are here to transform every pony into a human so we can all be as violent and disharmonious as they are! I admit a lot of these came from my suggestions, but some of Blueblood's own touches were pretty creative. Such as the one about transforming ponies into humans. Seriously, why would they ever want to do that? And yet many of the nobleponies of Canterlot are dumb enough to fall for this stuff even without Blueblood's Element of Arrogance putting some oomph into it.

Enough of these rumors were circulating around that when Celestia had plans to summon Anon and Twilight to Canterlot to give them a special mission, Luna expressed concern for Anon's safety given the state of the rumor mill in Canterlot, and Blueblood backed her up, expressing great dismay about these horrible rumors besmirching a true hero of Equestria just because of his species, but of course, we simply can't afford to have anything happen to him! So Celestia called Twilight alone. Blueblood didn't know the details of the mission, but he knew enough that I was able to figure out what's going on. He heard a rumor of a dark power arising to the north that the Elements may be needed to quell.

In other words, Sombra and his Crystal Empire are coming back.

I knew it was going to happen eventually, and I figured that when it did happen, most likely Celestia would send Anon with the Bearers to deal with it. Blueblood's been trying to re-establish his old friendship with Shining Armor, and he managed to find out that Shiny and the Princess of Pink are being sent as well. If the cartoon was an accurate representation of how things would have gone down if Anon hadn't intervened, then the way it should have happened was that Shining and Cadance would have gone first, Shining would have gotten his flank handed to him by Sombra, disabling his magic, and then Cadance would have barely held him off while Twilight Sparkle and Spike went looking for the Crystal Heart. The way it is going now, apparently Spike is being left home, Shining and Cadance are going at the same time as the Bearers, Anon will be with them, and there is still inexplicably a train station for the Crystal Empire despite the fact that it hasn't existed in a thousand years and the train is only about a century old, tops. Celestia plays the long game, but I really wonder what ponies thought when she told them to construct a station in the far north in the middle of absolutely nowhere.

This is definitely something I need to take advantage of.

I can't go help Sombra. If they get the Crystal Heart up and running, and they almost certainly will, I am absolutely boned if I'm anywhere near it. The Heart is a harmonious amplifier of emotion; Sombra can use it, if he gets it, to amplify terror and despair, which he can use to power his own dark magic, and Cadance can use it to spread peace and love and complete nausea, but either way it's harmony. I can probably survive it without getting stoned if it's just on in the background and not being activated or actively used as a weapon, but in a contest between Cadance and Sombra it's going to be about who can get their hooves on the Heart first, and one way or another that nasty piece of crystal fruit is getting activated, which means, I am not going to go anywhere near it.
Besides, I hate Sombra. Tyrant, slaves, dark magic, spreads uniform fear – boring! He's my favorite
go-to example when ponies try to tell me that order is a good thing. Given a choice between him and
Cadance, I'm secretly rooting for our pink gal; harmony, while nauseating, is not nearly as
unpleasant as repressive order. I mean, I really really wish I could arrange things so Anon and
Sombra kill each other, but I can't be there and I'm not the one who warps probability, except in the
sense that probably your door shouldn't have spontaneously turned into bees, my bad.

But while the cat's away, the mice will play, and I'm feeling playful. Sadly, Flim and Flam aren't. I
sent my singing trio back to their house to see if they wanted to try a second meetup, and they
slammed the door in the trio's faces. That really hurt their feelings. If they had feelings, which they
don't, because I made them up, but you know, fictional characters have feelings too! Just because
they are inventions of my imagination and I couldn't even be bothered to give them names doesn't
mean that having a door slammed in their faces is just hunky-dory with them. I'm going to need a
new Element of Greed, but before I focus on that, it's time to go get Deception. And possibly maybe
have a conversation with Spikey-Wikey. He's been left behind, and I happen to know that he was
supposed to have been the big hero this adventure, and instead Anon is going to take it from him like
he's taken everything else. (I am, of course, operating under the assumption that Anon et al will win,
but given their track record against me, I think that's fairly reasonable to assume.) It might be a
friendly gesture, you know, a bit of an apology for threatening his life when I was trying to kill
Anon, if I let him know that fact while Twilight and Anon aren't around at all to stop me.

Also... I've agreed to do some training exercises with Gilda. I still think she got lucky that day! But...
I have to admit, she's got a point. I don't appear to be nearly as spectacular at fighting without my
powers as I ought to be. I doubt I can possibly learn anything from her, but maybe some practice
sessions will help me learn some tricks on my own. And with Blueblood making some actual
headway against Anon – admittedly, just turning pompous stuffed shirts against him, but still – the
thought occurs to me that I really, really, really want to live through this. If, ugh, swallowing my
pride and asking Gilda to spar with me a few more times can give me a better chance of surviving
against Anon and his Sword o'Doom, and not getting my tail cut off... well, you know, I have one
minion who's getting things done and one minion who's actually a somewhat tolerable companion to
have around the place, I've been blowing off some steam at that xenophile hangout in Manehattan
lately... things are coming together for me. I'm probably having more fun right now than I have had
since I came back from Zebrica and met Anon. So it'd be a terrible shame for me to get killed or
maimed now, especially if I could have prevented it by working with Gilda.

Don't assume I like it, though.
So here I am, flying into the Badlands, using my nifty new dictation tooth to write this remotely. Why am I up in the sky, flying, where ponies can theoretically see me, instead of just cleanly teleporting, you ask? A good question! The answer is, I have no idea where I'm going!

No, seriously. I'm looking for Chrysalis' hive. It's around here someplace, but the thing about Changelings, see, is that they're good at blending in. The Badlands are full of caves, and very, very treacherous to travel in if you don't have wings – the mountains you can see, the ones that stick up above the ground, are only the tips. See, what's actually there is a mountain range that was lowered a quarter of a trot below sea level.

A quarter of a trot may not sound like so much to you – since a trot, as in the distance measurement, was originally defined as the distance the average earth pony could cover in five minutes while trotting, you can probably go a quarter of a trot in less than 2 minutes, on land, even if you're a unicorn or a pegasus. But to put this in perspective... Canterlot is only a trot and a half above sea level. Distances for up and down, even for flying creatures, are very very different than distances on land. Pegasi can't usually fly higher than a gallop, which is approximately 3 trots (yes, I'm aware that Rainbow Dash and other stunt flyers can sometimes get up as high as 2 gallops for brief periods of time; even if I hadn't known, my dear roommate would never let me forget it); dragons can go up to an elevation of 15 gallops; an alicorn can get up to a whopping 300 gallops, which is approaching the edge of our world's thaumosphere (and atmosphere... you need to be an alicorn to get that high because you need to drag your own air bubble with you.) I, of course, can go anywhere I want to. I once hit a bunch of invaders from another reality with the sun. Celestia was so mad at me that day. It was hilarious.

But I'm digressing. A quarter trot below sea level is deep. I'm not going to talk about why the Badlands are so far sunken below sea level, except to say that it's something I don't like to talk about, which is why I'm not going to. The point is, the Badlands are a desert, filled with sand, and most of that sand is tightly compacted enough to take the weight of a pony... most of the time. It's called the Badlands for a reason, though. At any point, a pony might step on a region of more loosely compacted sand, and sink... and keep in mind, ground level for the Badlands range is a quarter trot down. That's a lot of sand. Admittedly, there are so many mountains in the area, almost none of the Badlands is actually as low as a quarter trot... but most of it is deep enough that if the sandstorms have loosened up the sand enough that a pony can sink... unless they're a unicorn with self-levitation spells, that pony is going to die.

So I highly recommend not traveling in the Badlands unless you're a pegasus, and maybe not even then, because seriously. Sand sand rocks rocks mountain sand. Could this area be more boring? There's a much more exciting region directly to the southeast of the Badlands, which is actually labeled on some maps as "the Battle of Discord", complete with attractively colorful checkerboards and floating rock islands, but the sad fact is, you probably couldn't visit. It's actually a region where raw chaos spills out of the underverse our universe floats in and the laws of physics break down completely, and Celestia and Luna have it walled off. I just checked. I could break that wall, if I really felt like it, but with the dimensional gates closed I'd really rather not. As fun as it would be for me to bask in the chaos energy and enjoy the sweet feeling of reality itself being warped into tapioca pudding, I'd be concerned that the magic penned up in there might be under a tad more pressure than usual, since it can't get back out of our dimension, and, well, you don't go venting a steam boiler willy-nilly if the steam has the power to melt reality, which it does.

The point is. There are no ponies out here. It's incredibly dangerous for anypony but a pegasus, and
with desert conditions (so no weather to manage), nothing fun to explore, and alternate air routes to get anywhere a pegasus might actually want to go, there's no reason for them to be out this way either.

But, as you might have noticed before Anon basically squashed them all — all Changelings can fly.

The mountain range here is riddled with caves and tunnels. Many were dug by Diamond Dogs, because this mountain range is a rich source of iron, copper, and other minerals that Diamond Dogs can sell for gems. Or it was, once, before the Dogs mined it out and sold everything. Many were dug by draconequui, back before I was born — the land wasn't treacherous then, and we used to like to tunnel a lot, apparently. When I found these caves, not long after I began my glorious reign of chaos, I found them filled with the bones of my people, who huddled underground to escape the Second Fimbulwinter, and either froze, starved, or died of thirst. I laid them all to rest in convenient volcanoes in the San Palomino Desert, which has somehow managed to become a legend about Nightmare Moon's dragon skeleton army, which is totally unfair. Firstly, they weren't dragons, and I'm a little tired of my race being forgotten just because I'm the only one left. Secondly, this happened centuries before Luna's little hissy, and thirdly, they were my people and if they belonged to anyone they belonged to me, and fourthly, they weren't an army! It was just easier to animate the skeletons and make them walk and fly to their final resting places than it would have been to levitate the bones. Also, the reactions I got from ponies were vastly more entertaining this way.

Now, though, thar be Changelings in them thar hills. Hive Chrysalis isn't the only one in Equestria — she's had half a dozen daughter hives spawned, and most of them stayed in this country — but hers is, or was, the biggest. Changelings do need water, for which they generally have brainwashed, adoring pegasus slaves drag a few clouds into the desert, and that's what I'm looking for — not actual clouds, but evidence of water. All the actual bodies of water in the Badlands are so heavily salinated they're almost a more secure footing for a pony than the "land", or rather sand, is. The few living creatures who aren't Changelings who've adapted to live in this environment poop salt crystals. Really, I'm not making this up. There's an entire ecosystem of magical plant creatures that photosynthesize, run around finding overly salinated water, drinking it to fuel their photosynthesis, and then excreting the salt. (Sometimes pegasi do come down this way looking to gather salt crystals and smuggle them into Equestria, because this is the pure stuff, if you know what I mean.) Changelings, however, can't do that. They can survive on a lot less water than ponies can if their supply of love is good, but they do need some fresh water.

This is so boring. This is why I'm talking to myself, rambling on about salt poop and elevations like anypony but Twilight Sparkle could possibly care, attempting to win trivia contests with myself. I'm looking for water. In a desert. To be precise, in the mountains, hills and big protruding rocks, because when water actually falls on the sand here, it is soaked in completely. Most deserts experience occasional flash floods, where so much water falls at once that the packed sand saturates and the entire desert turns into a very shallow lake for a few hours, or a very deep puddle, depending on how you look at it. That never happens here because the water just goes straight down through the sand. Water can only collect on the solid ground, which means the parts of the mountain range that came up high enough that they stick out of the sand. So at least I don't have to look at endless quantities of sand, because I'd rather spork my eyeballs out with a rusty spoon a dragon has been chewing on, but oh dear chaos this is SO BORING.

Now you may be saying to yourself, "But Discord! You have such fantastic magic powers, why don't you scry for the Changelings or something?" Remember that iron I mentioned? Diamond Dogs got most of what could be easily mined, but there's still veins of it running throughout the rock. Iron disrupts harmonic magic almost completely, which is one of the reasons the Changelings hide out here. It doesn't block chaos magic nearly as badly... but if I push energy through iron with the goal "go get me information", when it comes back it is likely to be completely loopy and tell me "la la flowers are so pretty", or more likely "wisenheimer sixty-seven purpled the from". Remember signal
and noise? It's possible for me to get "information" back that's so full of noise even I can't detect signal within it. So I'll be able to use my magic in the hive, and I could even teleport out of it once I'm in... but I can't teleport into it even once I know where it is, and I can't scry from the outside to find it.

On the other hand, I just now realized that I can scry for water without salt in it.

You have no idea how hard I am facepawing right now.

That did the trick. Approximately five minutes after I stopped dictating, I found several bodies of water large enough and fresh enough to support a Changeling population... including one where it was actively raining. That seemed quite promising, so I teleported there, and sure enough, there was a pegasus with glazed eyes managing a nearly depleted cloud, raining it into a fairly large funnel-like hole that went down into the side of a mountain. The hole was not filling with water; all of it was draining away somewhere else. So of course, being as insatiably curious as I am, I sized myself down and jumped down the hole. The pegasus didn't even notice; Changeling victims are not well known for their powers of observation.

I hit water shortly after the light disappeared, and swam down the rest of the way. I don't recommend that ponies try this, by the way. The tunnel I went down was too small for a pony for most of its length, including a significant part of the portion that was under rock and water with no air to be found anywhere, so unless you're powerful enough to turn yourself into a fish, you're probably not going to survive the trip. Not an issue for me, of course; quite aside from the fact that I can turn myself into pure magic and don't even really need to breathe at all most of the time, I have gills, so I wouldn't have been discommoded even if I did need oxygen to survive. Also, I'm pretty sure that even at full size I could have squeezed through the entire passage, though I might have needed to remove my antler and horn first.

I came up in an underground lake. Now, unlike my underground lake, which is fed by an underground river, this particular lake was plainly fed only by captured pegasii. And maybe the occasional natural cloud that drifted in from the ocean and smacked into the mountain that the watering hole was built into, but that was likely to happen at best once a year. The water level was significantly lower than it ought to be. The lake basin was about 20 heads deep, but the lake itself went up to 16 or 17. The air quality in the lake was poor – if I had needed to breathe I might have gotten quite dizzy from the low oxygen content – and there was low-light algae growing all over the place, capable of surviving in as little light as came from the magic-powered lamps the Changelings had hung overhead, half of which had gone out.

This was not a well-cared-for hive any longer.

I floated up and out of the water, resizing myself again to Breezy size (I'd say bug size, but given that I was in a Changeling hive, that might have given you the wrong impression.) In the poor lighting conditions, and with my overall dark colors, I was practically invisible as I flew through the cave, looking for Chrysalis. I found ponies sealed in goo – many of them dead. Ponies need real food, and more water than Changelings do. A well-kept hive rotates its captives; they spend part of their time in the goo, metabolic functions depressed so they don't need quite as much food and water, having wonderful dreams about all the ponies they love, and part of the time they're physically free and completely mesmerized by whichever Changeling they're attached to. Either way, they're given food and water until either their magic or their capacity for love completely depletes, at which point their bodies are fed to other captives in goo. It's a process that usually takes a decade or two, if they're cultivated properly. These ponies had simply been left in the goo until they wasted away, because there weren't enough Changelings left to care for them.
The defeat of the Changelings was around two months ago. Two months is more than enough time for a pony to starve to death, and far more than enough to die of dehydration.

I find Changeling methods somewhat wasteful to begin with – they’re predators, sure, but they’re predators that don’t have to kill, so why use up ponies to death? If they’d put more harvesters in the field who claim to have legitimate specializations in illusion magic, who get jobs as body doubles for celebrities or whatnot, they could probably harvest more than they could handle. Of course, the more Changelings are out in the field impersonating ponies, the fewer Changelings the Queen of the hive has direct control over, so I know why they do things the way they do, but one queen's desire to have more 'lings to lord over doesn't seem to me to balance the disadvantages of being seen as murderous predators by ponies. But then, what do I know? I'm only the last member of a species that starved to death because they'd gotten a reputation for eating ponies, and ponies responded accordingly by driving them away from every food source they could find even after they gave the pony-eating up.

This, though... this wasn't just wasteful. This was horrifying. I wondered if Anon had the vaguest idea how many ponies he'd doomed to die by slaughtering so much of the hive. In the cartoon version of events, Changelings had been blasted into the sky by a wave of love, and surely some of them would likely have been killed off-screen, but Changelings can fly. Enough of them would have survived Princess Lovey's attack that their captives wouldn't have died of thirst.

I made a large portion of the cave into a giant cow-like creature, who I connected to the goo via tentacles and tentacle-like udders. The cow-thing would absorb magic from the surviving pony captives through the tentacles, feed on that, and use it to make milk that would feed the ponies. I didn't give it enough of a brain to feel anything but a general sense of vague satisfaction with standing there giving milk to ponies, and its own metabolism was decidedly low-maintenance. That would keep the ponies that were still alive fed and hydrated for a while, at least.

Ponies low on magic wouldn't be able to provide much love to Changelings, but I wasn't going to let them go – firstly, most of them were earth ponies and unicorns, because pegasi were of more use outside of goo prisons, and as I believe I made clear already, earth ponies and unicorns can’t escape the Badlands, so where were they going to go? Secondly, releasing them would probably ensure the death by starvation of whatever else was in this hive. I make a point of not interfering with the chaotic processes of nature, such as conflicts between predators and prey, even between sapient beings, unless one side manages to really tick me off like the dragons did. Between Changelings and ponies, I'm not going to take sides. But I was going to do what I could to minimize the death toll on both sides, because death is seriously no fun at all.

Further into the hive I found a pit, where glaze-eyed Diamond Dog slaves, their coats mangy and unkempt but their tails wagging, were tossing limp Changeling bodies, mostly broken, badly injured harvesters and soldiers. There were Bitches down in the pit shucking the chitinous shells and lightly seasoning the meat underneath, then putting approximately equal portions onto plates and passing out to other Dogs, or young Pups. Plainly injured harvesters lay all around the pit, firing off their magic every so often to draw love from one of the Dogs or the Bitches, though they left the Pups alone. I watched for a while, rather amazed at the novelty of it. I so rarely see sapient-eating being openly conducted in front of the species being eaten, especially not when they're plainly the ones in charge.

Eventually I figured out what was going on, as I explored deeper and then ranged back to the pit. Diamond Dogs make tasty but low-calorie meals for Changelings – Changeling nutrition depends on both the strength of the emotion and the amount of the target's magic. (I once had a pet mini-hive of Changelings, a Princess and about 20 worker lings, that I could keep fed at a subsistence level without them ever needing to feed on anypony else, and without noticing any impact to myself, because they were able to convert my mild affection for them as amusing pets into satisfying, if
somewhat tasteless, meals due to my godly levels of magic.) Diamond Dogs have little magic, especially when they don't have access to gems, but intensely powerful love. The Changelings had mesmerized an entire pack and were feeding on them, and disposing of the dead bodies of Changelings who'd finally succumbed to their injuries by letting their Dog slaves eat them. It was a lovely example of a symbiotic relationship in action. Might have brought a tear to my eye, although that could have also been the grit and dust in the air. Caves are not delightful places to be when you're the size of a Breezy.

There were injured Changelings everywhere. The only ones I saw that were unhurt were elderly workers, adolescent workers and harvesters, and larvalings (who are positively adorable – imagine a tiny foal, completely covered in green ooze that slimes out of every pore of its body! You just wanna hug them and squeeze them and rub their ooze all over everything! They don't grow the chitinous exoskeletons until first metamorphosis.) Most were heavily bandaged. Many were missing limbs, or eyes, or wings. I saw a de-horned Princess (or possibly a Prince, it's not always so easy to tell them apart), who, to add insult to her (or his) injury, was also missing a forehoof. Morbidly, I wondered if she'd tried to throw up her hoof in front of herself to protect her head from Anon's sword, and he'd cleaved right through it and her horn as well. At that she was probably lucky to be alive; when I broke out the day after the invasion, right before I headed for Zebrica, I could see there were dead bugs all over Canterlot Gardens. Probably took them a week to clean them all up.

And even given that there were injuredlings all over the place... there were still far, far too few lings. Elderly workers aren't actually supposed to work – they're old and fragile and their chitin gives out if another ling accidentally elbows them. They sit around and tell stories to the larvalings, educating and caring for the youth, and they sleep a lot. And larvalings typically don't do any work at all because without their chitin in place, the ooze that carries Changeling magic gets all over everything, and their actual skin is very soft, sensitive and easy to damage. (Changelings are not actually insects. They're much more like ponies than you'd think. The chitinous armor is really armor, not an exoskeleton, and it exists primarily to hold in the ooze, which is more or less concentrated illusion magic. They've really got skin, muscles and bones in there, under the layer of ooze.) But here I saw fragile old Changelings and fragile young Changelings performing normal hive duties that usually would fall to the workers. The uninjured adolescents were mostly tending to the injured lings... and even counting those who were badly injured enough to be near death, there were maybe about a tenth of the Changelings that should have been in a hive this size.

You know, I'd known that Anon killed a lot of Changelings. I was there. I saw the bodies in Canterlot Gardens. But it wasn't until I was flying around the mostly empty hive that it really sank in how many he slaughtered. Personally. With a sword. As the master of the improbable, I can tell you how ludicrously improbable this is. Most Changeling hives have between 200 – 500 lings, but Chrysalis, as I mentioned earlier, was extraordinarily ambitious. Her hive could easily have housed 3,000 lings, and if she'd had enough field harvesters to support a hive of that size... okay, we are hitting the limits of my ability to do arithmetic here, but my point is, Chrysalis' hive had a lot of Changelings in it, before Anon. And now most of them are dead, and most of the ones that aren't dead are crippled or injured in some way. And Anon, personally, killed or injured most of them. I'm sure the Royal Guard got some, but ponies are rarely this brutal.

Eventually I found Chrysalis.

She wasn't in her throne room; that was empty. She was in the birthing room, which is essentially a secondary throne room for a Queen, but with a bed and supplies for medical emergencies. There were no eggs being laid or babies being born today... none for quite some time, because in order to get there I had to pass the nursery and the clutching chambers, and there were no eggs, and no larvalings younger than a year. Instead, Chrysalis was lying on something like a narrow, padded table exactly the height of the bottom of her barrel, so her hooves could touch the floor, but only
barely. It was a lot longer than she was, though, so she could comfortably rest her head on a large pile of pillows in front of her.

Most of her chitin was gone, exposing green ooze and pale white skin underneath it. Her horn was broken off at the tip, and broken again in the middle but not all the way through, so the top half hung at an angle. Her wings were a tattered ruin. Her mane and tail were braided with ribbons and tiny jewels, so obviously someling was trying to take good care of her, but being clean and well-kept didn't change the fact that she looked half-dead. There were a lot more holes in her legs than there ought to be, and one of her forehooves was torn, as if something had caught in one of the holes and ripped its way through. One ear was missing, and one of the tines on her queen antenna, the little bud of vaguely crown-like antennae on her head that allowed her to communicate mentally with her Changelings, had been sliced off.

At the top of her power Chrysalis had beaten down Celestia. Admittedly, part of that was because if Celestia had pulled on the raw power of the sun in the middle of Canterlot Palace, she'd probably have melted it and a significant proportion of the wedding guests to glassy slag, but still, being able to defeat Celestia was a stunt even Starswirl would have found it hard to pull off – he'd have succeeded eventually, but probably by resorting to dirty tricks – and that neither Luna nor Cadance was actually capable of. (Nightmare Moon could, but I believe I've talked about how dark magic functions as an amplifier.) And here she was, two months after her defeat by Anon, looking as if she'd been barely healing in that time. I had to assume that when whatever lings had survived the assault had managed to drag their queen back home, she had looked basically dead.

There were relatively uninjured worker lings bustling about, caring for her and two injured Princesses, probably her direct heirs. One Prince in mint condition stood guard. The main difference between regular Changelings and the lesser royals is that Princes and Princesses have manes (short, sparse ones, but manes nonetheless), and horns – closer to standard unicorn size than the monstrosity Chrysalis sports – and their eyes have pupils. (That thing you see on the normal Changeling's head looks like a horn, but it's really an antenna. It can do some very, very limited magic, but it's mostly for communicating with the hive and receiving the orders of the Queen.) They don't have whites in them, and good for them, because whites in the eyes are highly overrated, and they're the size of normal Changelings, so they don't look like crunchy cheese-legged alicorns with insect wings, but rather like crunchy cheese-legged unicorns with insect wings.

Noling else in the room seemed to have a functioning horn – Changelings who morph into unicorn forms can do basic unicorn spells, but they don't have a lot of power and they can't do anything complex, so I wasn't worried about them. Princes, on the other hand, often train to be full-blown mages, because they can't metamorphose into Queens – their entire purpose is to cement alliances between hives by marrying foreign Queens, though sometimes they work as harvesters and sometimes they provide a second line of defense for the hive. He might actually know some spells complex and powerful enough to give me a moment or two of discomfort.

So I took his horn. Yes, a trifle repetitive, I admit it, but I'd never done that one with Changelings before, and I wasn't here for fun and entertainment, sadly enough.

As the Prince, predictably, gasped, "My horn!", I sized myself up, twirling the horn on one talon.

"Oh, relax, Your Royal Unhorniness, I'm just borrowing it for a bit so you don't make trouble," I said. "I need to have a conversation with your mom. Or is she your wife? Maybe your wife and your mom?"

"Discord," Chrysalis hissed. "I'd heard you escaped. Come to finish the job that wretched creature started?"
All of the Changelings in the room clustered around their queen, most of them between her and me, the rest in a ragged V formation flanking her sides while still facing me. I was almost tempted to provoke them into a fight, because I really wanted to see what a handful of Changelings thought they could do to stop me, but I was here for a reason and I wanted my Element of Deception a lot more than I wanted to play with Changelings. So I snapped my talon, and all of them dropped onto conveniently placed pillows and started ostentatiously snoring. I didn't want Chryssie to think I'd killed her little lings, after all.

"Chryssie! Long time no see!" I said.

"We've never met, you oaf," she snapped... after glancing at her fallen Changelings, presumably checking to make sure I hadn't just turned them into animatronics or something.

"And yet you still recognize me. The curse of being so beautiful, I suppose; I can never escape my fans." I snapped up a snazzy ensemble in purple, red and green, with sunglasses and a broad-brimmed hat, and created paparazzi to range around me snapping photos. "I'd say you're looking good as well, but we both know that's a lie."

"Why are you here, chaos creature?" she snarled. "Wasn't the chaos of our deaths enough for you? We died to free you; you could at least show us the courtesy of leaving us be in our misery."

"Oh, come now. You didn't die to free me; that was simply a bonus, and one you most likely never intended." I sat down in front of her on an intangible floating chair. It wasn't really a chair, of course, it was just gravity shaped like a chair. "You died because a murderous monster from another universe showed up with an improbable shiny crystal sword and proceeded to murderize you. Am I right?"

"And so you've come to torment me with memories of that day?" she said bitterly, turning her head away from me as much as she could, considering that it was supported by a pile of pillows and I was getting the impression that she probably had a neck injury of some sort.

"Not at all!" I leaned down into her face. "But I thought you might be in the market for a little revenge."

Her eyes widened. "I'm listening."

I manifested a trench coat and opened it up to show her a collection of my best fantasies about Anon – Anon being strangled to death by me, Anon being strangled to death by my vines that never bothered to wake up and grow, Anon being strangled to death by all of the bearers of the Elements... hey, I don't like blood. If someone absolutely has to die, I kind of like the whole strangling thing. But I'm not a one-trick draconequus; there were also images of Anon being sliced to pieces by his own sword, Anon being zapped to death by Celestia and Luna, Anon drowning in a giant mug of hot cocoa, Anon falling to his death from a bookcase the size of a tower in Canterlot Palace...

I admit it, I spend a lot of time fantasizing about killing Anon. I mean, I'm only going to actually do it if it turns out that I can and it's the only thing that will work – I'd honestly prefer to stop him without bloodshed if possible. (This is a filthy lie and I should wash my mouth out with apple cider, which I'm doing right now. But there's a difference between what I want, in my gloriously chaotic and impulsive heart, and what I feel is the best thing for me to do. Admittedly, most of the time the difference is pretty much invisible, but in this case... death is still not chaotic, and I'd much prefer to have Anon alive, humiliated, hated by everypony he manipulated, broken, despairing, and forced to go back to Earth to work as a grocery bagger for a psychotic manager who makes him work unpaid overtime. And then I could go visit him for the rest of his life and taunt him about how he used to be a god and now he bags groceries and all of his marefriends hate him and ritually burn pictures of him
on the anniversary of his ignominious defeat. Hey, a draconequus can dream. Either that or throw him into a dimension of madness where his mind will be fed on by a horde of eldritch things from beyond the veil for the next thousand years as he gibbers and screams for mercy in forgotten languages even he no longer understands. One or the other.)

"Take a look at the possibilities," I invited. "Any of them speak to you?"

"All of them. Though I'd prefer ones where I'm healthy, and restored to my former strength, avenging my children on him in blood while wearing the form of whoever he most loves. But I doubt even you're capable of granting that to me." She rested her head on the pillows, gazing up at me only with her eyes. "What do you want?"

"Well, I thought that was obvious. Revenge. Just like you."

"Why do you want revenge on him? He didn't murder your children. Do you even have any?"

"I'm really more of a free and independent spirit, if you must know," I said. "Changing diapers and giving up the nightlife for nursery rhymes and bedtime stories? Not really my thing."

"And plainly, he didn't murder you, and from the stories we have carried down through the generations, I know of no evidence that you're even capable of loving anything aside from yourself."

"It wasn't for lack of trying." I stretched out, floating more longways than seated now. "I'm guessing, from the numerous spots where your physicians' best attempts to graft dead Changeling armor onto the big holes in yours have obviously failed miserably, that you had a taste of the Element of Protection yourself?"

"Yes." She closed her eyes and spoke bitterly. "Everything we knew about the Elements of Harmony said that they shouldn't be able to harm us. We treasure harmony within our ranks even more than ponies do. There is no more perfect harmony than a well-run hive. It should have been no more possible to use them against me and my Changelings as to use them against Celestia."

If she hadn't been using the Element of Deception, then her hypothesis would probably have been correct, for the original six elements anyway. The Elements of Harmony would have worked on her because she was using an Element of Disharmony, but wouldn't have done anything to her Changelings. But the existence of the Seventh Element changed matters. "They shouldn't have," I agreed. "But the Element of Protection isn't really a Seventh Element of Harmony."

"Then what is it?"

I shrugged. "I don't know, yet. But I intend to find out. And then I intend to destroy it, or its wielder, or both. You're not the only one he used that oversized Ginsu on."

"That what?"

"Never mind. His oversized bread slicer. He's chopped me with it, more than once."

"It can harm you?"

"It's not an Element of Harmony, but it's close enough to one that it does very bad things to chaos, yes. Obviously, seeing that I am in possession of all my parts and you are not, I'm still a gazillion times more impervious than you are, but that doesn't mean I like losing my tail, even if it grows back a few days later as good as new."

"So he can harm you." She smiled thinly. "That would be useful news, if my hive and I weren't
already dead."

I tilted my head sideways. "You're looking like something the cat dragged in, certainly, but most
days I'm fairly certain the dead don't hold conversations. Or at least they don't do so while lounging
on silk pillows. I mean, after a thousand years maybe I'm a bit behind the times, but I'm fairly sure I'd
have noted a change like that."

Chrysalis laughed harshly. "Oh, I live still, now. But I can predict the future as well as any
soothsayer could. I made the mistake of bringing my strongest daughters with me to what should
have been my triumph, and instead, those that the monster didn't outright murder lie as broken and
weak as I. All the Changelings I didn't bring with me into the battle that day, all the ones still
whole and hearty, I sent with the daughters too young for metamorphosis. I begged another hive to
take them in, traded them treasures beyond reckoning, so that some other queen will raise my
daughters until they're old enough to start their own hives."

"Didn't think it was a good idea to keep them around the old family manse, hmmm?" I knew exactly
why she'd done it. Changeling Princesses get along as well as any other sisters as long as their
mother is alive. When the Queen dies, all of the ones still living in the same hive as their mother fall
into a bloodlust frenzy, murdering each other for the right to be Queen. And then the survivor
metamorphoses, whether she's old enough and strong enough to bear the transformation or not.
Queens are very tough and hard to kill – almost as bad as alicorns, if they're properly fed, though
they age like any other pony – and usually a Queen stops producing new ones a few decades before
she dies of old age. So she has plenty of time to choose a successor and make sure that the other ones
have all gone out into the world to found their own hives. If Chrysalis was dying of the injuries
Anon inflicted, she wouldn't have that kind of time.

Whichever of her badly injured daughters was unhurt enough to bear metamorphosis would probably
become the new Queen of the hive, and if her sisters were in bad enough shape that one might even
be able to control her murderous impulses, since none of them would be viable rivals. But if there'd
been healthy ones around, there'd have been a bloodbath as soon as Chrysalis kicked it.

"I don't know what you know of healthy hives, chaos creature," Chrysalis said, "but mine will not
survive. More die of their injuries every day; there isn't enough love to sustain us, let alone heal us.
By the time enough have died that the love supply we have now could heal the rest... most of our
provisions will have gone bad as well." In case you're wondering, she meant that the ponies in the
cocoons would be dead. Just so you know. "Few of my larvalings will be ready for first
metamorphosis by the time the adults of the hive are dead... and only the love we adults feel for them
is sustaining them. I'd have sent them away as well, but at the time I thought the hive had some hope
for survival, even if I didn't."

"I was getting that impression, yes," I said. "Healthy hives don't generally feed their dead to
Diamond Dogs."

She laughed weakly. "True, but that simple strategy has probably kept us going longer than we
would otherwise have. Dead Changelings bring disease to the hive, and there are so many and we
are so few, I'm not sure we could carry them all to the outside and give them to the sand. The Dogs
give us love, at least."

"It's too bad you can't make use of love from entirely non-magical creatures."

"Nothing in Equestria is entirely without magic," she said softly. "We could make use of creatures
without magic, if there were enough. But you perhaps may have noticed how very, very few
creatures live out here. We chose the spot for its isolation, and now it will be our grave."
"Well, that's morbid."

Chrysalis closed her eyes. "If you have not noticed, I am very busy dying. Get to the point of your visit soon, or it may be rendered moot."

She was exaggerating – she wasn't going to die in the next hour. I gave her at least a week. Maybe a month or two – as I said, Changeling Queens are tough. She'd be in agony the whole time, though, because her wounds weren't healing. The Element of Protection hadn't disintegrated her the way it had tried to do to me, but it had disrupted her magic, so she was healing at the pace of an unmagical creature – a donkey, a cow, a sheep – and given that half her chitin was missing, and was probably never going to grow back without magical assistance that she wasn't going to get, her exposed skin would be in pain just from exposure to the air. Bandages could only do so much. The ichor that supported her magic would slowly ooze out of her, leaving her body through the large wounds in her armor too fast for her disrupted magic to replenish it, and finally her magic would fail completely, leaving her to starve to death because without magic Changelings have no way to feed. But she might die of her injuries before that happened.

"Oh, very well, if you insist," I said. "I can be blunt and straightforward if I have to." I teleported behind her and murmured directly in her ear as I floated above her. "You have my Element of Deception. I want it back."

Chrysalis laughed. It sounded like it wanted to turn into hysteria, but her ribs probably hurt her too much to laugh that much. "I don't," she said.

"Oh really?" I coiled up in front of her and glared into her eyes. "Don't lie to me, Chryssy, I can make your death a lot more painful and prolonged than it was going to be otherwise."

"I'm not," she said, laughing again, bitterly. "If it's what I think it is... the amulet I was using to amplify my powers so that neither Celestia nor any other who knew Cadance well could notice if I slipped from character?"

"Nice to see you at least acknowledge that you know what I'm talking about," I said coldly. "Where is it, then, if you don't have it? Since you admit you did have it."

"I'll tell you if you promise me something."

"It's funny, I could have sworn that you're helpless on your deathbed in front of me, that your only protectors are asleep and hornless anyway, and that I'm the god of chaos. You know, when I went to business school, they told me to negotiate from a position of strength. I guess you never went to university?"

"As if you'd have lasted a day in a university, any university," Chrysalis said. "Too much order and control." She closed her eyes again. "You want something from me. I may be helpless... but I have nothing to lose. Torture us? Drive us to madness? We're dying. You can help us, and perhaps we'd have a chance... or you can torment us as much as you like, but it will do you no good. I'll tell you nothing unless you help us."

I glared at her. "Do you really think you're tough enough to take what I can dish out?" I hissed.

"On the contrary, I think I'll die five minutes into whatever you're planning to do," Chrysalis said, chuckling sardonically. "Perhaps ten, if I'm unlucky. I am much too weak for you to torture me for information, Discord. And the longer you delay, the greater the odds that I'll simply expire before I have a chance to give you what you want."
"Oh, fine." I stopped trying to be intimidating and stood on the ground, arms folded. "What sort of help do you want?"

"Let my hive live," she whispered. "I don't expect you to save me, and after I brought us to such an end I am not even sure I'd want you to. But give one of my daughters back her health and strength, so she can lead the rest to safety. Give us food to help us regain our health, if that's within your power. I realize you don't love anything but yourself and we can't feed on reflection, but give us ponies, or some other creature that loves. Let there be a new Queen who is healthy and strong, and a good supply of food, and they can live on without me."

"How do you guys feel about winter sports?"

She blinked at me. "What?"

With a thought, I removed the entire cave structure and displaced it into the mountains around the Crystal Empire. If Anon and pals did anything even remotely like what had happened in the cartoon, there was going to be a food bomb going off within the next couple of days. Actual insects hate the cold, but Changelings aren't actually insects, and are in fact warm-blooded creatures who can tolerate the cold well, their magical ichor forming an excellent layer of insulation. Plus, now that the Empire was back, the magical warmth generated by its crystals would heat the entire region.

"What did you do?" Chrysalis asked, gasping, her magical sensitivities strong enough to detect exactly how many ley lines I'd just dragged her entire hive across, cave structure and all.

"I don't really want to put a new puppet queen on the throne," I said. "Quite aside from the fact that it would be much more fun to watch your daughters fight it out, I can count on you to hate Anon as much as I do and not lock up with PTSD or something. So rather than wait for one of your daughters to get queened and lead you all to the Promised Land, I decided to dump you there myself."

"Where are we?"

"That would be telling." I grinned. "You'll find out soon enough. As for food—"

Ordinary dogs, small d, aren't magical creatures, but according to Chrysalis, Changelings can feed on them anyway. When I was a child, ponies weren't great at taking good care of their animals – cats and dogs bred and ran wild, and the "pounds" that they were collected in often had miserable conditions, and sometimes were forced to kill animals due to overcrowding. Now ponies have swung much, much too far in the opposite direction; they take such good care of their animals that animals are often virtually helpless without pony assistance. Animal shelters in the big cities of Equestria are stuffed to the gills with animals that can't survive without pony care, where the ponies they would have relied on have died, moved, given up on animal care, or have just become overwhelmed. Ponies like Fluttershy step in to adopt as many as they can, but because ponies have crippled animals' natural abilities to take care of themselves, the level of pony care needed by Equestria's animals is more than ponies can possibly give.

Dogs, in particular, are well-known for being loving, loyal pets – which is part of how carnivorous animals got to be such popular pets for herbivorous ponies. So I just pulled dogs out of shelters all over Equestria and dumped them all over the caves, along with big piles of yummy raw meat made from chaos. I gave them some meat trees growing outside, with branches high enough that the dogs wouldn't be able to get to them, but Changelings can all fly. Let the Changelings collect meat from meat trees to feed their pups, and the supply of love would be endless. The fact that ordinary dogs have very little magic meant that there wouldn't be a lot of nutrition coming from any one dog, but I provided them with a lot of dogs.
"What is that noise? What did you do?"

"Fixed your food problem. You now have a very large quantity of loving canines who are even stupider than your Diamond Dogs. Take care of them, feed them from the meat trees I gave you outside the caves—"

"Meat trees?"

"Don't interrupt. You should be doing reasonably well for food for a while. And for my final trick —" I snapped my talon and sheared away the edges of Chrysalis' chitin, where the Element of Protection had slashed through. She screamed.

"What are you doing? Stop!"

"Sorry." I wasn't actually that sorry. "I know from personal experience that if Anon slices you up with his cheese dicer, the parts of you that his sword touched while he was cutting off other parts of you are contaminated, their magic disrupted. I'm removing the parts he disrupted, which should allow the rest of it to start healing. You might still die – I'm not in the business of handing out miracle cures – but I've given you a fighting chance." I grinned down at her. "I find that chance is so much more fun and exciting than inevitability, don't you?"

She moved, slightly, as if trying to pull herself off of her supporting bed, and collapsed back onto it. "I'm in agony. Are you sure this isn't the part where you try to torture me for information?"

"No, you're going to freely give me that information, now that I've helped you. Your hive has a good chance of survival, now, and I expect you to make good on your promise."

"And if I don't, you'll torture me."

"If you don't, I take back the gifts I've given you, and you can die in torment knowing that you won a second chance for your hive, and then lost it by double-crossing me."

Chrysalis took a deep breath. "I traded it to the hive of Forgotten Sky, where I sent my daughters, as payment for taking them in."

"Which is where, exactly?"

"In Hayre. In the old lands. Near Underhill."

Very interesting. I whistled. "Moving up in the world, your girls, aren't they."

"Equestria was supposed to be the New World. They know us, in Hayre. They know how to ward us away. The lands are old and full of heritage and tradition, and you know as well as I do that those are other names for stagnation. This was the land of progress, the land where Changelings would finally make their mark. She was plainly exhausted, eyes closed, voice starting to slur. "I didn't want to send them there, but no other hive would take them."

Changelings originate from a subdimension called Underhill, or sometimes called the Fey Lands, which is very similar to Tartarus except for the fact that it is nice, and you would want to live there, if it weren't for the fact that if you're a magical pony the inhabitants will probably suck you dry. The only natural gate to Underhill in Equestria is Breezy Land, and that's actually sealed off from the rest of Underhill so you can only get there via the Equestria side and only during the time window that the gates are open. Most of the Underhill gates are in Neighropa or the islands around it. What Chrysalis was talking about was a hive near, or possibly within, the Sidhe Gates, the ones that can be accessed via caves in Hayre. There's also the Low Gates in Agland, the Avalon Gate in Albion, the
Fae Gate in Prance... no shortage of ways to get there, if you cross an ocean first.

The thing is, of course, that because Changelings came up first in those regions, the creatures that reside there – ponies in Albion and Prance, sheep and goats in Agland, cows, ponies and sheep in Hayre – are very, very well aware of how to properly detect, fight and protect themselves from Changelings. Equestria knows very little about Changelings, so the ponies over here were easy pickings. Normally, hives do not take in Princesses from other hives – the risk to their own Princesses is far too great. But a hive in Hayre, where the inhabitants know what herbs repel Changelings and what potions force them to transform to their true selves, would have a lot of use for the Element of Deception, simply in order to thrive and grow.

Which meant I might have a serious fight on my hands, if I couldn't negotiate with them to give them something they wanted even more. Well, I doubted they could possibly be as tough as Winnie was.

"Thank you, my dear, you've been an enormous help," I said, and gave Chrysalis a big fat smooch on her cheek, which woke her up enough to try to bat me away. She had a disgusted expression but you know, I bet she secretly enjoyed it. "Ta-ta!"

If Chrysalis survives – and with the help I gave her, she might, now – she's on my short list for allies to potentially give Elements to. I'm not giving her Deception, obviously – she handled that so badly, I doubt she's capable of properly bonding to it now. But one of the others, maybe.

And now, I'm off to lovely green Hayre, land of the Eohippos, Breezies, Changelings, and various other creatures from Underhill, to negotiate with the Changeling hive that got my Element of Deception. {Editor's Note: Hayre is pronounced hay-ruh, not like hair. This confused me the first time I read it because for once Discord spelled it correctly, which I didn't expect. –ed}

Oh, except Gilda says I have to spar with her first. Like I have time for this.

So here I am in beautiful Hayre, looking for the Board of Tourism, but for some reason everypony I've asked about it has screamed and run away. Really, it's enough to give a draconequus a complex. Do I have spinach stuck in my teeth? That would be very unusual, considering that I never eat spinach.

Changeling hives are even better warded over here than they were in the Badlands, but they're doing it with pure magic. There's a superstition that cold iron, a substance that disrupts magic in general, is dangerous to Changelings, and it's a persistent enough superstition that Changelings themselves believe it. So noiling lives in a cave with iron running through it (also, there is very little iron in Hayre to begin with.) And the thing about trying to hide your cave, or bog, or tree forts, with magic is that I can directly detect magic, so that trick doesn't work on me. It's sort of like dyeing your coat black to sneak through the night and forgetting that ponies are warm-blooded creatures and that therefore anything that can see heat—which, among other creatures, dragons, thestrals, timberwolves and hydras can—can see you just fine.

No, I'm faced with the opposite problem right now. I'm in the capital of Hayre, Dapplin, sitting on top of one of the tallest towers, and I can detect no less than fourteen hives within a quick trot of the city. No, wait, is that fifteen? Fourteen, fifteen, eurgh. Math is hard. I keep losing track of whether I counted one of them twice or whether I missed one. They're all using Changeling magic, aka processed love-derived magic, to disguise their hives. If they were trying to hide from me it would have made more sense to mind-whammy a unicorn, or maybe a zebra, into making them a cloak, because then I might not notice – I'd see a concentration of unicorn magic but figuring out that it's actually important would be less like a needle in a haystack and more like trying to find your favorite needle in a haystack-sized stack of needles. Zebra magic might work because they make their magic
blend into the background of the natural magic; I'm less likely to notice a spot that's very, very green on a background of mostly green than a spot of blue on the same background. But of course, they haven't done either one because they have no idea they should be worried about me. News doesn't travel particularly quickly between nations, and it's not as if the Hayre government would go out of its way to inform the Changelings of anything except how pleased they would be if the Changelings obligingly dropped dead.

But, you know... now I have to go visit fourteen hives, or maybe fifteen, to see which one of them is Forgotten Sky, and it might not be any of them because the hive might not be near Dapplin. Changelings have a bit of a dilemma when they choose the location for their hive. They blend in best in big cities, so close to a city is an ideal location to get a large number of harvesters out into the population, find a significant number of ponies that nopony will miss, and drain them, while also finding ponies that somepony will miss and impersonating them. On the other hoof, land is generally at a premium near a big city, and it's much harder to hide your hive when developers want to build a suburb on it. Forgotten Sky could be anywhere in Hayre, and this being where Changelings come from in the first place, there are many, many hives here.

Hmm. Let's try this.

Excuse me! Excuse me, sir! Or ma'am, or whatever you are, I can never gender you Changelings properly. Can you tell me –

--No, that is what we call rude. You do not try to mob the draconequus for asking—

--It's jello. You're swimming in it. If you don't want it to cover your breathing holes you might want to—

--Hello! Lord of Chaos, trying to talk here!

--No, it makes perfect sense. I'm rubber, you're glue, whatever magic you fire bounces off of me and sticks to you. Literally. Also, got your horn!

--I would already—

--Stop jumping on me! I am three seconds away from conjuring a giant fly swatter—

--All right, that's it. This is my ool! Notice there are no liferafts in it! I'm sure there will be some pee once you figure out that I really don't care if you all drown, but there are definitely no liferafts.

--The meaning of this, Your Majesty, is that I came here to ask a simple question and all of these changelings attacked me.

--I can't be trespassing. I'm the spirit of chaos. See my badge, here? This gives me the right to go anywhere on the world I want to.

--You really don't want to be doing that, Your Majesticness.

--I warn them and warn them but they never listen...

--What? It's just butter! I didn't kill your queen, she'll have herself dug out of there in no time.

--If you would just—

--Fine! You can all drown! Or you could answer my very simple question, and then I could give Mr. Princely here back his horn, and move my ool back home, and maybe even stop buttering your
queen! Though really, she should be paying me for this. Butter will do wonders for her complexion.

--Just one little question. Where is the hive of Forgotten Sky?

--That's fine, that's fine. Changeling solidarity and all that. I guess I'll just put your hive in my bag to go—

--Yes. Yes, you're in a bag. Yes, I'm going to tie the bag closed and then you're all going to have to do a lot of drinking if you don't want to drown. Wow, that's going to result in a whole lot of pee, won't it. I mean, it'll go from being an ool to a pool to a p, because there won't be any water left in the ool after you guys are done drinking it all—

--Oh, did I forget to mention that? Silly me! I'm Discord, the spirit of chaos. Pretty sure I did mention the spirit of chaos part.

--Hi, Queeny! How did you like the butter? Me, I prefer cream cheese.

--Speak up! Don't be shy!

--Oh, come now, trying to drown the only fellow who's trying to save all your lives? Just because he's willing to sell out a fellow Changeling hive to save this one? What did Forgotten Sky do for you guys that you're willing to die for them?

--You're right, that's not what my rep suggests at all. I've been going about this all wrong! Instead of filling the bag with water and threatening to drown you, I should turn you all into collectible Hearth's Warming ornaments!

--Oh, you've heard that? You've been to Equestria, or am I just that fascinating?

--You spied on Celestia? Magnificent! Right under Chrysalis' nose, too. I'm very impressed. But see, the thing I said was "I don't turn ponies to stone", not "I don't turn Changelings into hoof-sized crystal ornaments for a Hearth's Warming tree." Oh, wait, Yule tree. I forgot you guys don't even celebrate Hearth's Warming over here!

--How about cheese? Would you prefer being cheese?

--Your Majesty, I don't think this ling likes being cheese. Now that you're covered in cream cheese, I think you have the experience to answer this. Should I make him an orn—

--That was rude, my dear.

--Yes, I know this is your hive. I still outrank you. Spirit of Chaos, fundamental underpinning force of magic, plus, not only do I have your horn, I also have your nose.

--Gingerbread Changelings! There we go! That's not a single bit like stone.

--Alas, poor Changeling Queen! I knew her, Horatio. A mare of infinite stubbornness.

--No, I haven't killed her. How could she still be screaming curses at me if I had killed her? I just removed her head, sheesh.

--Well, she should have thought of that before she charged at me... after I'd already taken her horn. And her nose. But I think I'm going to put back her nose; there you go, much more attractive. I don't really have enough heads that are always screaming in my trophy room at home; old pal of mine used to send me one every Samhain, but we fell out of touch this last millennium.
--Now you're willing to deal? I turn half the lings in this room into Gingerlings and one of them into cheese, I remove your queen's head from her body and dance with it, and it's not until I say I'm going to take her for a trophy—

--You actually don't, dear heart. See?

--Oh, the screaming. Tone it down, willya? That's better. Ah, the old zipper trick, never fails to calm them down.

--Why, yes. Yes, these fully poseable and finely crafted figurines are all of the Princesses currently present in this hive. Except I think this guy might be a Prince. I could look at his undercarriage to check but frankly you guys aren't really impressively built to begin with and now that I've made him fun-sized I think I'd need a magnifying—

--Did you have something to say, Your Majesty? Because if this is more snarling and cursing I'll just take your entire mouth the next time and not even bother with a zipper.

--So that thing you were saying before about how it doesn't matter what I do to you because your daughters will take your place... is it sinking in now that that is not an option on the table?

--I already told you what I want! Give me the location of the Forgotten Sky hive and I'll turn everyling back into a Changeling, return the horns I took, clean up the water and the cream cheese, and put your head back on your body.

--There we go. Was that really so hard? Here, just to show you how grateful I am that you finally answered my question, let me give you all a makeover.

--I think it's an improvement! You're love vampires, right? Well, all the fillies love vampires that sparkle! You'll be a huge hit!

--Mmm... no. You can stay this way. Let it be a lesson to you. When the Spirit of Chaos says "jump", you say, "how applesauce?"

--And here I thought we already had the discussion about horns.

--Oh, it's in this hive someplace. Dig hard enough, you'll find it. Do be sure to wash it before you put it back on your head.

--What do you mean what good will that do? As soon as it's back on your head, it'll stick again and you'll be able to do magic just like before. But you won't be able to get rid of the yellow stripes. Those are a permanent gift from me to you.

--One more complaint and when you stick the horn back on it will fasten to your nose and you'll bloat to the size of a giant honeybee. Maybe I should do that anyway.

--You let your children beg on your behalf, but you're too proud to beg for yourself? Is that it? Well, after the hard time you've given me, maybe I'd like to hear some begging. Maybe some "Discord, please, don't make me look like a giant bee and be the laughingstock of every hive in Hayre for the rest of my life" would go down nicely right now.

--Okay, bee that way! Haha! You get it? Bee that way?

--Oh, you Changelings are a terrible audience. Grow a sense of humor if you don't want to be pink sparkly Changelings with a honeybee Queen for the rest of your lives.
Whew! Now that was some excellent chaos there. I won't lie; as frustrating as I might find it in the moment when it's happening, I really do like it better when they resist, and give me an excuse to let loose on them. That particular Changeling hive was unusually dense – not in terms of how many Changelings resided within, but in terms of how long it took them to figure out that they can't fight me.

It surprises me a little that whatever nameless hive I first invaded (which I shall heretofore dub Honeycomb Hive in honor of the makeover I gave the queen) fought so hard not to give up the location of another hive. I'd always thought Changeling hives were competitors. And maybe they are, but maybe when faced with a threat that could impact multiple hives, they band together. Hmm! I must give this some thought. If Changeling hives are competitors but intercooperate when dealing with threats that imperil all Changelings, then what would happen if I persuaded a few queens that letting their neighboring hive be discovered by ponies would be a delightful way to get rid of the competition? That could be lots of fun.

Maybe I'm overthinking things and the real reason they tried so hard not to betray Forgotten Sky is that Forgotten Sky is some kind of uber-hive, rather like Chrysalis' hive is in Equestria. Most hives in Equestria descend from Chrysalis; there were Changelings in my day – as I think I mentioned, I had a pet miniature hive of my own for a while, and they weren't the only lings in Equestria – but Changelings dream, and they were too slow to adapt to the new world order. They were used to my freewheeling world of anarchy where there was no central government to try to hunt them down. Once Celestia and Luna took control, Luna hunted all the Queens and Princesses down by their dreams, invaded hives, corralled the lings, and banished them to islands off the west coast of Equestria. I wonder to this day if Luna ever realizes she doomed them to a slow death by starvation that way, that her attempt to grant them mercy by banishing instead of killing them was no real mercy at all. By the time of Luna's fall, there were no Changelings in Equestria, and they didn't return until Chrysalis' arrival, less than a century ago. So now, almost all the Changelings in Equestria are in Chrysalis' daughter hives.

I won't know if any of the Changelings' side of the conversation came out until I go back home and see what my tooth just recorded to my journal, but just in case nothing came through: after a tense negotiation with one of the local hives, in which I of course thoroughly humiliated them and their queen for trying to refuse me the information I wanted, I finally got the location of Forgotten Sky. So I'm going to stop narrating in real time now. Judging from how hard Honeycomb Hive resisted me on the simple question of Forgotten Sky's location, I may be in for a fight... but unlike dragons, Changelings aren't much of a threat to me, and while most of them are pretty boring the queens are always fun to mess with, so I expect to have some fun.

You know, either way I win. They capitulate, I get what I want and move on with my life, maybe go find Lulalula Trixamoon and give her the shiny thing I just acquired, maybe go have a chat with Spike the Tiny Dragon, or maybe just go make myself a platter of spaghetti with cream cheese, jalapenos, and toadstools and drink it all up. They refuse me, I get to amuse myself at their expense. See, win-win! Sometimes I love being me.
Forgotten Sky turned out to be under a hill, very, very close to the Sidhe Gates. I guessed this meant they might have been one of the founding hives in Hayre. If many of the hives in Hayre descend from Forgotten Sky, this could also explain the fervor with which the Changelings at Honeycomb Hive tried to defend its location from me, I thought. I don't usually have to cover somepony with butter and cream cheese, threaten to drown their minions, put their home in a leather sack, take their horn and their nose, remove their head and dance with it, and turn their daughters into action figures to get them to comply with me. Maybe Queen Bee is a daughter of Forgotten Sky, or a granddaughter, or something.

Anyhoo. I didn't teleport straight in – the spells they use to hide themselves from ponies show up to me as magical beacons, but they still work to obfuscate the internal structure so I can't teleport in without risking ending up in a wall. Which is a lot less unpleasant for me than it is for unicorns who pull the same stunt, but since it's a cave, and therefore the walls are made of stone... brrr. I have... issues with being embedded in stone nowadays, even if I can easily get myself out with no harm done. If the walls were made of beeswax, or cheese, or whatever boring stuff it is that ponies make their walls out of, it wouldn't bother me much, but stone walls? No thank you.

So I snuck into the hive, and found it apparently abandoned.

This wasn't like with Chrysalis' hive, where it had fallen into ruined squalor. This was an empty hive. The lights were on, but nothing was home. No captives in goo, no Changelings bustling about attending to hive business. I went down to the nursery, because I knew they couldn't move infant larvalings and elderly caretakers on short notice – I'd teleported here. Even if the Queen was powerful enough to teleport most of her hive out – and Celestia couldn't do that, so I doubted any Changeling Queen could – the larvalings and elderly would have required more care than that. Teleportation is hard on a body, and to safely teleport an infant, an elderly individual, or a sick or injured individual, you either have to create a gateway – which isn't any strain on a being's body, but requires that you can walk, fly or slither through it, and there wouldn't have been time – or you have to wrap them tightly in your aura. Ordinary Changelings don't have anything other than Changeling magic and the ability to fly, though if they impersonate unicorns or pegasii they can impersonate those races' magic as well – but not well. No ordinary Changeling impersonating a unicorn could teleport. Princes and Princesses naturally had full-on magical horns, as did Queens, so in theory any of them could teleport. But there couldn't possibly be enough Princes and Princesses to personally wrap all the larvalings and elderly in their auras and teleport them; the royal class of Changelings is rare, borne personally by Queens or Princesses in body, not laid from an egg.

My first reaction was to think that Queen Bee had lied to me, and I considered going back, removing her head again and putting it on a spike outside her hive, while taking her body and hiding it in a museum in Albion. And then I remembered what I'd come here to find.

I relaxed and opened myself up completely to the magic within the caves. And there it was. A faint thread mixed in with the overwhelming ambience of Changeling magic, but I could indeed smell disharmony magic in there. My Element of Deception was being used. It was being used well – I couldn't find it, and I couldn't easily identify the spell it was amplifying and disrupt it. Deception, for obvious reasons, is very, very good at hiding itself and the effects it's causing. I could have sat there and meditated for hours to try to find the thing, and eventually I would probably have tracked it down, but I'm not that patient, and I had a better idea.

I stretched out my telekinesis to feel the walls. They felt like rock – rough, barely polished stone
walls, exactly as I would have expected. But when I touched the walls, I felt an amorphous spike of disharmonious emotion that seemed to be coming from nowhere. Anxiety. Fear. Anger. Yum. Only one of the walls didn't seem to get upset when I fondled it.

"Nice hive," I said. "Too bad the previous owners seem to have left in such a hurry, but oh well! Mine now, I guess! Very considerate of them – how did they know I was looking for a new base of operations in Hayre? A little chaos to spruce the place up, and this could be great!" I put my paw to my chin, stroking my goatee. "This room could use a little more space, though," I said. "Hmm. How about this?"

I pointed my finger and blasted the phlegmatic wall to smithereens, opening up the space considerably. I felt the anxiety around me spike. Walls have feelings, apparently, and get worried when they see their fellow wall destroyed. Good to know! "Much better," I said, making a beach chair and reclining my full length in it, simultaneously manufacturing a swimming pool, a shining smiley face to serve me for a sun, and sunglasses because I look awesome in sunglasses. After a moment, I realized to my chagrin that I had forgotten my towel. I snapped one up tout suite. You should never forget your towel.

"Ah, yes, this is nice," I said. "But it's lacking something... I know! It needs an ice cream stand. I'll put one right over there." I sat up and pointed at the far wall. "Just need to blast that one out of the way, and—"

An elderly changeling materialized out of the wall, shaking. It bowed deeply. (Standard Changelings don't have gender. Also, they are not called drones. Everypony gets this wrong for some reason – drone is the correct term for a Prince, because it refers to a male insect whose only role in life is to sit around until it's time to mate with the Queen. It's not the term for sexless insect workers.) "L-lord Discord, sir, please forgive me for hiding from you, but the hive abandoned me and a small number of others when we heard you were coming," it said. "Please don't destroy the walls of our hive, please. There are other Changelings hiding in them, old and useless ones like me that the others left behind."

"Are there now," I said. "I don't believe you. You'd better all come out and show me, or I'll have to assume there's nothing here but you."

Several other elderly Changelings appeared from the walls. I grinned. Now that I'd seen them shuck off the illusion spell, I could break it any time I wanted to. Changelings cannot, normally, impersonate part of the wall. That was my Element of Deception being used to bolster natural Changeling magic, with a big boost of queenly power behind it. "Oh, I see!" I said cheerfully. "You were pretending to be the walls!"

"Y-yes, sir," the one who'd spoken whimpered. All the others were bowed as far as they could go, practically prostrate on the ground.

"And you're the only lings in this hive? Where did the others go?"

"We don't know, sir. They left us behind because we're old and useless. We don't know anything."

"So they left you to my supposed wrath, after clearing out of here in a jiffy, because you're old? How terrible of them. But listen, there's plenty of room to go around. You don't have to leave the hive just because I've taken it over for my new home. Look, a heated pool with a miniature sun! Great for relaxing your muscles and supporting those poor old bones." I floated above the pool and cannonballed into the water, making sure to splash all of them. "Come on in, the water's great!"

"N-no, sir, we're too old to be able to swim very well. Changelings aren't good at swimming unless
"we're young and healthy," a different old Changeling said.

"Oh, what a shame. But I'm sure you'll enjoy my ice cream stand!" I pointed my talon at the wall again.

"NO!" several of the oldsters screamed at once.

"Why not?" I asked. "Is there something so very wrong with ice cream?"

"We're Changelings, we can't eat ice cream," one of them whimpered.

"Oh! Right! I forgot! Well, I'll make sure that right next to the ice cream stand we'll have a stand for selling love on a stick, how about that?" I pointed my talon again.

"No, please don't destroy our walls! They're – they're the only reminder we have of the days when we were young and healthy!" the first oldster to appear said.

"Oh, don't be silly. I'll build new walls that look just like them. You'll never even know anything has changed, except there'll be more space for love on a stick! And bumper carts, I'll bet you old fellas would just love some bumper carts."

Once again I pointed my talon at the far wall. This time the elderly Changeling who'd first spoken to me threw itself in front of my talon, hovering as hard as its old wings could hover, while the others ranged themselves between me and the wall, some on the ground and some in the air. "We can't let you destroy that wall, sir! It's sacred to us!"

"All right, then, how about this wall?" I pointed at a different one.

"No! They're all sacred!"

"Oh, you Changelings need to grow up. Time I introduced you to the joy of chaos! There's nothing special about one wall or another." I manufactured small whirlwinds that picked the elderly Changelings up and pinned them, throwing them to the center of the vortex and boxing them in. They weren't strong enough to fight their way out, though some were trying. "Or... is there?" I made a great show of stroking my goatee again before snapping my main Changeling liaison into place in front of me, holding it there with my telekinesis. "Tell me, old fella. Is there a reason you don't want me to destroy those walls? Because unless you can come up with a very, very good reason, perhaps one that admits to me that you're lying to me about being alone in the hive, I am going to smash those walls into itsy, bitsy pieces. After all, no Changelings will be harmed if I do that! You're alone in the hive, so it's not like there are any other Changelings hiding on the walls, are there?"

A sound like a sob came out of the old Changeling, and it bowed its head. The walls shimmered, and showed themselves to be completely covered in larvalings, pinned to the walls with Changeling goo. Most of them were sleeping, because that's what larvalings do when cocooned up. A few were staring at me from within their cocoons, and some seemed to be trying to scream, except of course you can't do that in a Changeling cocoon.

I slapped my forehead. "Oh, dear me! There were larvalings all over those walls! This must be an entire nursery worth! No wonder you didn't want me to destroy the walls! Oh goodness gracious, I would have accidentally killed all those poor sweet larvalings! I'm so glad you decided to come clean with me!"

"P-please, there's nothing here for you," the oldster said. "Just us, the old Changelings, and the babies the rest of the hive left behind because they couldn't flee in time. The hive is empty. Can't you just leave us in peace?"
"What? No, of course not. If there's nothing else in the hive, then there's no reason I shouldn't start going out there—" I gestured to the door—"and replacing those walls with something nicer. Obviously I'll leave this nursery intact, though you can keep the swimming pool. But that just means I'll have to do my redecorating with the rest of the hive!" I skipped out the doorway and into the large hall-tunnel it was attached to. "Look at all this limestone. Boring! Seriously, a few good blasts and this place could be much more attractive. I could replace all this limestone with papier-maché! Maybe in a nice sky-blue color. Or a brilliant yellow! Get some bright colors into this place, liven it up! Just because you live in a cave is no reason why your hive has to be so dreary looking." I pointed at a random spot. "Why don't I start here?"

"NO!"

I looked down at the old Changeling, hard. "...Was there something you might perhaps have neglected to tell me about your hive? Something you'd like to share?"

The illusion dropped. Changelings were pressed up against the walls everywhere. Some hanging by their hooves, which were held by goo. Some clinging to stalactites in the ceiling. Some fully gooed to the wall. Some standing on each other, their legs trembling.

A Queen strode up to me. For a Changeling, she had it going on – her carapace was so polished it shone, with iridescent greens, blues and purples sliding across its surface. Her mane was silver and very, very thick and done up in an elaborate do, with strands of it hanging down to form a glittering fringe around the back and sides of her head. Glittering silver rings holding sapphires and diamonds were clasped through the holes in her legs, and her mane and tail were laced with strands of pearls. Her gloriously misshapen Queen-horn was the ivory color of bone, not the same color as her carapace, and small jewels on a strand of copper had been wound around it. She was hot, is what I'm saying. I bowed.

"Your Majesty, do I have the honor of addressing the Queen of Forgotten Sky Hive?" I asked her in my best imitation of a courtier. I took her forehoof and kissed it gently. She yanked it back from me. Changelings. I tell you, even the Queens have no manners.

"You do," she said. "I am Queen Fantasia, daughter of High Queen Elusine of Emain Ablach Hive."

I whistled. So yes indeedy, Forgotten Sky is a big deal among the Changelings. I hadn't known the name of the High Queen, but I'd known that in Hayre, there was one, and that Chrysalis' bid to take over Equestria was in part a stunt intended to get her declared High Queen of Equestria. Emain Ablach is an ancient name for the land beyond the Sidhe Gates; I doubted the High Queen of Hayre actually resided in the Land Beyond, considering that it is both ferociously dangerous (though, unlike Tartarus, very deceptively so, appearing to the average pony like a verdant paradise) and rather devoid of love. But she might be in a hive built into one of the hills that the Sidhe Gates actually resided within. If Forgotten Sky was a direct daughter hive of the High Queen's hive, then it was very, very powerful. Chrysalis had driven a great bargain for a Changeling who was half dead and no longer had much of a hive to speak of.

"Well, my Queen, I doubt I need to be introduced, as it seems somepony's done it before me. But I wouldn't wish to be accused of lacking in the social graces. I am Discord, Spirit of Chaos and Disharmony, and I believe you can guess why I'm here."

"I can guess," she said. "But I would prefer to hear it from your own mouth. Why did you torment Triskele Hive to learn where to find us, and what do you want with us?"

Triskele Hive? I liked my name for them better. "I wouldn't have had to torment Triskele Hive, but they were very stubborn," I said. "Really, all they needed to do was tell me and I'd have been out of
"You have done them great harm," Fantasia said coldly. "Have you come to harm us as well?"

"Maybe." I floated up and coiled around, circling her, making her crane her head to look up at me. "Or maybe I've come to deliver a great boon. Chaos, you know, is very sensitive to initial conditions. Your dealings with me in the next few minutes will have a tremendous impact on whether your hive prospers, or whether all your Changelings end up turned into fish."

She breathed deeply. She'd tried to weave some sort of spell around herself to hide her emotions, but it's hard to hide disharmony from me. I could taste her fear, her anger and helplessness. I'd expected my words might leaven that with a bit of hope – a mind churning with both negative and positive emotion is more chaotic than one suffering from negativity alone – but so far, all I was feeling was negative. Which was still tasty, just a trifle blander than I prefer. "What do you want from us?"

"You know what I want." I dangled down and lifted my head, so my eyes were positioned just above hers, my face aligned to the same gravity as hers was. "I want my Element of Deception, Your Majesty. I am prepared to reward your hive handsomely for giving it back to me... and to break your heart, shatter your mind with despair and anguish and leave you broken, weeping and hating yourself if you refuse me. Which will it be?"

"Don't underestimate us, Spirit of Chaos," she said. "If it's a fight you want... it may not go the way you wish."

"Really." I pulled myself up more or less upright and then lowered my head to right above hers, where she had to tilt her head almost all the way back to see me. "That thing I said about breaking your heart and shattering you? I did that. To a dragon who was more than a canter long. Oh, wait, you Hayrish don't use trots and canters, do you. It's kilometers, isn't it? He was two and a half of them. And the last I saw, he was begging hysterically for me to give his hoard back to him, and then crying like an orphaned foal when I refused. And he had nearly every magic item you've ever heard of, because he'd held one of my Elements for centuries. You've had my Element of Deception what, a month? Two, tops?"

"We aren't dragons," Fantasia said. "If it were in our interest to capitulate, and give you what you've asked for, we'd do so. But the magical item you refer to as the Element of Deception is key to our continued survival here in Hayre. We cannot yield it."

"You've lived this long without it, why change now?"

"We know what happened to Chrysalis' hive." She turned her back on me, walking slowly away, infuriating me. But I held my temper, I was good. "It's emboldened the ponies here to hunt us. They've developed spells that can identify the source of a creature's magic. No Changeling can hide from such a spell... without the legendary Amulet of Illusion, that which you call the Element of Deception." She turned. "They've found most of the harvesters in Dapplin... and burned them alive."

I frowned. That was ugly. Equestrian justice was far kinder; there's no death penalty on the books for any crime, certainly not for simply being a Changeling. Although that might have been something Anon changed. I did know, however, that Hayre was home to cows and sheep, and just a short griffon's flight away from the Griffon Empire. Even with Albion and Agland as a buffer, cows and sheep in Hayre are far, far more willing to defend themselves with violence than they are in Equestria, where they're under the protection of the Sun Princess, or in the Griffin Empire, where they're decidedly third-class citizens and so beaten down and resigned to their fates, many of them volunteer for the slaughterhouses in hopes that the payout will give their families a better life. Ponies can't afford to be as gentle and harmonious when they share power with insecure and bloodthirsty
prey animals who don't have wings, horns, earth pony strength, or the Princess of the Sun an ocean away being a member of their species. Predators who try to feed on any sapient citizen of Hayre generally end up put to death if they get caught.

Still, murder by fire was gratuitous. There was no reason ponies couldn't execute the Changelings swiftly and cleanly, without pain. Burning them was intended to send a message, and apparently it had worked. Queen Fantasia was more afraid of the ponies and their Changeling-hunting spells than she was of me. Part of me was offended by this, but I recognized that this was more of Anon's work, indirectly. He was the one who destroyed Chrysalis' hive, personally slaughtered nearly every ling in it, and apparently that had given the ponies here the confidence to take on their own greatest predator. Griffons leave ponies alone, but Changelings prefer to feed on ponies because ponies have magic, and cows and sheep don't.

"I'm not wholly unmoved by your plight," I said. "But I need the Element of Deception to fight the creature that took Chrysalis' hive down. Surely you recognize that, rather than using it simply to conceal yourselves, it'd be better to attack the problem at its root, and destroy the one who destroyed her hive?"

"It wouldn't matter," Fantasia said. "Destroy one pony, and it means nothing. His actions have already taken place, and already led ponies to believe that they can, and that they should, destroy us all." So she didn't know the details – namely, that Anon wasn't a pony.

She was probably right – Hayre was most likely outside of Anon's influence. I hadn't checked the stallion-to-mare ratio, but Zebrica had seemed exactly as I expected – I hadn't known about Anon at the time, so maybe there was some subtlety I'd missed, but it looked to me more likely that Anon simply wasn't affecting anywhere in the world but Equestria. And probably the Crystal Empire, now. This didn't change the fact that it was my Element and had never been Chrysalis' to give away in the first place. "Well, I sympathize, I truly do. But the Element of Deception is mine, part of my office as Spirit of Disharmony, and if I want it back, you—"

Without any warning whatsoever there were what seemed like a hundred Changelings on top of me. I never saw it coming, and I don't mean that to suggest that I failed at paying attention. When I know I'm in a hostile situation and I don't believe I've already won, I pay a great deal of attention, and my reaction time is excellent. The fact that one moment all the Changelings were ranged around me and the next they were on top of me, with no shift in magic large enough to indicate a mass teleportation, meant that Fantasia, or someling anyway, had just used my Element of Deception against me, again. The lings launching an attack on me had been hidden for a few crucial seconds, the gap between launching and landing. And now I had what seemed like every harvester ling in the place piled on top of me... draining my emotions.

You may have noticed that emotion is what drives me, moreso than most ponies. Chaos is all about randomness and following one's whims, and without emotion, one cannot have a whim. There are only two possible drivers of motivation, two things that can make anyone do whatever they do – emotion, and rules. Ponies can follow rules, like golems or robots, in the absence of emotion, but I cannot, because, well, I don't follow rules. Without my emotions, I have no motivation to do anything.

When I felt them draining me, when I felt my love of chaos and my fear and my anger bleeding out of my body and leaving me empty, I felt renewed fear... but they drained that as well. It's a myth that Changelings can only consume love. Love is what's best for them, but just as ponies can eat meat and paper and go rooting through the trash to eat garbage, Changelings can eat any emotion. Most negative emotions are fairly bad for them, and don't taste pleasant, although they do enjoy anger and
jealousy as a delicious hot spice on their love, sometimes. These ones were determined; the Queen
plainly knew my weakness. One Changeling couldn't have made a dent in me, but while I doubt
there really were a hundred, I am fairly sure there were at least forty, all draining me as fast and hard
as they could, and because I'd been given no chance to see them attacking before they did it, I'd had
no chance to muster a defense. Turning myself to magic didn't help at all; magic is part of what
Changelings drain. They weren't harming my body; it was my mind and my magic they were
draining. I tried to teleport, but the Queen was blocking me, and ordinarily I could break a spell like
that in moments, but I didn't have moments.

Within seconds, all the frantic plans I'd come up with to defend myself seemed like much too much
work to bother with. They bore me down to the ground, and I stared up at the ceiling, feeling too
empty and apathetic to even try to push them away. Logically I knew what was happening, and I
knew that I should be feeling emotion, and that I should be afraid, and that I should be fighting
back... but logic and I, as I may have pointed out on multiple occasions, are not on good terms.

In just a few minutes, though, they were full to bursting. As I said earlier, Changeling nutrition is a
factor of the intensity of the emotion, the type of the emotion (they digest variants of love far more
easily than other emotions), and the magical pool of the target. With my enormous magical pool, they
didn't have to drain me deep before they filled up.

I should explain here how Changeling emotipredation works. Every sentient creature has a deep,
depth well of emotion that's a fundamental part of their personality and their psyche, and then a much
shallower pool which is what they're feeling right now. Drain the shallow pool, and usually, it will
replenish quickly from the deep wells of personality. Ponies, and other creatures, with a tendency
toward depression may not recover so quickly, because they have problems keeping their pools full
at the best of times, but most creatures will recover their emotional equilibrium from a Changeling
attack fairly rapidly. When Changelings drain a pony completely dry, if that pony survives it, they
genally suffer from severe depression for the rest of their lives, become sociopaths, or become
severely depressed sociopaths, losing the ability to love or care for anyone and generally most of the
rest of their emotions as well. That takes months, and rarely happens; usually the pony's magic runs
out first, and then their life force depletes as well, and then they die. Most ponies have more emotion
than magic.

I have so much of both I've never tried to compare the two, but because of that, every harvester in the
hive, taking turns after I was incapacitated, couldn't significantly drain my magic, let alone my life
force, and couldn't do more than skim the top off my well. They drained my emotional pool dry more
than once (it kept trying to fill up with fear, because I knew this was bad and I should be afraid), but
even after every Changeling in the hive had made themselves nauseous gorging on my emotions
(which, let's not forget, have next to no love in them, if you don't count self-love... which probably
should count! I personally think that my passionate love for the handsome and dashing Discord,
Master of Chaos, should go down through history as one of the loveliest romances ever told. Not
sure the Changelings would agree, though), they hadn't done more than temporarily incapacitate me.
I was still perfectly healthy and full of magic, just much too tired and apathetic to want to try to fight
them.

I might possibly have remained that way long enough for them to evacuate and flee, but that is not
what Queen Fantasia decided to do. With me conscious but unmoving at her hooves, no emotion
driving me to do much of anything at all... she decided to do the one thing that could undo that
situation. She made the decision to dispose of me... and made a terrible, terrible mistake when she
chose her method.

Fed by all of the emotion (most of it disgusting and hard to digest for Changelings, but it could still
be converted into magic) her Changelings had taken from me, she unleashed a spell on me, at
strength equal to Celestia's on a good day... to turn me to stone.

Now, alicorn-level spells are nothing to sneeze at. But there was a reason Celestia hadn't tried such a stunt herself, despite the fact that she most certainly knows petrification spells, and had instead relied on the Elements of Harmony, both times. An ordinary unicorn's casting would have dissolved against my natural field of chaos. An alicorn-level spell could actually get through, and work... and it did. I felt the familiar, terrible sensation of my limbs and body flaring with momentary pain, then going horribly numb and heavy, and I did what I think anyone who had spent over a thousand years in that state would have done. I panicked completely.

The only reason I hadn't reacted or fought back was that the Changelings had drained me of emotion. But turning me to stone – which is, if not the thing I am most afraid of, definitely up there in the top three – replenished my pool with raw animal terror, pretty much instantly. With emotion came motivation, aka get me out of this thing right now right right right NOW get me OUT! And while the Elements of Harmony have the ability to bind my magic, an alicorn-level petrification spell does not.

So I was free within a minute, maybe. Two, tops. And I was furious.

To get out of the stone, I'd started a spell that annihilated stone, reverting it to whatever it was before it was stone. In my case, I was a living draconequus first, but for most of the stone on Equestria, it was superheated gases before it was superheated liquefied stone, and since superheated gas tends to be bad for things that breathe, including me if I don't protect myself, I opened a thousand pinpoint wormholes to the ocean and let the gas flow through, where it would congeal back into rock near the bottom of the sea. Since we were in a cave, where there was plenty of rock, this was immediately noticeable. Changeling started screaming as the walls around them and the floor underneath them started evaporating, trails of visible black steam (did you think superheated gas that can turn into rock would be as transparent as air? It's not) disappearing into tiny holes in the air. Sunlight shone into the cave for probably the first time in millions of years, if ever.

"What are you doing? Stop!" Fantasia screamed, firing spell after spell at me. Changelings tried, gamely, to feed from me, to bring me down again, but this time I was prepared. I redirected Fantasia's spells at her Changelings, transforming the energy as I did so, so that spells intended to blast me to my component atoms instead morphed Changelings into living teddy bears, giant intelligent apples, fish with hooves, or screaming flowerpots. The Changelings who tried to drain my emotion got a focused pulse of my feelings for Anon. Remember that I said that emotions that aren't love aren't all that good for Changelings? Hate, in particular, tastes bitter and horrible to them, and with my magic amplifying it, every Changeling who tried to feed on my emotions got force-fed a huge heaping helping of pure willowbark extract covered in sulfur and battery alkaline, or the Changeling equivalent thereof. They choked, and vomited up green gooey magic, and collapsed retching on the rapidly disappearing floor of the cave. I'm not heartless; the larvalings and the elderly couldn't necessarily fly, so I was evaporating the rock beneath our feet in such a way as if it was water draining out of a bathtub, not the floor of an upper story vanishing, even though technically there had been open caverns below us.

"Stop! Stop it, please!" Fantasia shouted at me. "This is our home!"

By now we were essentially in a hollowed-out crater where there had once been a hill and caverns within it. I slapped my forehead. "Whoops! I can't believe how carried away I got with that rock erasing spell!" I said, grinning coldly. "Of course you changelings need some rock back. How about this?"

Large boulders, and marshmallows that looked exactly large boulders, began raining from the sky when I snapped. Changelings shrieked and flew about this way and that, trying to dodge. "Here you
go! Rocks to build a new cave with, and marshmallows to help you glue them together!

I heard Fantasia shouting at me, but since I'd replaced everything that came out of her mouth with the quacking of a duck, I couldn't tell what she was saying, and the chaos of Changelings desperately trying to evade objects that might be either rocks or marshmallows was just too delicious. I waved my conductor's baton as I floated over the orchestra of chaos, and laughed and laughed as Changelings panicked and tried to flee. I also manufactured a few fake Changelings to be squashed by rocks – Changelings tell each other apart by magical signals with their antennae, mostly. In this mayhem, noling would realize that the dead ones couldn't be identified as anyling from their hive at all, and by the time they figured out I'd faked them out, this would all be over.

See, I like fear. I like panic, I like cacophony, I like the sheer terror creatures feel when they're in fear for their lives and they flee and run into an invisible wall that seems to have no upper boundary. I love this stuff, in fact. But I have a little problem. If I actually kill anyone, then they're dead and they're not generating any more glorious terror and wreaking havoc in their escape attempts. But if I don't actually kill anyone, then my victims think I've gone soft, and they stop feeling quite as much fear.

So I faked the Changelings out. When I observed that a rock was actually going to fall on a Changeling, I swapped it out for a marshmallow. If a marshmallow was about to fall right next to a pinned and helpless Changeling, I occasionally swapped it for a rock. So rocks thudded into the ground next to Changelings, barely missing them; what actually hit them was marshmallows. However, if noling ended up squashed by a rock, they might possibly figure out I was pulling my punches. So I created fake, nonliving Changelings and had them stumble directly into the path of a falling rock, which promptly squished their head and made it impossible for anyling to tell they were fakes without a forensic analysis or a careful roll call, neither of which were possible at the moment. That way, each Changeling was certain that their life or death was a matter of random chance, or my personal whim, which aren't easily distinguishable to the naked eye; but the quantity of fear and the complexity of the chaos created by the panic didn't diminish.

When a good number of Changelings were stuck in marshmallows, struggling and crying as they awaited their expected grim fate, I turned back to the quacking queen, who was on her knees on the ground beneath me, sobbing. I landed en pointe, my dragon foot encased in a beautiful green and orange striped ballet slipper with pink ribbons. "Did you have something to say, queeny?" I inquired, restoring her ability to speak. "You look a little down in the dumps there!"

"Please," she sobbed, looking up at me. "I'll give you the Amulet of Illusion. I'll do anything. Please, please, stop killing my Changelings, please."

"I don't know," I said. "You tried to kill me. You did encase me in stone, however briefly. And stupidity like that really should be its own reward."

"Then spare them, and turn your wrath on me," she begged, prostrate in front of me. "I'm the one who gave the order. I'm responsible. Please, torment me if you must, but not them. Please."

While Fantasia had managed to royally torque me off by turning me to stone, she did get points for throwing herself in front of me and begging without being coached to do it. "I haven't actually heard an apology out of you," I said.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry we tried to hide from you, I'm sorry we defied you! I'm sorry! Here!" I hadn't seen the amulet around her neck until the moment she tore it free and tossed it on the bare rock at my feet. "Please, have mercy on my hive, please!"

I picked up my Element and pocketed it. "I'll think about it." I watched the chaos for a bit more, but
the fear was starting to curdle and turn to despair. I don’t like despair; it’s the emotion of motionlessness, sometimes indistinguishable from apathy. Fear motivates; despair drains all motivation, because why bother to fight if you can’t win? I'd had as much fun as I was going to get out of these Changelings. "Oh, all right." I snapped, and the rocks and marshmallows still in the air all vanished.

The air was still filled with sobbing as terrorized Changelings took stock and tried to help one another. What big babies. I knew for a fact that not a single one of them was physically harmed.

This included Fantasia, who was still weeping hysterically at my feet. "Oh, grow up," I said. "I took the rocks away. What are you crying about now?"

"You've doomed our hive," she choked out. "You've doomed all Changelingkind in Hayre. When Chrysalis called, I saw hope for a future, for the first time in a month. We could use the Amulet of Illusion to enhance our magic and hide all of our hives, all of our harvesters. We had some hope of safety when I thought it was hopeless. And now you've snatched that from us and left us to be murdered by the ponies of Hayre as soon as they find us."

"Ever considered laying low until the heat is off?"

"We have to eat! If I can't send harvesters out, we'll starve! Is that any sort of choice? Burn, or waste away of hunger?"

"And I might have been willing to work with you on that, if you hadn't jumped straight to trying to kill me." I twirled some of her mane around my talon. It had fallen out of her elaborate hairdo and was beautifully disheveled now. She flinched. "But just to show you that I can be the bigger draconequus and that I don't hold grudges, I will consider the possibility of helping you out with this. The being who's emboldened the ponies against you and who slaughtered Chrysalis' hive is my personal nemesis, and just to spit in his face I might consider aiding you. Maybe."


I twirled her mane tighter, pulling her closer in. "I am prepared," I murmured to her, "to send you to a new location for your hive in Northern Amaerica. The ancient Crystal Empire has returned, and is ruled over by the youngest alicorn, the legendary Princess of Love." It was unlikely that Chrysalis would have shared the full details of her ignominious defeat with her fellow queen. And in Hayre, at least, they remembered the Crystal Empire – a legend of a land of overflowing love and light, a place that drew a great deal of Changeling emigration from the old world of Neighropa, until an evil pony king plunged the land into fear and despair, and all the love, and the Changelings dependent on it, died. "The dark king has fallen." This wasn't actually true; I hadn't felt the magical shift that would signify Somby's destruction yet. But it was in the bag, considering that Anon and his I-get-to-be-the-big-hero reality warping powers were on the case. "I could place your hive in the mountains around the Crystal Empire, to bask in the love and the light of the long-lost Crystal Heart."

"Our hive alone? We had intended to use the Amulet of Illusion to protect all the Changelings of Hayre..."

"I'm not taking sides in the war between predators and prey like that," I said. "Your hive only. If that's a problem, you're free to refuse the deal."

"Not a problem," she said hastily, trembling. "W-what would you want for this boon?"

I pulled her much closer. "You," I whispered in her ear.
I let the entendre hang in the air for a moment, savoring the look of surprise and shock on her face (and just a bit of fear, which is honestly totally unfair considering what Changelings have been known to do for a meal), before clarifying. "And your hive. As my minions. You go about your little lives as usual, harvesting your love, laying your eggs, but when I have a mission to give a Changeling, you will give me a Changeling to do it. Without question. Even if it's a suicide mission."

"I – I could agree to that, yes," she said. "For the sake of—"

"Even if I ask for one of your daughters. Or for you. If I tell you I need a Queen, you come, personally."

Changeling carapaces hide any sort of color shift from emotion, but I can feel disharmony. I felt her fear spike. Had she been a pony, she'd have gone pale. "I... I understand."

"Your lives are mine, if I do this for you," I said with my face right up against hers. I wanted to sound terrifying, and dominant, and sexy in a kind of brutally villainous way, and judging from her reaction I was succeeding. Her emotional state was in a shambles. I'd just terrorized her entire hive, and as far as she knew, had murdered several of her Changelings; I'd taken what I wanted and made her beg; and now I was offering a chance of survival, magnanimous beyond anything she could have hoped for. She was humiliated, fearful, hopeful, and the part of her that evolution built to find the best possible mates from any species, to help her produce truly powerful daughters and sons so genetically desirable that other hives would be desperate to ally with her, had just identified me as the most mateworthy creature she'd ever met... much to her chagrin and deeper humiliation, because Changeling Queens are taught to rule and to dominate without question, not to find submission sexy.

I didn't actually want her, except in the sense that I want pretty much any interesting creature I meet, especially the ones that are outstanding and unusual specimens of their respective species. But after what she'd just done to me, I needed her emotions to be in utter chaos when she thought of me... and I enjoy being wanted. Who doesn't? So with my talon tangled in her mane, pulling so hard I'd lifted her off the ground and she had to beat her wings to stay even with my head, I held her close enough to kiss and said, "Do you agree to my terms, or will you remain here in Hayre and die?"

"I... accept, my Lord," she said, trying to moisten dry lips, and oh, how she hated calling me that. Such a delicious cocktail of shame and rage and relief and desire. I almost wanted to take her then, to give her a chance to fight me on terrain that Changelings usually dominate on, and defeat her there as well. A mating with a Changeling Queen is a contest to see who can get the emotional upper paw on who, and by definition they almost always win... but I have a lot more experience in playing such games with Queens than Fantasia could have in playing them with avatars of Chaos, so I'd win.

Immediately I rejected the idea, though. I'd been out of the game for a long, long time, and I'd been noticing that my reactions, when I'd go to my xenophile club and engage in a bit of mutual fun with strangers, were much, much stronger than they used to be. Lock a guy up in a stone statue for a thousand years, unable to feel any tactile sensation at all, and maybe it was no surprise that sex lately was more intense than I remember it being since I was a teenager with a recently misplaced virginity. Not that I'm complaining, but it meant I might actually lose to a Changeling's manipulations. Better not to risk it. I liked making her think that I might, though.

I released her, letting her almost fall before she regained her equilibrium and managed to catch herself with her wings. "There's a good filly," I said, reaching out and patting her head in as patronizing a means as I could manage. "See? Was that so bad?"

I saw the outrage in her eyes. "So bad? You killed—" And then she was brought up short, because when she looked back at the battlefield to point at the poor mangled corpses of the Changelings I'd so cavalierly brained with giant rocks... there weren't any. While I'd been negotiating with her I'd
vanished the fake dead Changelings.

"Killed who? My dear, you should know that I never kill if I can avoid it. Death is stasis; only life can produce change and chaos."

"But... I saw..."

"This has been very stressful for you, poor little queeny. You need a nice soak in a hot tub and a good long rest. Fortunately for you, I'll be setting you up practically next door to your old friend Chrysalis, and I'm sure the two of you can get together for lunch or something. It'll do you some good to be social for once."

"W-what?"

I grinned broadly. "Do say hi to her for me, will you?" And snapped my talon.

In Hayre, Fantasia was the daughter of the High Queen. In the Crystal Empire, she'd be an interloper; Chrysalis had the greatest possible claim to be High Queen of North Amaerica, given that most hives in Equestria are her daughters' hives. Of course, Chrysalis was extremely weak, and having taken in some of her Princesses, Fantasia would know that... but open conflict with Chrysalis would turn these new adopted daughters into dangerous moles within the hive, lings whose allegiance couldn't be fully predicted. Politically, I'd just dumped her into an even stickier situation than she'd been in before – albeit with much less chance of being slaughtered by ponies. Although, Cadance seems to have some serious PTSD, and I wouldn't put it past her to call Anon up to the Crystal Empire to do the slaughtering for her.

Any way you looked at it, there was going to be some glorious conflict, and it was going to be hilarious.

So. With my Element of Deception secure, it was time to pay a visit to Spikey-Wikey.

Twilight, adorably, had surrounded the Golden Oaks library with wards and alarms to keep me out. It was so gosh-darned cute how she thought a 20-something-year-old unicorn could best the same Lord of Chaos who'd broken the locks Celestia (and later Luna as well) had put on the Elements of Harmony... twice. I'll give her this, she spared no expense of research, time or magic. There were chaos-sensing fields, there were whitelist wards that kept out anyone except those on the authorized list, there were puzzle wards that were supposed to draw in the mind of any invader and make them spend hours trying to solve the puzzle, there were sensor webs for hostile intent. It just made me want to pinch her little cheeks and give her a big hug, and maybe a cookie. Her wards took me ten whole minutes to dismantle completely.

I found him in the kitchen, morosely binge-eating ice cream and potato chips. His color was a little dull, and his magical aura weaker than usual – looked to me as if Twilight had been neglecting her little assistant's dietary needs. Gems aren't just tasty to dragons, they're necessary for maintaining their magic, particularly in a growing dragon like this one. The deprivation wasn't going to kill him or even seriously harm him – Spike had, in the past, gotten a lot more gems than the average dragon whelp had by his age – but it could slow down his development if it went on too long. Plus, his body's probably gotten used to the high level of gems in his diet. So with more neglect from Twilight and less doting from Rarity, it was my guess that he was feeling physically drained, like a constant low-grade cold (which dragons don't actually get, fortunately, because can you imagine a dragon sneezing all the time? I'm all for chaos but even I think that's a bit much). I'm not concerned for his welfare personally – sure, I might have been horrified at the thought of killing him myself, but it's not as if I care what happens to the kid – but I added "child neglect" to the litany of crimes caused by
Figuring that I could get his complete attention, under the circumstances, by feeding him, I popped a bowl of gems into existence. (Actually they were real gems, I just grabbed them from elsewhere. I could have made gems, but the last thing I want to do is feed my enemy's pet dragon Chaos magic, and Twilight will continue to be my enemy after Anon has been destroyed until I manage to persuade Celestia to tell her to stand down. Which I don't mind; Twilight at her full mental capacity is a fun enemy to have. Sure, she beat me the last time, but that's just going to make our next real contest more exciting.)

Spike's eyes widened. "Oh, wow!" He jumped up and looked around himself. "Twilight? Twilight, are you back? Princess Celestia, is that you?"

I materialized on all fours, wearing a Celestia wig (it might have been a little crooked, but come on, you try to balance that much mane on your head) and a hastily applied white paint job all over my body. "Yes, my faithful student's little dragon, it is I, Princess Cakelestia," I said in a high-pitched voice. I was wearing a cutie mark of Celestia's sun with a big grinning face on it and a slice of cake being stuffed into that face, and I'd reduced my horn count down to one, though admittedly my goat horn doesn't resemble Celestia's all that much and maybe I should have centered it.

Somehow, Spike wasn't fooled. "Discord!" he shouted, and grabbed at a scroll that was sitting on the table next to his ice cream. He raised it to his mouth, pursing his lips to blow flame at it, but I grabbed it in my telekinesis and pulled it over to read it. Now I confess that I'm not the best at reading, but I was easily able to read this message; all it said was, "Dear Princess Celestia, I'm in the library. HELP! Spike."

"Give that back!" Spike shouted.

"Oh, of course. Pardon me, I do forget the social niceties sometimes. It's impolite to read other people's mail, isn't it." I hoofed it back to him (well, technically, I used my talon), waiting to see if he'd fire it off without reading it. Sadly, he didn't. He scowled at me as soon as he saw that I had changed the message to, "Dear Princess Celestia, I like big butts and I cannot lie. Will you marry me? Spike."

Spike dropped the note on the floor and started slowly backing away from me. "Twilight and Anon are just over at Sweet Apple Acres. They're supposed to be coming back any minute now," he said, his paw slowly reaching toward his side like he thought I couldn't see him do it, or more likely, like he thought I didn't know dragon whelps have pockets.

"That's funny, I could have sworn I saw them in the Crystal Empire just a few minutes ago," I said. "Ooh, more letters! Are any of them for me?" I pulled all the letters Spike was trying to get to out of his pocket and started reading them. "Dear Princess Celestia, I'm at Fluttershy's. Help. Dear Princess Celestia, I'm at Rarity's. Help. Dear Princess Celestia, I'm in Ponyville. Help. I'm detecting a pattern here. Were you expecting to be abducted everywhere?"

"I – I'm warning you," Spike said, his voice shaking. "I know Princess Celestia has somepony keeping an eye on me. If you hurt me you're going to end up in a world of trouble."

"Hurt you?" I teleported over to him and coiled around him, making him go rigid with terror. "My dear boy, whyever would I want to do that?"

"Uh, for whatever the reason was that you tried to kill me a couple of weeks ago?"

I laughed. Even terrified, the boy had some snark to him. "Oh, Spike, I'm so deeply sorry for that. I
never meant to hurt you at all! I was going after Anon." I teleported over to the gems, sitting in the
seat he'd vacated. "Consider this an apology gift," I said, pushing the bowl toward him as I tossed a
particularly savory sapphire into my mouth. (I can't eat gems naturally like dragons can – I don't have
either dragon teeth or a dragon digestive system – but with my powers, I can eat anything I want, and
I'm dragon enough that I can taste the gem the way a dragon would have.)

"If you were going after Anon, why did you threaten me in the first place?"

I wondered if the fact that Anon was so far away would allow me to actually explain what was going
on. Well, small steps first. "Because she was supposed to pick him. I wanted him to suffer what he's
made me suffer," I said.

"Wait, what has Anon made you suffer?" Spike asked warily.

"He's—" made Celestia forget our past together. "—nearly killed me, more than once." Damn. It
wasn't going to work. I couldn't say what I needed to say, to explain to Spike why I'd wanted Anon
to suffer that way before he died, and without being able to explain it, I looked like I'd been
pointlessly villainous. I decided to try to roll with it, see how far I could get from another angle. "I'm
not much of a fan of death, but if I don't take him out, sooner or later he'll get me."

"Yeah, but why did you want Twilight to pick him to die, instead of just killing him?"

"She was supposed to pick him," I said, redirecting the subject. "You're the dragon she hatched and
raised. You've been like a son, or at least a little brother, to her. You've been with her through thick
and thin. Even when I broke her and made her believe friendship was worthless, she never
questioned your loyalty. Anon is a fellow she just met a few months ago. Why did she pick you and
not him? It's completely out of character."

Spike looked down morosely. "It's because I'm just a dumb sidekick and I can't do anything to help,"
he mumbled. "What do you even want, Discord? You just want to taunt me about how useless I am?
Go on, I already know. You can't turn me into my opposite by telling me things I already know."

This was untrue, actually; I often get the best results from telling ponies things they already know but
are desperately trying not to think about. But that was beside the point. I teleported him into the chair
I'd been occupying, in front of the gems, and took a chair for myself next to him. "And since when
have you been merely a 'dumb sidekick', Spike?"

"All my life." He pushed back his chair. "Why am I even talking to you?"

"Because you know instinctively that I'm here to help you?"

"Really." Oh, the deadpan snark of that little dragon. I love it. When he grows up he's going to put
the "dragon" back in "sardonic", I just know it.

"Really! Just because we're enemies doesn't mean I can't be outraged at the way you're being treated!
I know just a bit of what it's like to be growing up around ponies when you're not one, so I can fully
sympathize with the position you're in." Except for the part where, had I been in his position, by now
I'd have thrown several temper tantrums, played half a dozen practical jokes on Anon in increasing
levels of severity, and eventually have run away from home.

"I'm not real big on taking advice from ponies who've tried to kill me."

"Ah yes, but I'm not a pony! And to be perfectly fair, I never tried to kill you. I pretended that I
intended to kill you, but I actually never planned to do so, or even try."
"Right, so it's just a coincidence that Anon saved me when you were planning on letting me go anyhow."

"No, it's not a coincidence at all," I said sourly. "It's just not my coincidence. Anon didn't save you, he saved himself. He was the one I was going to kill; I was just trying to think of something suitably scathing to say to Twilight before I did it. Maybe something about how repulsive she was for even considering condemning her oldest and most loyal loved one to death." And telling her that I was killing Anon, instead of the one she'd chosen, to punish her for how disloyal she'd been to someone who loved her. Yes, that would have been good.

"Twilight did what she had to do," Spike said dully. "Anon is more important to Equestria. He's the Element of Protection. I'm just a dragon."

"Spike, no dragon is 'just' a dragon," I protested. "Besides, I happen to know that Anon's supposed importance to Equestria is all smoke and mirrors." Yes! I'd gotten that far, at least.

Spike scowled. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"Well. I'm sure you're aware why it is that Anon knew all of you even before any of you met him, correct?"

"Uh, yeah. On his world they have these, like, short serial films, and one series is about us and our lives and adventures." And naturally, upon learning this shortly after meeting him, none of the ponies, nor the dragon, were afflicted with the sense of existential angst that I was, because even if they were deep enough thinkers to worry about the implications, Anon prevented them from doing so.

"Indeed it is. I've seen it."

"You – no way. How? It's only in Anon's world. We don't even have the equipment here to be able to see it..."

I gave him a Look. "Really, Spike, you're forgetting who you're talking to."

"Good point, and on that note, I really don't think I should be talking to you! If you really want to apologize to me for trying to kill me then maybe you should go somewhere else."

I lay back on the kitchen table. "But this table is so comfy."

While I was laying on the table, ostensibly not looking at him, Spike grabbed a scroll from the floor and one of the ubiquitous quills that were more or less everywhere in the library, and started writing with it. I let him get as far as "PRINCESS CELESTIA HEL" before making everything he wrote after that turn as he wrote it into "LO FROM PONYVILLE I NEED SOME ADVICE I AM TOO SEXY HOW DO I DEAL? SPIKE"

He dropped the paper in disgust, and I sat up. "I'm a kid. These jokes are gross," he complained.

"A kid who's been madly in lust with an adult pony for three years."

"Love! Not lust! And how do you know about that? And anyway that's all over now. She only wants Anon."

I rolled my eyes. "It always comes back to Anon, doesn't it." I sat up. "Are you really over Rarity, or is it just that you think you have no chance?"
Spike started ticking things off on his clawed digits. "He's tall. I'm short. He's handsome for his species. I'm a baby for mine. He's a big hero. I'm just a useless kid. He has the Element of Protection. I don't have anything but the ability to send messages."

I reached over him from above and started ticking more things off with his digits, making him yell "Hey!" I didn't let him interrupt, though. "You have native, inherent magic and are building up more and more over time. He doesn't. You have magic resistance. He doesn't. You have skin that's nearly impervious to attack; only diamond flechettes or another dragon's claws could generally get through. He doesn't. You have internal flame, giving you incredible cold resistance, and you're naturally resistant to heat up to the intensity of lava. He has less temperature resistance than a pony, which is why he needs to wear clothes all the time. You have claws that can rip through steel and teeth that can chomp through gems. He has fingernails that can rip through another human's skin, maybe, if he grows them some more, but are useless against creatures with coats, which is pretty much everything here in Equestria, and his teeth are actually weaker as weapons than pony teeth are because pony jaws are so much stronger, even though he does have meat-cutting teeth. You're likely to live a thousand years, maybe two thousand if you watch your health and don't get into pointless fights. He'll live another 60 at best. You're superior to him in nearly every way, Spike; you're just a child who hasn't grown into your power yet. Time is on your side."

"It doesn't feel that way."

"It never does, to children."

"He says humans killed all the dragons on his world."

"Magic faded from his world, which would have naturally killed any dragons alive at the time it happened. Humans did kill some of them, but mostly only while magic was fading. And even at that, dragons are much, much more famous for killing humans than the other way around. It would usually take a dozen heroes going after a dragon with the best weapons humans could muster at the time before one of them got lucky and took one out; the rest ended up as the dragon's lunch."

"Humans have built weapons that can destroy entire cities with a single bomb, and they can fly to their moon."

"Only twelve of them in their entire history ever did fly to the moon, and even though they have the capability to do it again, they don't want to spend the money. And the weapons you're talking about are widely believed by humans to be the thing that is going to wipe out their entire species, because they know that some of them are idiots and therefore none of them should be trusted with that kind of power. And either way, Anon can't build either a nuclear bomb or a spaceship." I hoped. I hoped his reality warping abilities couldn't go that far.

"It doesn't matter." Spike sagged again. "Even if what you're saying is true and I'm gonna grow up to be awesome... how long is that going to take? Fifty years? Rarity might be dead before I'm a grown dragon."

"Which is in your favor, because a grown dragon and a pony... don't work. Really. Matters of scale, you know. An adolescent dragon is what you want to be, if you want to romance a pony."

"Well, how long is that going to take? And that's not the point anyway! Rarity loves him! Anon says I'm a doormat for letting her use me and doing all the stuff I did to help her when she wasn't even in love with me, and he says that makes me a beta. Girls like guys who are strong and confident and do what they want, not guys who are nice to them."

I slapped myself in the forehead. "Spike. Do not take romantic advice from Anon. Seriously."
"Yeah, but he got the mare I love to love him back, and I didn't. And all of my friends are in love with him. So who else am I supposed to take advice from, you? You don't exactly have mares beating down your door."

"I've had mares beating down my door. It's just a little bit difficult to manage being out there for them to find your door when you're in hiding from a stupid human with a sword." I shook my head. "Anyway, your romantic life isn't really the point here. As I've said, I've seen the series Anon saw. Did you know that it continued past the point where Anon arrived here? That it showed the Changeling invasion, and the battle against King Sombra that's taking place right now? And Anon wasn't in it?"

"Wait... how could the series show the future? I thought it was chronicling our lives and adventures after they happened!"

"It's not. There's even more past that point, that Anon might have seen, though I haven't gotten around to it yet. It seems rather less relevant, given how much Anon has changed by being here. Would you like to know how the Changelings were defeated, in the version of our lives where Anon wasn't there?"

"Uh... um, I'm guessing Twilight and the others made it to the Elements of Harmony somehow?"

"Wrong. They were still defeated, they still couldn't get to the Elements, they were still all tied up in Changeling goo. But there was no Anon with a sword to suddenly go berserk and start slaughtering Changelings."

"Wait – Princess Luna! She was asleep through the whole thing! Maybe she woke up?"

"She did wake up, but no, she didn't save the day. Cadance and Shining Armor did."

Spike stared at me. "How? Chrysalis was powerful enough to take out Princess Celestia! Princess Cadance is powerful, but she's not that powerful."

"Oh, but she is. Chrysalis gained all that power from Shining Armor's love for Cadance. The real Cadance, being the Alicorn of Love, is just as capable of drawing power from love... but she had both Shining Armor's love for her and her own love for him to draw from, and her power doesn't consume the love within a pony. It uses what radiates outward, so it doesn't harm the pony or affect their ability to love. She and Shining Armor merged their magic, guided by their love for each other, and with Cadance's power amplified by that love, they cast a version of Shining Armor's shield that caught all the Changelings and flung them out of Canterlot, with great force."

Spike's eyes were the size of tea saucers. "Wow. They could do that?"

"They could. If Anon hadn't been there to steal their victory."

"Well... Anon didn't know that! He's a good guy! He just wanted to help, and when he saw his friends in danger—"

"He did know, Spike. He watched the same film series. He knew exactly what was supposed to happen, but he didn't like how bloodless the victory was. Shining Armor and Cadance probably killed some Changelings, but Changelings can fly. Being flung with great force into the sky around a mountaintop probably left most of them alive, and if it killed any, Anon never got to see their deaths. He wanted to hack Changelings up with a sword, because he likes blood and the suffering of his enemies. I thought of mentioning how he'd laughed while I bled and screamed and burned, and decided against it. Some things are too humiliating to talk about even if they'd be useful."
"You don't know that. You don't even know him!"

"I know what he did to me." That was as close as I needed to get to it, I figured. "Remember, I'm one of his enemies. You're not. You haven't seen the part of him that loves to bathe in his opponents' blood."

"I... guess that would give you a different perspective, wouldn't it..." He shook his head. "But Anon's our friend. He wants to protect us. He's a really nice person. Maybe he gets a little violent when his friends are threatened, but I can understand that."

"He's a really nice person who calls you a doormat? And a beta, whatever that is?" Beta being the second letter of the old Minosian alphabet, I assumed it meant "sidekick", as in a secondary character, but that chain of logic seemed a little advanced for Anon.

"I can't blame him for saying what everypony already knows," Spike said. "Anon's not the kind of guy who lies to make you feel better."

"No, he's the kind of guy who lies to make himself feel better. He's tried to convince you, and Twilight, and all her pony pals, that he's the hero your world needs." I knelt down on my haunches, looking right at the young dragon. "Isn't that why Twilight said she wanted to sacrifice you instead of Anon? Equestria needs Anon more than it needs you? Isn't that what she said?"

Spike's mouth worked as if he was trying to come up with something to say, and rejecting everything that came to mind. I took advantage. "Does that really seem like Twilight to you? Would she really have chosen to sacrifice you? She's spent what, ten years raising you?"

"Thirteen. I'm thirteen." Spike swallowed. "I told you already. I'm useless and Anon isn't."

"Spike, I am hardly the expert on parenting, particularly not pony parenting. But no one, not pony, not griffon, not dragon, sacrifices their child, or their younger sibling who is still a child, for being useless. Would Applejack do that to Apple Bud?"

"Apple Bloom."

"Whatever. Would Rarity sacrifice Sugar Belle?"

"Sweetie Belle, and it's different," Spike said, swallowing again. "I'm not a pony. I have to prove I'm useful or—"

"Or what? They'll send you away? You're still here, so that strongly suggests that either they won't send you away for being useless, or you're not useless. Who's been telling you that, anyway?"

"Everyone knows it."

"So what you're saying is Anon is telling you this."

"Everypony else agrees with him!"

"Typical." I leaned forward. "Anon and the others are in the Crystal Empire, right now, fighting the shade of the Dark King Sombra, and given Anon's history I'm sure that they'll send him packing. But I've seen the Crystal Empire battle already, in that film series Anon has also seen. The one where he wasn't there. And they beat Sombra without Anon. Would you like to know who did it?"

"I already know. It would have been Twilight. Twilight beat everyone, before Anon came, but the Changelings... and no one believed her, and then it was too late, so she needed Anon..."
"Except she didn't. Had he not been there, she would have found and rescued Cadance herself, without his help. And then Cadance would have come to the rescue and saved you all. But no, Twilight's not the one who saved the Crystal Empire, in the timeline we should be in, the one where Anon isn't here."

"Then Princess Cadance and Shining Armor?"

"Half right, my boy. Cadance was instrumental. But there was a key piece she couldn't accomplish herself, something she needed someone else to do before she could save anyone, and Shining Armor couldn't do it. Twilight couldn't do it. Only one individual was in the right place, at the right time, to save the Crystal Empire. Guess who that was?"

"Pinkie Pie."

He was so dense. "You!" I said, exasperated. "It was you! If Anon hadn't been here, you would be there, saving the Crystal Empire, right now! And they'd build a statue in your honor, and hold a party, and feed you all the gems you could eat, and you'd be known as a great hero, the one who helped their Princess defeat their enslaver!"

Spike looked at me flatly. "You're lying. There's no way I could do that."

"Well, there's no way anymore, now that Anon has gotten his hooks into you and convinced you that you're useless. You could have been a hero, and you still could be, if you'd just dragon up and recognize that these feelings of worthlessness you're feeling are a crock of horsefeathers."

"But if it's not because I'm useless then why don't any of them care about me anymore?" he wailed. "And why am I even talking to you about this? Go away, Discord! You're not going to turn me against my friends, so don't even try!"

"Are they really your friends if none of them care about you anymore?"

"I said go away! I'm not listening to you!"

"But the truth is, Spike... the truth is, they are your friends." I whispered in his ear as he huddled in a ball on the floor, paws over his ears, trying to block me out, except that it was child's play for me to make my voice heard over any level of distortion. "They love you. All except one. Only one of them despises you. Only one of them thinks you're useless. And none of them started to believe that, or to ignore you the way they've been doing, until he showed up."

"They always ignored me! They always just told me, watch the library, Spike! Feed the animals, Spike! Do the chores, Spike!"

"Oh, what a horrifying existence. Told to do chores by the mare who's paying for your room and board, and educating you! I despise chores myself, so I fully sympathize. I wouldn't stand for that! I'd be saying, 'Go do your own chores, you horrible witch!' And then I'd run off to join the circus. Which I wouldn't recommend, by the way, it's a lot less fun than it looks from the outside."

"I don't mind doing chores, I just... I wanted to... I thought Twilight might start to treat me like an equal. Like I'm growing up, instead of just being the same baby I look like year in and year out."

"If you ever in your existence find a parent of anyone, dragon, pony, or flowerpot, who treats their adolescent child as an adult, run away. It's obviously an eldritch abomination. Or worse. Most of the eldritch abominations I have over for tea and monkey shadows are surprisingly strict with their teenage spawn."
"It doesn't matter anyway. I'm not her equal. I never will be. Or Anon's."

"Yes, but the greater than and less than are in different places. Do you remember what they look like? Because I can never keep them straight in my head. Something about the alligator wants to eat more fish?"

"What are you talking about?" He stared at me.

"You'll never be Twilight's equal because she's a mother or older sister to you, and even when she's old and grey and you're a young strong dragon, you'll see her as more than you. And you'll never be Anon's equal because at the age of thirteen, you are so far his superior that there's no way he could possibly ever catch up." I stood up. "He stole your place, Spike. He made all your friends love him, but they have to love him more than they love anything else, and that meant your friends couldn't love you anymore. He took your place on this trip to the Crystal Empire, and he'll take your spot as the hero. He is a despicable creature, far worse than I am."

Spike shook his head. "That's complete nonsense. Anon is nice, and besides, he doesn't have any powers besides the Element of Protection, so how could he make my friends do or feel anything?"

"That's what he wants you to think." To be fair, it was probably what Anon himself thought, but I wasn't inclined to be fair.

"This is stupid. You're just saying things you think I want to hear to turn me against Anon. He's a hero, and you're not fit to wipe his boots!"

"Check the census records, Spike. Go to Canterlot, or Manehattan. Look at the birth records. Or look up the archives of marriage announcements from the newspapers. But don't do it in Ponyville."

"Why not in Ponyville?"

"Too small."

"What would I even be looking for?"

"You'll know it when you see it. And when you do, you'll know I'm telling the truth that Anon is not what he seems."

"How do I know you didn't just fake some evidence for whatever it is you want to convince me of?"

I sighed. "I can't manipulate the records in every single city in Equestria, Spike. I'm good, but I'm not that good. Go somewhere I didn't tell you to go, or somewhere I did tell you to go if you think I'm trying to fake you out."

And then I left.

I don't know if any of what I said will sink in. I don't know if Spike is so thoroughly brainwashed by Anon that he can't question the human's supposed heroic credentials, even if it means thinking the worst of himself. But unlike the Bearers, who at least are presumably getting decent sex out of Anon's manipulations (I doubt he's actually any good, but sex has so much to do with what participants feel about what's happening, they probably think it's marvelous), Spike is getting nothing but depression and a feeling of worthlessness out of the role Anon's assigned to him. And Twilight's trained the kid in how to do research. So I have some hope that maybe, just maybe, I can pry him loose from Anon.

He's right that he's a kid, and not able to do all that much, not yet. But his position of closeness to
Twilight, the fact that he lives in the same house as Anon, means that if there's any chance whatsoever that I can recruit him to my cause, I've got to try. He'll be the hardest of my targets to convince, because of his proximity to Anon, but for the same reason he'd be the best ally to have. (Well, the best that I could possibly convince; Tia and Luna would be fantastic, but that's not going to happen.)
A Cheesy Encounter

I be-eat Gilda! I be-eat Gilda! Nanny nanny boo boo! Take that, you stuck-up griffin! Booyah!

Yeah, okay, this has nothing to do with my quest to defeat Anon, but it's making me very happy. I spent the last two hours dancing around the Grotto of Disharmony, singing victory songs (Gilda claims that my singing ability, or lack thereof, makes her ears bleed, but I checked and there is no blood. Besides, would you really expect the Spirit of Disharmony, who happens to be named Discord, to sing well? Anyway, I like my own singing! I'm very free and creative about what key I'm in, and I'm very avant-garde and experimental about pitch. Why should songs always hit the same notes that they were written with anyway? I'd think she'd be more concerned about the celebratory fireworks and the party cannons. I got the idea from Pinkie Pie but mine have actual cannonballs that explode.) I can't quite decide on a decorating scheme – I've done carnival, nightclub, discotheque, rave, and gala – so I think I'm just going to mix them all together.

Gilda's opinion of all this: "You were supposed to beat me, you dumbshit, that's why we were training you! You're like three times bigger than me!" She keeps saying that, but I really don't think her numbers tie out. I tried duplicating her twice, and when I stacked them on top of her, the three of them were taller than me. Also irritated with me for stacking them, and duplicating them in the first place.

She's still fast, but I'm re-learning moves I haven't needed in two thousand years, things that once upon a time I did with my body and not magic because I didn't have as much magic to burn as I do nowadays. When she came in on a dive, going for my neck (again... does she think I have no other vulnerable spots?), I twisted like a pretzel, swiveling my upper body so I was facing her, and I grabbed her before she had a chance to land on me. She almost got free – griffins are strong, and she's really wiggly – but then I got my tail around her, and well, that was it. My tail's actually stronger than my arms and legs, because unlike a pony tail it's really an extension of my core body, not an appendage at all. Also it has dragon scales, so it's pretty impervious to anything a griffin can do to it.

So now I am celebrating, and irritating the living daylights out of Gilda, who is not at all happy that I'm making such a big thing out of my win, but come on! This might be the first time I've beaten anyone in combat without my magic ever!

Okay, no, there was that bar fight on the planet full of humans and alien creatures with no counterparts on Equestria, but while I did take down two guys on my own with a chair, mostly I just tricked the bar patrons into fighting each other by ducking out of the way of a belligerent drunk's swing in just such a way that it would hit a different belligerent drunk. Also, I was wearing a human body, and I believe I've mentioned at length how much a human body does not compare to my own.

Oh, and then there was the time I fought off the long-ma who couldn't figure out that underneath my gorgeous feminine kimono and elaborate makeup job I was actually male. I might even have agreed to sleep with him if he hadn't wanted to lock me in his harem and have his babies, which, even if I'd been in a female form, no. And I was in the past and couldn't afford to use my magic because Eris was active back then and chaos avatars follow the philosophy that there can be only one. And Eris started a war that devastated two nations because sometaur didn't invite her to a party, so I definitely did not want to have to fight her. But, you know, he was a lot bigger and stronger than me – one of the major differences between draconequii and long-ma is that we're smaller on average, or were back when we existed – so I might not have won that one without magic if I hadn't been able to trick him into agreeing to a blow job. Hopefully he wasn't originally destined to father a whole lot of kids
before I interfered in the timeline, but nothing seems too terribly messed up here in the future, so I guess it was all right.

Anyway, this is the first time I've won a fight without my magic in a very, very long time. So I think that's worth celebrating! So sue me!

...All right, all right. I'll give it to Gilda, she's getting stuff done. Right at this moment, Applejack is trapped in a net that's hanging over a gorge from what looks like a flimsy tree branch. Actually I've enchanted it for Gilda so that the net isn't actually able to fall. Once the ponies figure out that the net Gilda bagged Applejack in is actually floating, they'll know that I'm behind this, but they would have figured that out already because they know Gilda helped me, the day they ambushed me. The really neat thing about the kidnapping of Applejack, though, is that Anon wasn't able to stop it.

So here's what Gilda did. (I have no problem having my minions gloat to me about their plans after those plans have been realized; I just don't want to know what they intend to do before they do it.) She hired a bunch of Diamond Dog mercenaries to kidnap Rarity. Anon, of course, set off in hot pursuit to rescue Rarity, and while he was occupied being Rarity's big hero, Gilda lured Applejack onto a net trap, which bagged her. Applejack's strong, but I reinforced that net, and she's not stupid; once Gilda had her airborne, she stopped struggling.

I've told Gilda not to engage Anon; he's too dangerous. Once he shows up to rescue Applejack, she needs to run. She argued with me about this, saying that she didn't want to look like a coward in front of Rainbow Dash, but I pointed out that Anon would defeat her and I couldn't trust him not to kill her.

The point to this is simply to harass Anon. Keep him moving, keep him having to do things. Let him tire himself out. I don't know if his power weakens if he's tired (I don't actually know if he can get tired, but he does sleep, so I assume so.) But boy wouldn't I like to find out. Also, let Anon and the Bearers spin their wheels trying to figure out what my larger plan was here, because obviously the spirit of Chaos has a devious and complex plan and wouldn't just kidnap two ponies for the heck of it! Why, that wouldn't make any sense!

You laugh, but I have actually heard things like this come out of their mouths, while using the Panauricon to spy on them.

Anyway. While she's doing that, I'm off to find a blue unicorn, now that I'm more or less done with my victory celebration. Just a couple more noodle bananas and I'm out of here.

So here's some fun facts you didn't know. Unless you're Celestia, in which case don't you think it would be a good idea to share this kind of information with somepony? Like, I don't know, maybe your trusted student? Or are you reluctant to let her know exactly how often your special students go crazy?

It turns out that alicorns are not fertile after their initial pony lifetime passes – so, if an alicorn wants to be a momma, she's gotta do it within her first 80 years or so. (At least, this is true of alicorn mares. No one knows anything about alicorn stallions because they're so rare; in my entire lifetime there's been only one.) Most of the time, alicorns are made, not born; there's no such thing as an "alicorn race". Alicorn mommies can have alicorn babies if the daddy is a sufficiently powerful pony of any race (yes, pegasi and earth ponies have magical power too... unicorns like to forget this, but tell me Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie are doing what they do without magic and I will follow you around with a laugh track giggling hysterically at everything you say for the next day or so), but mothers of other races cannot birth alicorns even if the father is one (and he almost never is, due to the aforementioned only one male alicorn in my lifetime. Ra the Sunbearer, who I've kind of avoided...
meeting because of his jealous boyfriend being a fellow chaos avatar and the aforementioned territorial behavior we exhibit when we meet another one intruding on our domain, was a male alicorn, and had kids, I think, but Set's memories in my head are even more jumbled than most of the memories I get from my predecessors due to his time under the control of Apep, also known as the Nightmare Forces. I'm not even 100% on Set having had kids; Baast claimed that Anubis was Set's son, but my access to Set's memories is too confused for me to confirm this, though I suppose I could do so if I really cared, which I don't.)

Anyway. Celestia and I agreed way back when that we wouldn't have kids; she'd save it for whoever she eventually married. I'm not fertile with ponies unless I use magic (not that I personally have ever done so, but I've run into close cognates who have), and up until our unfortunate misunderstanding involving mutual belief in exaggerated rumors of the other one's death (ok, mine weren't exaggerated, I confess), I'm pretty sure she was exclusive with me. During the years she was fighting me, I'm sure she felt things were too unstable for her to be able to afford to have kids. And after I was in stone, she found out the bad news about no bouncing baby Tias, ever. (Or Woonas. I had some pretty hilarious commentary on that with Luna – since she and I are both dreamwalkers, she was the only one I could talk to. I could visit the dreams of other ponies and observe them, but they couldn't see me. Luna could. Not that she appreciated my wit.) At the time, though, the sisters had each other, and Celestia had been sublimating her desire for foals into teaching youthful unicorns for centuries, while she was trying and failing to train up somepony who could stand against me, or help her and Luna do it.

This changed when Luna took her all-expenses-paid vacation to the moon. Suddenly Celestia was alone. And while she's always been very, very good at making friends, the thing about being an immortal alicorn is that your friends die. (Not a problem for me, despite my being equally immortal; I just avoid having any. Disharmony means never having to cry at a friend's funeral! After all the ones Celestia has cried at, you'd think she'd find my perspective more appealing.) So she set out to create another alicorn. Since she and Luna elevated each other by somehow managing to botch one of Starswirl's completely botched spells in a different direction than he had ever managed to botch it, and since my poor little Brightest Star had managed to make herself the Alicorn of Chaos by making up a ritual involving almost killing me (the intent was not for it to be 'almost', but well, I'm hard to kill and even harder to keep tied up on your sacrificial slab), she knew it could be done, and she knew it could go very badly but she wanted to do it anyway. That's the kind of selfish hypocrisy I truly love about my Tia. I'm not being sarcastic here; she tries so hard to convince the world of how perfect she is, but deep down inside she's a mare like any other and she makes stupid decisions that could destroy the world in order to satisfy her personal emotional needs, all the time. And I love that about her.

So she started taking personal students. Approximately four or five every century. She didn't stick solely to unicorns, either. Most of her students led largely unexceptional lives; they were talented, they did interesting things, but nothing that goes down in the history books. About one in five of them went spectacularly crazy in some way; the most recent example of this ran off after finding out Celestia wasn't going to let her just turn into an alicorn and refusing to listen when Celestia tried to explain that that's not how it works, and jumped into a magic mirror that sent her to another dimension someplace. I think it might have been one of Starswirl's attempts to contain and regulate one of my portals, but I was stone at the time so the details were hard to get. They didn't all go crazy in a bad way, even by Tia's standards – Professor Steamhead and her insistence that Equestria could be saved through the power of steam actually kick-started Equestrian industrialization, proving that various useful devices such as trains can be powered by earth ponies with shovels rather than unicorn magic. But Celestia puts her students under a great deal of pressure, and some of them crack.

Of those students, four became alicorns. Three of those alicorns are now dead, and when you consider that alicorns are supposed to be immortal, that says a lot right there. (The fourth one, the
Alicorn of Desolation, won't stay in Equestria because there's no true desolation in Equestria, though she sometimes visits the Badlands, so she too was a failure from the perspective of Tia's quest for an immortal friend and confidante.) The Alicorn of Nature chose to die because she wanted to rejoin the natural cycle of life and death. The Alicorn of Righteous Anger, predictably, died during a war. And the Alicorn of Honor, also the only male alicorn in two thousand years, also the only one of the bunch who started out as a unicorn, fell, the same way Luna did, and was corrupted semi-permanently into a dark magic addict and madpony who changed his color scheme from white and gold to... I hesitate even to say this, the horror that it may evoke in the mind of the unprepared being enough to give even me pause... black and red. Oh, the equinity!

I could have seen it coming the moment he recognized that his Concept, the principle he as an alicorn connected to, was Honor. In fact I did see it coming, but Woony was loony and on the moony at the time, so I couldn't exactly warn anypony... not that I would have. Just because I can't eat the popcorn doesn't mean I can't entertain myself imagining popcorn to eat. Of all concepts that ponies value, I gotta say that Honor is probably the absolute worst. I realize you're taking this with an entire salt lick, coming from me, but this is objectively true. I mean, I also hate Honesty, but Honesty at least is awfully useful in establishing your bona fides as someone who's trustworthy, so when you really need to be able to lie, everypony will believe you. And Loyalty is a crock, but mostly because it doesn't go both ways; what good did being loyal to Celestia ever do me? And oh yes, I was, enough that when the Tree was stupid enough to offer me Elements to try to co-opt me, the ones it offered were Laughter and, haha, Loyalty. They both ended up going to Luna, also bearer of Honesty, who turned on her sister slash best friend, after lying to her for months, and who now doesn't remember what the word fun means. I am not making this up. Ask Pinkie Pie. So, you know, the track record of the Tree of Harmony isn't great.

But Honor is a lie. A hilarious lie that's amazingly good at infecting ponies and making them stupid, and for that I suppose I enjoy it, but there's some small part of me that wants to believe ponies are smarter than they are that winces every time I see it in action. To be precise, I don't mean honor as in integrity, the sense of not being a hypocrite. I mean Honor, the thing that encourages intelligent beings to throw their lives away in pointless wars, that allows the ponies of Neighpon to have believed for centuries that killing yourself to avoid having to carry out an order you find reprehensible was a better idea than just refusing, that kept the dragons psychologically incapable of surrendering and stopping their invasion of Equestria and forced me to have to kill or drive irrevocably mad nearly every single one of them. The kind of Honor that leads ponies to duel each other to the death over an insult. (And ponies are among the most resistant to the excesses of Honor of all the species I've encountered. Dragons and minotaurs and griffins are much, much worse.) Fighting for Honor almost always boils down to "fighting to make my nation or tribe look good."

There's a story my mother once told me, and I know I've pointed out that draconequui weren't, as a general rule, particularly chaotic, but I doubt they could have produced me if they hadn't had some reverence for chaos. In the story, a dire wolf and a pony get into a fight. The pony challenges the dire wolf to a duel, and loses, and the wolf eats him. A coyote has something rude to say about this, so the wolf challenges the coyote to a duel. And the night before the duel, the coyote sets the wolf's house on fire. The story was told to be comic, with an image of a wolf in a nightgown and underpants racing out of a burning house, yipping, as flames lick at his booties and the edges of his gown. The point was very clear, though. My mother would have agreed with me, and presumably if that was a story draconequus mothers told their children, she wouldn't have been the only one.

Honor is an excuse to kill without reason, and a reason to die stupidly. If someone wants to kill you for the sake of their honor, don't play along with them – fight them on a different ground.

The Alicorn of Honor believed in his own total righteousness, in the absoluteness of his cause, which was nothing more than his belief that he should be Celestia's superior because she was merely the
Alicorn of the Sun, which is a concept that lacks a moral valence, but Honor is Good and therefore he deserved to rule. Yes, this is stupid. Everything about Honor is stupid. Celestia couldn't do much about it except fight him; she didn't have the use of the Elements anymore, so there were neither magical banishment nor magical purification available to her as options. But in their final battle, she managed to get through to him, and made him recognize how dishonorable he was being by turning on his teacher and ruler. In the brief moment when he felt that his original personality was in control, he tore his own magic out and poured it into an amulet he'd been using as a battery for extra magical storage. And then he activated rune-based spells – since he'd just purged himself of all of his own magic – by cutting open his veins and bleeding out his life force, which is often the way you need to activate runes if you don't have enough practitioners with enough magic to turn them on – to seal the magic away.

Celestia, in a marvelous display of the tremendous self-control and foresight that we've all come to expect of her... drop-kicked the amulet into orbit, in fury and grief that her student was dead. Because, of course, the Alicorn of Proximate Stellar Dynamics apparently had no notion of the concept that orbits decay and that a magical amulet can't be trusted to burn up on re-entry. It landed a few decades later and immediately started wreaking havoc. The spells that the Alicorn of Honor wove around it with the last of his life force prevent the magic from escaping or leaking, but there's a catch, of course. If a pony puts on the amulet of their own free will, they can tap the magic within, and once that happens, it can only be removed if the pony dies or voluntarily gives the amulet up.

Now, I've said that magic has a personality, and that raw magic is essentially a ferret on pixie stix and triple espresso. Raw magic is emotionally volatile, constantly shifting, but is mostly positive – curious, energetic and happy to be doing magical things that are fun. Dark magic also has a personality, and it is not the same one. Dark magic, in general, dwells on anger, humiliation, jealousy, self-pity... dark magic is angry at everything, and wants to make absolutely sure that you know to respect its authority. And the magic of the Alicorn Amulet, in particular, is the magic of Honor turned bad. The Alicorn Amulet makes its wearers absolutely certain they are right – not in the sense of the Element of Arrogance, which makes the user convinced they are right and that others are stupid and should be laughed at, but in the sense that the Alicorn Amulet is right and any pony who is wrong should be humiliated utterly until they submit and admit how wrong they were, and generally they should be humiliated some more after that for being generally inferior. It is a recipe for turning a pony into a monster.

I caught up with Trixie Lulamoon as she was leaving the shop of a vendor of shady magical artifacts with the address of another such vendor who might or might not have the Alicorn Amulet available to sell her. As she stomped off in disappointment and determination, I created another small shady-magical-artifact shop and placed it by the side of the road she was walking down.

She ignored it.

I created another one, half a trot down the road from that. Trixie was so busy muttering to herself about how awful Twilight Sparkle was that she ignored that one too. So finally I just made one in the middle of the road, where she'd have to look up at it, at least, since it was in her way.

Trixie looked up at my sign (Magic R Us, with a backward R), scowled, started to go around, then swung back to scowl at it again. Finally she sighed, and went inside.

I was sitting there waiting for her, with a turban wrapped around my horns like they do in Bovinia. "Welcome, welcome, little pony!" I said, pitching my voice deep. "Is there something you seek? Here you can find many things."

She glanced around at the wide assortment of magical knickknacks I'd decorated the place with.
"Trixie doubts that you have what she seeks," she said, arrogant to the point of being snooty. "But in the very unlikely case that you will not disappoint Trixie as she has been disappointed so many other times, Trixie is willing to ask if you have what she is looking for."

"Is it the letter I? Because I can hear that you're definitely missing that," I said in my normal tone of voice.

Trixie glared at me. "No, I am not missing the letter I," she spat out. "But the Great and Powerful Trixie has no need to use the word 'I'. It is diminishing, and Trixie is far too Great and Powerful to have need of it."

"Really? I always thought it was the other way around," I said. "I mean, anypony can refer to me as Discord, Awesomely Powerful and Handsome Lord of Chaos, but only I get to be that amazing individual." I leaned forward, turbanless, letting her get a good look at me for the first time. To her credit, Trixie did not run screaming. She took a step back, lighting her horn.

"Trixie has heard of you, chaos monster!" she declared. "If it is a fight you want, know that Trixie will not back down in a matter of magic!"

"Oh, please." I rolled my eyes. "It wouldn't be a fight, my dear, and I'm not interested in a conflict right now anyway. I'm interested in helping you."

"Trixie does not need help from the likes of you!"

"Maybe not, but I could certainly use your help, and I had thought we could be of mutual use to one another. But I suppose you're not interested in saving Equestria from a monster who has mind-controlled Twilight Sparkle, all of her friends, and the Princesses." I sighed. "It's too bad, I really thought you'd be up to the job."

"Wait. What is this? I've heard nothing of Twilight being mind-controlled."

"Of course not." I filed my talon nails. "You've been too busy stomping around searching for the Alicorn Amulet. What were you planning on doing with that thing once you got it?"

"Trixie intended to show Twilight Sparkle who is the better unicorn, once and for all!"

I choked, gasping. "With – with the Alicorn Amulet?" I started laughing hysterically. "That's like demonstrating how tough you are to your opponent by playing griffin roulette with six bullets and going first!"

Trixie scowled even more deeply. "The Great and Powerful Trixie does not need to listen to your insults," she said, and turned around, at which point she evidently realized that I had taken the door away. "Release Trixie at once, chaos monster!"

I teleported in front of her, floating, and waggled my talon at her. "Ah-ah-ah. It's not very nice to call someone a monster, especially when you're asking them for a favor. How about 'chaos demigod'? Or 'chaos lord'? I'll accept 'chaos beast' if you start it with the word 'sexy'. Or, you know, you could use my name. Which is Discord."

"Very well, Discord, release Trixie at once!"

"So you can do what? Go off, find the Alicorn Amulet, fall under its spell and lose yourself completely?"

She snorted. "The Great and Powerful Trixie is not some weak-willed simp to lose her mind to an
Amulet. Trixie's will is strong enough to remain in control!"

I chortled at her. "You... you have no idea how the Alicorn Amulet works, do you?"

Trixie glared. "Trixie knows enough. Now release me!"

"It doesn't matter how powerful your will is. The Alicorn Amulet grants you power the way you grant a wagon you're pulling mobility. It isn't giving you power; you're giving the entity within it a body."

"Trixie would be able to resist any sort of alien interloper within her mind," she sniffed. "Ah, but if you did successfully resist, you wouldn't get any power." I attached her to a carriage, bending space to make it fit in the small shop. Trixie yowled and used her magic to try to pry herself out of harness, but I had it on tight. "Behold! This carriage has been endowed with the power of a unicorn! Fear the carriage, and its mastery over magic!"

"It has no mastery over magic, you oaf," Trixie snarled. "It's just a carriage!"

"Ah, but it has the Great and Powerful Trixie harnessed to it! Now it's not a mere carriage – it's a unicorn-powered carriage!"

"It still can't go anywhere that I, the aforementioned Great and Powerful Trixie, don't drag it to," she said. "Assuming its wheels don't fall off."

"Yes, now you're getting my point." I snapped the carriage away. "The Alicorn Amulet will use you as a vessel. A carriage. Your will won't be in control; you won't even be conscious. And since the only way to remove it is for your body to die or for the entity within the Amulet to choose to remove it... it essentially means that if you put it on you're killing yourself. Maybe it will take itself off when it finds a younger, healthier host. You'll blink your eyes open after putting it around your neck and find that in that eyeflink you've transformed into an elderly, decrepit mare... and all the crimes it committed in your body would be on your head."

This was all a lie, in fact. There are artifacts that work like this, but the Alicorn Amulet isn't one of them. But I knew that Trixie wouldn't be swayed by explaining to her that no, she wouldn't be able to resist its corruption, that in fact she had exactly the sort of mindset and personality best suited for it to corrupt. While I strongly suspected that the obsession with upstaging Twilight Sparkle was Anon's doing – there are ponies petty enough to want to humiliate other ponies for saving their lives because they didn't want to be seen as somepony who had ever needed help, but they're rare, so this was more likely Anon at work – she really was a self-aggrandizing, pompous narcissist. Now, you may think that me being critical of ponies for being narcissists would be hypocritical, but it's not at all. Ponies who think the entire world revolves around them irritate me greatly, because in fact it revolves around me and they should recognize that fact. Who here is the avatar of a cosmic force and one of the fundamental underpinnings of magic on our world? That's right. Not Trixie. Besides, it's not so much the narcissism I object to as the pompous humorlessness. And either way, she was exactly the sort of target the dark, restless magic of the corrupted Alicorn of Honor would want to be channeled through.

"Then Trixie will have to find some other way," she said, after a moment of hesitation. "Twilight Sparkle must pay for all she's done to Trixie!"

"Which is what, precisely?"

This was obviously a litany she'd practices. "When Trixie went to Ponyville to perform, as she has
done in many towns all throughout Equestria, several mares repeatedly challenged her, and she defeated them all with ease. They said over and over that Trixie was not the most Great and Powerful unicorn in Equestria, but that their friend Twilight Sparkle held that honor. However, Twilight cowardly refused to meet my challenge in the open, allowing the implication of her superiority to linger without the courage to prove herself directly! Then an ursa minor attacked the town, and of course Trixie was unable to stop it – no pony can stop an ursa! But Twilight Sparkle cheated, soothing the creature to sleep by enchanting the water in a water tower to taste like milk and giving it to the ursa cub."

"How is that cheating? It sounds to me like she saved the town. Including you, my dear."

"Yes, but..." She squirmed. "Trixie may have claimed that she had previously defeated an ursa major, as part of her show, and two young colts were so stupid that they believed in what had been up to that point a harmless exaggeration for the sake of the show. They woke the ursa precisely because they wished to see Trixie defeat it. Instead, Twilight did! But she didn't defeat it in combat; she put it to sleep, like an infant! Trixie was a laughingstock!"

I had to resist the temptation to ask her what she expected Twilight to do – let Ponyville be destroyed to preserve Trixie's dignity? She made her own bed, in my opinion; if you aren't the most awesome and powerful creature around, like I am, then you have no business pretending. But I needed her rage at Twilight to get her on my side, so I let it go. She continued. "Every town that Trixie traveled to laughed at her or ostracized her. Trixie's wagon was destroyed, with all of her life's possessions. I was forced to work on a rock farm to survive and stay fed! A rock farm!"

I shuddered. "Now that truly is a fate worse than death. If Twilight's actions condemned you to spending any time at all on a rock farm, I can certainly see why you'd want revenge." I eed around her and put my eagle arm over her withers. "Which is why I am now your new best friend!"

She tossed her mane and pulled out of my grasp. "Trixie does not need anything so weak and sappy as friendship," she sneered.

"No, of course not. My feelings exactly. But, allies are always useful!" I put my arm around her again. "Besides, don't they say that the enemy of my enemy is my friend?"

"They may say so, but ignorant ponies say many things," Trixie said. "The enemy of my enemy could also be my enemy as well. Trixie has heard many things about you, Discord, none of them pleasant, and none of them incline me to ally with you."

"Even if I could give you a different amulet of power? One that won't take over your mind?"

Her eyes narrowed. "And why would you do this for Trixie?"

"I was thinking an alliance of mutual convenience." I landed on four feet. I've found that ponies find me slightly more trustworthy on all fours. "I know you don't trust me, but I think you'll find our goals are aligned. Twilight Sparkle is an enemy to both of us – and both of us want her to be at her best, to provide us with a real challenge. It hardly proves your worthiness to defeat a Twilight who's been rendered weak and stupider than she should be by the machinations of a mind-controlling alien, and I find there's no sport in such a match."

"This is the second time you've said this. How is Twilight Sparkle being mind-controlled?"

"Well. Did you know that she's fallen madly in love with an alien? A creature who looks like a monkey, only without a coat, so his skin's completely bare?"
"You're speaking of Anon. Of course Trixie has heard of him. He's a well-known hero of the realm."

"That's what he wants everypony to think. But I know the truth."

"What is the truth? Tell Trixie!" She shoved her muzzle into my face, her expression part determination, part indignation.

I didn't answer her right away; I stood up and paced. "Trixie, you're a showmare. You know all about telling a story. You know how to make yourself the hero of the story, and how to assign others in the story lesser roles that back you up but never overshadow you. Am I right?"

"Of course. Trixie is a performer nonpareil. If I didn't know how to do those things I would have been laughed out of stagecraft years ago. Why are you bringing this up?"

"Imagine that a part of your mind has been granted the power to make your stories come true. Imagine that everypony you've assigned the role of sidekick or villain in one of your more, shall we say, creative tales, was really bound into that role. Imagine that any mate you desired would instantly fall in love with you."

"Trixie has neither the time nor the patience for romantic entanglements."

"Good for you. But that isn't my point. Now imagine that somepony else has that power. Someone who isn't you. Someone who can make themselves the hero of every story. Who really can vanquish an ursa just because they want to and it would make them look cool, regardless of how senseless that is. Someone who makes every other being who comes into contact with him a sidekick, a love interest, or a villain. And he's not you. So no matter how Great and Powerful you want to present yourself as... he'll upstage you every time. And if he thinks you're attractive enough, he'll make you fall in love with him while he's doing it."

Trixie shook her head. "Nopony could do that! Trixie is far too strong—"

"Stronger than the Princesses? Because he's done it to them. And I hate to tell you this, Trixie, but you're nowhere near as powerful as I am... and he's done it to me. I've fought him on more than one occasion—and every time, he makes me stupid. He makes me careless. He makes me unoriginal. Would you like to be forced into being a caricature of yourself?" I snapped my fingers, creating an illusion that illustrated my words as I spoke. "I'm pretty sure I know what he'll do to you, if you fight him, even with the Alicorn Amulet. He'll make you fail. He'll make himself and every one of his marefriends defeat you, ignominiously, humiliating you utterly. Everything you try to do, they will do better. And then either he'll kill you or make you wish you were dead... or if he thinks you're attractive, he'll make you want to fall to your knees and beg forgiveness from him and all six of his marefriends. And then if you're very lucky, you'll get to join their herd as a junior wife, forced to throw yourself heart and soul into proving how much you love them all and how badly you want to prove yourself 'reformed'."

"That would never happen," Trixie said, but her voice wasn't as vehement as before. "Trixie would never—"

"—be given a choice," I finished her sentence for her. "Any more than I'm given a choice, when I have to face him. When you enter his story – which includes anytime you want to challenge any of his marefriends – you're forced to conform to it. He warps minds and probabilities. "I leaned down into her face. "There is one thing that might give you some protection. And by coincidence, it happens to be the thing I'm interested in offering you."

Trixie rolled her eyes. "Trixie is sure it's a great coincidence."
"Well, you really have only three options. Leave Twilight Sparkle alone, flee, and refuse to have anything to do with her ever... though that might not work. His power is already working on you, making you obsessed with revenge. He wants to fight you, to humiliate and hurt you for having dared to challenge his marefriends. He thinks you're a villain, and he wants a confrontation so he can punish you for being a villain."

"But Trixie is not a villain!"

"I know that, and you know that, but he doesn't, and that's all that matters. You may not be able to escape him; even if you choose to leave Twilight alone, if he wants you to come confront her so he can beat you in the name of protecting her, you will, and you'll think it was your own idea."

"Trixie can resist—"

"Trixie hasn't resisted yet." I snapped a mirror in front of her. "Take a good look at yourself. You're obsessed with getting revenge on a mare who saved your life, for saving your life, because the way she did it humiliated you... but that had nothing to do with her. She didn't make you brag about the ursa. She didn't bring the ursa. All she did was solve a problem you created, and for that you want to get revenge on her."

"I only want to prove that Trixie is the better unicorn!"

"By getting hold of an amulet of power that would amplify your abilities to alicorn level. My, my. In my day 'better' generally meant 'better without performance enhancers', but I suppose the concepts of fair play are old-fashioned now?"

She tore her eyes away from the mirror. "What is the third option?"

"Take the Amulet of Illusion. Also known as one of the Elements of Disharmony, the Element of Deception. The Changeling Queen used it to convince everypony that she was Princess Cadance despite her failure to even begin to stay in character. Another Changeling hive used it to hide themselves within walls so that even I couldn't detect them. It will make you better able to cast illusions, better able to see through anypony else's illusions – including Changelings – and better able to resist mind control. It won't make you more powerful than Twilight Sparkle, but it will make you smarter – because for all her intellect, right now she's under the control of a fairly stupid creature who won't let her be tactically smarter than he is. You'll have your mind intact and tremendous enhancement to your illusion spells. My understanding is that those are your specialty anyway?"

Trixie nodded. "It... does sound enticing. But in my experience, anything that sounds too good to be true probably is, and this seems entirely too much like something tailor-made for Trixie. If you were trying to trick me, this would be the sort of thing you'd come up with."

I snorted. "You're not that important, Trixie. It seems tailor-made for you because I hunted high and low for a pony that seemed tailor-made for it. My goal isn't to corrupt Trixie Lulamoon; my goal is to find a compatible Bearer for my Element of Disharmony. You just happen to fit the bill remarkably well."

"An Element of Disharmony sounds villainous. How can I know if it's you who's trying to trick me into being a villain?"

"You're already a villain." I snapped up a ghostly image of Anon. "Because he says so, and reality cares what he says. But you could be a pointless thug of a villain, out for revenge, destined to be beaten and humiliated... or you could be the kind of so-called villain who's secretly a hero. Anon's a greater villain than even I am, and a greater threat to Equestria. Fight him, with tools that give you..."
some hope of surviving it with your mind intact, and you could just possibly rescue Twilight, and her friends, and the Princesses, from a creature that's mind-controlled them into loving him." I grinned at her. "I don't know of any way to prove that you're the better unicorn that would be more effective than to rescue Twilight, and her friends, and the rulers of the realm, from a threat Twilight was powerless to fight back against."

And now I had her. She smiled, no doubt imagining herself at the head of a parade in her honor, or getting a medal from the Princesses, or something. "That... would be an excellent way to demonstrate Trixie's superiority, yes. But... an Element of Disharmony? How can Trixie be a hero by using a tool plainly designed for villainy?"

"Oh, you ponies. Disharmony isn't evil. It's a necessary part of the balance of existence. Did you know, that if an army of ponies marches across a stone bridge in perfect lockstep, the harmony of their hooves landing in synchronization will destroy the bridge and send them all plummeting to their death? Armies on the march make use of disharmony to protect themselves from threats like that. Besides, Anon calls himself an Element of Harmony, so naturally you should be an Element of Disharmony to fight him."

"Trixie thought there were only six."

"There are only six. He made up a new one, and reality bent to accommodate him. That's what we're up against here, Trixie." I wrapped my arm around her withers again. This time she didn't try to shake me off. "Ponies think of Deception as something evil, and certainly it can be used that way – Chrysalis didn't intend anything good for ponykind when she used it to impersonate Princess Cadance. But it doesn't have to be. You use deception in your storytelling, to put on an exciting show, all the time. Deceiving a pony into thinking they're receiving a useful medicine for a disease that has no actual cure has been known to cure them, because their own bodies might heal the disease if they think they're getting an effective treatment. And then of course, there's the deception every stallion knows to engage in if his wife asks him if this dress makes her rump look huge." I chuckled.

"How would I use this? Trixie has never fought a creature who can alter reality before."

I shrugged. "I don't actually know. That's why I'm giving out Elements of Disharmony to talented ponies who can figure out what to do with them and run with it. I can't tell you what to do; I can't even know what you're planning, because Anon could force me to monologue about it. Watch out for that, by the way."

Trixie nodded. "A villainous monologue. Of course. But if I had this Element of Deception... would I be able to craft a villainous monologue that isn't true, that would lead this Anon into a trap or some such?"

"Absolutely. An excellent idea. I'm going to pretend you didn't tell it to me, of course, but excellent nonetheless." I let go of her and floated away. "So. Does this mean you accept?"

Trixie sighed. "It appears that Trixie has no better options. But I will not be your minion! The Great and Powerful Trixie is a freelancer and will not tolerate micromanagement!"

"Wonderful, because I won't tolerate being expected to micromanage. I'm still going to call you my minion, though, because it's funny."

She stomped a hoof. "It is not!"

"It is! Look at you! You're furious just because of a word!" I pinched her cheek. "You ponies are so
adorable!

"The Great and Powerful Trixie demands to be treated with respect!"

"Trixie, in case you haven't noticed, I'm the spirit of Chaos. Chaos doesn't respect anyone or anything unless they earn it. You want my respect, you know what to do."

"Very well then! You will soon see that Trixie is the most effective choice you could have made for an ally!"

I hadn't even been trying to use reverse psychology on her. I mostly managed to avoid continuing to laugh at her, now that she'd somehow psyched herself into wanting to prove herself to me. Instead I summoned my Element.

The Element of Arrogance is a diadem in a crown; Greed is an eye; Rage is a hoof or paw in the moment of attack. Deception is a mask, though normally it takes the form of a cameo, a pendant or a pair of earrings rather than a full-sized wearable mask. It's shaped like a typical pony eyemask, like you'd see in Neigh Orleans at Maredi Gras (I find it hilarious that Winter's End, the "holiday" of deprivation and fasting that used to immediately precede Winter Wrap Up, has been largely eliminated, and ponies barely remember it ever existed... but the festival of complete licentiousness and overindulgence that used to occur right before Winter's End started is still a thing ponies celebrate, though mostly only in Neigh Orleans. And Prance. Which doesn't even have Winter Wrap-Up anymore, but they still have Maredi Gras.) Most of it is made of bone – dragon bone, I believe, because dragon bone can store an enormous quantity of magic. The eyeholes and the edge of the mask are lined with gold, and right along the gold there are embedded crystals. I gave it to Trixie as a pendant on a braided golden wire. Disharmony makes it hard for chain links to stay together, but wire is solid, and the braiding may give it additional strength, a trait of Harmony, but it also makes it much blunter and less likely to cut the wearer's skin, and that's a function of Disharmony.

As she took it, and I bonded it to her, the gold transmuted to silver – still every bit as magically active, but associated more with the moon than the sun – and the transparent crystals embedded in the mask turned blue. "This is... attractive," Trixie admitted. "Trixie has seen pictures of the Alicorn Amulet. It is not nearly as pleasant to look at."

"Well, creativity and chaos have much in common, so of course it's only natural that my amulet is nicer looking than something made out of boring old dark magic." I preened. Not entirely literally, because I'd have to have bent my head pretty far down to get at my wings.

"This will allow Trixie more power for illusion spells?"

I nodded. "It'll also make your lies more convincing, make you seem more trustworthy in general, make it easier for you to pull off pretty much any con, and make it easier for you to spot lies and illusions."

"This is acceptable," Trixie said. "Can Trixie take on this Anon with this?"

"Maybe. I wouldn't go after him directly if I were you, but since it'll give you some protection from his mind-warping, you can try if you want. What you need to remember is that in Anon's playbill, you're the villain. If you want to survive your encounters with him, stage your 'villainy' to allow you a quick getaway."

"You might as well teach your grandmother to chew cheese as to try to teach Trixie the finer points of escape artistry," Trixie sneered. "I believe I will challenge Twilight Sparkle... and when Anon
comes to defend his marefriend, I will make it a matter of honor. A hero will not interfere in a duel, not if the outcome won't harm anypony, and a stallion who does interfere to 'protect' his marefriend obviously believes that she will lose! Twilight will acknowledge my superiority, or Anon will stand down and let me duel her."

A grin crept across my face. "You really weren't supposed to tell me that, but I'll do my best to keep it under wraps, because that sounds hilarious. Make sure you get a recording for me, will you?"

So that was that. I have my Element of Deception in play. Go Team Chaos!

Ugh. The next one is the Element of Cruelty. I'm not looking forward to retrieving that. This is going to be sufficiently disgusting that I'm going to take a few days off before I head up north. Besides, I need to find out what exactly the story ended up being with the Crystal Empire. Not like I'm not pretty sure I already know.

Well, now that was an interesting event.

I wasn't actually expecting to do anything relevant. I was Twister, at the xenophile club. Yes, maybe it misses the point just a little bit to be impersonating a pony at a xenophile club, thus competing with all the other ponies for the non-ponies present. But I can't help it; I like being Twister. I have griffin and minotaur and zebra and ikaros forms that I take when I'm looking for nothing more than a quick quasi-anonymous encounter, but when I want to be social and interact with ponies as if I were one... Twister has a personality. Admittedly a personality a lot like my own, but that just makes him especially satisfying to be. I'd prefer to be myself, but if I can't be me, well, I have a history with Twister. And while I really do think it's cheating to consider zebras non-ponies... come on, they're equines, they can naturally breed with ponies without magic... there's a zebra lady there who's rather fond of Twister, or possibly rather fond of Twister's habit of spending a lot of bits, and oh does she ever know what she's doing, if you know what I mean, and I think you do. Zebras specialize in the magic of the natural world, and Amari's specialty seems to be the magic of equine bodies. (And yes, that is a zebra name. They don't all have names that start with Z.)

But I'm trying to keep this memoir, if not family-friendly, then at least relatively safe for working ponies (though honestly, who's reading my journal at work?), so enough about that. I was actually sitting at the bar, watching the other denizens of the club circulate, and considering whether I wanted to get up and buy someone a drink or sit here and wait to see if someone would buy me one, when someone I recognized entered the bar.

I might have mentioned being somewhat disorganized about writing this thing (you think?) This is not the first time that it's come up that I completely forgot to talk about Cheese Louise, but the last time I remembered that I hadn't done it yet, I forgot again. I'd blame Anon, but I'm perfectly capable of being scatterbrained on my own. You can't really expect the spirit of Chaos to be detail oriented, after all.

So. Sometime between my de-tailing and my tea party with Wiñaypaqori, I encountered an itinerant mare who reminded me a great deal of Pinkie – a party planner, with a goofy curly mane, who uses chaos magic and doesn't know it. It was the chaos magic that drew my attention; Pinkie's just background noise at this point, I've been observing her most of her life, but a new spike of chaos magic... well, you can see why that would interest me. I dropped in to observe her set up a gigantic party for a cuteceñera for an orphaned foal living with his grandmother, by pulling it out of a cart that was in no way large enough to contain the multiple bouncy castles, portable hedge maze, balloon cannon, foam ball shooters, and elaborate fireworks display, not to mention the various pastries, that turned out to be in it.
Her name was Cheese Louise, she had a cutie mark of a cheese sandwich reminiscent of an accordion, and while she was approachable and cheerful during the party, afterward she slipped into a mysterious, taciturn persona that was obviously modeled after the Colt Eastwood character in A Fistful of Bits and the other movies in that series. At the time, I was actively looking for evidence of mares who might possibly really be stallions, who'd been warped by Anon, because I was still trying to figure out if Anon had turned the stallions into mares or just sent them into nothingness. Under most circumstances a mare modeling herself after a male character wouldn't have really drawn my attention, but I was looking for it.

So I dropped down to have a conversation with Cheese Louise, in my Twister form. We sat outside under the moonlight in the middle of the San Palomino Desert and ate cheese sandwiches, which were apparently Louise's favored travel food. It was a bit awkward to try to bring up the issue of whether or not the mare you are talking to might possibly identify as a stallion in her own mind instead, so I talked about myself and my feelings that I wasn't really a pony. (Which, being that I am not really a pony, were absolutely true.) Encouraged by my tale, Cheese admitted to me that she'd been feeling for a few months as if she really shouldn't be a mare. She didn't understand it; her memories held no such questioning, and from what she knew of transgendered ponies they usually recognize their true gender before they get their cutie mark (hard to identify your destiny if you have no idea who you really are, I suppose.) But the feeling had been getting stronger. She'd adopted the Stallion with No Name's persona because she'd started feeling deeply uncomfortable with ponies seeing her body, or with wearing mare's clothes to cover it, so she went around in a masculine poncho most of the time.

After our conversation, I questioned several more mares who I found wearing stallion-style clothing. A few of them were just butch, or enjoyed the thrill of cross-dressing, but a good number of them had the same issue – they only felt comfortable in stallion's clothing, they'd recently started to feel as if they weren't really mares, yadda yadda. So I figured out from all this that Anon was slightly less monstrous than I'd feared, and had just changed the stallions into mares. I might even have appreciated the amusement factor of mareifying stallions if it weren't for the fact that it was coming from him, and that his motives seemed so very base and venal.

Anyhoo. So here I am in the club when Cheese Louise walks in, looking totally lost. Not like innocent and confused lost, like that mailmare with the misaligned eyes, but more of a determined lost – "I have no idea where I am, but by golly I'm going to keep marching forward until I figure it out" kind of expression. I got up and headed over to her. "Cheesy! I had no idea you swung this way!"

She turned red. "I'm looking for a client. I think. My Cheesy Sense told me that there was somepony important I had to meet somewhere in this bar, and usually that means somepony wants a big party. Um. I guess if they're in here they might not be a somepony. Somegriffin or something?"

"The correct term is someone when you don't know what species they are, and somegriff if you know they're a griffin," I said. "So you just wandered in here because you thought there might be a client?"

"Well, that's usually what it means. It could mean that somepony from Publisher's Stable wants to give me a huge check, but that's not usually how it works."

"What if someone wanted to give you a profound revelation that would change how you perceive the world, and yourself?"

"Uh... yeah, I suppose theoretically that could be it..."

I grinned. "Well, then, my Cheesy friend, I think you've come straight to the right place!" I put a
foreleg up over his withers. "I suspect very strongly that I have something to show you that will blow
your mind."

She looked deeply uncomfortable. "You're a decent guy, Twister, but I'm strictly a mare's mare, you
know? Not that there's anything wrong with it the other way around, just not my cup of soda pop."

I laughed. "Oh, trust me, I have no designs on your virtue, not as long as you don't have any designs
on mine. Well, actually, how would one go about making designs on virtue? And what if the pony in
question hasn't got any? Because I'm fairly sure I lost the last of mine many years ago."

"Yeah, I gotta wonder about that. Are they making the designs with Magic Marker? Hoofpaint?
What?"

I quite like this pony. She's essentially a less hyper Pinkie Pie who doesn't carry a weapon that can
turn me to stone and hasn't been made stupid by Anon. "In any case, I'm not certain until we go look,
but I'm fairly sure I have something to show you that will change the entire way you look at the
world, and no, it's not the sort of thing that folks at this club are usually offering to show each other."
My grin got bigger. "But first, where were you born?"

"Uh, here in Manehattan, but I don't see what that has to do with—"

"Come quickly, I'll show you!"

I led her off to one of the private rooms in the back. Cheese was getting increasingly nervous. "You
know, I'm all for being friendly, but this might be a step too far, you know? I'm not sure how I feel
about going into a room with a strange stallion at some kind of weird club for kinksters."

I sighed. "I'm not a rapist, Cheese. Trust me, I have no sexual intentions in this matter."

"Well, then why can't you just tell me what you have to show me?"

"Because you have to see it to believe it." I opened the door to the room. "Ladies first."

She flicked her ears in annoyance, but stepped through the door – and looked around herself,
blinking. "What – where's the light?"

I switched it on. "Sorry, I should have realized there wouldn't be any lights on after hours in here."

Now she was even more confused. "What the – where are we?"

We were in a room full of filing cabinets. "The Department of Vital Records for Manehattan. When
were you born?"

She gave me her birthdate. I made one attempt to find where that would be stored, and gave up. "Oh,
I'm no good at organizing anything. Cheese, can you figure out where records for your birth date
would be stored?"

"Why are we looking up my birthdate?"

"You'll see. My, you're impatient."

Hesitantly, she went through the files, until finally she found her own birthdate. "Okay... these are
birth certificates. Are we looking up my birth certificate?"

"Maybe. What are your parents' names?"
She told me. I cast a spell to make a certificate containing those names light up, and when I found it, I withdrew it from the cabinet. "Take a look at this."

"Huh. A colt named Cheese Sandwich, born the same day I was. That's a pretty wild coincidence." Her eyes flickered back and forth as she read. "Born in the hospital I was born in! And... wait. These are my parents' names."

"Yes. Yes, they are." I grinned broadly at her. Or rather, at him, now that I'd confirmed my guess. He stared at me in total confusion. "Is this some kind of joke? Because it's actually not all that funny."

"No joke. That's your birth certificate. You were born a stallion. Well, technically a colt."

"I don't understand. Are you saying someone changed me when I was born?"

"No, actually. I'm saying someone changed you a few months ago and altered your and everyone else's memories to make you think it had always been that way." An idea that was almost certainly idiotic had come to me, but since when has idiocy ever stopped me? I stretched. "Now don't go panicking on me. You showed me yours – well, technically, I showed you yours – and now I'll show you mine." Cheese took a step backward, nervously, as I kept stretching, and stretching, and stretching, pulling my draconequus form out of my pony form by what looked like sheer muscle power. "Ta-daa! See, we were both right. You're really a stallion and I'm really not a pony."

"I kind of recognize you from somewhere," Cheese said, and then snapped his hoof, which previously I had only ever seen Pinkie Pie pull off. "Yeah, that's right! You were that statue in Canterlot Gardens, weren't you?"

"That was me," I said.

"I saw you on a class field trip, and then I got into a fight. Two idiot fillies in my class knocked a couple of my baby teeth out."

"Sorry about that." I wasn't sorry. Cheese's pain had been my gain; ten or fifteen years of foals being disharmonious to each other had given me the strength to break free, the first time. Or rather, the strength to break free within only a year of the Elements shifting as they were reassigned. Without Cheese and many foals like him punching each other's lights out, I might have been stuck in there for a few more years after the Elements changed hooves. "I'm pleased to see you're not running and screaming."

He shrugged. "What would be the point? It's kinda hard to imagine why you'd go to all the trouble to show me my birth certificate if you were just going to eat me."

"That's a very mature way to look at it. I'm proud of you."

"Did you do this to me?"

I scowled. "I take it back. You're terrible."

"Hey, just asking."

"Why would I be telling you about this if I was the one who'd done it?"

"Because a prank isn't funny if nopony knows about it?"
Well, I had to admit he had a point. "Yes, yes, but I didn't do this. I do know who did, though."

Cheese was still staring at his birth certificate. "Why?"

"Why do I know? Because I researched this."

"No, that's not... why would anypony do this? Why change stallions to mares? I – are any of my memories real? I remember being a filly. I remember playing with dolls, and wearing dresses... but I can't remember any of the details. I couldn't tell you what any of my dresses looked like."

"Because they weren't real. Unless you were in the habit of crossdressing, and I suspect you'd be able to remember some dresses if that were the case."

"So how do I know what is real? My cutie mark story – did that really happen? Did I really run away from home? Did my dad really threaten to cut off my allowance if I wouldn't go home and become a dentist, like him? Did my mom really send me care packages of cookies with bits hidden in the package so my dad wouldn't know she was giving me money?"

"I don't know." I shrugged. "I wasn't there for any of that. But false memories are notable for their lack of actual detail. Things you remember very vividly are probably true. Things that seem like you don't remember them at all, you just know what happened, are probably false."

"Why would somepony do this?" He shook his head, eyes wide, apparently afflicted with the existential angst of discovering that some creatures really are just bad. "All the soul-searching I've been doing, all of the feeling that everything is wrong, and the feeling that the feeling that everything is wrong is wrong because if everything is wrong then how did I just notice it now? When did this happen?"

"A few months ago. If you're familiar with the Changeling invasion of Canterlot... it happened right around then."

"Why? Who did it?"

"You heard about the human who was the big hero of the Changeling invasion? It was him."

"But why? What did I do to him?"

He was obviously quite distraught. "What would you say the ratio of mares to stallions is, nowadays?"

"Uh... that's not really something I'm an expert in, but... three, maybe four, to one?"

"It used to be about 60 percent to 40 percent. Maybe even 55 to 45. I'm no expert either. A slight imbalance in favor of mares, but nothing too serious. Then Anon came... and now the ratio is what it is now. Millions of stallions were turned into mares, their memories and the memories of everypony who knew them altered to accommodate the change, so nopony knew it had happened. But I'm resistant to Anon's power. I could tell." I wasn't going to say that the main source of my resistance ability had been the fact that I'd been a stone statue at the time.

"i just don't... why would anypony do this? Anyone?"

"Well, I don't read minds, but my guess is, it was because he wanted the world to be one where males, and particularly him, can easily have an entire harem of wives. The way it was before, herding was rare, and most marriages were opposite-sex and involved just two ponies."
"Wow. Mind. Blown." He shook his head. "How? And why? I mean, why would you change everything just so you can have a herd? Why not just change the minds of the ponies you want in the herd, if you've got that kind of power? It's nonsense, and not the fun, clowny kind."

"I don't know. That's my best guess. For all I know he's a misandrist who hates stallions. It's not that important why he did it. What's important is fighting back."

"Can you change me back? If you know who I was supposed to be, can you make me into him?"

I shook my head. "Pony sex change spells rely on harmony. They only work when the body and the soul are misaligned with each other, as in your case. So it's possible that a standard pony sex change spell could fix you... but I can sense the spell on you, now that I know for a fact that it's there, and it's very, very rigid. Harmony has a hard time working with such rigid structures. I, on the other hand, love to disrupt rigid structures... but changing your sex would be bringing you into alignment, which is Harmony, and my magic requires either Disharmony or Chaos. Changing one stallion back into who he ought to be is harmonious and does not cause a particularly large amount of chaos." While this is not 100% true – I have been known to pull off magical stunts that cause neither – it's very hard for me, and not reliable, and I wasn't going to put myself that far out for Cheese. Besides, I had a better idea.

His face fell. "Darn it. That sounded like it could have worked so well, too."

"But! If you can find and recruit enough of you who want to be reverted – say, 200 stallions in the bodies of mares, or so... well, restoring a large number of you might cause quite a bit of chaos. And you travel all over and meet all kinds of ponies; you shouldn't have trouble finding a large number of your kind. Now, you could go ahead and try the standard sex change spell—"

"I can't," Cheese said. "I went to a doctor and asked about it, two weeks ago. He said there wasn't any such spell and only weirdos would want such a thing and wanting to be something that I'm not is disharmonious and means I'm sick in the head."

I slapped myself in the forehead. Of course Anon wouldn't have allowed society to undo his perfect mostly-mares paradise. I was reminded of the rapists at Something Different, of the cops' attitude about them, and the prejudices against homosexuality and xenophilia that operated only on stallions. He'd managed to introduce disgust with transgenderism into a world that hadn't had it before. The concept of the cutie mark and destiny had generally made ponies unusually accepting of the differences of others, as long as those others were ponies. That hadn't been true when the tribes had been in conflict with each other, but nowadays, a pegasus could choose to live on the ground and take care of animals and a unicorn could choose to be a weather worker, and as long as they had a good cutie mark story to explain it, few ponies had trouble with members of one race acting in manners stereotyped to another. I couldn't remember a time when ponies had been hostile to the notion of ponies born into the wrong gender, though the harmonious alignment spell that could transform the body to match had only been invented about 200 years ago. But the human world lacked cutie marks, and had spent many more centuries focused on the idea that you do what you are born to do; now that they'd opened up and decided that anyone could be anything, they were still having trouble extending the concept from "any job" to fundamental parts of identity. This was either Anon's belief, or the belief that he expected everyone to have regardless of what his own belief was, imposed on ponies.

"Well, fine," I said. "In that case, this strategy's your best chance. Round up 200 stallions or more who are stuck as mares, and get in contact with me." I handed him a business card, which had nothing on it but a picture of me. "Set this on fire or shred it up, and I'll know to come see you. I can perform the procedure if it's likely to cause chaos, even if it's going to increase the personal harmony
of the targets. I can't restore your lost memories or the memories of your friends and family, though."

"Can the guy who did this undo it? Why hasn't the Princess done anything? Well, princesses."

"No one but me knows what he's responsible for. Including himself. And no, he can't undo it, though I'm hoping that if I can defeat him maybe it will undo itself."

"Well, good luck with that. In the meantime... can we get out of the Department of Vital Records? I really don't want to get caught here."

"There isn't even any security," I scoffed. "Who'd break in and steal birth certificates?" But I returned him to the club, because he was a potential ally. I had no Element of Disharmony to give him, and he wasn't well-suited for any of them anyway, but a guy spreading the information all over Equestria about the stallions being turned into mares was every bit as useful to me as the Elements were, if not moreso. Let it get back to Celestia and Luna what had happened, through a source that wasn't me, and maybe it might break Anon's hold over them, or at least open their eyes a bit.

So I've just checked up on how things are going with my minions. Trixie hasn't really gotten in gear yet; right now, she's primarily occupied in buying supplies and replacing her wagon. (The new one has an option for ski blades and is also waterproofed and can function as a boat. She's going all out.) The money she'd saved to buy the Alicorn Amulet when she eventually found it is going into her shopping spree, but she's reserving it for the stuff that's very specific to magic; mostly what she's doing is walking into places like Barnyard Bargains and P-Mart and convincing them that she has a line of credit with the store, then buying food and furniture and other basic supplies.

Blueblood has been going after Anon's stipend. All of the Elements of Harmony receive a stipend from the Crown, a payment for services rendered that's intended to function as a replacement for the money they're losing by doing their Elements thing instead of their jobs. Anon does not in fact have a job, which means that a stipend based on replacing his lost wages ought to be $0. Of course, Twilight filled it out for him with a non-zero number, so Blueblood has gotten an auditor who isn't too thrilled with xenophilia in general, even in mares, to take a good hard look at the paperwork. Bluey expects that Anon's stipend will be revoked, retroactively, which means he'll be sent a big fat bill and everything he bought on letter of marque – the form of credit those who are receiving a government stipend can use where they can bill goods against future stipend – will be owed, so that's a lot of other big fat bills he'll get. I'm really appreciating having brought Blueblood onto the non-team (they're Elements of Disharmony, they can't work together. Of course they're not a team.) I would never have thought of that! Of course eventually it will get back to Celestia, who will override it, but if the auditor sends a sternly worded letter to Twilight regarding the fraud she committed by filling out Anon's form as if he had a job when he doesn't, Twilight will probably panic and refuse to contact Celestia about the problem out of fear that Celestia will throw her in jail. I suggested this to Blueblood, since he has less insight into the instability of Twilight Sparkle's psyche than I do, and he thought it was a good idea.

Gilda, as I mentioned earlier, was involved in a nice direct confrontation with the Elements, which takes some of the pressure off me. Of course Applejack got rescued, but she had to wait, because Rainbow Dash showed up, found her, and then got scared that she wouldn't be able to fly Applejack down safely, so she had to wait for Anon to get back. She didn't even think to go get Twilight; oh, no, it had to be Anon. (And, mind you, Anon went alone to rescue Rarity, so it probably took him a lot longer than it should have.) Gilda taunted Dash for this, a lot, and ended up getting her jaw broken by a punch she didn't dodge in time, but according to her it was worth it. She didn't even think to use one of the teleport tokens I gave her – she insisted she'd never need them, that she was too fast and they couldn't possibly get the drop on her, but I insisted she carry the teleport tokens anyway, and it
turns out I was right, as I usually am. Anon had his sword, of course, and he went for her. Part of me thinks I should be pleased at the thought of Gilda getting skewered by Anon in front of Rainbow Dash, because I'm fairly sure that if anything could turn Rainbow against Anon, that would be it. But the truth is... I like Gilda. Sure, she's annoying as all get-out, but being that I am disharmony, I get a perverse pleasure out of being around someone who annoys me. I like arguments, I like challenges, I like feeling perfectly righteous about pulling pranks because the other one totally deserves it. And while I've had an entourage before, in my days of unruling Equestria, the fact that Gilda has no respect for the fact that I am vastly more powerful than she is actually feels good. I don't like being kowtowed to. It doesn't feel as if it fits. Chaos should be about smashing hierarchies. All right, maybe I'd like a little more respect than I'm getting, but that's all right. Besides, she eats my food. Who else do I have to share meat with? Ponies today are strictly vegetarian.

You know what, I'm stalling again. I really don't want to have to go get the Element of Cruelty. I mean, maybe I could do without it? I've got three perfectly good minions and a spare Element to hand out to someone greedy... but no. I think I'm going to need at least six of them in play, if not all seven, because Anon's story won't make sense to him if there aren't at least six, and if Anon's story doesn't make sense then he starts mind-controlling others into making it make sense. I don't want to be mind-controlled into going and getting my other Elements, particularly since I still have no idea where Selfishness is. So I guess I have no choice.

I don't really expect any trouble on this trip, per se, but I might need to bathe my head in a bucket of brain bleach after I get back.
Alas, Poor Loki! I knew him, Horatio. Sort of.

I've overshot. By a fair bit, if I don't miss my estimate.

Normally this would not be a problem. Long-distance teleportation often has bugs like this in it; it's the price of using Chaos, a lack of precision. I can be even more precise than your average unicorn at short distances, but over long ones, I don't mind saying I don't always end up exactly where I want to go. So this isn't any great surprise... but it's freezing cold up here! And my magic is heavily constrained, so I can't easily just teleport out.

Ugh. I hate the Far North.

I can smell that stupid dead harmonic tree from here. Yggdrasil was dead before I was born, but like the realtors say, it's all about location, location, location, and Yggdrasil is rooted in the North Pole, where all the magic in the world goes underground to be fed into the core and come back up on the equator. So its corpse is still there, sustained just enough by the magic flow that I can feel it. Or, oh, right, maybe that's the reindeer I'm feeling. Magic here becomes so tightly controlled and harmonic, even ponies have a hard time using it; if there were such a thing as "order magic" this is where it would live. Kind of funny that Matrisse wasn't located here, actually. Matrisse was between Bovinia and Long-kuo, aka Chineigh, aka The Dragon Kingdom (not to be confused with the Dragon Empire, which doesn't exist anymore, or the dragon nations, which are way way south; Long-kuo is populated primarily by ponies and Neighsian dragons, the kind I descend from.)

I'm rambling. I'm cold. I'm really, really cold. I've snapped myself up a furry hat and coat, and some boots, but oh dear chaos it is cold up here. And here I am, walking on the very very cold icy ground, because I can't teleport and exposing my tender and delicate wings to the temperature up here is right out. I don't actually need my wings to fly – I can levitate – but I like to use them to steer, and I am not taking them out of this coat to flap them until I get to somewhere warmer than this.

You say to me, "But Discord, can't you use your powers to warm up?" Oh, if only. Like I said, the ley lines converge up here. There's a lot of magic, but it's almost inaccessible – very little in the air, so a pegasus probably couldn't work the weather, but fortunately weather is actually almost nonexistent here. Not much in the ambient for a unicorn to draw. And no chaos. All the magic's going underground, so an earth pony might be able to get at it, if they could actually stand on the earth and not on a thick sheet of ice. But I can't get it, and when I open up my own magic to use it, the damn ley lines start pulling magic out of me, the way this cold air is pulling all the moisture out of my beautiful face and is undoubtedly going to leave me wrinkled before my time. Or at least badly chapped. I have a lot of magic, so I could survive the bleed – I did conjure up all this snow gear, after all, though I'm pretty sure I need a lot more – but it's really uncomfortable. And warming myself would require a constant low-level application of magic, exactly the kind that will leave me open and suck me dry. Not literally, I suppose; it would probably take months before it actually sucked all the magic out of me. But did I mention it's really uncomfortable? Possibly moreso than the cold. I'm not sure, I'm actually debating which is worse.

Also I'm bored. Really bored. I mean, really, really, really, really, really bored. I can add some more reallys to that if the idea isn't getting through. There's nothing around here but ice! And occasionally rocks. Covered in ice. Oh, and for a change of pace, big rocks covered in ice! I'll give it this, the ice formations are really intriguing – I'm getting some inspiration from them, honestly. There are walls of ice that curl, bending over, their tops turning into fringes of dangling, glittering spikes; cliffs of
compacted snow; arches and portals made of snow and ice that don't seem to have been made by any sapient being, just the course of nature... I'd love to replicate some of this in translucent obsidian. (Which doesn't exist, except when I say it does. Obsidian is normally opaque, but when you rearrange its internal molecules magically to make it behave something like glass, it's stunning. Especially when you let flecks of silver and gold get into the center so the light that passes through can reflect off them.) It actually reminds me of my cave, except that caves have this kind of architecture naturally; under normal circumstances you'd never find it out in the daylight.

At least it's summertime. Did you know that the sun and the moon rotate around the equator of the planet, not around Equestria, despite the fact that that's where the Sun-Bearer and Moon-Bearer live? Did you know that Celestia actually moves the sun closer to Equestria in the summertime and closer to Drakonia in the winter (which is Drakonia's summer)? Did you know that because of this, during the middle of the summer, the sun is always visible in the sky in Arctica? I'm sure you thought the pegasi were solely responsible for the coming of winter, but no, without Celestia's active role in cooling the entire northern hemisphere by shifting the sun so it's closer to the southern hemisphere, none of the ice the pegasi make could actually avoid melting. That's why I used to let her control the sun most of the time; if I feel like having a winter, I can just do it with my magic, but I don't want the world to go without winter just because I've been too busy to arrange for one. Celestia could be counted on to make the summers and winters happen on their boring, predictable schedule, and when I felt like doing something different, I could make it any season I wanted, any time I wanted, regardless of where the sun was.

Luna, by the way, has nothing to do with the seasons, despite the fact that the cycle of shapes the moon takes on in the sky is a month in length. You might want to point out to her sometime that while the moon does govern the tides, almost all of Equestria is landlocked and never experiences tides, whereas summer and winter are a thing every pony is familiar with. Well, actually you wouldn't want to point this out, but I would.

Sweet chaos I am so cold. And so bored. But mostly cold. How far away is caribou territory? It can't be too far away.

That's a little better. These boots are made for walking! That's just what they'll do! One of these days these boots are gonna walk right over Anon!... I wonder if the tooth still picks it up when I'm singing. 99 spikes of ice on the wall, 99 spikes of ice, if one of those spikes should happen to fall, I certainly hope it doesn't fall on my head!... right. I've made a second pair of boots so I can go four-legged, because I can generally go faster four-legged over rough terrain, also because the wind was cutting right through my coat. Both of them, the one I'm wearing and the one that's attached to my skin. You might not recognize them as boots, though; they're more like socks, if socks were waterproof, had hatch marks and short spikes for traction all over their bottoms, and were lined with fur for warmth. But they're still flexible and if I absolutely had to, I could still use my forefeet as hands with them on.

I wish I was going to go deal with reindeer instead. Oh, reindeer are so annoyingly soppy and harmonic and gosh gee willikers we love everyone, let's be BFFs, they'd drive me sane within days... but reindeer would find me, because they send out patrol parties to rescue potentially lost creatures, and since I'm not a caribou, they'd give me hot chocolate and wrap me in warm towels and take me back to one of their cities on a sleigh. (They're not as sweet and harmonious as they like to pretend. If what they found while patrolling was a male caribou, he'd be feeding the polar bears within minutes, and by that I don't mean he'd be trotting around passing out fish and berries.) Whereas caribou have patrol parties too, but I have to hide from those because caribou consider any creature that's not a caribou a threat, at least if they find one strolling around in their back yard. It's not that I couldn't fight off any number of caribou, but I'm here to negotiate with them, which means turning them into bouncy balls, aside from using up a lot of the magic I'm trying to conserve here, would
probably make it more difficult for me to get my Element of Cruelty back from them. Bouncy balls might still come into the picture, you understand, just not as an opening gambit.

But unless you're Luna or Celestia you have no idea what I'm talking about. You know about the reindeer, because Sinterklauss and the fact that Albion and Prance and Roam all participate in the annual Yule festival to join a quarter of the planet in harmony and eugh. You probably don't know about the reindeer's evil twins, the caribou, because quite frankly you are entirely too sheltered to begin to comprehend that a society like theirs could exist. Well, unless you're from the Crystal Empire, but even then, caribou practice a form of brutality so senseless and insane-seeming, at least from the outside, that Sombra found them morally disgusting, and yaks will stomp a caribou to death without asking questions if they ever encounter one. Or they'll try, anyway. Caribou carry weapons when they patrol.

So over two and a half thousand years ago, the world was a peaceful and harmonious place due to the activities of Yggdrasil, the World Tree. It was the ancestor of the current Tree of Harmony, but unlike the current Tree of Harmony, which is planted in the middle of a large land mass and surrounded by a chaotic forest and therefore can’t spread its influence much beyond Equestria, Yggdrasil covered most of the world. The ley lines of magic run in the air and water and upper earth, going north, until they reach the pole, where they plunge under the crust into the roiling, chaotic magma below, and are carried by the currents until they spout upward through volcanoes, underwater crevasses, and the veins of crystal that run through most mountain ranges. When Yggdrasil was alive, all of the magic of the entire world funneled through it to be purified, and when it spouted back up, it was rich with harmony. Even the dragons lived peacefully, enough that they could build themselves an Empire. It was horrible. Everyone in the world got along with everyone else, though none of them intermingled much. Species kept to species, and they all lived in a hazy dream of contentment where nothing much changed.

I despise my predecessor, Mayhem, for many reasons, but while I'm sure I would never take things as far as he did... I understand why he did it. Desperate times call for desperate actions. He used the Element of Hatred to poison Yggdrasil, so that as magic went through it to be purified, it was instead thoroughly contaminated with hate.

The reindeer and caribou had been one society, at the time, their entire purpose in existence to tend the Tree and use their mastery of rune magic to ensure that Harmony ruled the world. They were the first to fall. They split into two groups, those that continued to struggle to maintain Harmony – who became the reindeer, and settled on the Neighropan and Neighsian side of Arctica – and those that embraced, not chaos, but hierarchy. A rule of dominance, where only the strong survive and the rule of the leader is absolute. A triumph of Order, not Chaos. Mayhem's first mistake was in allowing that. His second was in allowing worldwide hatred and distrust of the Other to become so widespread, the discord and enmity so thorough, that it brought the windigos, and the cold brought by the windigos wiped out our species. Which I still haven't forgiven him for. Yes, I probably wouldn't exist if the windigos hadn’t killed off most of the draconequui and I certainly wouldn't exist without Mayhem's other actions, but I still hate him for them.

Harmony magic is powerful, and reindeer can channel group workings through runes. The reindeer had every incentive to try to maintain worldwide harmony, which was why they initiated the Yule ritual where they bring food and presents to all of the foals (and young of other species) in Neighropa. Doing this generates so much goodwill toward them that they can keep the winter wasteland of their home a winter wonderland instead, growing food despite a climate that ought to make it impossible and defending themselves and others with their magic. This was not an option for the caribou, so they turned to dark magic, specifically the magic of sacrifice. Mayhem gave them the Element of Cruelty so they could have the strength to continue to harass the reindeer, and with the Element of Cruelty in hoof, they figured out how to create power.
Sombra raised dark magic through fear. He maintained a society where all of the crystal ponies lived in a state of paranoia and terror, even those who had power within that society. The caribou went in a different direction.

...Ugh, it hurts to talk. It hurts to breathe up here it's so godawfully cold. I was planning on trying to explain the caribou before I actually get to their nearest settlement but my lungs actually hurt.

To Tartarus with this. I am making myself some hot chocolate and spicy soup, and then a warm blanket and a fire, and I am going to sit down and warm myself up a bit before I keep going.

Ahhh. That is so much better. I had to pay for it, of course; even the trivial amount of magic it takes to make myself food and a warm place to sit left me open enough that I'm feeling a little lightheaded from the drain, but I've sealed my magic back up and oh, I may have outdone myself with this chocolate. Hot Mexicaballan spicy chocolate, guaranteed to be searingly hot even when it's ice cold, thick fudge-flavored cream, a ton of sugar, salt, and ginger. Mmmm. I might make some strawberries to soak in it, but on the other hand the magic drain feels quite unpleasant, so maybe not. My five-pepper soup is actually tasting rather pleasant in comparison. Needed more garlic, I think. And some cyanide. You can't go wrong with bitter almond to pep up your soup.

I'm sitting in the lee of a big rock covered in ice, letting it take the brunt of the wind while I have my little picnic. It's comfy. I'd like to lie back, but firstly, this big rock I'd be leaning against is covered in ice, and even with my big winter coat on that wouldn't be pleasant, and secondly... I'm actually afraid I might fall asleep up here. It's been such a struggle to keep walking through this cold, and holding in my magic against the pull of the pole, and... I'm tired. Maybe this isn't even a good idea. I won't be at my best dealing with the caribou if I go to face them like this. Maybe I should just teleport home, and come back here later.

Right, because I'm ever going to get any more precise about teleporting in the Frozen North. I mean I suppose I could jump from Yakyakistan... but I suspect the caribou are doing something to specifically boggle teleporters. One way or another I'm gonna have to find them on foot.

So what I'm doing now, as I finish sipping my spicy chocolate, is I'm looking around with eagle vision, hoping to find some sign of life. See, here is one of the other wonderful parts of being me. I can shift the traits of any part of my body to match the nature of any other part. For instance, when I'm being stealthy, I can make my hoof, my claw and my talon all match my lion paw – they don't change shape, but they all acquire the trait of being soft and nearly silent. Or because my bat wing is actually a batpony wing, I can make my eyes take on the trait of the catlike night vision batponies have. (If I was an actual bat I'd have sonar. Which is fun, don't get me wrong, but I prefer the night vision.) The only traits I can't share around are basic pony and dragon, possibly because those are the ones I was born with and not the ones I was gifted by Chaos, and to be even more specific, I can make all my paws dig like the dragon claw; I just can't share dragon invulnerability across my entire body, only where I actually do have scales.

My talon is an eagle's talon, specifically. So I can give myself eagle eyesight. It doesn't combine with the night vision, sadly (not without an act of chaos magic, anyway), but right now that's not a problem. I'm looking around myself with long distance eyes and observing... a whole lot of ice. What a surprise.

All right, I'm going to climb this big rock that's covered with ice. Get some height, and also see in the directions that it blocks.

This isn't really so bad. I'm only saying that because I'm stuffed full of warm liquid right now, of course; the wind would be really biting into me here if I weren't wearing a coat. But it's not bothering me so much at the moment. I'm looking around myself for any variation in this endless vista of ice,
ice, ice, ice, rock, ice, rock and more ice, but so far I'm not seeing anything. Maybe I'll have to fly after –

--oh, oh now wait, what's that?

That looks like a frost dragon. And frost dragons eat heat. Meaning that he (or she) might very well know where the caribou capital city is. (If you can call it a city. I think it's made of tents.)

Well! I think it's time I made a new friend!

...that's... not a frost dragon.

Or is it? That's either a superbly rendered statue, or...

...it's Loki. Dear chaos it's Loki.

And... he's dead. There's nothing. No magic inside that statue at all, let alone chaos energy.

I can't talk about this anymore.

The sun is gliding around the horizon. This is amazing. I should have come up here years ago; it's one thing when I do silly things with the sun, but when Celestia's normal, boring patterns for rising and setting the sun produce something as ridiculous as this... well. It almost makes up for how bitterly cold it still is. Almost.

I made camp a few hours ago. I'm having to rethink my strategy for dealing with the caribou, which is to say, I'm trying to come up with a strategy for dealing with the caribou. When I headed out I assumed I'd have more access to my magic than it turns out I have... and I didn't know that the Frozen North can kill a chaos avatar. Loki... I am willing to admit that finding his body has shaken me up more than just a bit. I knew he was turned to stone at the end of Ragnarok, but I always assumed he must have gotten out eventually and I just didn't have access to those memories, because a thousand years in stone didn't affect my being the chaos avatar in the slightest, so I'd assumed that if Loki had still been stone he'd still be the chaos avatar and not me, or any of the others that came between us. I didn't know it was possible for us to die in stone.

So. I decided it would be a bad idea to face the caribou if I'm exhausted. Thus, I exhausted myself a lot further by making a nice thermally sealed tent, magicking up some more hot food and some firewood, and some fuzzy blankets, and getting a fire going. I've always liked fire. When I was very young I thought of it as a pet, and its chaotic nature warms my heart the way its heat warms my toesies. Took a nap – to be honest, I rarely sleep like ponies do, for an entire eight hours at a stretch. I'm too restless. Usually I sleep a few hours, then wake up, then go back to sleep a few hours later. I'll probably be going back to sleep again before too long – the warmth of my tent beckons me – but I woke up twice with nightmares about being in stone, so here I am, up and watching the sun refuse to set.

Maybe it will help to talk to my journal about the whole Loki thing and why it's bothering me so much. Better than trying to think about what I'm facing with the caribou, anyway. I don't do well with trying to plan.

It's not as if I haven't had plenty of reminders of my own mortality, while fighting Anon, and it's not as if I care all that much, personally, about Loki. I have some of his memories, sure, but I think they might actually be the first ones I've got – either he was the first chaos avatar or the memories of the others are simply too old for me to recall. They're not particularly clear, either. Before I spent a thousand years in stone, I couldn't really recall any of them except Mayhem; I knew they'd existed,
and that was it. The others didn't become available to me until I did some meditation while I was stuck in stone; meditation doesn't exactly come naturally to me, but I didn't have anything else to do, after all. Even now, my memories of Loki are weaker than any of the others. I never even knew how he died.

Now I do.

Loki was a frost dragon, but either he was part reindeer or he was a runt, or something... I don't remember. In any case, he had shapeshifting abilities, which is rare but not unheard of among dragons. Frost dragons feed on heat; they live in the cold because the temperature of a place like Equestria would be like any pony but Pinkie suddenly having forty cakes shoved in their mouth. (I am fairly certain Pinkie could handle this, but she's probably the only pony who could.) Loki, however, didn't need to eat heat to fuel his magic; he had chaos.

He was adopted by the ruling tribe of the reindeer, the Aesir – which is essentially the term for reindeer alicorns. Yes, some reindeer can fly, how do you think it is that supposedly Sinterklaus and his team of nine assistants travel all over Neighropa? And some reindeer can perform magic directly, though all of them can use rune magic – rather like us draconequui, in fact. Loki was taken in as either the son or the younger brother of the king, Woden (like I said, my memories are really unclear here). Despite this, he was generally treated like garbage by the Aesir, who didn't approve of chaos any more than ponies do. Loki put up with it until one day he didn't.

One of the Aesir, Balder, was generally considered an all around wonderful guy that everydeer loved to pieces. He was a shining star of harmony, a friend to absolutely everyone in the universe apparently, truly Creation's gift to reindeerkind or something like that. I'm pretty sure I'd have hated him too and I wasn't even raised with the guy. Loki decided to play a cruel prank and get Balder, who was supposed to be impervious to all harm, injured by the one thing in the world that could harm him. He miscalculated, and Balder ended up dead. Things spiraled out of control, Loki went to war with the rest of the Aesir, lost, was brutally tortured for I don't know how long, got loose, and decided to destroy the world.

He created the windigos. While frost dragons feed on heat and thus generate cold, windigos generate cold magically, and feed on disharmony. He created ice wolves – rather like timberwolves, but made of ice – in the shape of his murdered son (Loki, being a shapeshifter, got around. One of his kids was fathered on a dire wolf, and ended up born in wolf shape. That was the one the Aesir killed.) Then he set them loose on the bearer of the sun, an Aesir doe named Sola, and they ripped her to pieces, because apparently when you melt ice wolves to water, you get water wolves, and when you vaporize them, you get vapor wolves. Alicorns, and alicorn-level reindeer, aren't immune to being torn apart from the inside by wolves that they've accidentally breathed into their lungs. Who knew? (Well, the victim did. Apparently, Sola, who had the prophecy gift like most sun bearers do, had been seeing this death for years before it happened; she just hadn't known Loki would be involved. Why she melted and vaporized the wolves anyway when she knew how it would end up, I don't know, but I guess when you have a hammer, every problem looks like a nail – she had the power of the sun, so everything she had to fight was something to melt or burn. I'm glad Celestia has more variety in her repertoire than that.)

Loki took control of the sun and forced it away from our world, making the whole planet colder and darker. He caged in Yggsdrasil so it couldn't interfere, and brought what is called the First Fimbulwinter, the winter that destroys the world as we know it. At the battle of Ragnarok, he killed Woden, and Thor, master of the weather (reindeer didn't have their flyers handle this job – flying reindeer were actually best known for being medics, coming to the fallen on the battlefield to heal them, though they were also famous for fighting demons and sealing the gate to Tartarus, not that they called it Tartarus. There are actually Tartarus gates all over the world, but they have different
names depending on where they are – this was the gate called Hel.) And probably a lot of other Aesir as well. I can’t much say I blame him; they tortured him really, really gruesomely, for a very long time. No, I’m not going to give you the details. If I wanted to give you nightmares I’d do it when I’m alive and can point and laugh at you.

Yggdrasil came up with a strategy to save the world; it grew six fruit and gifted them to six young creatures, at least one of which was a reindeer but probably not Aesir, and I think some of them might have been a different species but I’m not sure which ones, as to be honest Loki only saw these guys once and then his memories cut off completely. Now, see, it would have been really really useful for me to know that a Tree of Harmony can grow fruit that represent the Elements of Harmony and hoof (branch?) them over to representative bearers who can then wield the powers of a Harmony Tree, before I was turned to stone. The collective memories of the chaos avatars failed me badly there. Though I admit that maybe if I’d cared more about how any of my predecessors aside from Mayhem came to be not around anymore, possibly I’d have been able to retrieve those memories. The point is, Loki didn't know that those gems were Harmony fruits or that they could turn him to stone any more than I did, so he laughed in their faces, like I did, and ended up a statue.

My status as chaos avatar never changed while I was a statue, so I always assumed that Loki must have gotten out of that statued state, somehow, and died after that, allowing the power to pass on to the next one. In fact, if I recall correctly, there were times when I clung to the belief that surely Loki had gotten out or he'd still be the statued avatar of Chaos and not me, as proof that it was possible to get out, while I was desperately hoping that someday I’d get out. But no. He never did.

When I found him out there on the ice, earlier today, his mouth was in a laughing position but his eyes wide with shock, as if he’d had just enough time to realize what was happening to him to start to feel horror instead of humor before he was frozen in place. I walked around him, running my paws over his ice-cold rock body, stretching my senses. Trying to feel anything, any sign of life. Even though Chaos avatars usually end up trying to fight each other to the death when they encounter each other, I would still have freed him if he was alive; he’d have been too weak to be a threat to me, and if I did have to kill him, better a quick clean death than thousands of years in stone. But he was dead, not a shred of life force or magic remaining. Nothing but a statue.

So I smashed it. Chaos should never be frozen into place for eternity for passersby to gawk at. Admittedly not a lot of passersby in the Frozen North, but that's part of the point. That's what killed him.

There's no chaos up here. I was in a garden, in a place where the sun rises and the moon sets at least once every twenty-four hours or so, most of the time, when Woona's not throwing a tantrum. It's predictable, and annoying because it's predictable, but at least it's change. There's weather in Equestria, rain and sun and snow and wind and sometimes some idiot pegasus lets a tornado get loose. Canterlot's up high enough that they never got any natural weather even before the pegasi got everything completely under their hooves, but as unnatural and pony-made as the weather is, it's still weather. There are ponies, with their own agendas, roaming around, and some of them start arguments. There's some disharmony. There's some chaos. And my magic was trapped safely within me, no force native to the area strong enough to pull it out.

In the Frozen North, the winter nights last a long, long time, and for months of the year there's nothing but night. In the summer the same thing happens to the sun. Aside from a snowstorm once every year or so, there's no weather because weather requires heat. Water doesn't evaporate when it is perpetually frozen. The territories where the reindeer (and later, caribou) actually live are much nicer than this, because they use their magic for heat and to create weather, but out of those zones, out in the cold empty wilderness of ice... nothing changes. There's no ponies or reindeer or other sapient beings around – even frost dragons prefer to live near settlements with heat, because they've
gotta eat. Polar bears live near the water, because there's no fish deep within the continent of Arctica.

But there is the pull of the leylines, sapping magic away from any creature who has it.

I don't want to talk about this. Even to my journal. I'm having flashbacks just thinking about it. If I thought I'd be alive when any pony read this I'd never write it, because this has to be the thing I'm most afraid of, out of all possibilities, even worse than being killed by Anon. Loki died slowly, agonizingly, trapped in stone (a horror for a chaotic creature, as I am well qualified to tell you), surrounded by endless nothing, his magic pulled out of him by the draw from the leylines until eventually there was nothing left of it, or him. I mean, I don't know how fast it was, but I know how much the lines were pulling on my magic and I would imagine that being in stone would have made it harder, not easier, for them to pull his magic from him... but also harder for him to resist it. He'd have had no conscious control, no way to fight back, as the leylines drank him like a particularly sludgy, thick milkshake through a tiny sippy straw.

And then there's the cold. I noticed when I was in stone that while most of the time I couldn't feel anything at all, I could feel cold on particularly bitter winter nights... mind you, the numbness I normally lived with was so terrible that most of the time, I enjoyed the novelty of being able to feel anything, even if cold is hardly my favorite sensation. The cold in the North is so much worse than the worst Equestrian winter, though, I'm sure Loki would have been able to feel the cold the entire time... which wouldn't have bothered him. He was a frost dragon, and he was in his dragon form when they petrified him. But I can't help imagining what if I was in that situation... what if it was so cold that I could feel, and all I could feel was the cold, which, as I might have pointed out, killed most of my entire race...

No. I'm done here. Talking about this has been spectacularly unhelpful. I've recorded what I need to for posterity and to make sure my memories can't be taken from me and now I'm done. No more dwelling on things that didn't happen. I was in Equestria, not the Frozen North. I wouldn't have died in my prison. Loki killed pretty much everyone who would have ever thought of showing him mercy; I went out of my way to never kill anypony. Even Luna wouldn't have done something so horrible to me.

Fairly sure I'm going to have more nightmares, though, when I eventually go back to sleep.

And it hasn't put me in a particularly good mood for dealing with the caribou. Not that I think I'd ever be in a good mood for dealing with the caribou, but I'm in a particularly bad mood right now.

They're a lot more powerful than I was taking into account when I headed up here – in this barren wasteland, almost devoid of magic, I can feel the concentration of dark magic that they represent, somewhere around here, just as I can feel echoes of the reindeer's harmony and possibly the ghost of that stupid tree. And I'm a lot less powerful than I usually am, considering that every act of magic is like opening a vein. And they're never, ever, ever going to give me what I want without a fight, because their entire society depends on it. This is going to be like Winnie all over again, except that it's not just going to be my overconfidence and unwillingness to go all out when I don't have to that's crippling me.

Well. The advantage is, I can do a demonstration of godlike power if I have to, and if they remember me from the old days... I'm still the most powerful male creature on the planet. Not counting Anon, at the moment. (If we're not counting Anon I'm actually the most powerful creature on the planet, never mind my gender, which I could change any time I felt like I'd enjoy being a girl, but the caribou care a lot about that kind of thing.) So if I don't reveal myself to be an enemy who finds them disgusting and is there to steal back their most powerful magical item, they're likely to suck up to me outrageously, same as they did way back when. I can hope, at least.
I'm going back to bed now. Maybe sleeping on it will give me some ideas.

Chapter End Notes

IMPORTANT STUFF:
The next few chapters mock an AU called "Fall of Equestria" in much the same way that all of this work is mocking Gary Stus in general.

Fall of Equestria (as those of you who have heard of it know) is an absolutely X-rated fetish clopfic series dealing with nonconsensual sex slavery and degrading female characters. It portrays a society so ridiculously obsessed with sex and degrading women that it wouldn't actually be functional, with a total Gary Stu DeVille (my term for a Stu who is a villain) as the main villain, and relies on characters to be massively OOC to function at all. I've had people tell me it should be beneath my notice, since it's simply fetish clopfic. However, because it's a shared universe, which has attracted numerous decent artists and even some half-decent writers who try to make sense of the premise, it's a trope... and besides, mocking Gary Stu is kind of low hanging fruit so I don't know why anyone thinks I'm above that. :-) That being said, the main reason I want to spork it so badly is that the "canon" of the shared universe suggests that the villains succeeded in conquering Equestria with the help of Discord... who then proceeds to never appear, which is so massively OOC for Discord I feel like I absolutely have to address it. The society as portrayed is stilted, boring, rigid, and totally opposed to chaos, and if Discord had voluntarily helped the villains win, it would be Rapist!Discord looking to get revenge and claim prizes of his own, yet he never shows up again in "canon".

So. Here's a thing I long to make fun of, or at least to point out all the flaws in, and I have a perfect vehicle to do it with. The problem is, my vehicle is Teen rated, and the series itself is absolutely Explicit.

So. In the next chapter in particular, there will be considerable, but euphemistic and non-graphic, discussion of rape and sex slavery. To keep my T rating, I assure you that nothing will get any more detailed than some of what Discord's already talked about (such as the incident with the waitresses or his early visits to his xenophile club.) However, if this is something you feel that you can't handle... after next chapter, the discussion of any details of sex slavery drops off considerably in favor of a slave riot and lengthy battle. So if you need to skip chapter 19 and go straight to 20, I'll provide a brief synopsis, in character, at the start of 20, as to what happened in 19.

Some notes regarding this chapter:

Caribou and reindeer are two names for the same animal, but "caribou" have been primarily popularized as the villains of Fall of Equestria, whereas "reindeer" have largely appeared in pony fics as being responsible for something vaguely like Christmas. So I split the difference and went with both. Equestrians celebrate Hearth's Warming, not Yule, but some of their traditions are borrowed from Yule, which is widely celebrated on the other side of the world.

I am playing fast and loose with Norse mythology, as anyone who knows it well would be aware of.
In a geocentric solar system, there would not normally be sizable temperature differences at the poles, because this is caused by axial tilt, which doesn't make a whole lot of sense if the sun goes around the planet. So I created artificial axial tilt by establishing that Celestia actually changes the orbit of the sun, spiraling it closer to the Northern Hemisphere in Equestria's summer and the Southern Hemisphere in the winter, and this allows me to have the weird polar effects like the midnight sun.

BTW, this chapter was originally 50,000 words, which is why I am breaking it into either 3 or 4 chapters total. I will probably post 19 on Sunday, 20 on Tuesday, and if there is a 21 that comes out of this, that'll be next Thursday or so.
Partying With The Enemy

Chapter Notes

If you didn't read the author's note at the end of the last chapter: the following chapter contains discussion of child abuse, rape and sex slavery. It's as euphemistic and non-graphic as I could get away with, but if you feel like you can't handle that... the next chapter will be action and battle sequences, and I'll have a brief synopsis of this chapter up at the start of that, written in character as Discord's Editor, so if you have to skip you won't be lost.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Editor's Note:

Discord asked me to look over this chapter to see what would offend "conservative pony sensibilities" so badly that they wouldn't want to keep reading anymore, on the grounds that I am "exquisitely trained in being a stick in the mud," and told me to cut it out of my copy of his document, the one he wants me to publish if Anon kills him or something. I... thought it would be a good idea to cut a lot of stuff. Discord disagreed and made me put most of it back, but I got rid of the worst stuff. This chapter talks a lot about a society that is so disgusting, it's hard to imagine that they're actually real, except that I don't think even Discord would make stuff like this up.

There's stuff that happens in it that's a big deal, so I don't think ponies should skip it, but if you think you can't handle reading about a society that turns mares into, uh, love slaves, except without the part about loving them... gosh, this is hard to even write about for me. I can copy Discord's words about it a lot easier than I can write them myself. Look, there's a country in here where all the mares are sex slaves, okay? I said it. And it's really, really gross to read about. So if you can't handle reading about that, skip to the next chapter – I put in tabs before putting this thing in a binder, so you can jump ahead – and I'll try to provide a short summary of the important stuff that happens in here before the chapter starts. -end note.

Home again, home again, jiggity jog. Let me tell you, that was disturbing. Several different layers of disturbing, in fact. My entire trip to the north consisted of a soup of disturbing with disturbing salad followed by a fine meal of unease, displeasure and disturbance with disturbing ice cream for dessert. Not as tasty as it sounds when I write it down, I assure you.

I'm done with my adventure in the North, thank chaos. A lot has happened, including some things I still find completely implausible and can barely believe I pulled off, including... well, spoilers. We'll get to that when we get to it. It won't make any sense as to why I did what I did without telling the whole story to begin with. Which I don't want to do, because aside from the things that are just disgusting and unpleasant to talk about... well. Now I know what it feels like to be mind-controlled into thinking and feeling things you find utterly abhorrent. I... am getting just the tiniest inkling of an understanding why ponies really, really hate it when I do that to them. Of course, when I do it to ponies I'm just making them into annoying jerks, usually, not... well, not the really awful thing I could have potentially become if I hadn't figured out what was going on and broken free of it.

But I'm trying to figure out how to even begin to talk about what happened, and stalling out, because I have no idea how I'm going to describe any of this. Part of my problem here is my audience. I'm all
for telling a good risqué joke in front of a group of like-minded adults, but I have no idea who is going to pick up this document and read it, and in my experience, there are certain things one can discuss that are so grotesque, so shocking to the sensibilities of the ordinary pony, that simply describing them will cause the pony to recoil in disgust... and then refuse to read the rest of the document. I mean, if I make ponies recoil in disgust because I describe in great detail a peanut butter pickled mango ice cream sandwich with cole slaw, ketchup and raw fish eggs, odds are the pony will come back to the document, because nopony considers reading about disgusting food to be something either immoral or so horrifying that sensitive eyes must be protected from it. But you talk about one orgy, and all of a sudden it's "Well! I never!", and pearl clenching, and fainting, and the end result is the pony simply ignores everything else you have to say.

Unfortunately caribou society is of a nature that simply describing it in front of foals could probably get a pony thrown in jail for a day or two. And not because of anything as pleasant as mutually enjoyable orgies, either. I'm going to do my best to be as circumspect and euphemistic as I can be, in telling a tale whose very setting is unsettling even to me, let alone ponies. But it won't be easy, I fear.

Reindeer make their home a paradise within the land of eternal winter by using harmony, feelings of friendship and love and gratitude harvested from all over Neighropa, every Yule, which they induce by doing good deeds and bringing cookies to foals and whatnot. Caribou make their homeland livable through dark magic. They harvest feelings of despair, depression, misery, hatred, sadism, and the brute enjoyment of dominance, to gain the magic they require. Also, while they don't practice outright necromancy, they did discover that it's possible to gain power by sacrificing a sapient child's intelligence. Basically, perform a spell on a child that severs her from her willpower and her higher mental functions, so what you get is a child who's obedient and stupid to the point of being barely able to manufacture language – about as bright as your average Diamond Dog, actually, but with no personal ambition and no ability or desire to disobey orders. It takes several such sacrifices of sapience to match one sacrifice of life, but performing it on half your population generates a lot of power.

Caribou turn their cows into near-mindless slaves, when they're still calves. (Reindeer and caribou, for some reason that I have never understood, are referred to with the same terms we use for cattle – bulls, cows and calves – rather than bucks/stags, does, and fawns as we do with regular deer, despite the fact that reindeer and caribou are, in fact, deer.) They then use these stupid, loyal creatures who would be cheerfully obedient to anything they were asked to do... as sex slaves. What, when you heard that they do it to all of their females, did you think I was going somewhere else with this?

This would be horrible enough if they only took their own sacrificed, stupid daughters and raised them up to be sexually abused by any bull with an itch in his pants, but it wouldn't generate enough misery for their magic to use. Most of the sacrificed cows are incapable of even particularly wanting to resist their fate; they literally live to please their masters. Rather like dogs. Except they're the same species, so no need for xenophilia to find them attractive; you'd just have to not care that they barely have minds. And caribou, though they are raised and trained to despise females – of any species – to the point where the only language they ever use for any female ever is the most contemptuous set of terms they could come up with, still don't manage to be quite evil enough to torture and beat their loving, loyal, stupid slaves... most of the time anyway. Sure, they use them for sex the way colts going through puberty use socks, but they can't muster up enough hatred to really dish out the abuse, and because the poor girls have been raised to believe that supplying sex to their masters is the highest grace they can aspire to, it frequently only qualifies as rape on the grounds that it's not like they'd be able to refuse if they wanted to.

So they have to have someone to hate. They have to have slaves that they can demean and torture and break down mentally. They also have to be absolutely brutal to each other, crushing dissent and any kind of nonconformity, weakness or both, in the most horrible way they can imagine. They turn
dissenters into cows and enslave them, but don't sacrifice their minds. The former bulls, not having been raised to be slaves and not lacking the ability to refuse orders, of course resist their new station in life as hard as they can, but in the icy wilderness it's not as if running away is much of an option, so inevitably they become resigned enough to their fates to stop resisting. This doesn't stop them from hating what's being done to them, despising their former friends who betrayed them... and taking it out on the born-female slaves, because those are the only creatures low enough on the totem pole that they can take out their rage on.

But even that wasn't enough. The fact that it turned their entire society into a seething cesspool of backstabbing and favor-currying, where the dominance hierarchy is practically hardened into stone and anyone who challenges authority had better be doing so only in the limited sense that they want to replace one specific guy in authority with themselves, and also, they had better win... that wasn't enough either. They needed more slaves. After all, every bull's position is incredibly precarious, so if he doesn't have a lot of slaves to lord it over and take his frustrations out on, why, he might slip and actually display his anxiety to his peers... who'd see that as weakness, and bring him down. And it's considered much more manly to abuse and torment slaves that fight back.

So they go on raiding parties. They find reindeer, or yaks, or griffins, or dip down far enough south to snag ponies living in the borderlands north of Equestria, around the same latitudes as the Crystal Empire. There are a number of small settlements outside any well-defined national borders, and trading caravans crossing the wastes up here, and of course reindeer, yaks and griffins have patrol parties out looking for caribou to kill, and sometimes they're careless enough or outnumbered enough that the caribou win those skirmishes. When raiding parties find victims, they'll take the females captive, and initiate them via the entire raiding party into what will generally be their new life from now on, unless they manage to escape before being taken to caribou territory. Males might be killed, or abused the same way the females would be and dragged back to caribou territory to be turned into females, depending on how "masculine" the caribou see them as. You don't want to know what happens to any children they catch.

Once the slaves are ensconced in their new home, they're collared, which I suppose is an improvement on branding, with color-coded collars indicating how resistant they are. Black collars are there to be tortured and broken – they're the ones still fighting back. Or who the caribou still suspect of fighting back mentally, still capable of hating every moment of their new life. Red collars have submitted completely. They're either native caribou -- sacrificed cows, specifically -- or they're prisoners who have come to the conclusion that the only way to avoid being tortured is to act like you agree that you should submit to everything you're told and that you are a wholly inferior being who should be used only for sex. (Ed. note: cut some stuff here about other colored collars because they aren't relevant to Discord's story and because even Discord trying to be euphemistic ended up too graphic in my opinion.)

Back in my day, the caribou used to occasionally invade towns, and when they did, they used powerful spells to brainwash most of the males into agreeing with them and accepting their leadership. Though that cost a lot of magic, it paid off for them because it usually meant they could take and torment all of the town's females, and that would raise more than enough power to replace what they lost with the brainwashing... especially since brainwashed males would then come out from under the spell one or two at a time, and could be taken individually and killed or converted into new slaves. Sometimes they used magical artifacts to support the brainwashing.

I found this behavior distasteful, but since they'd obsequiously suck up to me, as the most supremely powerful male in the world, I found it vastly more entertaining to sic Celestia and Luna on them. Doing terrible things to someone who is bowing and scraping and singing my praises really leaves a terrible taste in my mouth, unless I'm incredibly angry, and most of the time I find caribou more disgusting than enraging. Also, I don't like killing, but most caribou that you don't kill will end up,
sooner or later, raping somebody, unless you hit them with a permanent mind whammy, and chaos doesn’t like permanence. Celestia and Luna, on the other hand, have no problem with killing when it needs to be done. And I must say, while the blood was unpleasant, the bonfires and explosions were beautiful.

And the truth is... all of this is possible because they are holding the Element of Cruelty.

That's the key. It's passed down from king to king, tied into the spells that generate the pool of magic that the caribou use. The first such king might even have been a designated bearer – Mayhem was still the chaos avatar when the caribou first established their philosophy of violent male domination, and while it makes sense for the Element of Hatred to have split what was one harmonious species and one culture into two warring factions, it's a little bit bizarre that one of those factions promptly took up treating their own cows like disposable handkerchiefs. If they’d had a leader who had the idea, and who was an official Bearer of Cruelty and therefore had the power to inspire others to cruel acts, though, then it makes sense. The entire society is organized around sadistic sexual domination, and it's hard to imagine how it got that way without a legitimate Bearer of Cruelty in the mix.

However, the artifacts of Disharmony are not hereditary any more than the artifacts of Harmony are (actually probably less so), so when he died (or was killed) and his office passed to his son, that king would not have been an authorized Bearer. I'm guessing Mayhem actually handed it off to the first caribou king as part of his plot to poison Yggdrasil and cause worldwide strife, and then never bothered to take it back or assign it to anyone else. So for more than two thousand years, the ruler of the caribou has invariably been a bull who wields the Element of Cruelty without the protection of being an authorized Bearer.

An authorized Bearer of Cruelty would be given keen insight into the weaknesses of others, and the ability to manipulate others into being cruel, which is part of why I suspect the first king was a true Bearer. Holders of Cruelty who aren't Bearers don't get those abilities, and they themselves are compulsively sadistic. But anyone who carries the Element gains power from the suffering they cause, or the suffering they inspire (it's not as if creatures in leadership positions have ever needed a magical item to get their followers to be cruel; it's just that it helps. Besides, using the Element as a component of a ritual spell, like the caribou kings are doing, can allow it to affect others even if the user is not a Bearer, depending on the spell).

The caribou philosophy of rigid hierarchy, worship of the alpha male and brutal domination, plus their skill with harnessing runes, has led to a complex magical construct in which their brutality to their slaves (and to each other) feeds the power of the king, who with the Element of Cruelty is the centerpoint from which the pool of mana that the caribou use radiates. It's as if they've created their own ley lines, except that instead of running through the air or the ground in parallel to the planet's magnetic field, the lines magically connect from the king to each individual caribou bull... which is part of why it's so easy for them to turn on each other, and why none of their slaves can tap into that power. (They make extra sure with the ponies by breaking horns and plucking wings, and with reindeer and transformed, intelligent caribou, they remove the antlers... but reindeer and transformed caribou with experience in rune magic wouldn't need their antlers for casting if they could tap into the available mana. They can't, because caribou get access to it by swearing fealty to the king, and the moment the king decides they shouldn't have it anymore, they don't.)

I knew all this before I left. I knew the caribou would never voluntarily give me the Element of Cruelty because it's the cornerstone of their entire corrupt society, and without it, they'd be powerless. What I sort of forgot was how weak I am in the Frozen North. I mean, I didn't really forget, I just... didn't think about how that was going to affect my ability to march right in there and steal their most precious item of power.
After I found Loki dead, I realized... these bozos could, potentially, actually kill me. If they turned me to stone and then used runes fed by their power to keep me that way, I’d bleed out magically the way Loki did. In theory, no set of runes could hold me captive; it takes the power levels of one of my fellow avatars, Order or Harmony, to bind me permanently. In practice... all it would take would be caribou mages to frequently re-apply the binding every time I managed to weaken it, and they could outwait me. In Equestria, being turned to stone could never have killed me – it was actually something I tried to avoid contemplating while I was trapped, because every time I thought about the fact that I was immortal and my bindings were never going to kill me and nothing else was going to either and I had no reason to think Harmony would ever relent... let’s just say there were lengthy periods of time when all I did was scream mentally for I have no idea how long. Days? Weeks? Years? I’d go down into black places where I stopped thinking and all I could perceive was fear, despair and helpless rage, because I thought I was going to be there for a literal eternity. I’d sleep, and dream I was free, and then wake up and start screaming again. It turns out that when you don’t have an actual voice, nothing prevents you from screaming the entire time that you’re awake, every day, day after day...

Okay, enough of that! Brr. At least I know better now. Harmony can't bind me forever. Neither could the caribou, but they wouldn't need to do it forever, because the Frozen North would eventually suck me dry, as it did to Loki. So my original plan, which was basically to go in there and turn their world upside down until they surrendered, like I did to Winnie and the changelings, was not going to work.

None of this would be a problem if it weren't for those damn ley lines draining me. At my full power the entire caribou nation isn't a match for me, because at my full power I could break the runic connections that allow any of them to tap the magic they've harvested. The thing about runes, see, is that they have to be very, very precise. They're the closest thing the world has to order magic. Ponies maintain their harmonic constructs through intelligence and willpower; their spells usually break apart when they hit me because their constructs can't stand up to my field of chaos, but I can't permanently mess up a pony's spellcasting ability just with chaos. I'd have to take their horn or something. Runes, however, aren't intelligent and have no willpower; they're simply symbols that channel and control magic into very, very specific and predictable patterns. And the thing about symbols is that when you mess with the symbols, tsuj a ynit egnahc to the symbol and it becomes unreadable, or it becomes something completely different. Think of a kit, and then think of a kite. Very different, wouldn't you say? Or consider the prints you hang on your wall and the prince who just acquired his title by marrying the Princess of Lurve. For that matter, take the L out of love and it's ove, and I'm really not sure what an ove is but I'm sure I'll think ove something.

Anyway! Wandering again. I swear sometimes I need a leash for my mind. At my full power, a simple flick of chaos and I could have destroyed the pattern of runes that give the caribou usable mana. But right now, I was having a hard time summoning boots. So I needed a new plan. Thus, devious mastermind that I am, I devised a clever plot which consists of "show up, something something, cause chaos, profit." Yes, my talents at being a Machiavellian long-range chessmaster are honestly somewhat overstated. To be fair, I like it better this way. Chessmasters don't do so well when half their pieces spontaneously turn into broccoli with wings and fly off. I'm much better at coming up with plans on the fly, based on the information I'm getting then and there, than I am at plotting out all the possible ways something could go wrong and countering them. Among other things, when I plan really carefully and I think out all the possibilities and I'm confident that I can handle whatever direction the encounter goes in, I have a bad habit of not noticing that things just went radically off-plan until it's too late. I do a lot better when I know I'm depending on my observational skills and my ability to roll with whatever life throws my way.

Fortunately for me, when I finally found a caribou encampment, the day after that conversation I had with my tooth that's recorded above, it took very, very little to prove to them that they should give me
every hospitality and immediately take me to the king. The caribou still remember Mayhem – not literally, none of them have been alive for two thousand years, but their culture legends tell them that the god of chaos is to be respected, feared, and honored. (They’d have a different opinion if the god of chaos they were dealing with was Ar, or Eris, but then Ar would have murdered them all in moments, and Eris would have probably murdered them all too, just in slower, hilariously cruel ways. Or she might just have removed all of their male organs for giggles.) I remember this behavior from when I used to rule Equestria. As I said, they used to suck up to me when I encountered them, because I’m the most powerful male being in the world and by their laws and culture that meant they owed me worship. Which is why I used to sic Celestia and Luna on them, because when an angry god you worship starts attacking you, your response is generally to kneel and beg and cry for mercy and be too pathetic to keep hurting, whereas when you’re obsessed with male dominance your reaction to angry female alicorns attacking you is to keep saying things that rile them up and make them even more willing to break every bone in your body.

They gave me hot spiced wine, berry pudding, and fried fish. I actually took the fish for once – I don’t usually like to eat meat that was once alive, even if someone else killed it, but after marching around in the cold for so long and losing so much magic and being so tired, even after making camp and getting some sleep the previous day, I needed every advantage I could get. I denatured the alcohol in the wine, which was easier than conjuring a hot drink for myself, and drank enough of it that it impressed them, as I should have been weaving and slurring and telling everyone how drunk I was and instead I was stone cold sober. (Well, warm sober. That term "stone cold" is actually one I’d like to avoid when referring to myself after what I saw in the North.)

They also tried to have a bevy of slaves give me more personal favors, but I told them their slaves – all red-collared sacrificed cows, placid and stupid – were the ugliest creatures I’d ever seen and if they wanted to offer their guests a sex toy maybe they should try having some higher quality ones around the place. When they attempted to punish the slaves for this, I slapped several of them with dead fish (large dead fish. We’re talking salmon here, big ones.) I told them it was disgusting how they tried to pass off the responsibility for offering me ugly slaves onto the slaves, like it was the slaves' decision to be substandard and not the caribou's decision to offer them to me even though they were substandard that I was offended by. Then I demanded that they propitiate me to apologize, and thus avoid my wrath, by sending all their slaves away and dancing for me while singing "Row, Row, Row Your Boat". They didn't know the lyrics, so I made some up.

While they danced and sang, badly, I ate the dead fish I'd just conjured – I’d wasted a bit of magic in making them, and while I couldn't get the magic back, I could get some nutrition out of the deal. Also, prey species tend to be disturbed when they see me eat meat, even if they eat meat themselves on occasion. I think it's the teeth. Something in an herbivore's mind winces in fear when they see sharp pointy bits in someone's mouth, slicing up dead animals.

They wanted to bring me to see the king in a chariot drawn by shaved female reindeer. The territory the caribou lay claim to isn't all warmed and cozy by their dark magic rites; they keep their actual towns, villages and cities warm enough, but the roads between their outposts are as ice cold as the rest of the Arctic, when there are roads at all. The reindeer were black collars; being forced to pull a chariot through the regions of ice, without fur, was intended as a form of torture. It wouldn't have killed them, but the ladies would have been in terrible shape at the end of the journey. I declared, two minutes after we'd started on our journey, that I was cold and wanted cuddly females as blankets, and insisted that my hosts pull the chariot while I piled the slaves on top of me. When one of the girls, hesitantly, offered me sex – they were black collars, but that didn't mean they hadn't learned any survive-in-slavery skills – I expressed dismay and shock that they thought for one moment I was willing to expose my sensitive, precious malehood to this kind of cold even for a single second, and then told them that when I said I wanted blankets, it wasn't their job to second-guess me, and they'd better shut up and keep me warm or I'd turn them into actual blankets. Of course, I have a thick fur
coat, so I was warmer than the shaved ladies... which was the point.

Lest you think I'm going soft, no, I wasn't keeping the slave girls warm out of chivalry or even compassion. They were black collars. Potential rebels. Sources of potential chaos. I didn't have much of a plan, but I did know I wanted to have as many black collared slaves in my general vicinity as I could get the caribou to give me. The very fact that these females actively hated their enslavement and still had the strength to want to rebel meant they were generating disharmony – not enough to compensate for the magic I was expending in warming the air around us so they'd still be in good fighting form, or as good as anyone who'd been abused like they had could be, but once we got where we were going I wouldn't need to keep them warm and they'd still be hating their captors.

Once we got to our destination, I told my escorts to set these particular cows aside for my entertainment later, after I'd met with the king. This ended up even being technically true, as what I eventually used them for entertained me greatly, though at the time I wasn't quite sure of how I'd use them or when. After I'd gone to all the trouble of keeping these particular rebels warm and cozy on our trip over here, I didn't want them being taken away for private punishment sessions or something, or for my escorts to take it out on them that I'd spared them the punishment they were supposed to have gotten. I might possibly have implied that what I intended to use them for would most likely permanently damage their minds, to ensure that their sadistic captors thought that saving them for me would be a greater punishment than anything the caribou themselves could dish out.

And then I let two of the caribou escort me into the castle.

Equestrian palaces tend to be confections of crystal or smooth, shining stone, all spires and crenellations and polished surfaces. Reindeer don't have palaces, they have mansions, made of stone but with elaborate wooden decorations providing color contrast, looking cozy and warm and as nauseatingly small-town-charming as Ponyville. The castle of the caribou king was neither a palace nor a mansion; it was a fortress. Large, with evenly shaped, dull grey stone bricks, its windows long narrow slits, its turrets and parapets plainly serving military purpose rather than being decorative like the same sorts of features on Canterlot Palace. (Not that Canterlot Palace can't be a fortress. It's halfway up the side of a mountain for a reason – no army can even try to invade unless they can fly, because earth ponies in Canterlot can just throw rocks down the side of the mountain to crush most earthbound armies. There's a reason Equestria's wars have generally been with griffins, changelings, dragons, and other ponies, not minotaurs, centaurs, zebras or yaks.) The stone bricks were not polished, and appeared rough-hewn, but were actually most likely concrete or some sort of magically carved granite bricks, because they were too even in shape and size to be actual rocks.

Inside, however, it was as opulent as a sultan's palace in Saddle Arabia, though with a barbarian aesthetic. Thick bearhide rugs on the stone floors, and in some rooms, wall to wall carpet woven from yak and reindeer fur, most of which probably came from slaves. Tapestries on the walls, showing caribou military triumphs, also woven from fur. Natural sunlight shone down through a glass dome over the top of the entire castle, so thick it was probably as strong as stone itself. I noted that there were lines etched through the dome, slender filaments of metal, running down to crystals all along the edges. A moment's glance at the pathways of magic and energy told me what that was. As I'd observed the day-ish before, the sun never sets in the summertime up in the Frozen North, and never rises during the winter. So the caribou were collecting sunlight in the crystals, harvesting it through the dome. Presumably during the winter the caribou would then light the interior of the palace all day with stored sunlight.

So there was no real need for torchlight or lamps. Despite this, there were poles, every ten pony lengths or so, on top of which there were torches inside protective glass. And on every pole, there was some female creature or another – most of them sacrificed cows – sliding her body around the pole in a lewd dance. They were generally leashed to the poles by long, slender metal chains
attached to their collars on one end and a ring around the pole on the other. The poles were sturdy enough that even if a caribou was behind a cow who was pressed against a pole, taking advantage of her – which there were, at least two of them on separate poles—the poles themselves didn't move at all.

There were bulls standing along the walls with weapons at the ready in the kind of formal, at-attention posture you see in the Royal Guard, except in most cases it was totally a joke because they had slaves under them or behind them applying mouths to sensitive locations. To some I suppose it could have been intimidating or impressive – a statement that either caribou soldiers are so good, they can remain alert and jump into battle at any moment even if they're enjoying intimate pleasures, or a statement that caribou guards don't need to be any good and that the king's fortress was so safe and impregnable that the guards could occupy themselves with sexual pastimes instead of actually staying alert. What it told me was that they had no defenses that could handle every slave in the room suddenly getting an urge to chew. Not that I was certain I could manage inspiring such an urge – I don't do collective actions very well – but it was an idea.

Really, caribou culture's obsession with sex is ridiculous. I'm not a fellow who's bothered by public displays of, shall we say, overly affectionate behavior, but the fact that there were slaves servicing bulls in such a matter-of-fact, passionless way, no more connection between the bull and the slave than there would have been if she'd been pouring him a drink, offended me. Sex is supposed to be fun, and exciting, and either arousing or hilarious (or both) to watch. These guys were making it every bit as exciting and enjoyable to watch as public urination would have been. Actually, I take that back; there are some ponies who would find such a thing titillating to watch. This was as much fun as watching ponies do paperwork.

Anyway. I was brought to see the caribou king, Dainn, who was seated on a large throne with a cow at his feet and two others at his sides, petting him. At least he wasn't actively engaged in anything overly risqué – I was actually starting to find the sight of sexual antics boring. The bull was as respectful and polite as I'd expected him to be, but it was obvious that he thought something was fishy about my sudden appearance, and he asked me, respectfully and politely, what on earth I was doing here.

"Oh, you know," I said airily. I burned a bit more magic than I honestly wanted to, levitating and lying flat on the air above him, because I didn't like the dynamics of him sitting and me standing. Sure, when I stand I'm impressively taller than any other creature in the room as long as there are no dragons around (or long-ma, quetzalcoatl, or other draconic relatives of my kind), but it's still got that "called on the carpet in front of the principal" flavor to it. It was making me slightly dizzy to use enough magic that I could levitate, but when you're weak is exactly when you need to put as much energy as you can into pretending you're strong. "I was in the area and thought I'd drop in. See what use you're making of the gifts Chaos gave you, all those centuries ago."

Dainn nodded sagely. "Of course," he said. "We honor the old bargain, Chaos Lord. We continue to fight the weak, decadent reindeer, and expand the territory we have claimed for the rule of the strong. Weak creatures learn to serve their stronger masters, regardless of whether they are outsiders or our own sons."

I was slightly surprised by this, though in retrospect I shouldn't have been. We Chaos avatars instinctively understand that nature isn't created, isn't a nice orderly well-shaped package like the things ponies and other sapient beings make. Nature evolves, creating itself as it goes along, and even life that's been created by minds, such as the various chimerae I and the other chaos avatars have created over the years, is still subject to the same rules. Things that are well adapted to living in the place they find themselves, feeding off the food they eat and reproducing in the way that they reproduce, continue onward, generation after generation. Things that are not well adapted, don't. It's
the constant struggle to live, the effort to find food and to not be killed by other things that consider you food, to find a mate and make enough young that they'll grow into a next generation and find their own mates, the conflict with your own kind and with other creatures around you, that shapes life. Stable systems arise out of chaos and disharmony, and then destabilize, change and stabilize again as the chaos of the natural world continues.

This is the thing ponies keep trying to stamp out, everywhere they go, so I can understand why Mayhem tried to actively indoctrinate the culture he created into preserving it. But they got it wrong. Every creature we try to teach this to gets it wrong. It's not the strong that survive and the weak that die. It's the well-adapted that survive. When strength is what's needed for survival, then yes, the weak die. When flexibility and adaptability are more valuable than strength, the strong often stay rigid, and break, like oak trees in a storm, while the weak learn to bend. Besides, caribou were missing the point even if strength itself was the trait to breed for. By taking their "weak" and mating with them, by making themselves so appallingly unattractive to any kind of consensual mating that they'd ensured the strongest, fastest females would never be their mates and only those weak enough to be captured would be the mothers of their calves, they were breeding what they called "weakness" into their population with every child they conceived. And then letting four fifths of them die. Which was one way to weed out the weak, I supposed, but more realistically it meant the children of the well-connected and wealthy survived.

I didn't point out the errors in his species' philosophy to him. "I'm pleased to see it," I said. "I'm also bored out of my mind. What do you creatures do for entertainment up here?"

"I would not question your decisions, Chaos Lord, but it does seem to me that if our realm bores you, wouldn't it be sensible to travel back to a more entertaining realm? We caribou are serious bulls, prepared always for war and for life in our harsh lands. There's little of decadent amusement and silliness here, not like what you'd find in pony lands." He pulled one of his slaves closer by her mane, smiling at me thinly. "Though we do have our pleasures, and I invite you to partake if you like."

"That word." I shuddered. "Sensible. No, of course I'm not going to do something sensible! What kind of lord of chaos do you take me for?" I landed, an indignant expression on my face. "I didn't give you the means to survive up here and fight off your enemies just so you could ignore me to my face when I tell you I want to be entertained." Of course I hadn't given them those things at all, but after two thousand years no one could tell the difference between things Mayhem had done and the things I had, and it was easier just to claim his actions as my own.

"Ah. Well, I can have one of my advisors show you around our capital city, to see if anything strikes your fancy. After the business of the day is done, we will have a feast in honor of your visit, and any entertainments that we caribou can provide you shall be yours if you wish."

"Delightful." The more I saw of this place, the better I'd understand its weak points, and the more ideas I'd get for how I could exploit them to take back what was mine.

I'm not going to go into any details about what I saw on my tour of the caribou's city, largely because I'd rather my audience didn't run off retching and refuse to return to read another word. Suffice it to say... that obsession with sex I talked about earlier? Yeah. Imagine a society where the food, the advertisements, the entertainments, the shops, everything is organized around sex, and specifically, around displaying females as objects to be purchased or used. The Element of Cruelty had been corroding caribou minds for centuries. I could see very, very little of their original culture – some artwork glorifying their current king had some mythological referents calling back to the Aesir, and some of the men's clothes were vaguely reminiscent of things reindeer might wear, except made with
materials like leather and bronze. The leather probably came from males from other nations that they killed in combat, which was a fairly brutal statement to make with one's choices in couture. Other than that it was all about sex and degrading females and degrading females with sex.

Oh, and they had a painting of a bunch of caribou bulls stabbing Ar with spears. She was painted to be both devastatingly ferocious, which she had been, and exaggeratedly feminine, which she hadn't been – I mean she was hot stuff by dragon standards, don't get me wrong, and I'm plenty dragon enough to appreciate the charms of a beautiful lady dragon, particularly one who was dedicated to Chaos. But full-size female dragons look to most prey species like, well, dragons. No pony or reindeer ever dwelled on how sensually attractive a dragon was while running for their lives from her.

I was fairly sure the painting depicted someone's fantasy rather than anything that had actually happened, but after finding Loki's body, it disturbed me a great deal. The expressions on the caribou, the positioning of their spears against their bodies, the specific way they'd painted Ar writhing in agony, the places they were stabbing her and the way they'd painted her face – honestly it looked disturbingly like a gang rape. As far as I know Ar went to sleep before Mayhem came into his power, so I wasn't at all sure how the caribou even knew who Ar was.

Though if she'd woken up, her power drastically reduced because it had passed on to Mayhem or me, and she'd found the caribou... everything about their society would have been everything she took on the mantle of Chaos in order to fight. Ar came from a society of patriarchal dragons, not nearly as bad as the Caribou but bad enough that she spent much of her career trying to overthrow any society that wasn't outright matriarchal, let alone a brutal patriarchy. It was her greatest failure as a Chaos avatar, of course; Chaos loves bloody revolution, but not ideology, except the ideology of Chaos itself. Her dedication to female dominance rivaled her dedication to Chaos, so of course Chaos punished her for it, as some of the most brutally patriarchal regimes our world has ever seen rose in direct response to her activities. There are to this day patriarchal dragon societies who refer to a female who leads as "a servant of Chaos", as if they're synonymous (and as if serving Chaos is a bad thing, but really I'm used to that.)

I tried very, very hard not to think about the possibility that a weakened Ar had tried to destroy the caribou and had actually been brought down and killed by them. Obviously it was someone's masturbation fantasy on canvas and they probably knew about Ar because they had had dealings with the Dragon Empire before I destroyed it. Bad enough I'd found evidence that the Frozen North had killed Loki after Harmony had paralyzed him; the thought that these very beasts I was dealing with might have killed a chaos avatar themselves, even a former chaos avatar, was making me seriously consider whether or not I just wanted to go home and give up on this particular Element. There was no way I was going to get this job done if I let myself believe the painting might have depicted reality. So I decided it was fiction, and focused on something else.

From a more practical standpoint there were runes everywhere. Rune circles surrounded buildings, runes were carved into rocks, runes were tattooed on shaved slaves or branded on their skin. I don't like runes. I believe I've mentioned that. If there was such a thing as order magic it'd be runes. I can't read them, but I can usually decipher what magical effect they are supposed to have if I have some time to study them. These were mostly maintaining the weather and temperature, gathering dark magic and channeling it back to the king, or feeding magic back out from the king into the environment for the caribou to use.

Magic in the form of tactile telekinesis is even more important to caribou than it is to ponies, or
should I say, ponies cheat. Pony hooves are flexible, and soft in comparison to their horse ancestors, and project a small field of tactile telekinesis that enables them to grasp things almost as well as those of us with fingers. Caribou and reindeer, not nearly so much. Their hooves are stronger, tougher, and much less flexible than pony hooves – not as tough or inflexible as my goat hoof (not that any part of my body is inflexible, but I actually need to use magic to make my goat hoof do anything that my leg didn't do first), but better designed than pony hooves for the ice and cold of the North. This makes them more dependent on magic to do pretty much anything an earth pony would do with hooves. They do have some tactile telekinesis – every hooved sapient species does – which is how de-antlered cows can do, well, pretty much anything aside from walking, rearing, kicking and other leg-locomotion activities. But it's not nearly as powerful, flexible or dexterous as pony tactile telekinesis. They can't, for instance, tie or untie knots with it.

So caribou and reindeer rely on magic projected through their antlers, much like unicorns do with their horns. Having an antler myself, and having shapechanged into the form of a unicorn on occasion, I can tell you that antlers are tougher, less sensitive, not covered with a thin layer of skin like unicorn horns are, and worse at directing a precision magical field. That's part of why they have two of them; there's no precision in their fields but they can overlap the fields and when they do that, they can be precise. They can also combine the magical field generated from their antlers with the weak tactile telekinesis of their hooves, greatly strengthening the hoof tactile telekinesis into something as strong and capable as any earth pony's, and they can do this at the same time as they're using the antler magic directly, say to fire force bolts or somesuch. So they can hold spears, and throw them, with their hooves, while also defending themselves from other thrown spears, with telekinesis from their antlers. On the second hoof, reindeer and caribou are a lot less capable than unicorns of channeling their magic into anything but telekinesis – the condition of being unable to perceive magical patterns and therefore being unable to actually cast spells, regardless of field strength, is rare among unicorns, and more common than not among caribou and reindeer. Plus, there's those ley lines, making natural, environmental magic incredibly difficult to use.

This means the caribou are absolutely dependent on the magic generated by cruelty and channeled through the king. One of the reasons that warrior reindeer cows, experienced in battle, ferocious, and capable of battling creatures native to Tartarus, can be enslaved at all is that a de-antlered caribou or reindeer is very close to helpless, especially if they've been boosting their hoof dexterity for grasping with antler magic for their entire lives, which most of them have. And even a caribou with antlers can't use them to do anything if he's been cut off from the supply of magic, because there's nothing in the environment he can grasp, which is how the caribou are so easily able to subdue their own bulls if the king decides a particular male is a dissident and should be arrested, turned female and enslaved.

I think you can see why this was highly relevant to me, and what I was thinking about doing. The trouble was, it was a very complex web of magic woven throughout the city, strong and redundant. There was no one point of failure I could pluck and disrupt the whole thing. Not even two or three. Unless you count the Element of Cruelty itself, and I'd have to use a metaphysical saw to get through the metaphorical vines of magic twining all around it. I couldn't pinpoint the Element itself through the tangled confusion of connections that led to it, and when you consider that my specialty is confusion and chaos, that's saying something.

On the other hand, any connection I did break would spill magic. The magic transmitted outward from the end point of the web of runes was tuned to a very specific frequency, unusable by anyone who wasn't a male caribou who'd sworn fealty to the king. But break one of those transmission lines, and raw magic would pour out, too fast and pure to be immediately pulled down by the ley lines.

All for me, in other words. And any black-collared unicorn or reindeer in the area, if I managed to repair her horn or antlers. Chaos isn't about repairing things, but I had some ideas about how I might do that, if I had enough magic to spare.
When I returned to the castle for the feast that was supposedly being thrown in my honor, I had a 
bare skeleton of a plan, which is honestly all the plan I generally need.

Ah, the feast. Words cannot describe how tempted I am to skip over all this and get right to the 
action, but Future Me will need to know my weaknesses so he can avoid them (or slap himself in the 
forehead and wonder why he fell for that again, like I would have done after being turned to stone 
the second time if I could have moved my paw.) I don't like thinking about what the caribou tried to 
do to me – and came close to succeeding at – because... well, because it says things about who I am, 
my innermost thoughts and beliefs, that deeply embarrass me, and also because I'm supposed to be 
the one altering the personalities and desires of others, not the target of alteration. Chaos is supposed 
to make me immune to mind control. Not that Chaos ever promised to make me immune to drugged 
smoke in the air unless I caught onto what it was quickly enough to eliminate its effects on me... as I 
said, most potions and concoctions don't work on me because I'm a draconequus and they're not 
designed for my biology.

I suppose I don't have much of a choice. Onward, then.

The parade of disturbingness began with the table. She was a sheared, black-collared yak whose 
forelegs had been amputated at the knee. Ponies, being small and light, can rear up on their hind legs 
and walk around on them for a short while; it's hard for ponies to maintain their balance that way, but 
they can do it. Yaks are huge. They can't do that. So this poor lady had to walk on her stumps, with 
her backside higher than her head and neck because the hind legs were still intact. Her back legs 
were shackled together with a fairly long chain, so she could walk, but couldn't kick. This made her 
steps short, mincing and delicate, like no yak I've ever seen move ever. She wasn't shaved down to 
the skin, but her thick yak coat had been sheared down to the thickness of my neck coat, or an 
average Equestrian pony's coat – more smooth and suede than furry. Although the room was plenty 
warm enough for me and the caribou, she was obviously used to more body covering than she had, 
and was shivering. And even with all that had been done to humiliate and hurt her and make it 
impossible for her to fight back, they still had to drag her in on a leash, because she kept balking, 
trying to use her body weight to keep the caribou from being able to move her.

I actually felt sorry for her. I don't do empathy much, but I remember what it felt like to be a captive, 
in restraints, ordered to do degrading and humiliating things and being treated like an animal. In my 
case it was because they thought I was an animal, or were pretending they thought so anyway, and 
nothing sexual was involved, but that didn't change the fact that I knew what it was like to be 
hobbled and mutilated to keep me from fighting or running. I couldn't do anything about it yet, of 
course, but hopefully enough time sitting near her and maybe I could; she was a regular furnace of 
disharmony, emotions like rage and despair positively boiling behind her eyes.

We had been seated in a roughly oval shape, on cushions on the floor in a large stone hall, with 
Dainn and myself at the two ends of the oval and a bunch of caribou advisors to the king along the 

sides. The yak was forced to lay down within the oval so her head was facing Dainn and her 
backside was facing me. They then put – I'm not sure how to describe it. Imagine pliers. Imagine the 
kind of pliers where the business ends bend toward each other in an arch, leaving space in the 
middle. Now turn them upside-down and make them large enough that a yak can fit in the arch, but 
with the "handle" side short enough that it sticks up from the yak's back only about two hoof-widths. 
They then had wooden table slats, on metal bars which ended in a piece that bent down at an angle 
and then ended in a ring. They slid the rings onto the handles of the clamps around the yak, so that 
sticking out from either side of her was a shelf-like wooden ledge similar to a picnic table, though 
narrower. The clamps weren't tight enough to hurt her – in fact it looked like they were wide enough 
that they were barely touching her – but they would effectively keep her from moving side to side, 
and with her legs pinned under her she wasn't going in any other direction. Two more slats, only the
width of her body, were placed on, and these were laying directly on her – one fastened over her lower back, the other over the top of her head, forcing it down. (Yaks have horns, but with no magical power in them; they're just used for fighting. Hers had been removed anyway.)

The slaves who brought out the food put plates and cups in front of me and the caribou seated around the yak, onto the wooden slats; the food platters themselves were laid on her back, with cloth bags filled with what seemed to be beans or tiny stones on the bottom of the platters, so they'd balance properly on any creature's back whatever the size and width. They filled everyone's mugs with mead; I drank mine like it was water (which it practically was, after I denatured the alcohol), and they immediately refilled it. I decided to wait until the caribou were paying attention before doing it again. Male caribou came out and replaced the torches on poles with something smokier, with a scent I couldn't quite place, but it smelled sweet and significantly improved the ambience of the place.

The second thing I found disturbing was the food. The first course was a meat stew, with onions and hardy root vegetables. It didn't bother me that the caribou ate meat; this far north it was almost necessary. Even the reindeer eat a lot of fish. What bothered me was that it was caribou meat.

See, female caribou don't get much in the way of medical treatment. And they're pregnant a lot. Not that this results in a high birth rate – caribou bulls resent allowing infants to take their slaves' attention away from pleasing them, so most infants who aren't a first born son are handed over to overworked elderly nurses, who don't have enough resources to keep them all alive because not many female caribou actually live to get old, due to the aforementioned lack of medical treatment. Bulls don't kill their females, generally, but as soon as one is old enough that some of her appeal has worn away, they get neglected, fed less and kept locked in cages more. Those that manage to transition into some other kind of work – child care, or menial service in places where bulls won't see them, like dishwashing in restaurants – are more likely to survive, but sacrificed cows are stupid, learning new skills is hard for them, and generally at this point in their lives they have never done anything other than provide sex. So most of them don't manage to make this transition. They grow weak from being fed less, and become much more vulnerable to dying of accidents or illnesses.

But why waste good meat? A cow who's just dropped dead wasn't treated like a sapient being in life, and they don't treat her as one in death either. Dead cows are butchered and stewed, with enough heat applied to kill whatever they might have died of, and then caribou males eat the meat.

You may recall I have issues with eating sentient animals. Sapient animals are beyond the pale. I took one bite of the stew, identified it as caribou meat, spit it out, and then pretended I was utterly disgusted by how bland and devoid of spices it was. What followed was a procession of increasingly anxious slaves bringing out pretty much every kind of spice the caribou actually have on hand, which isn't a lot of them, until I got ostentatiously frustrated and made the bowl explode (in air, because I tossed it), spattering caribou stew all over the various caribou at the table, who I then laughed at, a lot. Then I conjured myself a bowl of chocolate soup with gummy worms, and complained loudly about the quality of hospitality that forced me to bring my own food. Oh, how I enjoyed the gritted teeth and forced smiles of the various bulls ranged around the table.

The second course was a bit better. They had something very much like sushi – hardy Arctic grasses rather than rice or hay, marinated in vinegar, wrapped around raw fish, berries and cheese, and then all of that wrapped in seaweed. You may not be aware of this, given that the Equestrian version of sushi is always vegetarian, but in Neighpon where the dish originated, raw fish is actually a staple of it, so the caribou version was almost closer to the original than the Equestrian version is. For the same reasons as the last time the caribou gave me fish, I ate it. There was a haunch of polar bear, roasted. Polar bears aren't sapient and are perfectly capable of killing a caribou or two, so I decided for the sake of my cover that I'd partake in that too. However, I drew the line on the platter of
scrambled eggs; one bite, and the metallic undertones told me this was most likely dragon egg.

Anarchic dragons – the kind who live alone, like Winnie, except during mating season – don’t guard their eggs; they lay them in Arctica, burying them underground in the direct path of the ley lines, where all the magic being pulled down toward the pole runs through their egg on its way. This is why there’s a periodic dragon migration; young dragons are born in the North and make their way down through the Frozen North, past territories like Yakyakistan, Griffonstone and the recently restored Crystal Empire, down into Equestria, and then every twenty years or so they gather together and fly south toward the dragon lands. The thing about laying your egg in the path of the ley lines, of course, is that anyone magically sensitive enough to know where the lines are can find them. Dragon eggs are very, very hard to crack by force, but not impossible. Since dragons are most decidedly sapient, I didn’t eat more than that single bite of egg; instead I claimed the eggs were bland too, manifested a bottle of hot sauce, covered the eggs with the entire bottle until no egg was visible under hot sauce any longer, and then surreptitiously teleported the eggs to the bottom of the egg platter while slurping the hot sauce off the plate with my tongue.

Also, the cheese and the fermented milk I was offered came from caribou milk (I did mention that bulls are jealous of the resources their female slaves give to their own infants.) I don’t have any personal inhibitions against drinking the milk of any creature, though, so I had no issue with that.

At the beginning of the meal, I was asked if I wanted the shaven ladies I’d had reserved for my pleasure to attend me, and I said yes. A soft, plush cushion on the ground might be just the thing for a caribou tushy, but I’m a biped and needed somewhere to put my legs, and some back support. So I had two of them kneel on either side of me as footrests, one lay down behind me to give me lumbar support, and the fourth to give me a backrub. Her hooves weren’t all that dexterous, of course, given that she was a de-antlered reindeer, so first I demanded a black-collared pony to assist her, and then I wanted to know if there were any black-collared griffins available to preen my wings with their talons, and got one.

During the second course, as the bulls got more mead into them and wanted some female entertainment, I managed to acquire a dire wolf who could play a lyre and sing (I happen to like the way dire wolves sing, all right?) Of course, they made her sing a song about how much she loved to be degraded and treated like an object, which infuriated and humiliated her, but they’d declawed her and she was on a leash fastened to a ring on the floor, so there wasn’t much she could do about it. I demanded that the most acrobatic pony black collars come and dance for me. Then I wanted a few more reindeer, to wash my feet and tail. By the time I was done making ridiculous demands, I had about a dozen black collars around me, hating me and the caribou profoundly, sweet sweet disharmony churning in their hearts. Also, by mocking bulls who had red collars attending them, I managed to get all of the bulls there to have black collared slaves brought to them. The only exception was Dainn, who had the only red collar in the room – a young red dragon, barely older than Spike, who was looking up at him worshipfully.

Well. That was going to be a problem.

See, the thing no one realizes about dragons is that they imprint. Anarchic dragons lay their eggs in the middle of nowhere precisely so that their young won’t imprint, because anarchic dragons want total freedom to do as they wish without the control of other dragons. In matriarchal dragon societies, the females hatch all the eggs, and in patriarchal ones, the males do, because whoever hatches a dragon egg, that dragon will imprint on, love like a child loves a parent or a dog loves a master, and want to serve. If they’re mistreated, they’ll grow out of it by the time they’re adults, unless the society is actively oppressive – the one Ar came from did its best to beat any resistance out of young female dragons. But if they’re treated well, they will probably be loyal to the one who hatched them for the rest of their lives. This is the main reason dragons can even have a society.
Being the centerpoint of the entire caribou society’s magic, Dainn had more than enough juice to hatch a dragon egg, something that history suggests only two unicorns have ever done ever. (They used to use dragon eggs as a test to get into Celestia’s school for magic, to see how the young unicorn handled failure, because no unicorn since Starswirl had ever hatched a dragon egg. Then Twilight Sparkle hatched one, so they stopped doing that test.) Apparently, he’d hatched and raised himself a loyal dragon love slave. Who he hadn’t done anything to declaw or otherwise weaken; she was every bit as strong and equipped with sharp claws, sharper teeth and fire breath as I’d been telling Spike he was, some time ago.

Well, I’d cross that bridge when I came to it; she wasn’t much bigger than Spike and there was no telling if he’d given her any combat training, or if he just used her to look impressive because see, that manly male over there tamed and enslaved a dragon! After all, I had my own lovely ladies and the lovelier disharmony in their hearts. Plus the absolutely amazing backrub and preening job I was getting from them.

Sometime during the second course, I conjured a great quantity of hot spice – I think this was after the dragon egg – and poured it into my mead. Dainn noticed.

"It seems our food doesn't agree with you, Chaos Lord," he said.

"Oh, there's nothing wrong with it, it's just bland," I said. "Needed a bit of spice." I took a drink.
"Ah, that hits the spot. Would you like to try some?"

"We are all but mortals," Dainn said. "I wouldn't presume to challenge a god."

"Don't worry, it's not poisonous to caribou. Just a bit of hot spice." I grinned.

He reached out with his magic and took the mug. "Well, then I accept."

To his credit, he managed not to scream, cry, or spit it out, though he couldn't really control how his face turned red and he started panting. He set my mug down. "That was... an experience," he gasped, and took a drink from his own mug.

"You can have more if you want."

"To drink more of a god's brew would be hubris. I'm not sure more of this drink would be bearable to a mortal bull."

One of the younger advisors slammed his own mug down. "Or perhaps some mortal bulls are softer than others."

There was a sudden tension in the room. My grin got even bigger. This young upstart was challenging Dainn. One thing I've noticed about any society that values "toughness" of any kind, and has any hot spices on hand at all... the ability to tolerate hot spices is considered a proxy for how big of a badflank you are. Kind of like alcohol tolerance. I always win these games, for obvious reasons, but neither of the caribou were actively challenging me... yet. This was an internal affair.

"If the Chaos Lord permits it, I'm sure you are willing to test yourself by taking a drink of your own," Dainn said, sounding more amused than angry.

"Oh, feel free. I'm in a generous mood today," I said.

The upstart took a deep swig... and bellowed, spitting out what was left in his mouth. Tears welled in his eyes. He hastily drank more than half of his own flagon. All of the caribou burst out laughing, as did I.
That broke the ice, so to speak. After that they were all laughing and joking and telling stories, and including me. I thought I was playing them, biding my time to build up my energy. I thought I was sharing a meal and a few pranks with them to set them at ease, make them think I was on their side. But it felt surprisingly good to be included. And it never occurred to me to wonder exactly who was being played, here.

Whatever they had in those torches smelled sweet, and felt relaxing. I'd been afraid for so long—afraid of Anon, afraid of failing. Afraid since I'd found Loki's body, that I could possibly share his fate. The tension in my belly and the cold in my veins were loosening, warming up, and it felt good. There was food, and some of it was good, and a drink that warmed me up inside—not from alcohol, which I was still turning into not-alcohol, but from the hot spices I was putting in it—and the backrub I was getting felt incredible. At my club I was never in my true form, which always produces a slight bit of detachment, a kind of disassociation where things just don't feel as immediate. Sex still feels good even in another form, but non-sexual touching can't quite cut through the haze that makes sensation seem removed. I hadn't had a backrub in my true form since getting out of stone, and let me tell you, being a stone statue does a number on your back.

And these guys respected me. Feared me appropriately, not by running away and screaming or attacking me, but by tolerating antics I'm sure they would have preferred to slap down, because they knew what I could do and they were properly cautious. It had been a long time since I'd gotten respectful fear. I enjoyed that.

A few of the bulls started to tell war stories. Dainn asked me if I had interesting stories of my own. Did I! I recognized what would entertain my audience, and told stories of some of the most humiliating and silly things I did to Celestia and Luna, and the caribou were properly appreciative and amused. It'd been a long time since I'd gotten that, either.

At this point in my story I have to make a confession.

I'd really rather not. I'm ashamed of this. Ponies won't understand why, but Future Me probably will, on reading these words. Of course Future Me's the one who most needs to hear it. So I'm going to brace myself and tell the truth.

When I said the reason I don't like or approve of rape is that it's the cheapest, easiest means of generating disharmony and therefore it's beneath me...I lied. I'm perfectly capable of going for a cheese move. I've gone and riled up yaks, and I think I pointed out before how very easy it is to rile up yaks. My reasons aren't nearly as appropriate, for the Lord of Chaos. And, you know, I try to convince myself, what does chaos care about appropriate? And why do my feelings have to have a reason? Doesn't chaos mean I can have a whim and follow it, no matter how senseless? The trouble is, I do have a reason, and I know what it is, and that bothers me.

I legitimately believe that killing should be a last resort because dead bodies don't cause chaos; I'm okay with that. That relates to my mandate. I'm not ashamed of that, in fact I think I'm a better chaos avatar than most of my predecessors, because of it. But my feelings about why I don't like rape have nothing to do with chaos.

I have the memories of the prior chaos avatars. But before I spent a thousand years in stone, the only ones I could pull back strongly and clearly were the ones that belonged to Mayhem. And those ones, I couldn't stop seeing when something triggered them. It's not as if I can't tell they're not mine; they don't feel like me, they feel like...like when you have a dream where you're a completely different being with completely different thoughts and attitudes than you really have, and when you wake up you can remember the dream, but you also know, that's not who you are. It's like that.

But that doesn't mean some of those memories can't disgust or horrify me.
I can remember Mayhem raping my mother. From his perspective.

You have to understand. My mother was the only creature, ever, in over two millennia of my existence, who loved me unconditionally. I was only four or five when she died, but I remember her far better than I probably have any right to. Even now, sometimes, two thousand years later, I dream that I find her, that somehow she's alive, that she's been alive all this time but trapped and unable to come back for me... and I won't lie, waking up and realizing that it isn't true has been known to moisturize my eyeballs. And pillows. And Mayhem had the same powers I do... so he could feel the suffering he was causing her. I remember his memories of her pain (psychological pain; he didn't physically harm her. He didn't have to.)

I remember his memories of *enjoying* it.

And even if I managed to solve the problem of traveling to a specific moment in time and yet being able to change the past – generally you either can't change anything, or you can't control where you end up, even with chaos involved – I couldn't do anything about it. Even I'm not immune to that level of paradox. Because that's how I was conceived. Mayhem is my biological father.

She was in heat, and because she was the Principle of Motherhood, she was the only draconequus in our tribe allowed to go *into* heat, because they were starving and they couldn't add additional mouths to feed but no draconequus could be prevented from acting on their Principle. So the rule was, she'd offer any male draconequus who wanted a chance to father her child. She had no problem with that – we weren't a monogamous species and she liked her tribesmates well enough, and if several males mated with her, then her child could plausibly be any of theirs and all of them would be looking out for the kid. (Traditionally, fathers had next to nothing to do with draconequus cubs, but we thought we were the last tribe left, that all of the surviving draconequi in the world were right there in our little group, so a lot of traditions weren't in play anymore.)

None of them remembered when they made that rule that technically Mayhem was a draconequus.

When he showed up out of nowhere and demanded the same right that she granted the other male draconequi, she said no. He'd wiped out our species, reduced us to tiny scattered starving tribes, almost all of whom remembered barely surviving the cold. She *hated* him. It didn't matter. He said that if she wouldn't play fair and treat him as a draconequus, then he'd play by the rules of Chaos... and locked all the other draconequi out of her lair so no one could even try to help her. Not that they could have; your average draconequus wasn't much more powerful than your average unicorn.

She didn't know, afterward. The last thing he did was to wipe her memory of it, so she thought I was just an ordinary draconequus cub, not the son of the Spirit of Chaos. It haunts me, to think – if she'd known, would she still have loved me? Do I *owe* Mayhem for that? Not that he did it out of any love for me, but he was trying to create an heir; the power of chaos usually goes to an avatar's child when the avatar dies, if there is a child. He wanted to die, but he wanted the power to go to a draconequus, out of the guilt he felt that he'd gotten nearly all of us killed. It would have been deeply inconvenient for him if she'd abandoned me to die because I was the son of the creature she most hated.

But I'm pretty sure the others remembered. The leader of our tribe – I can't remember his name, just that his Principle was something opposite to mine, like Order or Control – named me Discord, Principle of Chaos and Disharmony, right before the ritual that killed all of them. I was being pretty hyperactive, because preparation for draconequus rituals has to be one of the most boring things in the universe even to an adult, but I'm also pretty sure I didn't earn my name and my Principle just from being an unruly little buzzbomb.

So, you know... I admit it. I like humiliating and psychologically tormenting ponies. Or, well, anyone. And I like to touch, and be touched, and I'm not always all that concerned over whether the
pony I am petting actually wanted to be petted. In fact, sometimes I scratch their ears or hug them or pick them up and dance with them precisely because my touch makes their skin crawl, and I'm angry that they're disgusted by me and I want to punish them for it. But I draw the line at anything sexual. The closest to that I've ever done to a pony that wasn't Celestia was a chaste little smooch on their cheek. (I did, one time, make Celestia forget she wasn't in love with me anymore... but even then, I didn't let her take me to bed, because by the time she started coming on to me, I'd realized what a hollow travesty of the love we'd once shared this was, and I didn't want to let her start anything that she'd look back on after I let her go and feel like I'd violated her. Also, I stole her tail on more than one occasion, and occasionally dressed her in lingerie. But come on, she was my ex.)

But I shouldn't be drawing a line anywhere! I'm Chaos! Objectively, what is the difference between juggling a pony when they're shrieking at you to put them down, and having sex with them when they're telling you to stop? Aren't they both basically the same thing? But one of them's hilarious and the other disgusts me. In the eyes of Chaos, though, they aren't any different. I've been cut off from a potential weapon in my arsenal, chained down to pony morality (well, or draconequus morality, but same difference), because I have empathy for a victim. Empathy is terrible! I'm supposed to be causing disharmony! You can't do that if you feel sorry for your targets!

At the same time... I can't stop feeling empathy for my mother. She's my mother. She loved me. Mayhem's parents never really gave a damn and Loki's family life was outright abusive and so was Ar's and I'm not even going to get into the things that were done to Eris before she became the avatar, but I had a mother who loved me, and she was a rape victim, and it makes me sick that that happened to her even though I wouldn't have existed if it hadn't. So okay, maybe this is a weakness, maybe I'm falling down on the job and being a bad chaos avatar because I find that tormenting creatures with sex is appalling even though I'm okay with tormenting them with virtually anything else. (Also, I really do like to be wanted and I really do feel like ponies who can't see how attractive I am don't deserve to have sex with me and I really feel like using mind control to make ponies want me would be like saying I'm too pathetic and ugly to be wanted any other way... but if that was all it was, I'd just feel distaste for the notion of personally committing rape. Rather like I don't personally want to eat dead animals, and avoid it most of the time, but I have nothing against Gilda eating an actual chicken if she can catch one.)

The reason I have felt the need to explain all this, right at this moment, is because something in that smoke started making me forget any of that.

I knew the smoke was drugged. Something has a strong smell and makes you feel warm and floaty and eases your tension when you breathe it in? I'm not stupid. But in my experience, alcohol's the only thing I ever encountered that works on a draconequus the same as on a pony, caribou, griffin or anyone else, and with no other draconequui in the world, drugs tailored to my biology are rare. I can get a little bit buzzed and a little bit high from a few things that also affect ponies, but generally speaking the ponies end up a lot more impaired than I do. So I didn't think the drug could possibly have more of an effect on me than it had on the caribou, and... I've been afraid for a long, long time by my standards. I'm not used to living in fear. I've been trying to pretend it's not there, but when I felt it leave me, there was no way I was going to counter the effects of the drug and make it come back.

Maybe if it hadn't made the fear go away, I'd have been more paranoid and protected myself better. But then, that's probably why they used a drug that would relax me and make me less afraid.

So as the night went on, my contempt for the caribou started fading, and the various attractive ladies on display were seeming much more appealing. There's a fine line between finding someone extra attractive because their lust for you is combined with fear, anger or hatred, and enjoying the disharmony therein... and finding someone extra attractive because their heart is churning with an
assortment of negative emotions, none of which are lust. That's a line I don't normally cross. I enjoy any sort of disharmony, but unless there's lust in it, I don't get a sexy sort of vibe from it... normally.

By this point I was lying on top of my various footstools, using them as an impromptu massage table the way the poor yak was still being used as a dinner table, and I had four or five different black collars working on my back, wings and tail. One of them was an earth pony, and she was amazing. I wouldn't have been shocked if she'd been a professional masseuse before being enslaved. So here we have me pressed up against the warm, furless skin of several rather silly-looking but still attractive shaved reindeer, who hate me and everything about this situation, with pegasi wearing bizarre wing sheaths dancing lewdly for my entertainment (and the bulls, but I didn't care about them), and other beautiful creatures of assorted races doing very, very pleasant things to my body. And the disgust I'd been feeling with the fact that none of these ladies actually wanted to be here had faded out. I challenge you to find any creature who finds the female form attractive to not start responding to this.

Before my audience declares me hopelessly depraved and loses all sympathy for me... no, at no point during the evening or at any other time did I have sex with any of them, and my definition of sex is rather broad. I never lost that much of myself. I did, however, listen to the caribou's stories of sexual conquest with rather more intense interest than I would have earlier in the evening, and I joined in with stories of my own, telling them about things like the time I had sex with five ponies at the same time. (I left out the part where three of them had been stallions.) Or making multiple copies of myself so my worshipful chaos groupies could each get some personal attention from me when there were too many of them for just one of me. They laughed, and praised me, and I... sort of forgot that these guys were enemies and I was here to steal their most precious magical item.

They seemed like fun. They appreciated my stories, laughing at my tales of pranks on alicorns and whistling in encouragement when I told them about my sexual escapades. And after all, the caribou had always kind of worshiped me. Sure, their society wasn't all that chaotic, but wasn't I making friends with their king here? Maybe I could change that. Certainly they were plenty disharmonious. I was getting back a nice charge from the emotions the slaves were seething with – a lot of which I was wasting on party tricks to impress my hosts. They respected me. They liked me. I'd last gotten that from ponies more than a thousand years ago.

So we got to talking about what would be an awesome prank on ponies, and a great way to stick it to Celestia, Luna and the Bearers. Dainn pointed out that the Crystal Heart projects emotion outward to the entire recently returned Crystal Empire, and then picks up the emotion as it's fed back to it from the citizens it projected it to, in a feedback loop. Sombra had used it to project fear and hatred. Cadance, like the rulers from before Sombra, used it to project love and hope. What if it was projecting lust instead?

I thought this was an absolutely hilarious idea. I could cast a spell on the Heart to change what it was "feeling", using a similar principle to the plunder vines I designed way back when (the ones that never sprouted... thanks, guys, a lot of help you were.) The plunder vines had been designed to drain the Tree (and alicorns, and any other source of major league magic they encountered), not modify it. But what if? I admit I'd had thoughts, in my stone prison, of altering the Elements so that they contained other principles – for maximum disharmony, probably their opposites, particularly because Magic has no opposite the way the others do, so it would bollax them from being able to harmonize together at all – and the main reason I hadn't tried it was that it was a lot easier to invert the Bearers than mess with the fruits of Harmony directly, and then I'd ended up in stone. What if I did that to the Crystal Heart, instead? Lust isn't even the opposite of love, just a distortion of it.

We could make all the Crystal Ponies, the entire Crystal Empire, obsessed with sex. Bring everything to a grinding halt, as ponies dropped everything they were doing to bang each other instead. The chaos would be incredible. And because the things the Crystal Ponies feel fuel the Heart, the
enchantment would keep going. Indefinitely, maybe. Chaos magic would only be required to start the cycle; harmony magic would make it persist. Oh, take that, Harmony! I could corrupt Yggdrasil's fruit and once harmony started fueling the corruption, the Tree and its Bearers would be able to do exactly nothing about it.

They suggested that the enchantment could make stallions want to dominate mares, and make mares want to submit. That's actually not hard. I've cast spells like that before. It doesn't cause mass rapes, not when I've done them anyway; it affects heterosexuals, making one gender of heterosexual ponies want the other gender to sweep them off their feet and take them to bed (or, sometimes, take them right there), and the other gender want to reciprocate. Homosexual ponies are generally not affected, and bisexuals only to the degree that if they naturally had such tendencies they'd be enhanced. But it works by altering love into lust, so it mostly affects married couples, special someponies, and pony couples who haven't worked up the courage to admit to their mutual desires yet and are still pretending to be just friends, or perhaps that they don't notice each other at all. I've done it with the sexes in both positions (in fact on one occasion I flipped who was dominant and who was submissive five times in one week). So this suggestion didn't manage to trip any red flags, not with me fairly stoned at this point and giggling at absolutely everything.

Cadance was an alicorn. Her hubby was a mere unicorn. The thought of such a powerful entity panting at the hooves of her significantly less powerful and more mortal boytoy really appealed to me. I love such inversions of power. (I may have been a lot less powerful than I am now, but I was still a lot more powerful than Celestia all the times I let her tie me up and make me beg. I was just a mortal chaos mage, but she was still just a unicorn then, so I still outclassed her.) Oh, and what if I could entice Celestia to come visit the Crystal Empire to investigate? Since if she sent the Bearers they'd just all end up having an orgy with Anon, like they do all the time anyway. Maybe there was still some deeply buried part of her, suppressed by Anon, that still had feelings for me... feelings that would immediately turn into an overwhelming desire to beg me for sex.

(Like I said. I really don't like what they altered me into, even temporarily.)

I was already planning out how, exactly, I'd structure that spell (for some reason being stoned doesn't actually affect my ability to either do spells or figure out how I'd do them, probably because most of my spells are more about convincing magic to do what I want it to do than building mental structures to force it.) Dainn was painting mental images to sweeten the deal and convince me, and I was most of the way to convinced. Cadance submitting to Shining Armor? Hot. Celestia submitting to me? Hotter. Luna submitting to me? Gross. I still think of her as a little sister and incest isn't my thing. Besides, Luna's as bi as the moon has phases. Luna utterly horrified because Celestia had surrendered willingly to my desires? Yes, ok, that was a good one. Then I'd turn her into an adorable blue parrot and give her to her sister as a pet, and make Celestia my Queen of Chaos.

Then Dainn suggested that I could get revenge on the Bearers who'd turned me to stone a year ago by making them submit to me as well.

Except the spell doesn't work like that. The way I was planning on doing it, a mare would already have to feel desire for a male to want to submit to him, and I was fairly sure none of the Bearers were interested in me. What it would lead to was them getting even kinkier in their games with Anon. Disgruntled, I said that if the Bearers got involved, the spell would only end up with my worst enemy getting lucky. Then I started giggling at the notion of inverting the spell for just the Bearers. "I could flip it around for them – but not him. Oh, he's happy to have them as his girltoys right now, but I'll bet he'd be singing a different song if all of them wanted to be on top!"

The fantasy of the six Bearers treating Anon the way the waitresses at Something Different had treated Twister amused me far more than it would normally. (Though, to be honest... I still think it's
funny, just not funny enough to overcome the general nausea I feel when I think about Anon having sex with anyone. Sure, rape jokes generally just come across as boorish, but when the victim's a rapist and his rapists are his former victims, then it's kind of hilarious.) Dainn and the other bulls were not impressed, however. Dainn scowled. "You want females to enslave a male? That isn't the way it should be."

"Disgusting," one of the other bulls said, and burped loudly. Apparently he was too drunk to remember to be afraid of me.

"I don't recall asking you," I said, took his mouth, and put it in a mug that had been empty until I conjured it full of spit. The mouth spluttered frantically while the caribou's eyes went wide and his nose flared, his hooves going to his mouth. I turned to Dainn, ignoring the rude bull. "Spirit of Chaos, remember? It's fun to do things the way they shouldn't be!"

"What if instead you turned him into a female? You could have him for your own slave, and teach him the impudence of challenging the Lord of Chaos!" The other bulls nodded, a few chiming in with lewd suggestions for what I could do to a female-bodied Anon to put him in his place.

I'm sure this was supposed to be persuasive. It was just nauseating. I would rather have sex with a snapping turtle who does oral than touch Anon with someone else's penis, let alone my own. Nothing against humans, you understand; they're incredibly weird-looking, with pony-like heads on bipedal bodies that are covered in such a light sprinkling of fur it might as well not be there, but weird is almost synonymous with sexy in my book, and the thought of how sensitive they are, with all that bare furless skin... mmm. (I didn't actually do anything with one when I went to Anon's world and adopted their form, unless you count my old friends with benefits, Me, Myself and I, but let's just say the art of the lift-etching is one they are enormously experienced with, except of course they don't have tails so there's no lifting involved. Some of the imagery I found was downright inspirational.)

No, it's specifically Anon that disgusts me. Having seen what the others of his species look like... he's so boring! Yes, on our world he stands out, but over there, he's almost the scientifically derived average of what they think a normal citizen of his nation looks like. His face and body are as dull as his personality and imagination. He could be Everyhuman, except that I feel positive that almost any other random human I picked would be more interesting and attractive than he is.

I'm no stranger to the intersection of hate and lust; it's not often that I desire someone I hate (though desiring someone who both hates and lusts for me, that was actually the majority of my sex life when I unruled Equestria), but it has happened. (There was a supercilious, protocol obsessed long-ma once who kept putting me down for being a draconequus, and oh how I enjoyed tearing his aloof façade to bits, turning his world to chaos, and making him beg for more. Making bigots who look down on you for your species beg for your supposedly inferior, unattractive, lowly body is one of the best things ever. But I digress.) However, there is not one single tiny speck of lust for Anon within my heart, and merely contemplating the possibility long enough to refute it makes me want to brush my teeth because I think I just threw up a little in my mouth. He's a stupid, unimaginative, brutal lout with no class, panache or style, and he has more power than me, and he doesn't deserve any of it.

I said so. "The only place I'd like to squeeze Anon is around the neck."

"Of course, that's always the way," Dainn said. "But once you have your enemy defeated before you, naked and female, I'm sure you can find some far more delightful things to do to her than simply kill her."

No, if Anon were female, I'd still want her to just die, I thought. I don't discriminate on the basis of gender in my attractions; turning someone who disgusts me a different gender isn't going to change
my opinion any more than turning someone who attracts me a different gender would.

This was the part where it suddenly occurred to me that Dainn couldn't comprehend that.

Bisexual and homosexual male caribou are closeted to the point where caribou in general think they don't exist, because any male who ever expressed sexual interest in another male – aside from perhaps sadistically dominating a recently overpowered enemy before being able to cast the rite that turns him female – would end up being turned female and enslaved himself. And Dainn couldn't imagine a world where females could take the lead or be sexually dominant; or rather, he could, but it disgusted him at a very visceral level. He couldn't tolerate the simplest amount of variety in existence – all creatures had to have sex the exact same way, with brutal male overlords degrading helpless female slaves. The only variation that was permitted in his world was whether or not the females pretended to like it or not.

Like someone had just dumped cold water on my head, I woke up, my head clearing. My magic was kicking in, rejecting a foreign magic that in my relaxed, accepting state, I hadn't noticed or resisted. I was still kind of high, but as I remembered that Dainn was my enemy and wanted a world far more regimented and rigid than any pony had ever dreamed of, and recognized that there was a fog of mind control magic woven around my thoughts... well, have you ever taken a drug that's supposed to relax you and reduce anxiety and fear, and then discovered something that made you suddenly terrified?

It was like a switch was thrown in my brain, turning me from giddy and stupid to paranoid and panicked. And being paranoid and panicking, I magicked away the drug as well, frightened enough despite it that I knew I needed a clear head.

I felt a sudden overpowering rage at Dainn, at all of his society. I looked at the magical patterns around him, once again, to see if I could see where they linked to the Element of Cruelty, because right then I was extremely tempted to just grab it and teleport off with it. But no, the dense tangle of magic was still too thick to see through. I'd have to start cutting threads, and the moment I did, the caribou would know their ploy hadn't worked.

I started laughing like I was still high as a kite. "No, no, I've got a better one!" I said, chortling loudly and giddily. "This prank's much better! You could even call it noble!"

"Noble?" Dainn frowned at me.

"That's right, because no bull has antlers!"

But cows, they sure did. Because I'd just taken all the antlers off the male caribou and put them on the females – who, you will recall, were all black collars, none of them sacrificed cows. Well, except my joke was a bit ruined by the fact that it didn't work on Dainn. Another case of my magic resisting my magic. If I survive this whole thing with Anon, I am going to have words with my Elements after all this is over. And by "words", I mean I'm seriously considering melting them down and recreating them, without the corruption of a thousand years out of my control.

I leapt off my massage table ladies as I did it, teleporting into the air and out of the reach of said antlers, since it might take them a moment to process that I was helping them. Caribou howled. Reindeer immediately tried to cast – and, of course, could not, because there wasn't nearly enough ambient magic to fuel a casting unless you were tied to Dainn, and they weren't. Which meant they were still sitting ducks for Dainn, who still had his antlers, plus all the magic. However, I'm a master of multitasking. At the same time, I was breaking all the bonds on the yak – so the table fell apart, dumping food and drink all over the caribou – and growing two big, thick, wooden cudgels out from her amputated stumps. Yeah, I could have given her back her actual legs, but trying to use chaos to
heal a creature back to normal takes more energy than transforming them into something strange, unless you use this one weird trick that caribou hate, and I didn't have time to do that to Ms. Yakky McYakface.

It is relevant here to point out that caribou bulls sit in a way that is positively lewd by pony standards. They keep their forelegs spread out wide and their butts scooted just a bit forward, so their entire underbelly is visible. Of course their poky bits are in a sheath, like nearly every male creature native to our planet that I can think of, but their testicles are not, and let's just say the position leaves nothing to the imagination if one is inclined to glance down. So I was expecting the yak to headbutt or bite Dainn in the balls. She surprised me. She went for his belly instead, butting him hard enough to make him oof.

Immediately I saw the tangle of magic around him shift. He had a semi-permanent knot of magical energy around his boy bits, which in retrospect was probably the reason the yak hadn't butted him there – she must have known Dainn had spellwork to protect his precious from anything a rebellious slave might try to do. The rest of the energy was in a loose web around and through him, rather like an alicorn mana field, except that I could plainly see that the magic wasn't actually his, personally. It did, however, mean he'd heal like an alicorn, so that headbutt wasn't going to provide much of a distraction.

So I grabbed one of those lines of magic around him, and with all of my strength, I pulled.

For a frightening moment, I thought I didn't actually have enough juice to break one of those mana lines. They were hardened, old, and heavily protected by runes – not runes I could see, either, or I could have erased them. Rune magic's extremely vulnerable to me when I can see the runes, and extremely tough for me to handle when I can't – the runes tie down the structure of the magic to symbols, and without being able to disrupt the symbols, I can't redirect or repointer the magic. All I can do is the most basic application of chaos – cause disorder where there had been order. Break bonds.

It snapped, of course, because I am awesome, and spilled usable magic everywhere, which was good because without usable magic to grab and bolster myself, I might have fainted from the effort. Also, it made Dainn scream and go back to his knees, which was pretty funny because he'd just gotten to his feet. The yak didn't waste time. If she was puzzled at having cudgels for legs, she didn't show it. Yaks don't think much, they just react – at least in combat. She'd gotten to her own feet after the headbutt, and she started swinging her hard wooden legs at Dainn's head, with a lot of force.

In the long run it wasn't going to help. It doesn't matter how much you whale on an alicorn's head, you can't kill them or cause any kind of permanent damage. In the short term, you can actually knock them unconscious, though, and certainly you can distract them and make it impossible for them to cast.

However, the red dragon slave then snarled and leapt at the yak. So I swapped her place with the dire wolf. There are a lot of things I can't do to dragons, particularly adult dragons, but teleporting a dragon child is not outside my range. The dire wolf had had a leash attached to her collar; now it was on the dragon, and the dire wolf was free. She didn't waste any time, going for Dainn's throat right away. Dainn blasted her back, but focusing his antlers on the wolf meant they weren't focused on the yak, who smacked him a good hard one in the back of the head.

Meanwhile my reindeer ladies now had antlers – which weren't theirs, and which were generally oversized for their heads, but an antler's an antler – and their caribou tormentors did not. They were still weak from poor nutrition and general misuse, though, and the caribou were trained fighters, with protective clothing and weapons. Not that reindeer cows aren't frequently trained fighters themselves,
and at least a few of these were, but they were naked and the only weapons they had were their antlers.

The earth pony masseuse had jumped into the fight, delivering some magnificently powerful bucks to some caribou, and I don't mean the sexy kind. The griffin had charged in as well, but she was getting her tail handed to her because she obviously didn't know how to fight without wings, and caribou pluck the feathers off captives with wings and make them wear stupid looking wing sheaths. There were the pegasus acrobats (complete with stupid wing sheaths) and a few unicorns with broken horns, hanging back against the walls. I decided to fix that.

Remember that one weird trick I mentioned? If I take a unicorn's horn, say, and I keep it lying around as a physical object, eventually either I'll put it back on her or the enchantment will wear out and it'll pop back onto her head. But if I turn it into something else, it converts into pure magic for a moment before being reconstructed into the new thing I want. And unless I'm focusing a lot of my attention on making sure magic gets all the details right and records perfectly exactly what it was like before I changed it... when I change it back, the magic will take shortcuts. Off her head, the horn will be an ur-horn, more of a magic placeholder that says "INSERT HORN HERE", a representation of the Platonic ideal of a horn. Usually in the color it used to be in, because that's easy, but it won't be genetically her horn, or anypony's; it'll be a magic construct of pure horn-ness. Put it back on her head, and harmony takes over, remodeling the horn into her horn.

Except it'll be her horn like she was just born and then instantly aged to her prime. It will be a perfect version of her horn, regardless of how imperfect the one I took off her head was.

I can't keep a pony immortal and eternally young this way. I've tried. They eventually get cancer, and cancer is chaos in cellular form. I can't cure it. I can't keep healing an injured pony this way over and over either; same reason. But the odds of a pony getting cancer from me doing it once are pretty low, and the odds of a pony preferring a horrible and degrading life as a slave to the tiny chance of getting horn cancer that might even turn out to be curable if caught early enough are about zero. I think. Anyway if I was a pony the slight risk of cancer would definitely be my choice over a life in slavery.

So I popped off all the unicorn horns, and wings of any species, and dropped them into a top hat I'd conjured for the purpose, then turned the hat upside down and put it on my head to demonstrate that the wings and horns were gone. Then I pulled them out of my ear (feathers are very ticklish on the inside of your ear. Who knew?) and popped them back onto their respective owners.

And then I sat down against the wall, because it was more dignified looking than collapsing there and I'd just used a lot of magic, to watch the chaos unfold.

Dainn had managed to summon reinforcements, because of course he had, and the red dragon had just bitten through her leash. The yak was in a frenzy, stomping and slamming her cudgels against anything she could reach, and despite the fact that there were at least two caribou with horns trying to hold her back... there's a reason that ponies, despite being a nation well supplied with combat-trained magic users, take yaks seriously. Telekinesis doesn't do much to a frenzied yak unless it's very powerful. Twilight Sparkle, babysitter of Ursa Minors, probably could hold back several yaks, but very few caribou are in Twilight's class as telekinetics. Two of the reindeer were actually spellcasters, not limited to telekinesis, which was a very good thing because the caribou kept trying to use runes, and the reindeer, being specifically trained in fighting caribou, had rune erasure spells.

(If you're curious, and I know you are, Twilight, rune magic doesn't involve throwing around little pieces of parchment that have runes scribed on them. It generally involves crystals or polished rocks that have had runes carved into them, and just a tiny bit of magic funneled into them activates whatever spell is scribed there. So if you scribed runes for a spell that makes a cookie appear into a
stone, and gave the stone to Pinkie Pie, Ponyville would be completely covered in cookies in approximately half a day, because even the magic of tactile telekinesis can activate the damn things. Eventually they run out of energy, depending on how much magic was stored in the stone to begin with, unless they're also scribed with runes for drawing magic from somewhere else. Eris got some minotaur catspaws, back in the day, to make some truly nasty little booby-trapped items that would grant you a material wish, like I wish I had an ice cream soda, every time you touched it... but would draw from your own magic to do it, in a way that you wouldn't notice the drain until you toppled over, magicless.)

With their horns and wings fixed, the rest of the ponies entered the fray. They weren't trained fighters. The pegasi were trained acrobats, at least, but the unicorns had no idea what they were doing; they were just firing bolts of pure magical force, easily countered by the caribou reinforcements. The griffin wasn't a trained fighter either, but considering that she probably came from Griffonstone, she knew how to fight dirty, as long as she had her wings to work with. The dire wolf was downright terrifying; she'd disemboweled one caribou with her teeth and ripped another one's foreleg off. I decided she needed her claws back, and made them grow back as steel razors. The screams of injured caribou filled the air. Dainn was ignoring the dire wolf, focusing his attacks on the reindeer spellcasters, but the red dragon was heading straight for her, and in a contest between an adult dire wolf and a barely-adolescent dragon, I wasn't sure who would win. Normally I wouldn't take sides, just a seat and plenty of popcorn, but the dire wolf was generating a lot of chaos. Not the tastiest kind, since caribou were ending up dead, but I've said before that death produces a nice strong burst of chaos, once, and right now I wasn't worrying about the long term.

So I teleported over, grabbed the dragon, and pinned her arms behind her back while I leaned my head over her head and gazed into her eyes. "All those reindeer are trying to take your master," I whispered into her mind. "Your master. Your very own master, and they're trying to steal him when he's yours."

She'd had enough of the concept of personal ownership beaten out of her that it was hard going, but no matter how you raise a dragon, deep inside, they're greedy. And while you can induce greed growth in a young dragon by giving them a hoard they're not strong enough to defend, triggering their biology to make them go super-sized... you can also do it by convincing them that someone is stealing their hoard right now. And dragons think of the ones they love and feel loyalty to as their possessions. As a slave, the red dragon had no hoard, no possessions at all – except her Master. Who would probably never have imagined that his dragon slave saw him as her possession, and to be honest, I had to peel away a few layers of trained inhibitions to get at that dragon core. But once I did...

"THIS SLAVE WANT!"

The ceiling was actually tall enough to accommodate her, but the walls weren't. Caribou, reindeer and unicorns alike had to shield themselves and others from the collapsing chunks of transparent dome, once the walls had been knocked out by the sudden enlargement of a small teenage dragon to giant-size. The dragon lunged at a very startled Dainn. "THIS SLAVE'S MASTER! THIS SLAVE WANTS! NO TAKE THIS SLAVE'S MASTER!"

(In the interests of verisimilitude, I have to say: she wasn't saying slave. I'm censoring this a lot. The caribou hardly ever miss a chance to use incredibly degrading and insulting language to describe or address their slaves, and many of the red collars use the same language when referring to themselves.)

So now Dainn had to fight off a possessive giant dragon who thought she loved him, the room had been reduced to rubble, and there were a lot more guards coming into the battle. The problem here
was that the palace was full of guards. It was also full of slaves, and a good number of them had black collars, and probably some of the red collars would fight back if they thought they had a chance, but the only slaves I'd managed to restore to fighting condition were the ones right here. This called for a very clever, devious plan, something as trickstery and easy for me to accomplish as turning the dragon had been.

But I didn't have time to think of one, so I did something stupid instead, and used brute force.

Identifying every black collar in the entire castle, breaking any bonds that restrained her, disabling any caribou bull who was extremely close to her, finding out if she was maimed in any way, and then pulling my trick on her where I'd remove the maimed part, dissolve it into magic and then put it back... most of the time, I'd call that a Tuesday. To use that much magic, I had to open my channels up fairly wide, though. It wasn't that I didn't have the magic – I'd pulled even more complex and larger stunts than that, in my day. It was that opening my channels wide enough to use that much magic was going to expose much, much more of my mana pool to the drain.

To top it all off, I sent a message to all of them. *"IF YOU WANT YOUR FREEDOM, JOIN THE FIGHT. TAKE OUT ANY CARIBOU YOU'RE ABLE TO! SET FIRES, DESTROY FURNITURE, RAISE CHAOS ANY WAY YOU CAN!"*

Oh, and then I passed out.

Chapter End Notes

Ar comes from "In Conquest Born" by C. S. Friedman, which depicts a society that is almost as bad as the caribou, except that they make more sense and there's less emphasis on sex in literally everything. Her bad guys have a saying, "Shem'ar shem'arit", which means "A woman who leads men is a servant of chaos", and their chaos goddess is named Ar.
In Which I Start A Riot

Editor’s Note:

I promised I’d try to cover what Discord said in the last chapter, but he rambles a lot. I might miss something.

The first thing is about the caribou, and where they get their magic. Because up north there isn’t any free magic, you have to generate it somehow. Reindeer generate it by being nice and making friends with everyone in Neighropa by bringing gifts to foals and things like that. Caribou use dark magic and the Element of Cruelty, and generate power in two main ways: first, they do something to make all their female children dumb and without any willpower of their own, so they grow up kind of automatically as slaves. Sacrificing their minds like that can generate as much power as sacrificing a living creature, if you do a lot of them. Also, they capture slaves from reindeer and other species. Female captives are turned into slaves; male captives are either killed, or turned female and then turned into slaves. Also, they turn some of their own guys into females and then make them slaves, and that’s how they prevent anyone from objecting to the regime or trying to overthrow it.

The suffering of the slaves, channeled through the Element of Cruelty, is what gives the caribou all of their power. It goes to the king, which makes him as powerful as an alicorn, and then it’s distributed out from him to all of his bulls. (Caribou are called bulls and cows, not stags and does, even though they are deer.) Discord can see the lines of power going between the king and the bulls, but there were so many of them, he couldn’t see his Element or break the connections except one at a time.

Uh, I mentioned last time that they’re sex slaves, right? Pretty sure I mentioned that. Yeah, ok, I looked up my notes from last time and I did say that. Sooo let’s just not talk about that again, ok? But here’s an important fact: some of the slaves are brainwashed and accept being slaves, and they wear red collars. Others are rebellious and they wear black collars. I guess slaves who have just given up fighting even though they still hate it are also red collars, but Discord couldn’t tell them from the ones who were actually loyal to their masters.

Discord went to the caribou pretending to be their friend (sort of… actually he was kind of being a big jerk, but the kind of big jerk Discord is when he’s being friendly, not when he’s trying to ruin your life) so he could get some details about how he could defeat them. When the ones he first went to were going to bring him to the king, they were going to make reindeer slaves with black collars pull his sled, even though the slaves were shaved so they didn’t have any fur. Discord pretended he wanted them to “serve” him as blankets so he could keep them warm, because he thought black collars might turn out to be useful.

He met the king and got the guy to invite him to a feast in his honor (because one of the other chaos avatars, Mayhem, gave the caribou the Element of Cruelty, the caribou honor the Lord of Chaos as the one who made their society possible, and they can’t tell the difference between Discord and Mayhem. Also it turns out Mayhem was Discord’s father, and Discord hates him because of the terrible thing Mayhem did to Discord’s mother.) At the feast, Discord got the caribou to bring out a lot more black collars, so there were no red collars left at the feast except a brainwashed female teen dragon. They used drugged smoke to get Discord to relax and then either they used mind control magic or a side effect of the drugged smoke to make Discord forget that the caribou were his enemies. They almost tricked him into helping them take over the Crystal Empire, but they made the mistake of suggesting he could turn Anon female and make Anon his slave, and Discord didn’t want to do that because he thinks Anon is gross and also he thinks rape is awful, which honestly makes
me feel a lot better about the life decisions I've made that ended up with me copying this entire stupid document, and I can say that because unlike Twilight, Discord either won’t ever read my copy, or he’ll laugh if he reads it and he sees that part.

Anyway, so Discord figured out that he was being mind controlled and used his powers to break it. Then he swapped around all of the caribou’s antlers, except for the king’s, so they were on the reindeer instead. (I forgot to mention that the caribou cut off antlers and horns on their captives, and if they have wings they pluck the wings so they don’t work.) He also healed the horns on the unicorns, the wings on the pegasi and a griffin, made a yak whose forelegs had been cut down to stumps grow big wooden clubs she could walk on. And he grew back the claws on a dire wolf slave, but made them razors instead of claws.

Because all of his magic was being drained by the ley lines going into the ground, he broke one of the lines connecting the king to his bulls. That spilled magic everywhere that he could use, and also that the reindeer and the unicorns could use. The poor brainwashed dragon was fighting the other slaves, so Discord got her to greed-grow to defend her “hoard”, since the only thing she had was her “master”, the king. So she started chasing the king around trying to capture him because she wanted him. That’s… really weird and I don’t want to think about what that implies.

Then Discord used up a lot of magic by healing and freeing all the black collars in the caribou palace, and that made him use so much so fast that he passed out. Which is where we are now.

It wasn't like I wanted to lose consciousness in the middle of a fight. I remember being distantly aware that I was lying on a floor, and there was combat and chaos going on all around me. I was frantically willing myself to wake up, to move, but nothing was happening. It wasn't as if I was suffering from sleep paralysis; more like I kept fading back and forth between dreams and semi-consciousness, so I'd think I'd woken up and was taking action, and then something particularly loud near my ear would startle me back into the more wakeful state where I was aware that I was still asleep.

This struggle lasted until severe pain in my head both woke me up and dazed me further. I managed to open my eyes. There was a caribou with antlers in front of me, using telekinesis to repeatedly smash my head into the wall. I reached for ambient magic and found there wasn't any; the line I'd torn open earlier must have sealed itself or withered, so it was no longer spilling raw magic everywhere. My own supply was still vast, but I had to concentrate to open myself up to use it or I'd bleed it out again into the drain and pass out like I just had, and you try concentrating while someone is beating a rug that happens to be your skull.

So I moaned dramatically, let my eyes roll back in my head, and went limp again, feigning unconsciousness. He slammed my head another couple of times for good measure, then used his telekinesis to pick up my supposedly helpless deadweight and lay it down on his back.

To be fair to him, he was smart enough not to leave either my head or tail too near his neck. It's just that I'm large enough that if you're a caribou, and you drape me over your back so my head and tail are dangling down on either side of you, this leaves my head, and fang, awfully close to your belly.

Not that it would have mattered much anyway. No matter where I bite a pony, the hallucinogen takes effect within half a minute. I assumed caribou would be similar, maybe a little longer due to their greater mass, and I wasn't disappointed. His sides and underbelly were armored, but not a solid piece; his underside was covered with a kind of sling of chain mail, held on by straps that went over his back, and his sides were hard bronze plates that hung down from a plate on his back. So when I
suddenly twisted my neck and lifted my dangling head up under his plate armor, I found a simple woolen protective sleeve around his barrel, nowhere near as thick as my fang is long. He screamed when I jabbed it into his side, and by reflex used his magic to throw me off him.

"Enjoy your trip," I said, grinning maliciously at the two or three of him that kept sliding back and forth and merging or separating in my vision. Yeah, he'd hit me in the head pretty hard, and I hadn't managed to heal it yet.

He tried to fire a bolt of magic at me and missed completely. At that point his knees gave way, he collapsed into a sitting position against the wall, and he started whimpering. Within seconds, he had flattened himself back against the wall. "No! Get away! I'll kill you! Don't touch me!" he started screaming at absolutely nothing.

"Whoa, bad trip," I said, and promptly fell over and faceplanted because getting hit in the head multiple times does nothing good for a biped's balance. Most ponies see harmless, fun hallucinations, and enjoy them; my venom takes out the part of their brains that's able to even try to want to make sense of something, and without that they just lay back and watch the pretty pictures. Either it worked differently with caribou, or the magic in it was interacting badly with the dark magic the caribou got from their king. Maybe I'd have to bite a few more caribou. Purely for science, of course. Just as soon as the room stopped spinning.

There needed to be more ambient magic, I thought. While I was still lying on the floor, I grabbed the magic lines connected to a couple of caribou nearby, reinforcements who had their antlers, and tore them loose. That didn't take as much energy as it did to rip open the lines near Dainn, before they branched out and connected outward with many caribou, but it didn't release as much energy either. The unicorns and reindeer, who can't see magic the way I can and who had been frantically trying to cast all this time, unaware of the dwindling supply of magic except in the sense that their spells and strikes were getting harder and harder to do, sucked up a lot of it immediately, but that was all right. I still had my own supply. I figured I'd get up, prop myself against the wall if I was still dizzy, and go for Dainn's lines directly again.

Only, as soon as I stood up again... something wrapped around my neck and started squeezing.

In my efforts to claw it off myself I determined that it was a leather strap, and very thick, and whoever had telekinetic hold of it was very strong. It's not actually possible to kill me by strangling me – at least, enough ponies have tried it and failed that I'm pretty sure it can't be done – but while I may not need to breathe to live, tell that to my lungs. My gills flared, uselessly trying to pull in oxygen from dry air because my nose and throat weren't doing such a good job at the moment and the gills were on the other side of the thing choking me. That hurts, you know; gills exposing themselves to dry air is very painful. So is choking. Of course I was frantically trying to use my magic, but I'm pretty sure it was Dainn strangling me, or someone he'd allocated a whole boatload of power to, because in my dazed, weakened and drained state, I couldn't muster up the strength to break the telekinetic grasp. If they'd used a spell, my natural field of chaos magic would probably have disrupted it, but this was just telekinesis and to counter that, I need to actively do something.

While I was gasping and choking, something flew in my mouth, and then the choking eased up just long enough for me to suck in a deep breath, so of course by instinct I did so despite the fact that there was a substance I didn't recognize in my mouth. Of course this was a mistake. I recognized an odd, nutty flavor that reminded me of the last thing my mother ever gave me to drink, before the ritual that killed her, and I realized with a shock that they had drugs prepared for draconequui. The strange incense-like drug that had relaxed me enough that I hadn't noticed Dainn weaving a web of subtle mind control around me was one thing... but this was a sleeping drug for draconequui (I assume, since when my mom gave me the drink, I immediately got dizzy and fell asleep like she'd
told me, despite the fact that my usual reaction to the command to take a nap had been to bounce on whatever I was supposed to be napping on for another hour or so with increasingly loud protestations that I wasn't even sleepy until I tired myself out and fell over.) I had no idea what it was – still don't, and it's not exactly as if I have a draconequus to ask or access to tomes of our medical literature, which I probably couldn't read anyway – but my memories of the day my tribe died have a hyper-clarity about them, since Starswirl used a spell to help me retrieve them in the first place. I recognized the taste, and the symptoms.

And then I went back down into unconsciousness again, so I didn't have much time to contemplate the implications.

The next thing I knew, I was lying across the backs of two caribou, and from the number of restraints on me, I didn't think there was anything good they were planning for me.

They had me face up, with a muzzle on and a gag bit that kept my mouth just open enough that my fang was level with the bottom of my own jaw. This would make it very, very difficult to bite anyone with it. My wings were strapped down, my wrists were tied behind my back with oversized hard leather mitts on my paws that were large enough that my frantically waving claws could barely touch, let alone scratch, the inside of them. They'd pushed my legs up so far they were in line with my body – which didn't hurt. I'm amazingly flexible and can lift my legs high enough that I can put my feet behind my back, but it was making me feel just a tad vulnerable, because they'd cuffed the dragon one, wound rope uncomfortably tight all the way down the goat leg, and run the end of the rope behind my back to tie to the cuff on the other, so I couldn't move my legs forward at all. Then they'd strapped me to two caribou with thick X-shaped straps on each caribou's back, pinning down my neck and my lower torso where my legs were tied, respectively. They'd also broken off my horns, which irritated me because my horns are very attractive and I felt light-headed without them (literally, because they're kind of heavy), but wasn't going to have any effect whatsoever on my powers.

What was going to have an effect on my powers was a necklace of rune-inscribed amulets, stones set in metal, tight around my neck. I couldn't have read the runes even if the necklace wasn't too close to my jaw for me to tilt my head around to see them, but I could feel what they were doing. My powers were bound. I couldn't muster up the tiniest little spark of telekinesis, let alone anything interestingly chaotic. Given time I could pull the thing apart magically, but it wouldn't be quick, because these were runes. I doubted I had the time.

The caribou were trotting forward in as close to perfect harmony as living creatures get, their movements perfectly synchronized with each other, which was good in the sense that if they separated from each other it would probably stretch my abdomen painfully, and bad in the sense that their perfect synchronization prevented them from separating from each other far enough they'd pull me loose from the X-straps. I didn't know where they were going with me, but I was pretty sure I didn't want to find out.

They hadn't, however, done anything to restrain my tail.

I wasn't surprised. It's hard to restrain my tail. You'd have to wind rope around it the way they did to my goat leg, and for the same reason – there's nothing much there to catch onto. Restraints usually take advantage of the bumpiness of bodies – hooves flare outward, widening so they're thicker than the leg they're attached to. Necks, dragon ankles, and wrists attached to paws like mine, extra-wide because they have opposable thumbs sticking out, are even thinner than the body part they're attached to. My goat leg's hard because my cloven hoof isn't much wider than the rest of my leg, and has no sensation aside from the ability to detect pressure from whatever I'm stepping on – pony
hooves *hurt* if you try to tug them free of restraints that were tied tightly around their legs, but goat hooves don't. My legs aren't all that strong, though, so winding enough rope around the thing, tightly, with lots of knots, is fairly secure.

My tail is *enormously* strong, and tapers down smoothly. There's no place where the spot closer to the edge of my body is wider than a spot closer to the rest of me. Yes, you can tie the tail between the spikes, but that requires me to cooperate because I can fold my spikes down and make them soft any time I want to. And if you just wind lots and lots of rope around it... you're going to get coils of lots and lots of rope on the floor after I use my great physical strength to slide my tail out of all of your rope. Plus, it's covered in dragon scales, so you can't actually tie it tight enough to cut off my circulation or keep me from being able to yank it out of its bonds. So they just didn't bother to try. After all, with my magic suppressed, my body bound and all of my other natural weaponry taken out of the equation, what could I possibly do with just a tail?

Well, wrap it around a captor's leg, for starters.

He stumbled. Since my tail was firmly secured around his leg and my neck was tied down tightly on the other caribou's back, this had the effect first of pulling me so my head was catching against the center of the X-straps that held me, and secondly of yanking the caribou that my head was strapped to off-balance. He tipped sideways, and before he could right himself, I *pulled*.

See, that's the thing the caribou forget, when dealing with a body type like mine. My strength's in my main body, not my limbs. Tying my limbs to each other in pairs doesn't restrain my *body* any; the only thing doing that was the X-straps, and if I'm tied to you... you're tied to me. My attempt to double myself over didn't work, of course, and I didn't expect it to, but it *did* pull my Head Caribou on top of my Tail Caribou, causing *both* of them to fall to the ground.

Meanwhile, I was doing the limbo. My head tilts back farther than probably any other creature on the planet; I can point it straight up, making my jaw perfectly level with the front-facing side of my neck. Or, in other words... nothing to catch onto anymore. This wouldn't have worked at all if they hadn't taken off my horn and antler, but they did. I wiggled, and used the strength of my neck to pull against the X-bonds, loosening them just enough that I could get my head partway under the crux. So when Head Caribou, cursing loudly at me, got to his feet, which he had to do first because he was on top of Tail Caribou... I pulled with my lower body, and my tail that was pinned under Tail Caribou's weight, and of course he resisted the pull, assuming I was trying to knock him over again or something, and yanked himself to his feet *hard*.

Thus yanking me.

My head slipped free of the X-bond. The stubs of my antler and horn were apparently a little ragged, because the caribou I was bound to bellowed as my head scraped across his back. I fell toward the ground, or rather my head did, but because of how incredibly awesome I am, I used the strength of my neck and torso to lift myself. With the gag in I couldn't bite, and with the mitts on my hands I couldn't use the claws on my fingers, but I've got some pretty sharp toe-claws on the dragon foot. I twisted so that my head was sideways right above my dragon toes, where I could use them to rake at the strap keeping my mouth from opening any further.

Unfortunately, it seemed to be leather, not rope, and the awkward positioning meant I couldn't bring my full strength to bear on it without risking ripping my face. I didn't get the gag out before the caribou who I was still tied to managed to grab my upper body with his telekinesis and tried to hold me still, as he got to his hooves. That lasted just as long as it took me to use my tail to break his leg – he really should have been focusing his telekinesis on the tail around his leg, not my body on his back. He screamed and went to his knees again. The other caribou grabbed me with his telekinesis,
and without my powers I can't really counter telekinesis, but a telekinetic grip has to use force to hold on just the same as hooves do. I thrashed, wiggling my entire body as violently as I could, attempting to whip myself one way and then the other. The guard wasn't *that* powerful – he couldn't keep hold of me.

The moment he let go, I shot my head and upper body forward like I was flinging myself as a rope, and managed to snag my neck around his. He reared and tossed his head, trying to throw me off, but it was too late – I'd managed to hook enough of my neck around his that I could stay hooked. And then I pulled, like I was inching, lifting the middle of my body up to pull my tail and head toward each other... *hard*. This threw Head Caribou into Tail Caribou again, knocking them both down.

I tried to bite Head Caribou's neck, but I couldn't get any sort of angle where my fang could actually penetrate, given that with the gag in, my jaw was actually lower than it for once. What I *was* able to do was to pull my lower body free of the X-strap on Tail Caribou, so now I was for all intents and purposes a snake without fangs. Which doesn't sound that intimidating until you remember that a boa constrictor doesn't use fangs to kill its prey.

Tail Caribou managed to grab me in his telekinesis again and yank me off Head Caribou, who I was trying to strangle. He lifted me into the air with enough clearance that I couldn't reach either of them. Head Caribou splinted and bandaged Tail Caribou's broken leg so he could walk on it – quickly, this was a *very* rushed job, because I was wiggling and thrashing again – and then both of them concentrated on carrying me, overlapping their fields. They couldn't hold me still, but they could hold me *up*.

Up ahead, I saw a high-roofed chamber (possibly in another building, or maybe the ceiling hadn't fallen *everywhere* in the castle), with a very large rune circle within it, large enough that if I were in the center of it and didn't have my powers, I wouldn't be able to reach any part of the edge just by stretching. Rune circles get cranky when you break the circle with your body; a large one like that was obviously intended to use against multiple ponies at once, or large creatures. Like myself. I didn't like any part of this, and focused on yanking my muzzle off with my toeclaw, more carefully this time. With my mouth free, I was able to reach down to where the circlet binding my power was, around my neck, and bite it, hard.

It didn't break, but my teeth must have damaged a rune or two, because some of my power came back. Not enough to turn these caribou into toads, but enough to counter their harmonized TK fields with a little disharmony. With the interference I was generating, their TK grip loosened, and I crashed to the ground.

Without wasting any time, I propelled myself forward from my tail, pushing like a spring and then springing forward, directly into Head Caribou. I dug my fang into him, but aside from making him shriek like a little foal, it didn't do anything; I must have blown my entire venom supply on the other guy. That was too bad... for Head Caribou, because it meant I had to use the rest of my teeth. I bit him around the back of the neck, used that for leverage, wrapped my own neck around his, and squeezed.

Tail Caribou tried to pull me free. I let go of Head Caribou's neck with my mouth, since I was firmly wrapped all the way around it, and grinned at Tail Caribou. "Oh, do try. Make my day. But keep in mind, you have to succeed quickly enough to keep me from breaking your friend's neck. Or, you could surrender so I don't kill your pal here."

"A caribou never surrenders!" Head Caribou choked out.

"Do be quiet, you," I said, and tightened up some more, strangling him. I looked up at Tail Caribou. "Well?"
"I will surrender," he snarled, his telekinetic grip on me releasing.

"Good, good. Now take this collar off, quickly, if you don't find the funny faces your friend is making amusing." Head Caribou, like most creatures who are getting strangled, was kind of popeyed, and flush under his coat, and making entertaining frog faces as he gasped for air.

Tail Caribou limped over, put his hooves on the golden necklace – and yanked, strangling me even as I was strangling his friend. Like I said, I don't need to breathe, but my body's used to it and it's painful when I can't, so I automatically loosened my grip on Head Caribou so I could use the back of my head to bash against Tail Caribou's face.

Head Caribou wasted no time slipping free from my grasp. He spun his head at me and lunged it forward, driving his antlers into me hard. One of them actually pierced my neck and started bleeding like a fountain in the courtyard of Canterlot Gardens, if that fountain was gushing blood and not water. The other one jabbed me in the ribs, which hurt but did no permanent damage. The neck injury hadn't hit anything vital per se, but I was bleeding hard enough that I was going to end up getting dizzy from it very shortly.

And I was mad, because I was hurt. So I clamped my teeth around the base of one of the antlers and chomped.

I don't have a dragon head. My teeth can't cut gems without magic, and they can't slice through the thick bone of an antler. But my neck is very strong, and I have pony jaws – very, very good at clamping onto something and not letting go. I twisted my head from side to side, rapidly, and the antler broke off.

Head Caribou screamed, and kicked me, hard enough to break ribs and send me flying across the hallway. I hit the stone wall hard enough that if I hadn't been wearing the oversized leather mitts, which cushioned the blow, I'd probably have broken an arm or a wing. It's been a long time since someone was able to toss me around like that when I don't have all my power, but, well, we're not going to get into the talking about child abuse again. Just, I know what happens to the bones of a mortal draconequus when they hit something that hard, and while I hoped I wasn't actually mortal, the rune collar was keeping me from self-healing like I normally do.

The impact did squash the mitts, though, pressing the leather against my claws. I was dazed and in a lot of pain, so it took a moment or two to realize this. Head Caribou charged at me, apparently planning on goring me again with his remaining antler. I swept his leg out from under him with my tail, and after he went down I wrapped my tail around the second antler. Antlers, like horns, radiate magic from the points, and antlers are a lot longer than horns, so it's harder for a caribou to use magic to get something off their antler than it would be for a unicorn – they have to cast down and backward, and their antlers aren't very precise anyway, and Head Caribou had only one antler. I managed to crack it before Tail Caribou grabbed me in his own magic again and started repeatedly throwing me into the wall.

I did the only thing I could do in that situation – I played dead, hoping the caribou wouldn't keep it up until the pretense became a reality. No, actually, I'm lying, that's not what I did. I doubt I could have stopped myself from screaming if I'd still been fully conscious. What I really did was cling to consciousness by a bare thread, my mind screaming at me that they were going to do something terrible to me if I blacked out completely. (It had not at all escaped my notice that the position they'd tied me in would be almost perfectly suited for, shall we say, taking advantage of me – all they'd need to do was pin down my head and tail, and put the gag and muzzle back on me. I had a fairly good idea of what they were going to try to do, given what I know caribou do to their enemies and the fact that I was being transported to a rune circle. While I didn't particularly care if they
transformed me into a female version of myself, with the rune collar on I wouldn't be able to use my powers to defend myself, and the limits of my ability to defend myself with just my physical abilities were rapidly coming into view.)

Between the blood loss, the cracked ribs, and the repeated smashing of my head into the wall, I was very, very close to being genuinely unconscious. I couldn't scream or fight back anymore, and I'd gone completely limp, and my vision had tunneled to the point where I could only see what was directly in front of my face and couldn't make out what it actually was, either. Everything had turned into blobs of color bobbing in a sea of nothing.

But I could still hear, and I spent a thousand years once with no sense but the ability to hear, so I'm really, really good at figuring out what's going on around me with hearing alone. And I was afraid enough that adrenaline kept me from blacking out completely, so I could still think, albeit not at my usual level of superior intellect.

After smacking my head into the stone a few more times for good measure, Tail Caribou dropped me and said to his friend, "Are you all right?"

"No, I'm not all right! That fucking bitch of a monster there broke both my antlers!" (This more or less confirmed my suspicions of their intentions, by the way. They don't refer to males as "bitches" unless they've decided to recategorize the male as a female.)

"Yeah, bitch broke my leg. But we gotta finish this, fellow. Once we drain all the magic out of this thing, King Dainn can heal our wounds – and given how hard we've fought to capture and turn it, I'm sure we'll be greatly rewarded." The sound of licking lips. "Maybe we'll even be allowed to go first. I've never had a beast so exotic, have you?"

"It's still a male, so I haven't thought about that much."

"It won't be for much longer."

_Drain all the magic._ This was even worse than I'd thought. I doubted they _could_ drain all of my magic – they were probably vastly underestimating how much of it I had, since my fear of the leyline drain had kept me from using more than a fraction of it – but if they had a means of draining _any_ of my magic, I'd probably lose two or three times as much as they drained to the leyline drain at the same time.

Not all of my magic was impaired, because I could feel myself healing – none of the pain had abated, but my head was clearing. Like most creatures with self-healing, my brain gets the benefits first. I had to keep playing dead – I hadn't healed enough to start fighting again. But I was terrified that they'd get me to that rune circle before I was strong enough to resist, and if it drained my magic... even if I didn't lose all of it, a major magic drain hits me as hard as major blood loss. At which point I'd be genuinely helpless, and, well. Fun as it is to play that way when I have my powers and can stop things any time I want to, I had no illusions. Without my power as a safeword, a situation like that wasn't going to be nearly as much fun.

I started clawing at the leather mitts, which, as I mentioned, had been smashed. They'd been hard leather, rather round objects, almost like putting hollow balls around my hands. Taking the brunt of the impact with the wall had crushed them, so the hard leather was now right there against my claws. I scratched and pinched and pulled, frantically, as Tail Caribou lifted me with his magic and laid me out on Head Caribou's back again. They put the muzzle and gag back in because of course they did. I guess even without venom in my fang Head Caribou didn't want to risk encountering my teeth again. Wise of him. After what he and his pal had admitted they were going to do to me, I'd been planning to tear out his throat as soon as I had the strength. Push me far enough, and it's no more Mr.
They had me on my back again, because it'd be harder for me to deploy my mouth that way (a bit paranoid, considering they'd just gagged me, but then I had bitten Head Caribou's antler off), and so that they could see my eyes, to tell if I was waking up. The thought that I was already awake and just faking it to regain my strength hadn't entered their heads, apparently. So they strapped me down under the X-strap again, with my head dangling almost low enough to hit the ground off one side of Head Caribou and my tail definitely dragging on the ground on his other side, and marched forward, Tail Caribou limping worse than he'd been before. From the timing of the hoof clacks against the stone, it sounded like he was walking with three legs and dragging the broken one.

My vision came back into focus as we entered the room with the rune circle. Tail Caribou undid the X-straps, obviously planning to pick me up with his magic and toss me into it. But I'd torn my way through my mitts. My hands weren't free – the wrists were still tied – but they were a lot freer than they'd just been. Tail Caribou was focused on his work, and Head Caribou was looking back at him, watching him undo the straps, and neither of them were looking at my face anymore. I bent my head back far enough and my arms up high enough that my claws could reach the back of my muzzle, and tore it off again. My arms, like my legs, have over 180 degrees of rotation in either direction. Tying my wrists in back of me limited me only as much as tying them in front of me would have.

As Tail Caribou started to lift me, I dug my claws into Head Caribou's back, digging in deep. Head Caribou screamed, and tried to thrash, but I immediately whipped my neck around his again and lifted, at an angle, so I had him in a headlock and I was choking him. "Ah-ah," I said. "You drop that magic field right now or I rip out your friend's spine."

Instead of doing that, Tail Caribou decided to be a big hero, throwing all his power at me in an effort to rip me off of Head Caribou. It succeeded, too, sort of. I was bluffing about the spine thing; I hadn't gotten my claws in deep enough. So he was able to push me off, but he didn't take into account how long my body is, how strong it is, or how fast I can react when I have all my senses. As I felt him tear me free, I lashed my tail into a hook, caught Head Caribou around the head with it, lifted him into the air as Tail Caribou's TK flung me, and threw him sideways.

Directly into the rune circle.

I had enough of myself back together to see magic and patterns again. Head Caribou screamed as magic flowed over him, changing his features, but that wasn't what horrified me. What horrified me was seeing the rune circle slurp all the magic out of his body, to feed it into the web of mana lines that fed Dainn and the rest of the caribou race... in less than a second. A drain that hard and fast might actually be able to get all of my magic.

Since physics operates when my magic doesn't, equal and opposite reaction ensured that when I'd flung Head Caribou into the rune circle, I'd changed my own course so I went in more or less the opposite direction. That was actually what I'd been trying to do, as I hadn't assumed the rune circle was automatic. Tail Caribou was frozen for a moment, his face caught in an expression of shock and horror as he stared at his now-female friend. I took advantage of that moment to reach up to the rune circlet around my neck again, and with my claws in play, hooked into some of the chain links that held the gold amulets together, and pulled.

Tail Caribou turned toward me, saw what I was doing, and blasted me – too late. The circlet binding my power tore open and fell off my neck, and I countered Tail Caribou's TK, rebounding it to blast him with his own magic. He screamed as he fell backward on his bad leg. I picked him up with my magic and tossed him into the circle, next to his friend.

It was interesting, the effects of the circle. It drained all the magic from the target, and changed their
bodies to be female (I didn't know whether it was an opposite-sex spell, which would also turn females male, or a turn-to-female spell, which would have no effect on females... and I didn't have a handy female to toss into the circle to find out). But it regenerated all of their injuries. Head Caribou's antlers grew back, not like that was going to help him with his magic drained (yes, he'd turned female, just like Anon had turned Cheese Sandwich into Cheese Louise, but it became apparent fairly quickly that it didn't change his fundamental sense of self so I'm still calling him a him), and Tail Caribou's broken leg was healed. Apparently the caribou like to start off with their slaves in pristine condition. Good to know.

I sat down to rest, and used my hands to free my legs and wings after using my TK to untie my hands. The rune circlet wasn't binding my power anymore, but I still couldn't use much magic at once and my own self-healing only goes so far. Chaos doesn't heal (not well anyway); to fully heal myself I'd have to do the same thing I did to the unicorn horns, transform my injured body parts into my uninjured body parts. The chaos going on a short distance away jumped into my attention, now that I could see magic and feel disharmony again, and it was still beautiful, but all the mana lines I'd torn was empty so the unicorns and reindeer no longer had access to ambient magic to use. A few of the more powerful unicorns were trying anyway, struggling to bring up magic out of the leyline pull... but let's put it this way, Celestia and Luna have a hard time casting up here. Even down south as far as the Crystal Heart, unicorn magic would be significantly impaired if it weren't for the Crystal Heart amplifying and broadcasting harmonic magic the way Yggsdrasil used to.

The pegasi, griffins, earth ponies and the yak (I assumed the pattern of "very large, magic focused on physical strength" I was seeing was the yak) were still in fighting form, and I could still see the dragon rampaging, trying to get to Dainn as he and a bunch of other caribou tried to revert her to her original size by pure magical force, and I had hopes that the dire wolf was still around though her patterns weren't enough different from griffins for me to make her out at this distance. Once the caribou subdued the dragon, though, it was going to be only a matter of time before they recaptured all my lovely ladies, because the caribou had free magic and the slaves did not. (Specialized magic, such as what pegasi use to control the weather or what gives earth ponies their strength, isn't affected by the pull. Only free magic, what unicorns and reindeer and caribou use to cast spells and employ distance telekinesis.)

Next to me, the caribou I'd tossed in the rune circle were shouting imprecations at me, demanding that I turn them back, calling me a traitor to malehood, et cetera. I turned and looked at them, blowing on my claws. "How strange. You two don't seem to realize that you've both just changed sides."

"I'll never betray the king!" one of them shouted. (After they were transformed, I lost track of which one had been Head and which one had been Tail.)

"So you're saying you still believe in male dominance, and that the proper destiny of anyone with a female body is to be a sex toy?" I shrugged. "To each their own. I am irresistible, after all, so I suppose it doesn't surprise me that you'd like me to have my way with you. Tell you what, do you prefer rough or gentle? I'm sensitive to your beliefs, truly, so I promise I'll do the opposite of whatever you'd prefer. Shall I pick out a sparkly red collar for you, too?"

The caribou in question went pale under his fur as he realized the implications of his transformation. I smiled at him. With lots and lots of teeth. "Oh, come on, now. You and I both know that I'm the most powerful male creature on the planet, and that therefore you, as a female, should be falling at my feet and begging to worship me. You can't have it both ways. Either you can get over here and commence with the worship... or you can recognize that the ideology of enslaving females is maybe not in your best interest right now. I don't really care which; I'm fond of sex, but I'm even more fond of chaos, unless my sex partners are really hot and I'm sorry to say, neither of you are all that."
"The king won't stand for this," he said weakly. "This isn't legitimate... I wasn't supposed to be turned into a female! I was loyal!"

"You think the king will care? Or any of your former pals?"

The other caribou spoke up, as he got to his feet. "No. No, he won't. Don't you remember when Oleg tricked Lord Vanayar into a transformation circle, enslaved him, and took his house and his slaves for himself? His Majesty just laughed about that, and when Vanayar tried to complain about it His Majesty had her personally." What he actually said was much less euphemistic than that. In fact, you can take as a given that any time I repeat dialogue from the caribou in which they could have said something obscene and crude, they probably did and I'm paraphrasing. "If you're transformed into a female, you were weak and you deserve to be female."

"But we were trying to turn this creature, on the orders of the king!"

"Doesn't matter." The more sensible caribou looked up at me. "If you're giving us the option of joining the riot you started, I'll take it."

Ah, hypocrisy and self interest. It's perfectly reasonable to believe that half the planet deserves to be degraded and used for your personal pleasure, until you're part of that half, and then all of a sudden it isn't okay anymore. On the other hand, the alternative's sheer idiocy. Who'd ever want to be a slave? Even creatures who like to play that way as a game generally have a safeword or something. Admittedly, power is an aphrodisiac and I've seen plenty of creatures overwhelmed with the desire to have me take them and do whatever I want to them, because I'm powerful – dear Queen Fantasia, recently, for starters – but generally speaking they were profoundly disappointed and tried to get me to let them go when I decided that what I wanted was to make them dress as clowns and chase them around on a unicycle, rather than taking them to my bed. No one's actually ever serious about the whole "do as you will with me", and if you're a slave, you don't get to change your mind. I've been a slave, in a circus where they treated me as an animal. It's not fun.

"Delightful. I'm sure that if you demonstrate sufficient murderous intent toward your former colleagues, the reindeer will take you in, if they win and make it home." I turned to the other one. "So what's it going to be? Join your pal there on the ladies' side of the revolution, kill your former pals before they have a chance to rape you, and win a place among the reindeer, maybe? Or stay here and wear a pretty red collar with a leash around your neck? Because after what you said about your plans for me, if you've decided to be a slave then you're going to be my slave and we can get you started with your new job duties right now." I think by now I probably don't have to point out that I was bluffing, and had no intention of doing anything sexual with any caribou, ever, but I'm going to point it out anyway. But if he said he wanted to be a slave, I really would have collared him and then tossed him into the middle of the battle, because there are actually male caribou who are so sex-obsessed they'll take time on the battlefield to rape a victim who isn't fighting back, and either he'd serve as a distraction for the more easily distracted enemy soldiers or he'd come to his senses and fight.

He scowled at me. "I won't be the slave of a monster like you. I'll fight."

"Good for you!" I re-adjusted both of their armor so it fit their new bodies better. "Come along, then. We've got chaos to make!"

"You're going the wrong way," one of them said.

I pointed at the wall I was headed toward. "Chaos. Thataway. You think I can't tell?"

"Maybe if you were flying above the keep, but the corridors don't go that way. And you're headed
straight for a wall, so unless you're going to go through it—" I put my now-intangible paw through the wall and looked back at them, raising my eyebrow. "—okay then."

"Don't think I won't notice if you never show up to the fight," I said. "Or that you'll manage to cast a glamour magic powerful enough to hide the fact that you're female now."

"We can't cast glamour magics. Females can't use their horns to do magic."

"You can, actually, I just need to make sure there's some ambient magic available for you. By the time you catch up I'm sure there'll be some."

Then I went through the wall, because I was impatient, and because after being prevented from using any of my magic at all I was desperate to feel chaos flowing through my paws again. There might not have been a whole lot of ambient magic for reindeer and unicorns and transformed caribou to use, but there was a lot of chaos.

I floated through several walls and back to the main action, where I just had to stop and stare at all the wonderful chaos like a foal who's just been dropped inside the door of the biggest candy store he's ever seen. This is probably why the dire wolf was able to rip my throat out.

As usual, I was prepared – when nothing's binding my magic, I turn myself into magic the moment I'm threatened, if not sooner, so what she actually got was a mouthful of ketchup and fuzzy mold. It hurt, but only for a split second before I was no longer genuinely corporeal. As she spat out the moldy ketchup, hacking, I resolidified. "How rude! And to think I complimented your singing!"

Hooves bucked me in the back, hard, sending me flying forward, but I forgot to fall on my face and ended up just levitating. I rolled onto my back in mid-air and sat up. My attacker was one of my shaved lady reindeer pals. The ingratitude, I tell you. "Ladies, ladies, I'm on your side! As fun as I find the senseless violence, shouldn't you be attacking caribou and not me?"

"On our side?" the wolf snarled.

"Of course you're on our side. That's why you made us serve you as blankets, and kneel to be your footstools," the reindeer said sarcastically. "I haven't been a slave for so long as to forget what males on our side actually act like, and your behavior is not it."

"So you would have preferred to march through the frozen tundra, pulling a sled, without my body heat to keep you warm? Or my magic?"

She blinked at me. "You said you wanted us to keep you warm."

"I lied. I do that a lot when I'm starting a revolution." I turned to the wolf. "And what's your problem? I even gave you a shot at Dainn!"

"You made me sing that disgusting song," she growled.

"Hey, I didn't write the lyrics. And it's not as if you or any of the caribou knew the words to 'I'm a Little Teapot.'" I leaned forward, speaking directly into her face while still levitating. "More importantly... you're a black collar. She's a black collar. All of you except the dragon are black collars. If I hadn't pretended I wanted you here to humiliate you, the caribou wouldn't have gone along with it. But I wasn't going to get a revolution started with nothing but red collars."

The reindeer scowled. "You came here to overthrow the caribou?"
"Out of the goodness of your heart," the dire wolf said. I never knew a growl could be so sarcastic.

"Yes. Out of my deep, noble, pure love of Chaos. I decided to overthrow the caribou because they're so eminently overthrow-able, with so many angry slaves embedded in their population. I'm bored! Equestria is so perfect and harmonious it makes me want to toss my cookies!" I flung some cookies into the air. "But they've got weapons that work against me, that I can't fight back against. The caribou don't. Their society might be more disharmonious, but in the end that just means more vulnerable to a really sweet rebel uprising."

The two slaves looked at each other. I sweetened the pot. "In any case, whether or not you're still mad at me about a little bit of humiliation I inflicted on you for a greater cause... you need me."

"For what, aside from the taste of your blood on my teeth?"

"Wolfy, my dear, don't posture like that. We both know my blood tasted like moldy ketchup and nearly made you upchuck your lunch. No, what you need me for is magic. Particularly you, milady."

I bowed to the reindeer.

"I cannot use chaos magic."

"Don't scowl like that, your face will freeze that way. Of course you can't use chaos magic; that's a monopoly I'm keeping. But the entire reason the caribou can do magic and you can't is that there's a web of rune-engraved artificial ley lines all over this city, carrying misery and suffering to Dainn to be converted into magic, and back out again to every caribou who's sworn loyalty to him. If I break those lines, it hurts Dainn and spills raw magic out that you and all the other reindeer and unicorns here can use. Win-win!"

The two looked at each other, then back at me. "You... are the reason we had magic, briefly?"

"And I could be the reason you have more magic, less briefly. Which to be honest you're gonna need, because I am counting caribou here, and sisters, I don't like your odds." I wasn't actually counting caribou, but even someone as math-challenged as I am could tell there were a lot more caribou than there were former slaves fighting back. The problem was there were far, far more red collars than black collars because of all the sacrificed cows, and there was no way I could tell which red collars had adopted subservience out of expediency and which ones were genuinely loyal, like the dragon. So I was limited to the black collars, and all of them were prisoners brought in from outside or transformed former caribou, meaning there were a lot less of them than there were able-bodied adult male caribou, all of whom were trained warriors.

"If he's the reason we had magic, we need to ally with him, Signi," the reindeer said. "And... he didn't molest us on the way here. He was insulting and he humiliated us but he's telling the truth; we were much warmer being forced to serve as his blankets than we would have been if the caribou had made us pull the sleigh."

The dire wolf's eyes focused on mine, a stare of challenge. I met her stare, grinning. She was the one who broke the gaze, looking down in the universal wolf acknowledgement of "yeah, I admit it, you could probably kick my rump." "I reserve judgement, but for now, I accept you as comrade," she said grudgingly.

"Great! So, comrades, you wouldn't mind watching my back here, would you? I have to concentrate to focus on breaking the mana lines, which makes me a bit less capable of noticing a caribou with a cudgel sneaking up on me."

"I am a warrior, not a guardsbitch!" Signi snarled. "I do not stand and watch; I tear out the throats of
"So would you mind tearing out the throat of any bull who comes after me? Pretty please with a cherry on top? Wait, you're a wolf. How about a raw, bloody steak on top?"

"Are you always so irritating?"

"What part of Spirit of Chaos and Disharmony did you miss?"

"I will defend you," the reindeer said. "I have weapons." She did. She'd obviously stolen them off some fallen caribou, because otherwise she was still shaved and completely naked. "But until you do as you've promised, I have no magic. So my fighting prowess is... limited, at the moment."

"Don't worry, your friendly neighborhood Discord will fix you right up. Just give me a moment."

I sat down, because using a lot of magic, like what I'd need to sever a line near Dainn, would drain me and make me dizzy – even with the glorious chaos of battle all around me, I was still a lot more limited than I'd like. (You may ask yourself, if I was so limited, why was I wasting my energy on silly jokes like manifesting cookies to toss in the air? And the answer is, firstly, illusions don't take all that much out of me and they weren't real cookies, and secondly... I kept forgetting. Use your magic every fifteen seconds for a thousand years and then tell me how easy it is for you to remember not to do it.) I didn't close my eyes, but I retreated into my chaos perceptions, into the patterns all around me and their wonderfully unpredictable flux and flow. I could see the lines radiating from Dainn, and the branching and re-branching they did before touching caribou.

They were strong, thick trunk lines, unbreakable by most standards, but there's nothing in this world that chaos cannot break. It just takes time. Dainn had reinforced them, which would have been adorable coming from someone who hadn't drugged me, tricked me into thinking we were friends while I was drugged, and then tried to steal my magic when I came to my senses. It wasn't going to stop me; he'd done the magical equivalent of building a tall fence around an oak tree in hopes that that would stop a hurricane from knocking it over. Not that I was feeling much like a hurricane at the moment, but I'd feel a lot better once I broke one of those lines and drank from it like a fire hose. The first one I broke was hard, very hard. After drinking my fill from the magic as it sprayed everywhere from the broken line, though, the next one was a lot easier. Then I went for another one after that, and I'd have gotten to four if the dragon hadn't charged at me.

They might have had better luck taking me by surprise if they'd sent a dozen caribou to overpower my protectors (despite what she'd said, Signi the wolf was, in fact, helping her pal to guard me); in the midst of so much lovely chaos I might miss the detail that a group of random dull patterns representing caribou were moving toward me amidst all the other caribou patterns. But it's hard to miss a dragon. I wanted to try to go for that last line, but as badflank as a dire wolf might be, she'd be no match for the dragon, so I snapped back to full focus to protect myself. Amazingly, Reindeer Lady and Signi were still holding the line, standing between me and the charging dragon. Signi's fur was raised so high she looked like she'd been hit by lightning and the reindeer's spear trembled slightly in her hooves, but they were still there. I snapped my fingers and put them behind me. "Thanks, gals, I'll take it from here. Go have fun," I said, and then the dragon was in my face.

"YOU HURT THIS SLAVE'S MASTER! THIS SLAVE KILLS YOU!" she boomed – large dragons are loud even when they're growling – and then fired off a huge ball of flame breath. Of course I wasn't there anymore; I was on her back.

"Yee-haw! Giddyup!" I shouted, popping reins and a bridle, with bit, into existence. I expected her to flame the bit out of existence within seconds, or bite through it, but she did neither; she threw her
head back and forth trying to shake me, but didn't do anything to free herself of the bridle. After a moment I realized – she might now be a large ferocious dragon, but she'd spent her life being a sex slave. She was probably trained to not bite or flame anything that was put in her mouth.

She thrashed around for a while, charging through the fracas, throwing her head back and forth to try to throw me off, but this wasn't my first dragon rodeo and she wasn't moving nearly fast enough to have any hope of tossing me. Several caribou fired off spells at me, and a few big spenders even fired bolts of magic – most caribou can't access enough magic to feel safe doing that, but I suppose they open up the reserves when there's a battle on. I was having so much fun, I almost didn't notice the dragon racing toward a hastily constructed rune circle that a few caribou mages were hurriedly putting into place. Almost.

As she leapt for the rune circle, I leapt off of her. The caribou mages attacked me, trying to force me into the circle, first with telekinesis and then when that failed laughably they tried to teleport it to where I was, which turned out to be very, very bad for one of them because at the moment the teleport began I swapped his place with my own. The rune circle presumably was the same one my two transformed caribou pals had tried to toss me into before – not literally the same circle, but the same runes, because it had the same effect. It turned the mage female and drained all of his magic. He screamed, and then huddled in the center of the circle, assuming I guess that none of the others could go in there after him without risking their own magic and masculinity. Despite having been a caribou his entire life, he seemed to have forgotten that caribou have telekinesis. One of his former comrades levitated him out of there, ripped his clothes off him as he shrieked and begged, and chained him to what had been one of the tall torch poles. The torch had been knocked off but the pole itself was still standing.

So I switched places with him again, batted my eyes seductively at the caribou mage that had captured and tied up his former comrade. When the fellow backed up frantically, realizing a moment too late that I wasn't his intended victim, I grabbed him with my tail, gave him a big wet smooch on the cheek, and flung him toward the rune circle. Another one of the mages saved him by blasting the circle apart, breaking at least one of the runes, so when the one I'd grabbed landed, nothing happened to him.

This gave me an idea, though. I reversed entropy on the broken rune, re-assembling it. This didn't reactivate the circle; rune circles actually do need to be circles. Remember what I said about order magic? These stupid things actually care what shape they're arranged in. But I did turn the runes into stone tiles, lifted them off the ground with my own telekinesis, assembled them into a circle, and then teleported them around a caribou who had pinned down a pegasus and was trying to break her wings. Simultaneously I turned the ground under the caribou and pegasus into a cloud, and lifted it rapidly. Clouds are solid to pegasi and griffins, intangible to almost everyone else. She was levitated up by the cloud that went right through her captor, and less than a second later the rune circle came into existence around the guy, turned him female, and drained his magic.

Oh, I had so much fun with that thing. I was trying to avoid collateral damage; I didn't know if it could drain a yak or a griffin, because they don't have any general magic, and I was sure it'd be bad for a pony, so unless the pony was a pegasus and I could pull that stunt with the levitating cloud, I couldn't surround any of my black collars with it. But I popped it into existence around more than half a dozen caribou before somebull had the presence of mind to smash a few of the tiles. I thought about running my entropy reversal again to fix the tiles so I could keep using my toy, but then Dainn himself engaged me, which is not to say that he offered to marry me.

Dainn's a nasty customer. I used to fight Celestia and Luna, back in the day, and that was fun. Almost like a dance. There were times when they were going all-out against me, trying their best to kill me, before they'd figured out that they couldn't, and that added spice to the game – just because I
don't stay dead doesn't mean I particularly like having to make my way back to the land of the living, and there's always that tiny possibility that I'd lose myself over there and never make it back. So there were real stakes involved, not like my fights with, well, anyone else. But even when they were trying to kill me, they were elegant, beautiful, their speed and grace in battle almost a poem embodied.

That... was not Dainn. He was just brutal. His magic was like a wall, if walls moved incredibly fast, and it was nothing but force. Kinetic, heat, electric... nothing exotic like a transformation spell or a reforming spell or even an attempted teleport. Just walls of energy, slamming into me. Teleporting didn't help much; he seemed to be able to generate those walls from virtually anywhere, and his ability to figure out where I'd just gone was almost as good as Winnie's had been. It didn't take me long to figure out why; he was connected to the webs of force all throughout his land, and of course they were the most tightly concentrated right around him, and being what I am I cause a disturbance in magic wherever I go. So anywhere that I teleported that was anywhere near Dainn, he'd feel me reappear before he could see me.

In Equestria, this trick wouldn't have worked either; a wall of magical force can't actually do damage to me if I've transformed myself into magic. No matter how tightly woven, all magic is made up of threads, lines of force, and there are always gaps in the weave that I can flow through. But here in the North, when I turned myself to magic I felt the drain pull on me harder than ever, trying to tear my entire essence apart and drain me into the ley lines going toward the north pole. It made me a lot weaker to turn myself into magic, because I had to expend so much energy just in holding myself together. When I was made of flesh rather than magic, though, I was breakable. Admittedly, as flexible as I am, it's hard to break me... but bruises are surprisingly easy to generate.

Meanwhile, the dragon was back, jumping in to assist her master. She actually managed to flame me to ash, an impressive feat considering that she was a greed-grown teenager and not an ancient beast like Winnie. Technically you could even say that that killed me, because I wasn't made of magic at the time... but there was so much ambient chaos on the battlefield, it took me mere seconds to transform the ash back into a draconequus who happened to be me, incidentally healing all the bruises and contusions Dainn had left on me thus far.

Occupying the attention of Dainn and the dragon was good for my revolution, here; they were easily the biggest single threats on the battlefield. Occupying their attention by being their punching bag, however, wasn't really how I wanted to spend my day. So I sank into the ground, transforming into magic for just moments before reconstructing the earth around me to be a small cave I could safely float in while I got my breath.

I had to think about the long range here. I'd done Dainn some damage, but I was no closer to even finding my Element of Cruelty, let alone prying it loose from him, than I'd been. I would have thought he'd be wearing it, but I may have mentioned that caribou styles of dress and seating leave little to the imagination, and I hadn't seen it. Maybe embedded in his skin, like Greed had been in Winnie's scales? Except Winnie was centuries old and Dainn was not, and caribou skin does not work at all like dragon scales. My troops were very highly motivated, but they were wearing out – a diet nutritionally balanced for the rigors of being a sex slave doesn't actually leave a lot of energy for combat. And I myself wasn't powerful enough to tip the balance all by myself – not here, not so close to the pole.

I needed an ace. So I wrote a letter.

"Dear Princess Luna, help, I am a unicorn slave of the caribou, my friends and I are fighting back and there's a battle but we're losing, please save us—Dreamy Star"

I had no idea what the names of any of the unicorns were. Dreamy Star was made up to catch Luna's
sympathies – with a name associated with stars and dreams, she'd most likely be a moon-aligned unicorn, if she existed, which she probably didn't. (I can't rule out that any of the slaves might be named Dreamy Star, but it seemed unlikely.) It was late at night; the midnight sun still shone on the horizon, barely brighter than a particularly brilliant moon, but the real moon was high in the sky. Celestia would be asleep. And Luna is easy to enrage, especially if her anger is righteous, and Luna fantasizes about being a warrior princess once again, a great hero in her own right, dispatching evil. And Luna used to hate the caribou, and probably still does, and I'm sure it chafes at her that Celestia's realpolitik keeps her from going into battle against them just on the principle of the thing.

I sent it to her with the unicorn version of the dragonfire spell, the one that Celestia would use to transmit letters to Spike. This was a very, very high-order spell, very difficult for all but the most powerful of unicorns to learn. It's part of dragons' native magic, so they have little trouble with it. I'm no unicorn, but I can make my magic behave just harmonically enough to fool ponies, at least if they're not studying it with the attention to detail a forensic thaumatologist would use.

With any luck, I thought, Luna wouldn't wait for morning and the calmer, more practical mind of her sister to prevail; she'd seize the chance to be a hero herself. And she'd bring an army. Because Luna isn't stupid, and she knows the pole affects her as badly as it affects any other magic-using pony.

Then I reappeared with a case of whooping flank so bad I probably should have been in quarantine. (Ed. note: I did not get this joke. Apparently three hundred years ago Princess Celestia's push for vaccinations eliminated the disease whooping cough, and Discord missed the fact that nopony is going to have any idea what that is anymore unless they actually research it, like I had to. -ed.) I drew in a big, juicy draught of chaos, and sent it back out again in full measure. Chaos is the gift that keeps on giving, and I had a lot to give. I created swarms – literally, hundreds – of magical sprites, most of them variations on four basic types, and set them loose.

See, friendly chaos isn't. Starfire and Starswirl used to say that to me when I asked why I couldn't go out with the soldiers to fight the dragons – there were unicorn battlemages going, why not me? They told me about the concept of friendly fire, and the saying "friendly fire isn't", as in, it isn't friendly. Since it is very likely that you, my reader, are a sheltered pony who knows pretty much nothing about military terminology, "friendly fire" means arrows or magical blasts coming from your own side. Chaos has a similar problem – it doesn't discriminate between friend or foe. But over the years, I've learned tricks to help keep my chaos focused on the targets I want to go after. It was easier with dragons, who are a completely separate species. Caribou and reindeer are the same species, so I had only two distinguishing features to work with. The enemy were all male, whereas all of the slaves were at least physiologically female, and the enemy were all tuned to the web of magic that ran through Dainn, deriving their magic from that, whereas no one on my side was.

Naturally, being the mature, restrained and tasteful draconequus that I am, I did not take the opportunity to build weapons out of rude and childish jokes about male anatomy. I also have a bridge in Manehattan that I can sell to you very affordably, and some lovely condos in the Hayseed Swamps.

My favorites were the nutcrackers. As I'm sure every pony who's ever celebrated Hearth's Warming is aware, a nutcracker is a stylized wooden pony with a jaw that can move up and down on a lever, powerful enough to crack a walnut. (They have simple tool versions as well, but what fun is that?) My nutcrackers had articulated joints and necks. They were a little taller than a newborn foal, but shaped like adult ponies. As is traditional, they were all earth ponies. And when they wandered under a caribou/reindeer or behind one, they were designed to look up and check for nuts, and if they found any, rear up, grab on with their cracking jaws, and get cracking.

The fireflies and lightning bugs were designed to home in on the frequency of caribou magic, which
meant that they'd be attracted to caribou antlers. Antlers themselves aren't sensitive, so I made the fireflies and lightning bugs attracted strongly to the base of the antlers. As you can probably guess, my fireflies and lightning bugs were not harmless, pretty bioluminescent insects, but were instead lighting up via fire and lightning. Not incredibly powerful or intense bursts of fire or electricity, admittedly, but they were landing on caribou heads, or flying straight at their eyes. (I considered using twittermites, but I couldn't make a destructive pun out of those.)

The accoutresprites were more of a giant nuisance than anything else. Where parasprites will eat any food item, unless Twilight Sparkle has reprogrammed them to eat everything that isn't food (tell me, why does that mare consider herself an enemy of chaos, again?), my accoutresprites were programmed to eat clothing, and only clothing. Slaves of the caribou are naked; caribou themselves are not. It was warm enough in the keep that being stripped naked by a swarm of adorable bugs wouldn't do any real physical harm to my opponents, but caribou think of nakedness as feminine and weak, and impose it on their slaves for exactly that reason. They never strip fully naked in public even when engaged in the public sex they're so fond of. Besides, a caribou who was distracted trying to drive off a swarm of bugs would be an open target for my rioting troops.

And the trouser snakes. Let's just say they don't like rivals, and leave the rest of their function to your imagination.

This is actually my forte, one of my more unique talents. With unicorns, animating more than 10 objects at once with spellwork is virtually impossible. Rarity can manipulate far more than that with telekinesis, but she's not performing spells. And Sombra was able to cast one single type of spell to animate far more than 10 objects at a time, as long as those objects were all black crystals growing out of solid objects or appearing in air. (Sombra is not technically a unicorn, but I count alicorns, umbra and horned seaponies as unicorns when I'm talking about their magical abilities.) Luna can get up to 10 or so individual animated sprites, and in dreams, she can pull off a lot more, but she uses a trick – instead of a thousand spells to make a thousand soldiers appear that will fight monsters in a foal's dream, she'll cast one spell that says "INSERT A THOUSAND SOLDIERS HERE, FOAL BRAIN" and the foal's brain will add the soldiers and animate them more or less independently, to the extent that the foal can imagine soldiers.

But I'm the Master of Chaos. When I animate a magical sprite, I don't usually continue to control it. I give it some parameters that it will try to fulfill until the spell wears off, and then it'll go do those things more or less independently. My power levels allow me to animate hundreds of them (sometimes even thousands, like I did with the skeletons of my kind), and because I don't have to concentrate on controlling them, I can send them all off to do whatever it is I wanted them to do. Unicorn mages have to stand there and trade magical blasts at each other. I can put a huge number of attacks into a batch and spawn them all at once.

Due to the leyline pull, this was exhausting, so after dumping my giant can of chaos all over the battlefield, I sat down against a wall to get my breath, and watch the lovely havoc I'd just unleashed. None of the effects I'd generated could kill a caribou, but after one of my trouser snakes got hold of them they might wish they were dead, and of course a caribou trying to protect his family jewels from my nutcrackers was an easier target for a slave to attack.

And they needed the edge. The yak was down. The griffin's wings were broken. Most of the unicorns were either unconscious or huddling behind a pile of rubble, where they would blast any caribou who tried to invade their territory, but they plainly didn't have the strength for offensive maneuvers. All but one of the pegasi were still in good shape, since there are no flyers among the caribou (the flying reindeer are very heavily matriarchal, with the medic/warriors who charge onto a battlefield to rescue the fallen being almost entirely comprised of cows. No male flying reindeer would have ever joined a movement in favor of patriarchy and male dominance, not when their most
important culture heroes are the Valkyrior that held off demons from Tartarus. Though they don't call it Tartarus, they call it Hel; like the lands of Underhill, there are many gates to Tartarus, scattered across the world, and they all have different names.) The earth pony seemed to have endless stamina, and I wasn't shocked – the earth has plenty of magic running through it up here. The ley lines pull the magic out of the ambient and force it underground. Signi the wolf was still tearing out the occasional throat, though more of her attacks were non-fatal damage to legs now; she might be tiring, unable to continue to leap at throats, but she was still in the game. And while many reindeer had fallen, many more were still fighting. The two caribou I'd turned were also in good fighting shape. But enough black collars were down that my remaining forces were hard pressed.

Also, Dainn had called in reinforcements from all over the city. Which meant fresh new caribou to fight my tired rebels. So if it wasn't for my several hundred animated chaos sprites, we'd probably have been up a creek.

As soon as I broke another of Dainn's magical threads, though, he focused on me – and what was worse, he focused his army on me. "The draconequus is responsible for these attacks! Take him down, and these creatures will cease to be!" This wasn't even slightly true – only Matrisse or the Tree of Harmony can take me out in a way that reverses my magic. If the caribou did manage to beat me, my sprites would have continued to run amuck. But they didn't know that – quite possibly even Dainn believed it – so they were, shall we say, inspired in their attacks on me by the belief that they'd spare themselves a visit from my nutcrackers or trouser snakes if they defeated me. Thus I ended up at the center of all the caribou mages, and quite a few of the non-mage soldiers, all trying to kill me, harm me, or restrain or drain my power.

If it weren't for the fact that I can actually split my attention in something like 50 directions I'd probably have been a goner. The mages had rune attacks that would actually work. Not all of them were as large and complex as the power drain attack, either. One had a few simple runes that caused confusion. (Generally I don't know what runes do until they activate; symbolic magic's not my thing. Causing confusion, however, is very much my thing, so I was able to tell.) Not a particularly deadly attack, but a moment of confusion on my part could have been it for me, with so many attacking me at once. There were other relatively small, simple rune spells they were trying to cast on me, none of them fatal in themselves, all of them capable of weakening me during a fight where I needed every resource I had. Dainn was in the mix as well. Because his own bulls were all around me, he couldn't use his force walls; he'd narrowed his magical attacks down to be sharp and precise, like lances, but those are much less likely to hit me, given the speed I can dodge at.

This might have been a wonderful opportunity for my rebel troops to charge in and do some serious damage, since all of the caribou were either focusing on me, or focusing on protecting the ones who were focusing on me from my chaos sprites. Too bad they didn't see it that way. They all went and huddled together behind barricades – since the dragon's sudden growth had destroyed a lot of the walls and ceiling, there was rubble everywhere. I suppose it wasn't a terrible idea – they were exhausted, and if the enemy are willing to ignore you in favor of attacking the heavy hitter, taking the opportunity to bandage wounds and rest a bit was probably better for them than continuing the attack. They had no way of knowing what the pole was doing to my magic – as far as anyone here was able to see, I must have still seemed to be the godlike near-omnipotent master of chaos I usually am.

But I wasn't.

In Equestria, none of this would have tired me in the slightest, but then in Equestria I would have been able to wrap this up in moments, so there wouldn't even have been the opportunity to get tired. Here, though, every time I used my magic, I lost two or three times as much magic as I'd actually used. Every time I turned into magic I felt the pull trying to rip me apart and drag me underground.
Every time I didn't turn into magic, I had to constantly dodge, because there were maybe fifty or so mages and soldiers directly attacking me. And fifty individuals all attacking one individual isn't nearly as chaotic as fifty individuals attacking twenty individuals, and since my chaos sprites can't really think for themselves, caribou being methodical about it could in fact destroy them... which also fed me less chaos than there'd been before. My source of easily reachable ambient magic was running out, so I had to draw more and more on my personal stores, and that made me vulnerable to the drain.

So I was actually getting tired.

Under normal circumstances I wouldn't have kept fighting. I'm not the sort to fight to the bitter end unless I have no choice; run away and live to fight another day, that's my motto. And the Element of Cruelty really wasn't that important. I had three Elements in play and one in hand that I hadn't assigned yet. Honestly I probably can get by with just those. There wasn't any good reason to risk my life to get this thing.

And yet for some reason I didn't want to retreat. I was angry, on a personal level, that Dainn had tried to brainwash me. Being personally angry had kept me in the fight against Winnie for longer than I'd normally have stayed, after all. But I don't think that would have been enough, either, not as I was actually getting worn out. This was just like that fight with Gilda where she wouldn't let me quit when I got tired. I don't get tired easily or often – sleepy, yes, but tiring out in the middle of a fight? That's rare. I think the last time that happened, before my battles with Anon started, was the time I fought intruders from another reality by hitting them with the sun. The sun is heavy when you pull it off course. So it's not a thing I have a lot of experience with or resistance to, and therefore, not a thing I'd normally try to push through even if I'm angry.

No, the honest truth is that I kept fighting because this felt right. This felt like the kind of fight I was meant for, not these stupid skirmishes with Anon that have nothing to do with my true purpose. Here I was, starting a slave rebellion and overthrowing an evil tyrannical government. I was causing wonderful chaos and helping those who actively sought anarchy to achieve it. My gifts are so rarely appreciated. I remember thinking during this fight that of course I'd been defeated by Harmony, because I could see now that my centuries of unrule over Equestria had been entirely the wrong thing to do. I had fought to maintain a stable state of chaos. Chaos isn't supposed to be stable! Chaos is transient, and that's part of its beauty! Sure, as soon as the dust settled the anarchy I was establishing here would give way to a new government, but I didn't have to stick around for that – I could go find another corrupt and evil tyranny to overthrow. Just because Equestria happens to have a benevolent immortal dictator doesn't mean that every other nation in the world can say the same.

I wanted to defeat Dainn and the caribou, not because I'd get my Element of Cruelty, but because I was morally opposed to everything they believed in and I desperately wanted to prove that chaos and freedom were strong enough to defeat rigid structure and tyranny. I wanted to free the slaves, all the slaves, not just the ones here but the red collars and the ones out in the outpost villages and the ones in the rest of the city, because slavery is as far from chaos as you can get. And I wanted to make sure no new slaves could be taken, and no young caribou heifers would be lobotomized anymore, and that an entire ideology based on rigidly defining living, sapient beings based on one binary categorization scheme would topple and restore complexity and variety. This was what I was for. I hadn't felt this passionate about a battle since the time I'd traveled in time back to Anugypt, after Set's death and before the coronation of the next chaos avatar, and helped Baast overthrow Anubis and free him from Apep's corruption. Maybe that particular revolution should have clued me in (or the fact that maintaining Equestria in a state of constant chaos actually bored me frequently enough that I had to go world-walking or time-traveling.) But better late than never, right?

So I kept fighting, even though I should have run away. I was getting battered, bruised and bloody,
and the slaves were all still huddling behind their barricades, expecting me to defeat the caribou for them, and it wasn't going to happen. And Luna hadn't shown up yet, and I had no idea if she even would. I was staying mostly airborne, after expanding my wings, because the caribou couldn't fly, but Dainn was riding on the back of the dragon and she totally could. She hadn't had wings to clip, as an adolescent sex slave, so they'd never clipped them, and after I'd caused her to grow, the wings had popped out, and somehow now she could fly. Unlike pegasi and griffins (and draconequi), dragon flight seems to be inborn knowledge that's activated with the appearance of wings. Probably Rainbow Dash could have flown rings around her, but then Rainbow Dash probably wouldn't have had several dozen caribou all attacking her specifically.

One of Dainn's bolts tore through me, actually ripping a hole straight through my abdomen. The force of it flung me to the ground near the barricades. I healed it without turning into magic, which meant it didn't really heal perfectly, but I felt like I was too exhausted to risk turning into magic – I might not be able to resist the pull tearing me apart, if I did.

I could hear the slaves whispering to each other behind the barricades, wondering if I was really in as bad shape as I looked like I was. I screamed to them, "Help me!" And then immediately had to fly up again as a dozen spears got chucked my way. Rather than turning myself to magic, I turned the spears themselves into jello, so they did no damage when they hit. Except that I was tired enough that the transformation wasn't complete, so some splinters ended up lodged fairly deep in my skin. And then I had to dodge dragon flame, and I wasn't quite fast enough, so my side got badly singed. And then another spear actually managed to plant itself in my back, piercing and pinning one of my wings. I was staying up on wingpower, not magical levitation, so of course I fell.

Before I could do more than push out the spear and heal the injury, they were surrounding me. Dainn was glaring down at me from dragonback. "You betrayed us," he said. "We gave you hospitality, and you attacked us. Why?"

I shrugged. "Don't ask chaos 'why'. You usually won't understand the answer."

"A pity. I'd have liked to know why, before we kill you." His eyes narrowed. "I will grant you this much, you've proven to be far too dangerous an opponent to enslave. As valuable as your magic would have been to us, you're too formidable to leave alive."

I was so tired. I'd gotten used enough to the drain that the repeated pulls on my magic had stopped making me swoon or get dizzy some time ago, but I'd been drained so much by now I felt hollow. Realistically I probably still had more magical reserves than Twilight Sparkle does on a good day, but unicorn-level is so much lower than what I'm used to that it felt like I had almost nothing left. The thought occurred to me that if I didn't muster up the strength to do something, they might kill me. If I don't turn myself into magic, my body actually can be killed – Celestia and Luna did it twice before they figured out it wouldn't stick, and there were a couple of others as well. Also the time I did it to myself so I could go after Celestia after something I did accidentally killed her. And if I was killed here, after I'd been drained so low, I might not be able to prevent my magic from being torn from me. The entire reason I can come back from the dead and no one else can is that I'm the only creature I know of who can hold onto magic after death. If I died and then lost my magic I was fairly sure I wasn't going to come back.

If this was some sort of fictional story, I'm sure that at this dramatic moment, where I was actually facing death for once, Luna and her troops would suddenly appear and save the day, or at least provide enough of a distraction for me to do it. Unfortunately for me, I don't have the reality-warping ability of turning my life into a dramatic story. I summoned up enough strength to shield myself from most of the attacks, turning spears into corn puffs shaped like spears, making rune inscriptions into melting chocolate so most of the rune would be lost, reflecting several bolts of magic. Enough of the
magic attacks did hit, though, that I ended up badly injured, more holes in me than in a Changeling's legs. I screamed, and tried to teleport, and for once in my life failed completely. I moved about three inches to the left.

Then Signi the dire wolf leapt out from behind the enclosure, snarling, and went directly for Dainn's throat, landing on the dragon's head and running along her spiny neck at Dainn, who was perched further up. She launched herself at him, and he blasted her. Dire wolves have no general magic and no real defense against it. The bolt tore her head mostly off her neck and threw her body to the rubble on the ground, where her corpse skidded over to one of the barricades, leaving a bloody smear behind her.

I'd called for help, and she was the only one who came. She gave her life, trying to protect me. No one had ever done that. I'm sure my mother would have, if she'd been faced with the choice, but she didn't die to try to save me – she died because I disrupted the ritual she was involved in. I'm sure Celestia and Luna might have, way back when, but they didn't die to save me – they ran away after I was already dead, saving themselves because they couldn't save me. Maybe King Starfire would have, but I wasn't his biological son so maybe not, and he didn't die to save me – he died fighting to save his entire nation. I was less at risk from the dragons than any of the ponies were. Maybe Starswirl would have, and there were certainly times he risked something to save me, like the time he and the earth pony with the hourglass cutie mark turned up in my time machine to rescue me when I was floating in space after hitting extradimensional invaders with the sun. (I still don't know how they got my time machine.) But he never was in a situation where he had to risk his life for mine, so it never came up. And no one else I've met in my millennia of existence would have likely taken any risk whatsoever to save me.

When Winnie had nearly killed me, the rage had been cold, calculating, and I'd opened the floodgates on purpose, deliberately tapping the well of dark magic to fuel myself. This was nothing like that. I just lost it. I saw the only creature who'd ever risked their life to save mine die for it, tossed aside ignominiously like a dirty dishrag, and I saw red.

I was just enough in control of myself that the volcano that erupted directly under Dainn and his dragon didn't spit lava out in the direction of the slaves behind the makeshift barriers.

Several of the caribou who had been ranged around me died instantly, screaming as they were engulfed by lava. The dragon sank like, well, like a pony who can't swim dropped in a swimming pool. Ponies are naturally buoyant in water, and dragons are naturally buoyant in lava, but that didn't mean she wouldn't sink, it just meant she'd bob back up to the top in moments. Moments that hopefully would engulf and kill the caribou riding her. Lava can't kill Celestia (I've seen dragons try), but it's not because she's an alicorn, it's because she's specifically the alicorn of the Sun, and you can't burn her no matter how much heat you generate. Alicorn-level beings don't naturally have the ability to resist lava.

Unfortunately, what Dainn did have was the ability to self-levitate. This is a rare skill among unicorns, and I've never understood why – surely, if you were surrounded by pegasi and you didn't have wings, you'd try to use magic to fly instead? But then, I was born with both wings and magic, so I suppose I can't really comprehend. He leapt off the dragon's back and flew up into the air, outrunning the gouts of lava spurting out of the top of the volcano. As is usual with volcanos, the air itself was turning foul, but because I had friendlies to worry about, I turned the sulfur and other noxious gases into clouds of perfume – very, very annoying, but the only creature whose sense of smell had been good enough that the perfume could have impaired her had just died, and perfume won't kill anypony. Or anydeer, either.
I started throwing things at him. Things like napalm pie and molten tar balls and miniature glass
tornados. He dodged, of course. The dragon came back up, sputtering, and shook herself, sending
lava spraying all over. The reindeer and unicorns behind the barriers managed to block any of the
lava from landing on the troops sheltering back there, but not all of the caribou were as quick. She
didn't even seem to notice, immediately taking flight to join her master. I didn't hold back. Dragons
are physically much tougher than caribou. None of the things I was throwing at Dainn could kill or
even seriously hurt a dragon; a napalm pie is no more of a problem to a dragon than a banana cream
one would have been, and while I have torn dragons apart with glass storms, I'd made the glass
super-dense lead crystal and spun the tornados at near-sonic speed. I wasn't doing that here.

Dainn shouted at me, as he threw bolts of force back at me, "You granted us our power! You gave
us the gift that made caribou society possible! Why do you turn on us now?"

I was beyond even pretending to make sense. "He had no right!" I screamed back. "It's mine, mine!
He had no right to give you my things!" Of course Mayhem had the right, because he'd been the
chaos avatar when he'd handed over the Element of Cruelty. But apparently when I'm driven over
the edge by rage and no longer have any kind of filter on my mouth, I have daddy issues. Good to
know.

"Who had no right?"

"He was a foul, disgusting rapist and so are you! Of course he liked you, but I have no respect for
you! I killed him, and I'll see you dead!" I was 2 when Mayhem committed suicide by pony. I
obviously didn't kill him, except metaphorically; he knew I would exist, due to the time travel
incident, and he knew that my existence as chaos avatar meant he was dead. So he told me, laughing,
that now that he knew, he just wouldn't have a child. I'd cease to exist and he'd never die. Yet here I
am, existing, and he's dead. He created me so that he could die. I don't think I was thinking clearly
enough to have such a sophisticated chain of symbolism in my head, though; I think I was irrational
enough that in that moment I actually believed I had killed Mayhem by becoming the chaos avatar,
or maybe by being born. I'm not sure, honestly.

"Who are you talking about?"

"Give It To ME or I'll rip It off Your corpse!"

Behind me, the caribou mages froze over the volcano. The rebels finally decided to join the party
again, now that the volcano had decimated the ranks of the caribou. After the attacks from my chaos
sprites, the caribou still alive and fighting were greatly weakened... but this didn't matter, because
reinforcements for the caribou had arrived. I flung buckets of burning oil and made the sky rain
knives down on them, which took some of them out, but they were fresh troops with access to
magic, and every time I turned my attention away from Dainn and his dragon to focus on the caribou
soldiers, I got hurt.

Rationally, the cause had just turned hopeless. With reinforcements in the mix and me riding on one
last wave of rage, burning myself out, there wasn't any realistic chance of us winning anymore. I
didn't care. If I killed Dainn, or weakened him enough to break his protective spells and find the
Element of Cruelty, I won anyway, even if all the slaves died in battle. None of them seemed
inclined to surrender, anyway. Any who'd have been so inclined would probably have been broken
into red collars a long time ago. Once Dainn had gone into the air, I'd figured out from the way the
web of magic shifted that yes, the Element was on his person... somewhere. I'd get it off him or die
trying.

And then the sky went dim.
I looked up. The moon was blocked by a black mass, rapidly descending. Even in the dim lighting provided by the moon and the midnight sun, I was very quickly able to make out that that was a mass of ponies.

There were maybe a couple of hundred thestrals. I didn't know Luna even had that many in her guard. There were dark-coated pegasi (or pegasi wearing Guard armor that glamoured them to look dark-coated.) There were unicorns in Guard armor, some solar, some lunar, riding on clouds being towed by pegasi – so at least some of them were battlemages with cloudwalking spells. There were earth ponies in harnesses, being carried by two pegasi at once. And at the front of the pack, of course, was Luna. With a funny-looking pink blob, like a balloon, bobbing somewhere above her back, but I assumed that was some kind of magic weapon.

Dainn took advantage of my distraction. He flung a chain at me that wound around my body and tightened, too fast and hard for me to use my own magic to fend it off. Every bone below the middle of my neck shattered, and what felt like almost all of them drove themselves into my lungs, except for the ones that were stabbing my innards in other locations. I fell. Facing death from blood loss, major trauma and asphyxiation, I turned myself to magic and let the chains fall through me, but I'd burned so much energy in my rage, I barely had the strength to hold myself together. When I turned myself back, I was done, at least for the moment. I lay against a pile of rubble, without the strength to make myself do anything else.

But by this point, I didn't need to do anything else. Not just yet.

"CARIBOU!" Luna shouted, and I hope I am getting the Royal Canterlot Voice across here by the size of the print. (Ed. note: No, sorry, I sized it down to normal capital letters to fit on the page better. Discord was taking up about half a page with every line of Princess Luna's. -ed) "YOU CRAVEN, MONSTROUS BEASTS, FILIACIDAL CREATURES, AFFRONT TO NATURE, HARMONY AND ALL GOODNESS IN THE UNIVERSE! TOO LONG HAVE WE ALLOWED YOU TO EXIST, A BLOT OF FOULNESS ON THE GLORIOUS HARMONY OF OUR WORLD! NO MORE! TODAY, YOU END! THUS SPEAKS LUNA, DIARCH OF EQUESTRIA, PRINCESS OF DARKNESS, NIGHT AND WAR!"

That got everyone's attention.

A ragged cheer went up from the surviving, conscious slaves, but it wasn't loud enough to drown the cacophony of misogynistic jeering from the caribou. From the clouds they rode on, several unicorns fired missiles, downward. An object flung with great force by magic will travel downward with much greater speed and force than if it's just dropped, and it looked as if the things they were throwing were explosives, because there were some really nice booms when they hit. Already the chaos was perking me up, restoring me like rain does a wilted flower.

The unicorns wouldn't have much magic to work with down here – they were probably drawing on their personal stores, and that wasn't going to last. So as a token of my gratitude for the gift of chaos, I used what little strength I had left to grab at another one of Dainn's lines and snap it. He screamed and fell, but the dragon caught him easily. The reindeer and unicorns down here were energized, though, their morale improved by Luna's arrival and now ambient magic made available for them to use.

Then Luna – who was deflecting all the magical attacks flung at her with contemptuous ease, though I knew she had to have started to feel the drain too – descended far enough that I could see what was on her back. I slapped myself on the forehead, felt the situation needed a few more facepalms, and slapped myself a few more times, then banged my head on the rubble. But only once, because that hurt.
That hadn't been a pink balloon. That had been the head of Anon, who was bundled in dark winter gear. Inexplicably, he didn't have a hat, but his hair was dark, so when he'd been high in the sky all I'd been able to make out against the blackness (and Luna's head in the way) had been his pale pink face.

Of course Anon was here to save the day and "protect" Luna. Of course.

This day just couldn't get any better, could it.
I watched as Anon jumped off Luna's back and ran to the aid of one of the pony mares who was still fighting. Reindeer weren't even in the cartoon, so I wondered if he actually knew the reindeer were female, or how to tell the difference. (Earlier in the day you could have told by who wasn't wearing clothes, but after I unleashed the accoutresprites there were a lot of naked caribou. And caribou, like most males on our planet, have sheaths, so you kind of have to study their rear ends to see what kind of equipment they have. I couldn't see Anon doing that.) I should have realized he'd come with Luna. I'd thought, because her dream got rid of him so she could be the big hero and defeat the caribou, that she wouldn't bring him with her, especially since he isn't nocturnal so she'd have had to make a special trip to wake him up and get him from Ponyville. But of course she had to go get him because of course he couldn't let someone else go be a hero on their own, without him. Oh, and predictably, as soon as he showed up to "save" her, the mare – who'd held her own through this entire long battle – somehow lost the will to fight and just cowered on the floor as Anon sliced and diced her assailant. Admittedly, this wasn't all that different from the hiding behind barricades and letting me take the brunt of all the caribou attacking that all the slaves had done earlier... except she wasn't safe behind a barricade. She'd been in the middle of combat.

It would have been nice to believe that maybe, just maybe, Anon's abilities might be blunted up here where magic is weak. I mean, I've never actually detected magic coming from him, but I was able to find faint signs of a spell on Cheese Louise Sandwich once I knew he'd been transformed, so I knew he was using magic, of some sort, not just randomly breaking the universe. But I should have known better. His magic, whatever it is, has to be more like pegasus flight magic than unicorn magic, some sort of specialized magic rather than general, and that meant he could still use it, just like the pegasi could still fly. At least so far he didn't seem to be impairing the performance of the ponies, but give it time, I figured.

My primary concern wasn't actually with getting skewered by his overgrown table knife, though I was exhausted and really, really low on magic and so maybe that should have been more of a concern than it was. What I feared far more was that he'd somehow force me into allying with Dainn, that his belief that I am the Big Bad behind everything would overwrite my own beliefs and my memories of why this fight got started in the first place. I didn't actually know if he was that powerful – after all, I'd just spent hours fighting the damn caribou, and I didn't know if Anon really could overwrite memories of stuff that just happened. But I didn't want to find out, either. So I needed to get out ahead of this one.

I summoned cotton candy clouds, small ones, that would be attracted to the frequency of caribou mana and then rain acid. There were far, far fewer of them than there had been of any of my other chaos sprites (all of which were gone by now, which was just as well as most of Luna's forces
The idea wasn't to seriously affect the course of the battle, but to let Anon know both that I was here and that I was fighting the caribou. I didn't honestly expect that just attacking caribou with my magic would convince him, or that he'd even notice who I was attacking, but I hoped it would help me convince him, because I was absolutely terrified that if I couldn't convince him that we were on the same side in this fight, his magic would force me onto the other side. (In this case the cotton candy was deliberate. I think. I wanted something that would signal my presence to a fairly stupid human who I know thinks I use cotton candy clouds all the time.)

Sure enough, after gutting two caribou who were attacking one of the few remaining unicorn slaves (I'd say "fighting her" except that she, too, dropped and cowered as soon as Anon got close, so by the time he actually reached her they were just attacking), he saw the clouds, looked around, saw me, and headed straight for me, sword held in front of his face and body as he ran. On his world, I had seen a lot of heroes of animated movies from their equivalent of Neighpon charge through a battlefield in exactly the same way. It looked to me like it ran a serious risk of taking his own face off if he tripped, but then, his power would never allow that to happen, so I guess he could get away with it.

As he approached, I turned the ground under his feet to ice, covered with a thick layer of olive oil. His footgear was well designed, probably a Rarity special, lined with fur and with good rubber soles for traction. But no amount of traction is going to help when you're running full tilt over greasy, oiled ice. Of course he skidded. He was supposed to fall, but he leaned forward into the skid, sliding forward. Which meant that the small piece of rubble I levitated from one of the nearby piles and dropped directly in his path, while his eyes were on me, did what I'd hoped the slippery ice would do on its own. Anon hit the rock, slipped backward, and fell on his butt.

I held out my paw toward him in a "stop right there" gesture, while there was still three pony lengths between us and I was prepared to levitate fast. "Hold up there," I said. "I'm on your side this time."

He glared at me from the floor. "Right. I'm sure you are."

"I am! Did you notice who my clouds were raining on?"

"I don't think chocolate milk is much of a weapon," he sneered.

I giggled. "You thought that was chocolate milk? Oh, I hate to disabuse you... if I didn't tell you, you might drink it! But no. It's acid. Specially formulated to eat antlers, not unicorn horns, and homing in on caribou only. You see? I'm helping!"

Anon got to his feet. "Yeah, because you're totally the kind of guy who wants to free slaves and overthrow evil. Pull the other one, Discord."

I glared at him. "You know what the most chaotic part of slavery is?"

"No, and I don't care."

"The part where the slaves rise up and throw down their masters in bloody revolution." I smirked. "I'm not here to overthrow evil. I'm here to overthrow order. The caribou society is very, very rigid, very controlled. Everyone but the king has to obey someone. No chaos in it at all."

"Except for the sex slavery!"

"What? That's not chaotic either. All the victims are female, all the masters are male. The roles are absolutely rigid and allow no deviation." I shuddered. "Disgusting. So you see, I hate these guys as much as you do—"
"I doubt that."

"—and besides, I'm the one who invited Luna to this party."

"So it's a trap!"

He started to lunge forward, but had forgotten about my slippery ice. Anon barely managed to keep his balance. "Thank you, Admiral Ackbar," I said. (It's a reference to a famous movie from his world. Don't ask.) "No, it's not a trap. I called in reinforcements because the slaves here were losing, and if they lose, then Order wins. The king re-establishes control, the caribou take their slaves home and punish them for trying to rise up, and everything goes on exactly the way it did before. Besides, Luna's been hankering to take out the caribou for a long time, and it's almost her birthday! I missed over a thousand of them, so I figured I needed to give her something big!" I was up in the air, so I wouldn't slip on the ice myself. Here I leaned forward, almost planning to talk directly into his face, before I remembered the sword and drew back. "Look. I hate you and I want you dead and I'm aware the feeling is entirely mutual, but if we don't do one of those villain teams up with the hero against the greater threat plots, we're both going to lose, and I'm sorry to say that you're going to lose a lot harder than me. I can teleport out of here any time I want, but Luna isn't powerful enough to do that."

"Bullshit. She teleported all of us here."

"Ask her about the North Pole and what it does to magic to be anywhere near it. Or ask any unicorn, because by now they're all feeling it." I lounged back on air. The levitation was actually a huge effort in my weakened state, but easier than hovering with wings would have been, and I couldn't let him see my weakness. "Or hey, they're busy not dying, so I'll tell you. The North Pole drags magic down into the earth. The unicorns, and the reindeer, and Luna, are all running on fumes. Luna's got more juice than any of the others, but you may have noticed she's fighting their king. And his pet dragon. And the caribou aren't impaired, because they generate their own magic from the suffering of their slaves, and channel it through their king. So he's basically as powerful as an alicorn and unlike Luna, his supply won't run out."

Anon scowled. "Why should I trust you?"

"Because! Don't take my word for it, ask any of those fine unicorn fellows you came with if maybe magic is being just a tad unresponsive? If they're struggling just a bit to pull anything out of the ether?" I put an expression of mock solicitousness on my face. "Your little toothpick there will work just fine, but you're only one man, and unlike the Changelings, caribou are warriors. They know how to fight guys with swords. They do it all the time. And if Luna runs out of magic... well. This society is based on hatred of females, and the desire to degrade them. What do you think they think of our lovely alicorn princesses? And what do you think they'll do to one of them if they manage to defeat her?"

"I will never let that happen!"

"That's the spirit! But she's up in the air, fighting a guy on a dragon, and you've got quite a lot of caribou between you and her position. She needs magic to defend herself. And I have the unique ability of being able to break the caribou's magic free from the channels King Dainn has it trapped in, making it available to everypony who can use it."

His eyes narrowed. "And you expect me to believe you'd use it to help Luna?"

I chortled. "To help Luna? No. Not in and of herself. But to help the ponies overthrow the caribou and destroy their society utterly, plunging this entire part of the world into beautiful anarchy?"
Absolutely. And even with all these ponies here... the caribou have a nation. This is just the guys available to fight in this city. They've put out the call; reinforcements will be arriving from all over. If Luna and her unicorns can't use magic and the caribou can, the slave revolt will fail and the caribou will win, and I for one don't intend to let that happen. I've got too much invested in this now. I clenched a paw, my anger getting the better of me for a moment. (No, I really didn't mean to show any of my true feelings to Anon. This is the kind of thing he does.)

"You do, huh?" Abruptly Anon smirked, and lowered his sword. "You look pretty beaten up, Discord. The caribou getting the better of you? Let me guess, this thing with the magic draining into the ground affects you too."

I hadn't really expected Anon to be smart enough to pick that up. "Hardly!" I snorted. "This is just dust. A battle kicks up a lot of dust, you know!"

"Uh-huh." His smirk got bigger. "So if you've been fighting these guys... I see the cotton candy clouds. Where's the floating pies? The mutated animals? The chocolate milk? None of this seems like your kind of chaos."

I scowled at him. "Chaos has many faces. What part of 'bloody revolution' did you not understand?"

"Yeah, the chaos of war. Got it. So in addition to being a tyrant scumbag who plays murderous games, sometimes you drop the games entirely and just turn into a killer."

"And you don't?" I landed. The levitation was getting to be untenable. The arrival of the ponies was generating some nice chaos, but I was going to have to lie still and bask in it for a bit before I could recover from everything I'd been through recently. "Listen, we're not here to be friends. Or even allies, except this one time. You don't like me, I don't like you, but neither of us like the caribou and neither of us are going to beat them if we waste our energy fighting each other. So, truce?"

"You're just going to stab me in the back when I least expect it."

"The only one of us who's done any stabbing is you," I retorted. "Besides, if you expect it all the time, then when would I have a chance?"

Anon shook his head. "There's more to this. You didn't just come up here to cause chaos. I know you've got an ulterior motive."

I smirked at him. "Maybe I do. But whether I do or don't, you still need me, or Luna... well, I don't think I need to go into any details on what will happen to her if she loses to Dainn because she ran out of magic, do I?"

"And I said, I'd protect her."

"And I said, you'd do a much better job at that if you focused on doing it and not on attacking me. You haven't even noticed that she's wearing out, have you?"

He spun around. "Shit!" Luna was, indeed, faltering against Dainn. Anon turned back to me. "If you can do something to give her more power, prove it. Do it, now."

I glared at him. "And how do I know you won't backstab me? This technique leaves me somewhat... vulnerable. If I concentrate on freeing magic with you right in front of me, I won't be able to defend myself."

"Fine. I give my word as the Element of Protection that I won't attack you as long as you're helping Princess Luna. But if you don't demonstrate to me that you can help her, right now..." I really did not
like the grin slowly growing on his face. "You're injured, Discord. I can see it. If you can't help her, then now is the perfect time to take you out."

I sighed. "You give your word?"

"I already said I would."

He was right. I'd stopped levitating because I was too tired. If he remembered that he needed to move like a skater, not like a runner, he could have that sword in my guts in an instant, and after the failure of my ability to teleport earlier, I couldn't trust that I could teleport away. Hanging my life on the question of whether or not Anon believed he had to keep his word to me seemed like a terrible idea, though. "Keep in mind, if you kill me here, there is no one else with the power to free the magic so the ponies can use it."

"Yeah yeah, you said that already. Do it now! Unless you can't, in which case..." He drew a finger across his throat dramatically.

I wasn't particularly afraid, mainly because I was too tired to really be afraid, but I can't say I wasn't a bit nervous as I focused in on one of Dainn's magic channels. By now I'd done this enough that I could still see the real world around me – my concentration didn't have to be total – so I could keep an eye on Anon. He was tapping his foot impatiently.

One of Dainn's force bolts got through Luna's shield. She cried out and reared backward, returning fire, but weakly. The blow would heal almost instantly – there are perks to being an alicorn – but the fact that Dainn had gotten through her shield at all was a problem. Not that Anon would ever acknowledge or believe it, but I didn't want to see Luna hurt. That counterbalanced my irritation with Anon and my desire to drag my hoof on this just because I don't like being told what to do, or being threatened. Anon wasn't what was important here. So with all the strength I had left, I pulled.

I ended up snapping three of them in rapid succession. If Dainn's dragon hadn't dodged and taken one of Luna's attacks for him, Luna would probably have blasted him good – he was doubled over on the dragon's back, screaming, the entire time I was breaking the lines. Immediately unicorn horns grew brighter and their own force bolts were visibly stronger. I turned back to Anon, panting. "You see? Is that good enough for you?"

He scowled at me again. "Fine. But I'll be watching you."

At this point a caribou charged up behind him. Without even particularly looking at the guy, Anon spun around, swung his sword in a manner that should have made it fly out of his hand, and cleaved the caribou's head off like he was a half-melted chocolate bunny rabbit for a Winter Wrap-Up party.

I swallowed. Somehow I'd managed to forget exactly how dangerous Anon was; my reaction to him threatening to kill me had been more "Oh, not this again" than actual fear. "Don't you have a princess to protect?" I asked him.

"I'm watching you," he said again, and left finally, charging back into the battle.

I retreated to the edge of the room to watch the show, and stay as far away from Anon as possible. For once, though, the idiot's I Am The Hero Of The Story field effect was working in my favor. He was chivalrously defending slaves who'd fallen or who were about to fall in battle (which was all of them because they stopped fighting whenever he came near, providing him the opportunity to rescue them), providing support to Luna's troops, and murdering more caribou than I've have thought any one being could manage. Their attacks barely touched him; he dodged with such ease it made him look like a video game character being played by someone who'd played the same game hundreds of
times and knew exactly what moves the game would make. The caribou had yet more reinforcements coming in, but Anon was killing nearly every caribou he encountered. As for the ponies, I'd feared that his presence might cause all of the rest of Luna's troops to suddenly collapse into helpless idiocy and need Anon to save them, but all I saw was evidence that caribou were more experienced in actual warfare than ponies, which was hardly something Anon made up. The ponies were performing about as well as you'd expect from creatures who've drilled a lot, and received training, but never actually been in real combat. Perhaps Anon's Big Hero powers didn't need to make the pony troops helpless and incompetent, as long as he got to look like a Big Hero anyway.

The chaos was restoring my strength, allowing me to heal myself. I broke a few more of Dainn's lines. By now I'd cut enough of them that the caribou were faltering slightly, though the fact that so many of them were dead or unconscious meant that the remaining magic being shared amongst the ones that were left was still almost up to their usual amounts. I decided to spend a bit of the magic I was gaining back from the chaos to heal the yak, who'd been battered until she was close to death, because I wanted to see how Anon handled a female slave who was decidedly unsexy by human standards and who was kind of a huge lumbering monster of brutal flank-kicking. Would he treat her as an enemy? Ignore her? Show the same "chivalry" toward her that he did toward the smaller, more feminine-looking slaves? (Not that the yak wasn't very sexy, by yak standards, but yak standards and human standards aren't even in the same city.)

I got no results. She healed, but she didn't wake up. Belatedly I realized she might have suffered brain damage; I can't heal that one in a creature I don't know. Either that or she was simply too exhausted to rouse even with her injuries healed. Or, Anon's powers wouldn't let her wake up and enter the battle because a female slave to be rescued had to be feminine and sexy, and the yak fighting like a berserker would break his brain. I contemplated turning one of the reindeer into a yak, but she'd still behave like a reindeer, rather than a rampaging berserker lunatic, so that really wouldn't get me the answers I wanted.

While I was focusing on the yak, Anon managed to do something downright ridiculous and impossible (yes, so what else is new?). Luna lifted him onto her back with her magic, while fighting Dainn, and he leapt from Luna's back to the back of the dragon. I thought he was going to attack Dainn from there, which would have ended wonderfully either way and I was so looking forward to it. But no. He attacked the dragon, while on her back, by hacking at one of her wings. A normal sword won't even cause a full-grown dragon to get itchy, and while the dragon was merely a young adolescent, her greed-growth had left her as fully armored as any dragon who actually lived through the hundred years it would take to get to that stage. Anon successfully hacked through the bone connecting the wing to her back, cutting it in half and making the entire wing list uselessly off her back, which made her plummet. His stupidity effect was in full force; Dainn did nothing to stop him, concentrating entirely on Luna. Having fought Dainn and his dragon earlier, I knew this wasn't normal. The guy was probably the most virulent misogynist on the planet, but he was too good of a tactician to overlook the advantage his dragon gave him, and when I'd attacked her with spells intended to confuse her, give her vertigo, or turn her wings backward, Dainn had shielded her. (Which was only possible, most likely, because with the density of the magical webs around him, he could actually sense my chaos magic incoming. Chaos magic isn't visible force bolts, so normally no one can shield against it.) Whereas when Anon started hacking at his ride's wings, Dainn completely ignored him until the dragon suddenly fell.

And then Dainn still ignored his injured dragon, using his self-levitation to continue fighting Luna, while Anon continued to attack the grounded dragon. I was watching the entire battle, not just Anon – Luna and Dainn's fight in particular interested me – but for obvious reasons I had to keep an eye on Anon. And that was how I realized, horrified, that Anon's attacks were seriously threatening her life. She'd shrugged off every attack I'd thrown at Dainn, but I knew from harsh personal experience that Anon's sword cuts through dragon scales like they're made of jelly.
I knew Anon wouldn't listen to me. So I teleported over to where Luna was fighting Dainn and got in between them, redirecting their force blasts around me. "Excuse me, can I cut in?" I said, grabbed Luna by the forehooves (she was flying in a more or less reared position, so her forehooves were up) and teleporting straight up a considerable distance, far enough that the air was thin. Alicorns can easily reach this height on their own, so she could fly back without problems, but it would take her a while and she'd be winded.

"Monster! Let me go! I knew you were lying when Anon said you'd told him you were on our side in this battle!"

"I am on your side, and you know I could do a lot worse to you than teleporting you out of a battle to have a chat," I said. "Anon's going to kill that dragon. You need to stop him! He's not going to listen to me."

"And why should I stop him?" she sneered. "Any who aid the caribou deserve their fate."

What I wanted to say was, "Because she's an enslaved, brainwashed child who's been greed-grown." What I actually said was, "Anon can't kill a dragon!"

"Oh, I am sure that he can." Below, Anon leapt out of the way of a blast of fire. Dainn, who had finally noticed his dragon in trouble, was also attacking, but using very visible lance-style force bolts that Anon dodged with ease, not the walls of force he'd directed at me.

"I know he can," I said, exasperated. "But he shouldn't." My mind formed the words "She's just a kid!" My lips actually spoke "He's supposed to be a hero!"

Horror dawned over me as I realized Anon's powers were preventing me from telling Luna why Anon shouldn't kill the enslaved dragon. Of course, Anon would feel bad about himself if he learned he was trying to slice and dice a female child who'd been enslaved and brainwashed. And Anon's powers wouldn't let me say anything that might make him uncomfortable about himself to anyone who might take it back to him.

"Sometimes the role of a hero is to kill the deserving," Luna said. Which wasn't totally out of character for Warrior Princess Luna, but Luna had never before been bloodthirsty for its own sake; if she could defeat a foe without killing them, she'd always take that option. The dragon couldn't fly anymore, and was badly wounded from Anon's attacks. He didn't need to kill her. In her own right mind, Luna would have seen this. "What devious plot do you need that dragon for, Discord? The fact that you want it spared makes me all the more certain that Anon should kill it."

"She's female," I said, trying desperately to convey the concept that the dragon was a slave, since Anon's power wouldn't let me say so outright.

"And a female who turns on her own sex to curry the favor of brutish, evil males is a traitor and deserves to share their fate."

I'd called the dragonet "Dainn's pet dragon" to Anon, being flippan as usual. I hadn't made it clear that she was a slave. And her red collar was gone, destroyed when she'd grown to massive size, so there was no visible marker that she was a slave. Anon had no respect for Spike and came from a world where humans were celebrated as heroes for killing dragons. And he was a savage, bloodthirsty waste of an existence. And I'd known all this before interacting with him.

I tried again. "Where do you think she came from? Luna, you know as well as I do what dragons up here are like!"
What I was trying to get at was that they were eggs, or younglings. Of course Luna took it wrong. "Anarchic, brutish creatures with none of the sophistication of those who live under the rule of order. I can see why you would prefer them. But why would you care for the fate of a dragon? As I recall, you have killed more than your share."

I blinked. "You remember that?"

"The wholesale slaughter of dragons at your hooves is difficult to forget."

"But let me guess, you've forgotten that I did that to save Equestria from them, haven't you."

"Am I expected to give you kudos for ‘protecting’ ponies because you saw us as your own possessions and you are too selfish to share?"

I didn't want to get into the same argument with her that I'd gotten into with Celestia. It still hurt to remember how Celestia had forgotten me; I knew Luna must have too, but as long as I didn't confront her too hard about it, I wouldn't have proof shoved in my face. "Look, that dragon is not what she seems to be. If you let Anon kill her, I promise, someday you'll regret it."

"More empty threats, Discord?" she sneered.

I snapped my talon, returning her to the battle, practically on top of Anon, so he had to check himself hard to avoid hitting her. I really shouldn't have – if he hadn't been able to pull his blow in time, he might have actually killed Luna, and she didn't deserve that for being a mind-controlled victim of his power. But I was furious. And feeling just a trifle guilty, because I could have prevented this if I'd thought to tell Anon the dragon was a slave child before he started whaling on her. I don't do well with feeling guilty; it happens so rarely that I don't really know how to handle it.

I tried teleporting the dragon. No go. My abilities were weakened, dragons have a certain degree of resistance to my magic, and she was huge. I mean, I've teleported an entire hive of Changelings, twice, and that was much bigger than a single dragon, but I didn't try to do it near the North Pole. I tried teleporting Anon, but his Element of Protection seemed to get in the way. I thought about going down there and mind-controlling the dragon to revert her to her true form, so it would be obvious that she was a child. Then I thought about Anon's sword, and the caribou he'd been cutting up like butter, and I couldn't make myself do it. Hey, I've never pretended to be a self-sacrificial hero. Getting between Anon and one of his targets when he hates me and has shown himself more than willing to kill me in horrible ways to protect anyone is not my thing. Even if I'm the one who put her in danger by triggering her greed-growth and then not telling a murderous maniac that she was a kid.

And since then, I've thought of a thousand things I could have done or said that I didn't think of doing or saying at the time. It doesn't matter. It's far, far too difficult for me to alter the past, and if I can't change it then why dwell on it? Except I do.

I floated in the air, helplessly, paralyzed by my own fear, as Anon hacked a child to death. Greed growth is permanent if something isn't done to actively revert it. She didn't turn back to her true form when she was dead. She remained a giant dead dragon corpse.

Then, once she was dead, Dainn bothered to pay attention. "That was my property you've destroyed," I heard him say to Anon. "I'll make you pay for that."

Because being angry at myself just made me feel awful and being angry at Anon, while fairly normal for me, makes me feel helpless because there's nothing I can do to him directly, I decided to be angry at Dainn, who after all was the one who found her egg, enslaved her, brainwashed her, most assuredly raped her repeatedly despite the fact that she was a child, quite possibly from before the
age when even the caribou are willing to start sexually abusing their own daughters, and then
couldn't be bothered to protect her after bringing her into battle. I couldn't do anything to Anon, but I
could hurt Dainn.

By now the number of lines was reduced to the point where I could disentangle them, moving them
aside, untying them from the twisted knots they were in, and forcing several of them to split in the
middle before rejoining a different line, making them thinner and easier to break. And then I started
breaking them. One by one, over and over. Dainn's bulls jumped in to protect him, but any of them
who were connected to him by one of the lines I broke would lose his own magic. Anon, though
vastly outnumbered, had only taken a single injury – one thin bleeding line on his cheekbone, not
even deep enough to scar most likely. He and Luna were having a hard time getting through Dainn's
ring of protectors, though, just because there were so many of them.

I stopped when I'd broken enough of them that I could clearly see the magic of my Element of
Cruelty, blazing through Dainn's body. It seemed to be on his underside someplace. Glamored for
invisibility, no doubt, since I'd seen far more of his underside than I'd wanted to. And then I waited.
Dainn recovered, faster than he should have, and started attacking Luna with everything he had,
while Anon sliced up his troops. Despite the large quantity of magic I'd just dumped into the
environment, Luna was faltering. I recognized the signs. Luna should be winning – Dainn had been
fighting a lot longer than she had, so he should be paying a penalty for exhaustion, or for having to
use magic to hold off exhaustion. But Anon was in the mix, so of course, Luna couldn't win on her
own.

And then Anon's sword started breaking more of the magical connections.

I stared. There are only two powers in our world that have meta-magic abilities of that nature: me,
and Matrisse. But the Element of Protection wasn't a shard of Matrisse; I'd have noticed. It had
always felt like badly distorted Harmony, not like Order. But Harmony didn't have that kind of
power.

I didn't have time to dwell on it much. Anon's attack forced Dainn to the ground. Dainn met him,
sword to sword (while an exhausted Luna simply hovered in the air, doing nothing but panting), and
for a while they seemed evenly matched. Except that in an actual swordfight, without Anon's powers
involved, ponies (or humans, or caribou) wouldn't be trading lengthy sentences describing everything
they hate about each other, because they wouldn't have enough air to do it. It was extremely
repetitive, and none of it was actually particularly witty. Here's a representative sample:

DAINN: You hoof-licking cuckold! You take orders from the alicorn bitches! You aren't even
worthy to be called a male!

ANON: No, true manhood means respect for women! I follow the princesses because they represent
goodness and harmony! You're disgusting; I'll bet you couldn't even get a woman to fuck you if you
didn't enslave them and give them no choice!

DAINN: As if it matters what a female chooses! We caribou will rise up and dominate this world,
and your {sexist insult redacted} princesses will {description of degrading sexual activity redacted}!

ANON: Women deserve to be protected and loved, not abused and enslaved! As long as real men
like me exist, evil like yours will never win!

This was kind of hilarious given what Anon has done to the Bearers, but then I know he thinks he's a
big heroic hero who respects mares and wins their love because he's just so awesome, not because
his powers are screwing with their heads. Still, I suppose I'll give him one thing: as poisonous as his
fantasies have been, they could have been worse. If he'd been the kind of human man who thought
like Dainn did, our world would have been much, much worse off.

They traded blows for a while. Dainn even seemed to be winning, slowly. And then, more or less exactly as I suspected, Anon managed to slice off Dainn's sword hoof, with sword in it.

Being a caribou, not a human, Dainn didn't need a hoof to fight with a sword – he had magic. But instead of using his magic to grab his sword back, he screamed and staggered backward, falling to the ground and pressing the leg that had been severed up into his chest to stanch the bleeding. Anon, grinning, wound up for the death blow, but didn't deliver it. "I guess this proves which of us is the real man," he gloated. "I just wish I wasn't sworn to a warrior's code of honor. You deserve a much, much more horrible end than a quick swipe with my blade, but I could never face the mares who love me again if I torture a stallion to death, no matter how badly he deserves it. So I regret it, and you don't deserve it... but I'll make your death quick."

This whole time, Dainn had simply cowered on the ground, and none of his caribou who were still alive came to his aid. Even I had almost forgotten why I was here, more mesmerized by the battle itself (and all the ways in which it had been absurd) than by any pathway to my objectives. As soon as Anon raised the blade high, though, I remembered why I didn't want Anon to kill Dainn.

Dainn screamed. "No! Have mercy! Please!"

"What mercy did you give any of your victims?" Anon said, and since he had to refrain from killing the guy long enough to make his heroic retort, he gave me time to act.

I teleported directly behind Dainn. "Scusi!" I said. "Sorry to spoil a tender moment, but I need to borrow this fellow!"

Grabbing Dainn by the antlers, I teleported straight up again, high enough that it would take Luna some time to get up here, particularly in her exhausted state, particularly if she had a human riding on her back. Below me I dimly heard Anon flinging curses at me, but I ignored that. I flung Dainn down against nothing, holding him in place with a gravity shelf. "You have something that belongs to me," I growled.

Dainn was obviously in a great deal of pain, but he managed to snarl at me. "What you gave us cannot be taken back. It's ours now." As I'd suspected, the begging and pleading had been Anon's influence; without Anon in front of him, he faced his death with defiance and rage. Not that that was going to do him any good. Creatures who snarl in the face of death, unbowed, end up every bit as dead as the cowards who beg. If not moreso. I thought of Signi. What good had her courage done her?

"I don't think so." I could see my Element now. He'd lost enough magic that the glamor wasn't holding. It was on his body, on his lower belly, right above his penile sheath, and nothing was visibly holding it onto him. The Element of Cruelty is an amulet showing a hoof pressing a head to the ground; it had adapted to the caribou, shaping the hoof as a caribou hoof and the head as an antlerless female caribou head.

He laughed, a short, pained sound. "It's mystically bonded to the body of the caribou king. No one may touch it but my heir, and only after my death. All the work you've done here, Chaos Lord, all the betrayals you've committed, and you still lose."

"Betrayals?" I snorted. "That rune circle was old. Very old. And much, much too large to be just for caribou... but much too small to be for dragons, and there's not a lot in between. Either you were planning on going down to Giraffica near Zebrica and capturing and enslaving some male giraffes... or you built that thing for me, a long time ago. Didn't you."
"We haven't forgotten!" he snarled suddenly. "You gave us this gift! And then you sided with the alicorn bitches when we tried to invade Equestria! You betrayed us! Yes, we've planned for centuries to avenge that slight, someday, but you're the one who began it! You gave us gifts and then you turned from us!"

I laughed heartily. "You poor stupid dupe. If you weren't so vile I'd feel sorry for you." I leaned down into his face. "First of all, whatever made you think that Chaos would ever take your side? Or really, any side at all? And secondly... I never gave you anything. That was my father, you mindless moron, and I inherited his power after the mother of those alicorn 'bitches' killed him, and frankly I just wish she'd done it sooner and more painfully. And even he didn't give you the Element of Cruelty because he approved of you. He did it because you'd keep the reindeer in check, because their power is based on worldwide Harmony."

"But... no! Our legends say—"

"Either Mayhem lied to you, which he probably did, or your legends are self-aggrandizing lies, which I'm sure they are. Or both. Both is good. I'm going with both." I held him up with my lion paw around his neck. The entire time he was trying desperately to cast, but at this close range, every time I saw magic swell in his antlers I shoved it back into the line it came from and then broke the line, and devoured all the energy released for myself. "You weren't anything to him. You weren't the special chosen ones of the Chaos Lord. You were a tool, a means to an end, and he laughed behind your back at you and your stupid fancies of male dominance, as if your philosophies haven't been slowly driving your species to extinction for two thousand years."

He managed to scowl, though the pain he was trying to suppress was obviously close to overwhelming him. "You still lose. You can't take the Amulet of Cruelty back. It's bonded to me."

I shook my head. "It's magically bonded to your skin," I said. "You caribou are such backstabbers, I'm kind of surprised you never figured out that anyone could take it just by skinning the wearer."

This wasn't actually true; I was just twisting the knife. If Anon had killed Dainn, the Element of Cruelty would have passed on to Dainn's designated heir, based on the magic the caribou had woven around it. It might even have disintegrated and reformed on whichever lucky prince was going to get the job. But no magic cast by mortals could keep me from taking control of my Element back, once it was in my hand. I dug my talons into his skin, right above the amulet, and drove in deep. He screamed. "As a dad, you should be thanking me," I said. "If I hadn't taken you away from Anon right then, he'd have killed you, and your son would have gotten the Element of Cruelty, just like you said." I ripped a wide strip of skin, muscle and viscera off his abdomen and downward. "And then I'd have had to do this to him instead of you. This way your son gets to live! Well, until Anon and the ponies get to him, anyway."

Dainn was too busy screaming to have any response to that. The strip I was ripping off widened as I pulled downward, tearing off his sheath as well. The rip stopped at his testicles, and as tempted as I was to rip them off too, the dramatic irony of castrating him was just too, too obvious. Anyone would think of it. I couldn't possibly go for such low-hanging fruit. Instead I gathered the skin in my fist, and pulled, tearing the whole thing off his body just above his testicles.

And then I changed my mind, for no good reason. "I was going to spare you this," I said, "and let you die with your malehood still on your body. But then I remembered what you tried to do to me."

I dismissed the gravity shelf and held him in the air by his genitals. He kicked and thrashed and screamed, trying to pull himself free, which was the worst possible thing he could have done. With all the skin I'd torn and the tiny rips it had left in the skin he still had, and my claws piercing his flesh as I gripped him... his own weight pulled him free of what my lion paw was clutching.
He fell, sans certain treasured accoutrements of his. And I watched, as gravity made intestines float out of the huge trench I'd carved down his middle, as he flailed and screamed and tried to summon magic. With my amulet in my fist, attached to the skin and flesh I'd torn off of him and no longer to his body, he had no magic to summon anymore. He didn't know how to switch over to the ambient raw magical energies I'd spilled from the web connecting him to the other caribou.

When he hit, he didn't fall on Anon. But he fell close enough that some of the blood splattered.

And then I teleported down. "Well?" I said mockingly to Anon, from well out of his reach. "Aren't you going to thank me? You wanted him to die in agony, right? And you didn't want to do it yourself!" I tossed Dainn's severed parts – the parts that weren't attached to the Element, the ones in my lion paw – down at Anon's feet. Luna, directly behind him, winced and turned her head away. "So here you go! Never say I never did anything for you!"

Anon glared at me. "Why did you want to kill him so badly? You weren't satisfied with the clean death I was going to give him? Not enough chaos and pain for you?"

"Oh, clean kills are what you're known so well for. Like you gave that poor dragon? Or tried to give to me?" I laughed. "It's all right, though, even if you don't know your manners, I know mine! Thank you so much!" I displayed my prize in my talon. "This was one of the last Elements of Disharmony I needed to collect, and I couldn't have done it without you!"

"Shit! I knew you were up to something!" Anon shouted. "Stop being such a coward and get down here, Discord! Face me!"

"Ohhh ho ho no, no, that's not how this works. I've got one more to collect and I'd be foolish to face you before then. Toodles! Let my adoring fan club know I'm sorry I couldn't take them home, but I'm leaving them in good hooves with you, Princess Luna!"

"I'll kill you, Discord!" Anon shouted, and lunged at me, but I was gone before he was anywhere near me.

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Yes, I know, I know. Hey, I managed to avoid villainous monologues that give away my plans until the very end, okay?

When I got back to the Grotto, I had started shaking. I took a very, very long shower in lavender orange water (scents and tastes, not colors, though the colors were there too), as hot as I could stand it, scrubbed my thick fur with the bristliest brush I own, dipped my tail in bleach and then scrubbed that off with a rock sponge, and then soaked in a hot tub with an eyemask on, occasionally letting myself sink. The jets in a hot tub hyper-oxygenate the water; normally when I'm using gills, I can only pull in enough air to maintain semiconsciousness if I don't keep moving constantly, but in the hot tub, the air came to me.

It wasn't enough. None of it was enough. I knew what I needed, and this wasn't it. But I didn't know if I could get it, and it was dangerous to try.

That being said, I've never let danger stop me from going after what I want.

I went to my club in Manehattan as Twister, where I started letting it be known that I had a friend who was a hyperchimera, with pony, dragon and griffin in the mix, who was very interested in showing a good time to anyone who was into extreme xeno, especially an interested female. (I should probably clarify - xenophiles have their own categories and classifications. "Interracial" is the most vanilla of categories, ponies with a fetish for a different pony race. Most ponies can get this...
kind of lovin' anywhere they want, but there are some from conservative families who need the anonymity and discretion of a club. "Near-xeno", in my opinion, is almost equally vanilla – ponies with a thing for zebras, for instance, or donkeys. "Pony pals" are non-ponies with a taste for ponies, "griffon grabbers" are non-griffons who are into griffons, and so on. A hyperchimera is a chimera of three or more species – such as a hippogriff, who's a cross between ponies and griffins (griffins are themselves chimeras, so a hippogriff is a hyper-chimera), or of course moi. And "extreme xeno" is just what it sounds like – those who seek the most unusual of partners, such as hyperchimeras or species rarely seen in Equestria. Technically all of the Bearers would count as being extreme xenophiles, being with Anon, who's the only of his species on the planet, but I'm fairly sure Anon imposed that preference on them and it's not their normal interest.) I had a few who expressed mild interest, but the fact that I couldn't tell them ahead of time the name or species mix of my "friend" unless they agreed to meet him soured most of them.)

Then a unicorn mare covered with tattoos, some of which were etched with sparkling ink, bought me a drink. "This friend of yours," she said. "How compatible is he?" (This is a fairly vital question for a xenophile. Sex between, say, a pony and a Breezy can't involve ordinary intercourse, and for similar reasons, a pony and a full grown dragon would have issues. I, however, am compatible with ponies without having to shapeshift, and with the shapeshifting taken into account I'm compatible with anyone.)

"Perfectly compatible. A trifle on the large side where it counts, and about three times bigger than a pony in body, but he's been with many ponies I've known personally and none of them had any complaints."

I saw her eyes go wide at the mention of my natural size – not the "where it counts" part but the size of my body. Some xenophiles are really, really into size difference. There are ponies who threw themselves at me simply because I was the largest sapient being they'd ever met, back in the old days. She was gorgeous herself – I'm big on ponies seeking to look unique and unusual. It's hard to tattoo a pony, because you have to shave the hair over the tattoo but if you shave it all off, then the pony ends up skin-colored on their tattoos, and most ponies do not appreciate pony skin color. But this lovely lady had found a way to perma-dye her individual coat strands to convey the same tattoo that was on her skin to the outside of her coat. She was naturally light gray with a pink mane in a tousled bob, and a cutie mark of a tattoo needle, but the images she'd drawn all over her body – and it turned out, when I talked to her, that she had done all the work herself, a feat impressive even for a unicorn because getting ink is painful and pain makes it hard to concentrate – were amazing. Some were too realistic to really appeal to me, but the stylized rendition of magical animals like phoenixes and nagas was beautifully done, probably even by pony standards and certainly by my own.

We agreed on some ground rules. I agreed that going to this meeting implied no obligation and if she wasn't interested she'd just leave, and she agreed that whether she left or stayed she wouldn't tell anyone about my "friend" and what he looked like (I was claiming this was because he was shy, and so extreme that he was afraid of ponies running from him in terror or turning away in disgust. The lovely lady, Tats Jewelstrand, and I'm totally sure that was her real name (although, knowing ponies, it might be), seemed only the more intrigued at that thought.) Then I took her to one of the back rooms, one I'd rented for the evening, and transformed.

Tats stared at me. "Were you impersonating Twister or have you been him all the time?" she asked, sounding slightly upset.

"Twister was never real. Call him my ponysona," I said. "This is who I've been under his skin, the entire time."

"You're Discord. The Spirit of Chaos."
"I am." I coiled in midair. "Which is why I needed a guarantee of discretion. There are ponies – and beings other than ponies – trying to kill me, and I'm very much afraid that if I walked in the door here in this form, there'd be a stampede."

"Probably." She stroked me gently with her telekinesis, as if trying to get more of a grasp on exactly what I'm shaped like. (All over. We hadn't gotten to anything more naughty yet.) "But that's because you've got a reputation for making ponies go crazy and causing chaos."

"A well deserved reputation, yes, but that's not what I'm here for tonight." I landed (mostly – I was still floating a bit) and took her hooves in my paws, bringing her upright, gently. She didn't resist. "Last night and this morning... the past few days... I've been... I've done and seen things I need to forget." I swallowed. "Do you think you might enjoy helping me forget them?"

She smiled. "Those griffin paws on your forelegs. Can you do anything interesting with them?"

I let go of her forehooves, lifted my paws, splayed my fingers, and played a bit of air piano for her, showing off my flexibility. "My dear, you have no idea."

"And if I ask you not to use magic on me unless I ask you to, will you respect that?"

"Under these circumstances? Absolutely." I wasn't here to cause chaos. I was here to wipe the taste of the caribou out of my brain. I needed to be reminded that sex between males and females wasn't naturally about cruelty and domination and exploitation. I needed to let a mare push me around a little, tell me how to please her and lose herself in ecstasy when I did what she wanted. I might perform magic on unwilling ponies all the time in my everyday life, but here and now, I wanted... not exactly to submit, but definitely not to dominate.

"Well then. You're pretty old and powerful, I hear. I'd love to see how that translates to what you know how to do in a bedroom." She grinned at me, running her hoof down my chest. "How does that sound?"

"Positively wonderful."

Tats was fascinated with everything about my body – she'd never had an opportunity to be with anyone remotely draconic before. There aren't any dragons at the club, and dragons aren't precisely known for xenophilia. I found her tattoos intriguing. She knew of some sensitive spots on the more griffin and pony-like parts of my anatomy that even I hadn't discovered (or possibly I just hadn't been nearly so sensitive on them before spending a thousand years in stone.) Just as nonsexual touching had been more pleasurable in my own body, I found the same was true of sex, and felt almost like I had the first night I'd been here when I'd had my first fully consensual experience since getting out of stone. I didn't skimp on treating her well, either. Maybe it was just pillow talk, but in the throes of her pleasure she told me no one had ever made her feel the way I was doing. (And I got her to agree to let me use magic, as long as I didn't do anything permanent. In fact, I got her to the point where she begged for it.)

It was satisfying, and wonderful, and eased the stress I'd been feeling since I headed north in the first place, quite pleasantly. So I really don't know why I broke down and started crying in her hooves, after we'd both been fully satiated for the night. She was startled – I'm sure nopony ever would expect a reaction like that out of me of all creatures – and she didn't quite seem to know what to do with me, but she stroked me and held me and told me she didn't know what it was but she was sure it would be all right, and that was good enough.

I coiled around her when I slept, and she snuggled against my coils like hardly any pony has ever done since Celestia. It made me regret what I had to do next.
I don't sleep straight through the night, most nights. Chaos is restless. When I woke up, I uncoiled myself, and I laid a talon on Tats' sleeping forehead, and I pushed her memory of our encounter into the realm of dreams. I can't erase a memory that's older than about 20 minutes without risking damage to other memories or the mind itself, but I can take a sleeping pony's memories and make them believe it was all a dream. I cleaned up all evidence of our encounter and I placed Tats in one of the other rooms, the rooms club members use to sleep it off when they're too drunk or too tired to trot home after the night's festivities and they don't feel like calling a cab. I tucked her into an empty bed, pulled the covers up around her and kissed her forehead. And then I teleported home.

I needed this. I needed to be touched in my own body, I needed to be enjoyed and desired in my own form. But I'm not stupid. There's nothing about a tattoo artist with a taste for extreme xeno that says she'd be untrustworthy with my secret, but there's nothing that says she'd be trustworthy either. Besides, she saw me crying, and I can't have that getting out.
Dragons Are Actually AWESOME And I Don't Care If Discord Makes Me Change This Chapter Title

Editor's Note: This was actually the first chapter Discord ever showed me. I mean, I started reading it from the beginning as soon as I got my paws on it, because who wouldn't? If you get a book that's your enemy writing about his fight with your friends, of course you're going to read it. But this was the chapter Discord himself handed me to read after I brought the book to him like he asked for, when we were keeping him prisoner in Fluttershy's house.

I think that's how I decided that I was making the right decision. It's really really stressful to be leading a double life like this, and secretly helping a guy who you're being told by all of your friends is the Worst Villain Ever against a guy who you're told by all your friends is the Best Hero Ever, and I'm not sure I could have done it. I've seen the evidence against Anon; I know Discord is telling the truth. I've personally hand-counted birth records in the Canterlot Archives and here in Ponyville, and compared them to the tax records for this year and the property deeds and the marriage announcements, and I've got proof that Discord is telling the truth about stallions being turned into mares, which I've put in a separate binder that I stuck in the "History of Ponyville" section. I've read everything in the Canterlot Archives about the Elements of Harmony, and there isn't one single thing in there about there being seven of them... including a book written by Princess Celestia and Luna recording everything they found out while they were searching. (Did you know that the Elements of Harmony come from a tree, and that it's in the Everfree someplace near the Castle of the Two Sisters? I didn't! But that ties out with stuff Discord has said as well.)

So I've got evidence that some of the things Discord has said are objectively true. But, well, that doesn't necessarily mean Anon was responsible for any of it, or that Discord is a good guy that anyone should be helping. And the truth is... I know he's not a good guy. He's a villain. He's not sorry for it. In this chapter itself, which he gave me as the first official thing to read that he was giving me from this book he's writing, he talks about driving creatures so insane they don't want to risk having children as if he's proud of it. Half the time he doesn't know right from wrong, and the other half he just doesn't care.

But that's the thing. He gave me this chapter to read. It doesn't make him look all that great. All it does is have information in it about dragons that I didn't know. If he was trying to make himself look good, there are better chapters for that. If he was trying to convince me how evil Anon is... Anon isn't even in this chapter. But he was trying to give me something I'd value, a gift of knowledge. Not holding it over my head saying I wouldn't get to read it unless I agreed to help him. He just lent it to me. (To be honest I guess he couldn't have stopped me, not then, but I'd have had to read through this whole thing up to this point to get to this chapter.)

The Dragon Lord, Torch... he doesn't actually sound so awful. I mean he doesn't sound nice, but he's nowhere near as awful as Garble was (and apparently still is.) Princess Ember sounds really smart. I didn't know dragons besides me could actually value being smart. Maybe the problem was that Garble's group of dragons were just all real jerks, because Torch and Ember sound tough, and maybe a little scary, but not mean. Also... aheh... I kinda admit I'd like to see a girl dragon that Discord says is young and hot. I mean I'm not even sure I could tell if any of the dragons I was hanging with were girls or guys, that one time, but I think they were all guys. I mean, it's Discord, so maybe she's got three heads, but he also says Princess Celestia is beautiful so I guess he's not totally weird about who's pretty and who isn't.

If we all make it through this, I've decided I'm going to go to the Dragon Lands someday. Princess Celestia must know a lot more about dragons than she ever told anyone, considering that there was
nothing Twilight and I could find when we tried to do research but it sounds like she has had a lot more dealings with dragons than I ever knew. Maybe she even knows where my egg came from. It was at her school, after all.

But I can't do any of that until I get them all free from Anon.

They don't care about me anymore. They just ignore me. For the longest time I thought it was something I'd done. That Anon was just so much cooler than me that of course they were going to ignore me and pay attention to him. Except that's not how friendship is supposed to work. And Discord is right. Twilight raised me. It's totally out of character for her to say Anon should live instead of me, and the only reason I was sure that she meant it was that I've always been insecure about whether any pony actually does care about me, even when I know they do.

Well, I'm done with that. Equestria is my country. My friends are my friends. And I'll make a deal with the devil himself to make sure they get to be the ponies they are, not the ponies someone else wants them to be, if I have to. I know it's wrong to be helping Discord, but when he mind-controlled my friends, it just took a reminder of what friendship really feels like to snap them out of it. Anon's mind control has been going on for months. Assuming it's really coming from him, but Discord's got a point – who else would it be coming from, when the main thing it does is make everyone listen to Anon and think he's the greatest guy ever and, and fall in love with him and stuff? So if Anon has been mind-controlling everypony for months, even me, and none of us noticed, and no one noticed, and it's even affecting Princess Celestia and Princess Luna...

...Someone's got to stop this. And Discord's the only one who's even trying. And Anon's supposed to be a hero, but he treats me like garbage, and Discord's supposed to be a villain, but he gives me a pep talk out of nowhere and then later gives me the chapter to read that tells me about how dragons aren't all totally awful. So I guess I'm his spy in Anon's camp now, and I'm helping him copy this thing out so it's readable, because Discord treats punctuation and capitalization as suggestions. (Not even friendly suggestions, more like the passive-aggressive snotty suggestions you get from unicorns who are trying to be jerks but with plausible deniability, so you almost never do what they suggest.) I never wanted to be in a place where I was working with a villain, but like I said... I want my friends to be my friends again. It's not wrong to want things. I was scared of wanting things for so long, after I turned into a monster because I wanted everything, but what I want now is I want my friends back, and that's not wrong. Even if I can't have them back as my friends. Even if they hate me forever for working with Discord. I'm still on their side, even if they don't know it. I just want them to be themselves again.

I'll do anything to make that happen.

P. S. In case you didn't figure it out, I'm responsible for the chapter title. These things didn't have titles, or actually chapters, before I started editing, and usually Discord tells me what the chapter title should be, but this time I named it myself and I don't care if he makes me change it.

So I suppose you are all on tenterhooks wondering how things turned out with the caribou and the slaves, after I left. I was too. After putting that much effort into something, it rubbed me the wrong way to just leave it, without any idea how it all turned out. I used the Panauricon to investigate.

It was saddening but not surprising to find out that of course, everyone thought Anon was the big hero of the hour and that my role in events wasn't particularly large. Apparently the slave uprising had nothing to do with me; it started on its own, and I showed up to take advantage of it, tricking poor, desperate females in slavery into believing I was there to help them when all I wanted to do was feed off the chaos, and, eventually, take my Element of Disharmony off Dainn's dead body. I mean, they're not wrong on the last part – I didn't go up there to nobly start a slave uprising for the
sake of Goodness and Honor – but they all seem to have forgotten how much I did to help them. Or, perhaps, the reindeer remember, because they didn't come to Equestria, they were repatriated to their own country, and it's only the ones who were brought down to Equestria for medical treatment or psychological therapy or because they're ponies and they live here that are getting the details wrong.

Even though I flat out told Anon that I had lured Luna up there with that letter, no one seems to be aware that there was never a Dreamy Star – I've heard Luna wax rhapsodic about the tragic fate of the heroic unicorn who risked her life and depleted her own magic to call for help, who was obviously killed after that because she hasn't turned up. Never mind that there also hasn't been a body and that none of her fellow slaves remember her. Also, no one seems to remember that it was a standard caribou tactic to deprive their slaves of horns and wings and that these things do not naturally grow back.

Or that one of the slaves sacrificed her life to save mine, even though I'd humiliated her, because she knew I was giving everything I had to save her and her fellow slaves. They don't remember that, either. I can only hope that the reindeer do.

There are areas where it turns out Celestia's intelligence hasn't been particularly weakened, which is sad because it leaves me being grateful for her ability to restore... ugh... order. Apparently Anon finds the process of overseeing an occupation and helping the rebels who overthrew the existing government to take charge as boring as I do, and hasn't hampered Celly from doing it. I'm not sure he even knows it's happening. At least I know when glorious anarchy is being nailed down and destroyed by laws and propositions.

But hey, there's a silver lining; Celestia's not yielding to the reindeer. She's politely, firmly and sweetly annexing the territory, letting reindeer come in to help, but for the most part filling it with earth pony teachers and social workers, nearly all of whom are female. Her ostensible reason for this is the severe lack of intelligence suffered by the female caribou and the fact that reindeer, leading a harsh existence in a frozen wasteland, have a lot less in the way of social workers and caretakers than ponies do. And no matter how shiny and harmonious they are, they have a lot more cows who are going to take it very, very personally when innocent sacrificed caribou females tell them in all seriousness that the path to happiness is to stop trying to think for themselves and just let bulls have sex with them. Whereas ponies, who didn't have to live with this crap next door for thousands of years, will just shrug that off.

And who knows? Maybe this is even Celestia's real reason, and this isn't a power grab. I know that mare well enough to know that if it is a power grab, she's deluded herself into thinking her motivations are pure and she's doing it for the greater good, whether or not it's true, so it's not like I'll ever get the real story out of her. All I know is, highway to disharmony, here we come! The reindeer are powerful, and deeply irritated that Celestia is questioning their skill at rehabilitating sacrificed caribou cows. Celestia's got a point; in the past, when they managed to "rescue" sacrificed cows, the reindeer would sterilize them and keep them in very pretty, homey and comfortable "group homes", aka prisons, that no males would ever be permitted to enter. Oh, and if they got away with calves, the calves would be taken from them and raised by adoptive reindeer parents who would never ever tell them they were really caribou. But, you know, they've been fighting the caribou forever, and here Luna and Anon and a bunch of pony soldiers came in to take advantage of a slave rebellion, and now all of a sudden Celestia is laying claim to territory that the reindeer think should be theirs.

Celestia also has a point that the reindeer would slaughter the bulls who surrendered, but to be honest, considering how most of those wastes of protoplasm are still scheming to somehow overthrow the ponies and enslave and rape all the nice mares who came up there to help, I am not sure the reindeer are wrong here. In any case, between one thing and another, I predict some lovely political conflict. I love politics. Oh, it's boring watching the sausage being made, but where else can
you get such churning, seething hatred between opposite parties that hardly ever results in anypony getting killed? Equestrian politics is dull as mud because everyone knows to kowtow to Celestia, and most of Celestia's diplomatic relations with other nations is also fairly dull because you do not mess with the mare who controls the sun. But the reindeer have had sunbearers amongst them before, and while Celestia is viewed as practically godlike by Equestrians, the reindeer are viewed in a similar light by all the ponies living in Neighropa. They're much closer matches for her than most other races are.

Back home on the ranch (does Applejack's farm count as a ranch? Irrelevant, because I'm actually talking about all of Ponyville), things went predictably horribly out of control without Anon to help, and he was forced to come home after his exciting northern adventure to hordes and hordes of Pinkie Pies. See, he warned her about using the Mirror Pool, but while he wasn't around she decided to do it anyway because it was so hard keeping her friends' spirits up without Anon! (He was gone for less than a day.) I would have run into them before Anon did except for my detour to relax and unwind for a bit with Tats. Twilight couldn't figure out how to solve the problem, and the entire town was overrun with Pinkies until Anon came home and gave them the brilliant idea of making the Pies watch paint dry to prove which of them was the real Pinkie, because the real Pinkie could overcome the overwhelming, horrifying boredom of staring at a wall covered in wet paint and doing nothing to it with the power of friendship. Gag me with a spoon. If friendship results in feeling like you have to endure watching paint dry, I'm better off without it.

Then Twilight brutally slaughtered the extra Pies, I mean, dispersed them back to the Mirror Pool, annihilating any hope they would ever have had of individuating into sapient beings... no, no, I can't keep a straight face with that one. They're magical constructs. They're no more sapient than this dancing fish with sexy pony legs that I just made is. But see, this is why the whole thing was idiotic in the extreme. I have to assume that Anon's "brilliant" idea to have them test the Pinkies with the drying paint and then have Twilight vaporize the ones that failed came from his knowledge of the show, because Anon's not that smart. Which means, in the "real" timeline that we don't live in anymore due to his interference, presumably Purple Egghead herself would have come up with it. But as usual for even a good Twilight plan, it was overkill. Zapping the real Pinkie with a spell intended to disperse a magical construct from the Mirror Pool back to the Pool would have done nothing. She's not a magical construct and she doesn't come from the Mirror Pool. The spell Twilight found to disperse the Extra Pies would have all by itself done the trick of distinguishing between the real Pinkie and the fakes. So poor, poor Pinkie had to watch paint dry for nothing, and I think I'll tell her so the next chance I get, since it was Anon who claimed she'd have to do that.

(Gilda killed one. Said it was "in her face", and she figured it wasn't the real thing anyway. All rants inspired by Anon to the contrary, I honestly don't think Gilda has it in her to commit cold-blooded murder, but she certainly shredded up this fake Pinkie... which then, like a good magical construct would, disintegrated as soon as it was "dead". This seems to have been somewhat cathartic for her, and she spent some time strut ting around crowing about it. Literally. It's usually griffin males that crow, but unlike chickens, griffins aren't quite as limited by biology.)

But you're not here to learn about Equestrian politics and hear about the fate of magical copies of Pinkie Pie! You're here to hear about the next thing I did about Anon!

So explaining the next thing I did about Anon requires a bit of explanation of some other things as well.

First of all, let's talk about the quetzalcoatl. Before the coming of the Second Fimbulwinter, quetzalcoatl got along with their close neighbors—the llamas and ahuizotls to the south, the draconequui, coyotes and buffalo to the north – about as well as any draconic being can be expected to get along with its neighbors. Which is to say, not well, but there weren't really any wars.
Quetzalcoatls mined for precious metals – gold, silver, copper, and rarest of all, iron – and traded with draconequui for the various amazing things we used our magic to make, or the stuff we acquired in trading on the open seas, because we were rather famous for our nautical skills. They traded with buffalo for pottery and llamas for wool and I haven't the foggiest what they traded with the ahuizotls for, because the only one I've ever met is a pompous idiot with a history of collecting dangerous magical items. And as far as I know coyotes never traded with anyone for anything; coyotes sneak in and take what they want.

Quetzalcoatls are closely related to both draconequui and sea serpents; we're all Eastern, serpentine, dragon hybrids. But where sea serpents are individualistic to the point where, much like anarchic dragons, they don't even have a centralized society, and where draconequui were free-spirited and preferred to live without the heavy hoof of too many rules weighing them down, quetzalcoatls were a lot worse about sticking to a rigid hierarchy and following laws. They were good at runic magic and group workings, as were the draconequui, but they could get a lot more quetzalcoatls in on a major working. They also had developed True Name magic. This is a bit of a problem.

You aren't familiar with True Name magic because it is dangerous enough to ponies that Luna and Celestia have gone out of their way to stamp it out. Basically, it's a form of magic that uses the True Names of sapient beings to control them. If a True Name user has your True Name, which is a name that represents your essence, your very nature, they can compel you to obedience. Not all ponies have True Names (well, technically everything has a True Name, magically, but not all ponies use it as their actual name, or even have any idea what it is), but... Fluttershy? Shining Armor? Luna? There are enough ponies out there who use True Names as their regular names that True Name magic would be very, very bad for ponies.

It was a lot worse for draconequui. All of us used True Names. My name isn't Discord because I enjoy long walks on the beach, snuggling in front of fireplaces, and reading poetry. We would go nameless until we found our Principle, the defining characteristic of our magic, which was a lot like a pony's cutie mark but represented by a word or idea rather than an image, and then we would be named for that Principle. My mother was the Principle of Motherhood, and her name in our language translates to "Madonna". I was the Principle of Chaos and Disharmony, accordingly named Discord. And so on.

When the Second Fimbulwinter came, the quetzalcoatls built an artificial sun, a magical construct that they fed with necromancy. They slaughtered captives in the thousands, cutting open chests and ripping out hearts, feeding the magic and the life force of the sacrifices into the artificial sun, which kept them alive as the cold grew. And because llamas are good at hiding in the mountains and ahuizotls don't use true names and good luck catching a coyote, most of their non-quetzalcoatl victims were buffalo and draconequui. Because when you know the name of a draconequus, you know their true name. And you can use True Name magic to force them to do whatever you want. Including march up the steps of their temple and lay yourself down on the sacrifice slab.

The draconequui who crowded close to the quetzalcoatls' artificial sun to survive the cold brought by the windigos died to feed that sun. The draconequui who stayed far away from it froze to death. I had, shall we say, a slight grudge against the quetzalcoatls for that.

When all the draconequui died, the quetzalcoatls moved into our territory. Not as far north as we ranged, because ponies had moved in from the north, but they annexed a good bit of it. And then I became the Chaos Avatar, and some quetzalcoatls who weren't fond of my chaos thought it would be a good idea to use True Name magic against me, because hey, I wear my True Name on my sleeve like any good draconequus. Which reminded me that True Name magic exists, and that quetzalcoatls were masters of it, and that as much as Chaos hates being bound and generally protects me from any sort of obedience spell, quetzalcoatls are capable of raising enormous amounts of
magical power through truly huge group workings.

So I made sure they wouldn't be capable of group workings anymore.

I didn't treat them as rough as I did the dragons. Sure, they'd contributed heavily toward the extinction of my race, but they weren't as dangerous as the dragons were. A lot of them got to keep their sanity, and their bodies remaining in a general quetzalcoatl shape. I destroyed all their records (okay, most of their records... sue me, I'm not detail oriented) and made sure that the elders with the greatest expertise in magic... well, let's say I facilitated an introduction between those elders and the force of raw, pure Chaos, and generally speaking, after that those elders were not going to be training the young in True Name magic, or anything else. But I didn't hurry them to the point of eating their own eggs. Most of the time. Sure, a lot of them chose not to lay any because they couldn't bear to raise children in a world of total chaos, also the mutations (I happen to think that sticking the limbs of multiple different animals on a serpentine draconid is lovely, but when high rates of ambient chaos magic did the same thing to the unhatched children of the quetzalcoatlis, well, those stick-in-the-muds couldn't see the beauty in uniqueness.)

The point is. By the time Luna and Celestia defeated me, the quetzalcoatlis had retreated out of Northern Amareica entirely. They still exist, living in the mountains of the Andalusians alongside llamas and anarchic dragons, but they really can't be said to be a major power anymore. That being said, at the time, the last time maps had meant anything the territory immediately south of Equestria had belonged to them. Including the lovely volcanic islands off the coast near where Marelantis used to be.

So Luna and Celestia, high on their victory over me, flew to those volcanic islands that were not part of Equestria and never had been, and therefore were not theirs to give away or dispose of... and invited dragons to come live there. As you do, when territory isn't yours to give away.

And everyone thinks they are so morally upright and pure. Oh, I love those gals. No one does devious scheming quite like an alicorn.

As I've mentioned before, there are three general types of social structure for dragons. Dragons imprint on whoever hatches them. There are dragon societies where the females hatch all the eggs, which are matriarchal; dragon societies where males hatch all the eggs, which are patriarchal; and dragon societies where no one hatches the egg, they hatch by themselves once they've built up enough magic. Those aren't honestly traditional societies at all, as most of those dragons prefer to be left alone by other dragons, or at most hang out with a small pack. I've referred to them before as anarchic dragons.

The dragon nations, down near the southernmost part of the world, are all either matriarchal or patriarchal. Among the patriarchal dragons, especially trusted and powerful females are allowed to go down to the south polar continent and lay their eggs there, to bask in the intense magic traveling toward the pole (yes, the south pole does the same thing as the north), bringing them back to the eggs’ fathers just as they’re almost ripe for hatching, so the fathers can hatch them. Most mothers are kept under much tighter control; patriarchal dragons have to rule over their females rigidly, because one dragoness choosing to hatch her own eggs can ruin your whole day, as the dragonets will imprint on Mom instead of Dad.

The matriarchal dragons also lay their eggs at the south pole, hatch them there and bring them home on their backs as tiny dragonets. Matriarchal dragons don't need to control their males anywhere near as much as the patriarchal dragons need to control the females, because generally speaking among dragons if anyone's going to brood on a clutch it'll be the dragoness, and some say the matriarchal style is more "normal" for dragons. It's certainly better for all the dragons who live under it, though
not necessarily for their neighbors – infighting and backbiting are more common among the patriarchal dragons. The Dragon Empire, the one where I had to drive them all mad, was matriarchal, united in a high degree of internal harmony. (You see now why I keep saying harmony’s not all it’s cracked up to be. Disharmony amongst creatures that want to eat you is a good thing even by pony standards.)

But the anarchic dragons don’t deal with any of that. Either they don’t feel like raising dragonets, or they want their young to be as free-spirited and untethered as they are, or both. They lay their eggs at the north pole, and just leave them there. Eventually, the egg gathers enough magic that it hatches spontaneously. The anarchic dragons owe no fealty to other dragons and are not imprinted. (Technically speaking, the only imprints they count are dragon imprints, which means that Spike, imprinted on a pony, would be considered anarchic.) I have no idea why Celestia ended up with an egg in her custody, nor do I care, but obviously most ponies can’t hatch a dragon egg, so she was using it as a test for potential students to see how they handled failure. That didn’t work out like she planned, obviously.

Anyway. So Celestia and Luna guessed, correctly, that the Dragon Nations were scared fewmetless of me and weren't going to go anywhere near Equestria as long as I was running the place, which suggests in turn that after they defeated me, the dragons who’d been afraid of me might not be nearly so intimidated by ponies, even alicorn ponies. So they had the brilliant idea to invite dragons to occupy territory that had once belonged to draconequui, and been taken from us by the quetzalcoatl, and then went largely abandoned while I was in charge. They invited anarchic dragons to come and stake out territory, and suggested the anarchic dragons could form their own nation, one without the tangled constraints of the Dragon Nations.

It's a testimony to Tia's persuasiveness that they didn't laugh in her face, but seriously, this should have been the stupidest idea ever. The only reason dragons can have nations is the bond of imprinting, and the intense loyalty a young dragon feels to its hatching-parent and desire to please that parent and serve them. Anarchic dragons are beholden to no one, so the inherently disharmonious nature of dragons takes over, making them solitary creatures who fight each other viciously for territory and material possessions. Unless there was a strong ruler at the top making them behave, the dragons would tear each other apart trying to take territory on these islands, and if there was a strong ruler at the top, he or she would have to spend so much time beating other dragons into submission they’d have no time to add to their hoard... which no dragon large enough to beat other dragons into submission could afford. A full-grown dragon is hard to cow into submission. I should know.

But Celestia and Luna (mostly Celestia; Luna's better with battle tactics and maintaining networks of spies than she is with diplomacy) had an answer for that too. They took their shiny new toys, the Elements of Harmony, and used them to create an artifact that embodies the only aspect of Harmony that dragons typically care about – Loyalty. A red gem was produced, Harmony being mostly predictable about its color choices, which, when bonded to a dragon who held it rightfully, would enable that dragon to command the loyalty of unimprinted dragons (and dragons imprinted by non-dragons, but at the time that wasn't an issue.) Dragons being what they are, they promptly gave the thing the name Bloodstone, because calling it something like the Loyalty Gem was obviously too pony. And to ensure that dragons wouldn't fight each other constantly to control the stone, the dragons, with some encouragement from Celestia, voted that the term of a Dragon Lord, the holder of this stone, would be a century – hardly a blink in the life of your average dragon.

Nowadays the Dragon Lands are barely populated; there’s the current Dragon Lord, his mate normally except right now this Dragon Lord's mate is dead, his daughter, and a handful of other dragons, among them the last two Dragon Lords. But if the Dragon Lord should choose to summon and command them, all the dragons who owe no fealty to other dragons will be compelled to
converge there, and obey whatever orders they get. It's not mind control so much as it is an
overwhelming feeling of loyalty and desire to please the Dragon Lord, as if they were imprinted on
him.

Oh, and ignoring the call can cause them to break out in hives, unless they're powerful enough to
push it away. Winnie, of course, never answered the call – which at a minimum is put out every
century so that all the dragons can choose who the next Dragon Lord will be, generally in some sort
of contest that the current Dragon Lord picks, which could be anything from all-out battle to riddle
games. One particularly interesting one, according to a book I stole from Luna's sealed archives, had
dragons competing with insulting improvised poetry, where the winner was the one who could most
creatively insult their opponents in rhyme and a recognized poetic form. I wish I hadn't missed that
one, but, well, there's lots of stuff that happened in the past thousand-odd years I wish I hadn't
missed.

The current Dragon Lord is a truly enormous fellow named Torch. Torch has a young daughter. This
is relevant to what I was trying to do.

I went to the Dragon Lands to soak in a volcano, first. Dragons like this because the searing heat is
good for their scales, burning off impurities; I like it because active volcanos spew out the magic that
is pulled underground at the poles. The ley lines go down into the earth there, into the magma, and
are carried in magical currents outward throughout our entire planet, so the earth everywhere is
saturated with magic. But where the magma actually spews out of the ground, or surfaces, boiling,
within a crater, the magic is raw, pure, highly concentrated, and extremely chaotic. It's a great place
for me to recharge and restore myself, as long as I have enough magic to turn myself into magic,
which I did. (That year where I had Matrisse's dust in my lungs, and couldn't turn myself to magic,
was agony – I knew if I could just swim in lava I could get enough of my magic back to clean my
lungs, except that without my magic, I couldn't swim in lava.)

As soon as I was strong enough to manage a direct teleport to the Frozen North, I went back to
caribou territory, to the location of the battle. They had towed the dead dragon out into the frozen
wastes, since they couldn't exactly cremate her. It took a few teleport hops, burning a lot of magic,
but I found her, and I brought her home.

She was a dragon who had never imprinted on a dragon. She'd been laid at the North Pole, and left
there. By dragon standards, she was an anarchic dragon and she deserved to go to the Dragon Lands.

The dragons hadn't even noticed me taking a volcano bath – there aren't very many of them actually
living there, as I said. But they sure did notice when I brought the corpse of a large dead dragoness to
the ritual clearing where every so often dragons show up to ask the Dragon Lord for something, or
where he calls them to service.

The Dragon Lord himself flew out of his cave, in an utter rage. I'll say this for the fellow, he was
brave. Ponies, with their short little lives and Celestia's desire to purge the inconvenient truth, don't
really know me, not after my thousand years in stone. And to be honest, no pony has ever known the
side of me the dragons knew. Whereas dragons live a long time, and they keep their histories; the
dragons who hoard knowledge would never permit any dragon to lock it away or wipe it out. Torch
knew exactly who and what I was, and what I'd done to his ancestors.

"CHAOS LORD!" he boomed at me. "What have you done!"

"Why, I'm just bringing a lost little girl home," I said.

He hovered in the sky above me, trying to intimidate me. He was failing miserably, of course. Torch
was huge, but Winnie had been a lot bigger, and had had a large number of deadly magic items that
Torch didn't have. "What madness did you drive this dragoness to, that she died like this?" he shouted.

"Greed growth," I said. "She was a slave. The slaves were rebelling. I tried to make her strong enough to break free, but all she did was fight more fiercely for the caribou who'd enslaved her."

Torch's eyes lit with outrage, and he drew back a breath, probably preparing to blast me with fire. But a very small dragon – bigger than Spike, but that's not saying much – landed on his nose.

"Dad. That's the Chaos Lord. I think maybe we want to hear what he has to say before we go trying to firebreath him. Because I'm pretty sure that won't work anyway."

He growled. "You're too much like your mother. Too smart! Too much book learning! Dragons should fight with claw and fire, not with their brains!"

"A philosophy that's served you well, seeing as you don't have any," I said. "Listen to your daughter. I'm here to lay a dead child to rest, and tell her closest kin who murdered her, not to get into a fight with you."

"Did you murder her?!"

I took my eyes out of my head and rolled them on the ground, just to emphasize how hard I was rolling them. "She was hacked to death with a sword. I'm sure you've heard the histories. Does that sound like something I'd do?"

"No," he snarled. "But you're the Chaos Lord. You do things because they don't make sense."

"I also don't kill unless I'm provoked, and dragons have known better than to provoke me in two thousand years. I have no quarrel with dragons anymore, Dragon Lord, not as long as you don't start something with me."

A pink dragon spoke up. "Then why did you attack the legendary Wiñaypaqori?"

"Oh, you're dragons. You'll appreciate this. He stole from my hoard while I was paralyzed and couldn't defend it. I demanded back what he'd taken – just one item, amidst a mountain of them – and he fought me for it. So I took it, and then I took everything else he had and scattered it. Which, by the way, means that any enterprising dragon who searches within three or four flights of his lair ought to find a whole lot of goodies."

Two smaller dragons tried to take off. Torch slammed his scepter, with the Bloodstone in it, against the ground. In his paw it looked like a toothpick. "NO DRAGON LEAVES UNTIL I SAY SO!" he shouted, and sheepishly, they folded their wings and bent their heads. "Why did this dragon die, then, if you didn't do it?"

"Ah. You're familiar with Equestria, of course, and the return of Princess Luna."

"What of it? I don't care what namby-pamby ponies do in their own country."

"Dad, he's talking about the 'namby-pamby' ponies that control the sun and the moon. That's kind of important."

"Is this about the sun and the moon?"

"No, but it's about how this child was murdered."
He was a father, with a daughter just a tiny bit older than this dragon. Now I had him, I thought. "Yes. A child. Hatched maybe two years before your beautiful daughter there. By the *caribou.*"

"Did they kill her? I will flay their flesh from their bones! I will burn their cities! I will—"

"Too late. I defeated them." I blew on my paw. "They didn't kill her, though. They enslaved her. They used her – forgive me, Princess Ember, there is no polite way to say this – as a slave to their lusts, even though she was only a dragonet. And because she was imprinted to their king, she was loyal to them. She had nothing, nothing of her own to hoard, except the creature who called himself her master." I could see the rage boiling in Torch's eyes – and Ember's. Good. Even the other dragons were moved. "She fought to defend him, to defend the creature who'd enslaved her, out of imprint loyalty and greed, because he was the only thing she had. And a servant of Celestia and Luna – a creature named Anon, a *human,* brought to this world from another dimension – hacked her to death with a sword, because all he saw was a monstrous beast."

"A servant of Celestia and Luna, you say?" he said with a dangerous growl.

"They think so. The truth is, they're under his mind control. They'd never have allowed him to kill a dragon in their right minds, and you know it. They think he's a servant, but he's their puppetmaster, and they're dancing on *his* strings." I flew up to Torch's face. "He has no respect for dragonkind. He abuses the dragonet that Celestia's student hatched, and no one stops him, even though Celestia's student raised the dragonet as if he were her son." To be honest I'm fairly sure the relationship between them is weirder than that, but I was talking to a dragon who wasn't very bright.

To my great surprise, Torch slumped slightly, the fire of rage going out in his eyes. "We don't want war with Equestria," he said. "Ponies are puny and weak, but the alicorn sisters are responsible for the sun and moon, and they'd fight to the death to protect the weaklings that they lead. I won't be the dragon responsible for losing the sun and moon."

"But Sire, dragons don't need either the sun or the moon," one of the dragons argued. "We would do fine in a world without either one of them."

"ARE YOU CONTRADICTING ME?" Torch bellowed. "I AM THE DRAGON LORD! NO DRAGON CONTRADICTS ME! Except my daughter, sometimes, but I let her get away with it, heh heh." He turned to Ember. "Your mother would never approve of war with Equestria."

Ember nodded. "You're making the right call, Dad. I'm sure of it. But we don't need to make war on Equestria to get them to hand a dragon-killer over to us. They're big on the whole law thing."

"They'd be very reluctant to give him up," I warned them. "You'll need a strong position to negotiate from."

"Who said we had to negotiate? We're dragons!" one of Torch's courtiers, such as they were, piped up. "We should just go there, find the killer, and kill him!"

"Are you mad? We're civilized dragons here! We follow the rule of the Dragon Code!" Torch shouted. "We will bring the killer back here for a fair trial, and once he's found guilty then we'll kill him!"

I snickered. Methinks somedrake wasn't very clear on the concept of a fair trial, but then, I'm not at all fond of the things myself. All that fact-finding and objectioning and all of the *rules!* Back in my day, when ponies wanted justice badly enough to brave coming to me for it, I generally just ruled in
favor of the plaintiff because anypony willing to risk coming anywhere near me when they didn't have to was either very much the wronged party, or hated the other party so much that they were willing to risk their sanity to lie to me, and in that case probably the other party had it coming. Sometimes I rolled dice. Sometimes I went with whoever seemed to have the more entertaining story, or who I liked better. None of this tedious investigating and employing lawyers and all that stuff.

"That's what we'll do," Torch said decisively. "We'll send an ambassadorial party to Equestria to speak to the Royal Sisters, and demand that if they don't hand the dragon-killer over to us to be tried, then we'll make war on them. We don't actually have to do it. Namby-pamby ponies will always back down to avoid war, but they know that dragons are tough and hard! Aren't we!" This didn't get a response. "I SAID, AREN'T WE!"

"YES, SIRE! WE'RE TOUGH AND HARD!" the dragons chorused back.

"And the ponies know it! So. Who wants to go to Equestria to negotiate with the ponies?" Crickets.

"Oh, now, don't all of you volunteer at once, I said.

"I'll go, Dad. I'm the best choice; I'm small enough to fit in their castles and I've got your authority backing me up, so they wouldn't dare try anything."

"No! You're too small. Hardly bigger than a pony! In fact, Celestia's bigger than you. I need someone they'll take seriously!"

A silver dragoness who hadn't had much to say so far spoke. "Sire, what if Princess Ember and I both go? She can negotiate with the pony princesses, and if she doesn't like how she's treated, I can lay waste to their capital city."

"I have an excellent idea!" Torch announced. "Ember, you go with Starflame! Both of you are female, so the pony princesses will listen to you." Dragon negotiations between matriarchal and patriarchal nations were always fraught with tension because the matriarchies take male dragons less seriously and the patriarchies don't take female dragons seriously at all, and while the number of dragons who aren't one or the other isn't actually zero, it's not large enough to guarantee a supply of ambassadors. (Anarchic dragons don't actually have that issue; without imprinting and being trained to believe in the inferiority of one sex or the other, dragons tend to view all other dragons as equally annoying or threatening, and when they manage to work together because the Dragon Lord makes them do so, they don't particularly care what gender the other dragons they're working with are. The term Dragon Lord itself is actually not gendered, despite what you'd think; there have been many, many female Dragon Lords.) Torch assumed Equestria to be a matriarchy, because it is, albeit one a lot closer to egalitarianism than any of the matriarchal Dragon Nations were. "And if they disrespect Ember because she's small and young, then Starflame can lay waste to Canterlot!"

"Excellent idea, Sire," Starflame said dryly. "I'm happy to serve."

"Don't say anything about my involvement in this," I warned them. "This Anon hates me passionately. If he were to learn that I brought you this dragon and told you of how she died, he'd twist things to make it sound like I was lying just to harm him."

Ember raised an eyebrow. "How exactly do we know you're not?" she said. "You're not known for your honesty, Chaos Lord, and you just admitted that the stallion you're calling a dragon-killer is your enemy."

"He's not a stallion. He's a human. Biped, no coat, pink skin like a naked mole rat, just about as tall as you are, Princess."
She rolled her eyes. "All right then, this human is your enemy. What proof do we have that he's the one that killed her?"

I teleported over to one of the wounds on the girl's body. "What weapons do you know of that can cut through dragonscale like this?"

Ember and Starflame both inspected the wounds. Starflame was a full-grown dragon, but not huge as dragons go, maybe twice the height and three times the length of Celestia, so she had no difficulty getting her head down to see where Anon's sword had sliced into the poor girl. "Beats me," Ember finally said. "Mom might have known, but..."

"I'm 300 years old and I've never seen a weapon to cut dragonscale so cleanly," Starflame said. "It cut through her scales like a claw through prey-flesh." She looked up at me. "What is this?"

"It's called the Element of Protection. It's a magic crystalline sword, usually about yay big—" I demonstrated the size with my fingers. "He hangs it around his neck until he needs it. Then it grows to full size, and it cuts dragon flesh like butter." I waggled my tail. "My tail's got the same scales you've got, and he sliced through it like it was nothing. Fortunately for me, I heal very quickly. This young dragon... not so much."

Starflame gently breathed a pale, ice blue flame onto the wound, then drew in a rapid breath, sucking the flame back in. "I have the flavor of the magic that contaminates the wound," she announced. "We will demand that this Anon present his Element of Protection to us for examination. If its magic has the same flavor, that proves his guilt, and we'll demand his extradition."

"Yes!" Torch said. "Good!" He turned to me. "But if my daughter and her companion find out that you were lying to me, to try to set the might of us dragons against your enemy, you had better beware!"

"Oh, please," I said, sighing. "I beat up Wiñaypaqori and took his hoard. I wouldn't exactly be trembling even if I was lying, which for the record I'm not. And honestly, I don't care if you go take on Anon or not." This was a lie, obviously. "I just wanted to make sure this child got laid to rest among her own kind, and that someone remembered her."

"What was her name?" Ember asked.

"I don't know. She may never have had one. Her enslaver just called her 'dragon'."

"You say she served that master until death? Bravely?" Torch asked.

"I did. And she did. She never begged or faltered in battle until she was too gravely wounded to fight." I wish she had. If she'd begged for her life, Anon might have spared her. Might. It had never worked for me, but Anon was patronizingly protective toward females, and hearing her voice might have led him to have second thoughts. On the other hand, maybe not. He'd shown Chrysalis no mercy, after all.

"And she's red. The color of loyalty and of heart's blood," Torch said. "We will name her Faith, and lay her to rest in the blood of the earth."

Dragons float in lava, but that's due to their internal magic, and it dissipates over time after their death. Float a dead dragon in a pool of lava, and she'll eventually sink and be dissolved. It's the traditional means that dragons dispose of their dead, and I don't know this just because of all the dragons who spontaneously decided to dive into lava to find dead family members who they were somehow deluded into thinking might still be alive down there, after an encounter with me.
Torch looked at me. "Chaos Lord, for bringing us this child's body, I will permit you to attend her funeral, if you like. As long as you are respectful and not disruptive."

"Thanks for the offer, but no thank you. Respectful and not disruptive? Those aren't my colors, I'll have you know." I lifted into the air. "But you go on and do your traditional thing, and I will take my leave of you and go find something fun to do. I swear, there is nothing remotely entertaining about anything to do with death. Such a somber, serious affair. I'm glad it's in your paws now!"

I turned invisible and watched as Torch corralled pallbearers, several dragons of approximately equal sizes to carry her body to a nearby active volcano. And then I really did leave, quite pleased with myself. The dragon child would be mourned by her own kind, returned to living, turbulent magic rather than left in the ice and cold to freeze and be forgotten. And far better, I'd just arranged for a major headache for Anon. Of course he wasn't going to be actually executed by the dragons – either they'd never get a chance to put him on trial, or they'd try him but someone would give a moving speech on his behalf that would inexplicably convince the most savage, grudge-holding creatures in the world to forgive him for hacking a child to death, or something. But he'd actually have to work for it.

Ember was feminine and pretty by human standards – well, not pretty by the standards they judged each other, but if he was regularly having sex with ponies he was obviously pretty comfortable with xenophilia, and by the average female-loving xenophile's standards, Ember was hot. Give her another 50 years and I wouldn't mind warming her embers, if you know what I mean and I think you do. Anon, being nowhere near as old as I am and probably nowhere near as good at judging the ages of dragons, would probably find her attractive, so this was going to be a problem he wouldn't want to solve with a sword. And if he solved it by seducing Ember, I knew a pony who could be very easily enticed into raging jealousy. Rarity is merely a unicorn, not even an overly powerful one, whereas Ember is a dragon and Anon is a reality warper, but let's put it this way... I, the nearly omnipotent Spirit of Chaos, would not want to be on the wrong side of one of her jealous rages. Also, I was fairly sure he wasn't actually having sex with Luna, but she wanted him, and I'm pretty sure the mare who tried to bring the night forever out of sisterly jealousy could be pushed into a good frothy fit of rage over Anon sexing up yet another female creature who wasn't her.

(Lest anyone think I'm somehow promoting pedophilia in my effort to ruin Anon's day... Ember, unlike Spikey-Wikey and our poor dead friend, is over the dragon age of consent. Barely, but dragon childhoods are so long, dragons who've finally come through puberty to be capable of laying eggs or fertilizing them are more than ready to take on the most pleasurable of adult rights. I did hope that Anon didn't actually manage to seduce her despite all the lovely disharmony I could stir up if he did, because the thought of him having sex nauseates me and the thought of him having sex with a female I find attractive, even one I consider much too young for me, much more so. Not that any of the Bearers are exactly uggos, but, well, I'd been with ponies fairly recently and I like variety, so other species start to get more and more attractive the longer I avoid getting it on with any of their kind. And I'm part dragon, so, well, yeah. Starflame was a nice-looking lady too, much more mature than Ember, and for me personally, give me an experienced partner who's been around the block a few times and knows what they're doing over a barely legal virgin any day. I wonder if she'd be amenable to a romp with a draconequus after all this is done, assuming I live.)

Death is depressing. I left, but I didn't go far. There was something I'd noticed while I chatted with Torch and his minions, a sharp peak of disharmony coming from one of the dragons. Someone around here really didn't like Torch's plan, and it had started right when he'd said he didn't want war with Equestria. Which suggested to me that one of these dragons did.

Now, I've got personal reasons to be interested in dragons who want to make war with Equestria, but it's no longer my job to protect the ponies, and Equestria's a very different place. When I was young
and living with Celestia and Luna, there was no such thing as alicorns, and in fact, they were considered a myth, a pretty story calling for the unification of the pony tribes and suggesting they'd be much stronger if all three tribes united as one pony race. Starswirl the Bearded was about at the level of Twilight Sparkle in terms of raw power, though obviously he had far more knowledge. I was more powerful than he was, but no one, including me, knew anything about how to control chaos. There were no alliances with non-pony races, and no contact with other pony nations like Prance or Saddle Arabia. Ponies were highly xenophobic. They weren't even in contact with their own lost homeland, the Crystal Empire, anymore; it was during Celestia's reign and before my ascension that the ponies discovered that the Crystal Empire still existed and hadn't fully succumbed to the windigos, due to their discovery of the Crystal Heart.

Today Equestria is powerful. There are three alicorns, four if you count the Alicorn of Desolation but I'm not sure Celestia could summon her back, five if you count poor lost Brightest Star. I mean Screwball, that's what she's calling herself now. (I mean, she's never bothered to grow back the wings and horn that were taken from her, so it's impossible for anyone but another immortal to notice, but she's still the Alicorn of Chaos and I fear for the dragon who manages to wake her from her trance enough to make her feel threatened. My blood is potent stuff, and you can't un-ascend an alicorn.) They have technology, and the will to use it in the defense of their home, if they have to. They have the Elements of Harmony. They have alliances. They have more advanced magic. There is no way the dragons could win a war against the ponies anymore, and Torch knows it, even if he had to posture otherwise.

But a dragon who wants to make war with ponies... well, I thought, that could be useful.

So I teleported down and had a conversation with one of the most singularly unpleasant young dragons it's been my misfortune to meet.

"Hey, bug off," the dragon said as soon as I appeared before him. He was a red dragon of a much darker shade than the bright red of the murdered youngster, with a golden crest and spikes, and a serious need for dental care. "I'm not in the mood."

I grinned at him. Music to my ears. And then I flipped gravity upside down, letting him dangle. I could have let him fall forever into the sky, but I was merciful, letting gravity center instead on a point slightly above my head, so when he fell, his body, standing on that point, reached down so that his head was right about at the level of my lower neck, but upside down. "You need to turn that frown upside down, fellow!" I said cheerfully. "Maybe you need something uplifting? Something to bring your mood up?"

"Put me down!" he snarled at me, and tried to lunge, except that the way I'd set up the gravity, it was much, much too heavy for him to just jump... so he tried to fly, but I flipped his wings backward and quickly put an end to that.

"Don't be such a downer!" I said. "It's a great day for up!" I leaned forward into his face to whisper something conspiratorially, but he tried to bite me. "Ohh, a feisty one, aren't you?"

"Leave me alone! What're you bugging me for?"

"You're fun to bug?" I let him down. "Actually the real reason is that a little bird told me you were, hmm, somewhat dissatisfied with the Dragon Lord's decision to not make war on Equestria?"

"Yeah, what kind of a lame ruling is that?" He scowled. "Weak little ponies and their weak little prissy princesses. We're dragons! How'm I supposed to take the Dragon Lord seriously when he's scared of war with ponies? What's next, dragons running away 'cause there's bunny rabbits?"
"Believe me, there are some bunny rabbits out there where you might be wise to run away." I've spied on all of the Bearers extensively with the Panauricon, but 90% of what I get from listening in on Fluttershy has to do with her pet rabbit being a selfish, demanding, overly entitled little monster. I hate it when creatures think they're better than everything else; it's very annoying to those of us who actually are. "But your disappointment seems to be personal, my dear lad. Why, were you spoiling for a fight with ponies?"

"Yeah!" He glared up at me. (As an adolescent dragon, he was significantly taller than a pony, but still a few hooves short of my height. And if he hadn't been, I'd have grown.) "What's it to you? I heard them call you the Chaos Lord but you don't look like all that. You some kind of wussy pony-lover?"

I chuckled. "You don't know your history very well, do you, youngster?"

"What do I need to know history for? I know everything I need to know. History's over! It's not coming back, so who needs it?"

I smiled at him.

And then, just for a moment, I made the world turn inside out.

Colors became music, loud and clashing. Up and down became circles and directions became cones, where one side got bigger the farther away it was and the other side grew smaller with distance. The scent of gems and lava and obsidian, all over the island, turned into the taste of dust and rock and writhing mealworm larvae. Hot and cold vanished, to be replaced by points of pressure on the inside or the outside. Dragon scales and flesh looked for a moment like glass, showing off bones and organs.

He was lying on his back on the ground, an arm and paw covering his eyes and another one held out as if to push away the chaos, screaming. As soon as he realized I'd stopped mangling reality, he stopped screaming and sat up. "What the ponyshit was that?"

"That was a history lesson," I said. "I just treated you to the tiniest sample of what I did to your ancestors in Neighropa, before you dragons fled across the ocean and hid down here, hoping I wouldn't find you. Imagine every day of your life being like that. For centuries." I was exaggerating. It was more effort to mess with dragon minds than it was to do the same to quetzalcoatl, or ponies, so I hadn't bothered to keep it up for centuries for any one of them. Besides, you actually get better results from randomizing it. One day the world is normal and the next it's insane, and there's no way to predict which it will be, or what form the insanity will take. Subject a creature to the same kind of chaos for too long and it becomes their new normal. You have to change it up frequently.

"That – that isn't cool, butthole! Not cool at all!" He got to his feet angrily. "I'm gonna tell Torch all about what you just did! Then he's gonna wreck you!"

"Or, I could tell him about your opinion of him for rejecting the idea of war on ponies. Who's going to get wrecked then, you think?" I snickered, then teleported the both of us to a rocky crag so we were both sitting, my arm around his shoulders like the best Chaos Dad you ever saw. "But seriously, young drake – what's your name, by the way? I can't just keep calling you young drake."

"It's Garble," he said, and tried to throw my arm off of him, except I might possibly have made it too heavy for an adolescent dragon to lift. "What's it to you?"

"Well, you see, I'm fascinated by your opinions here. If you were listening, you might perhaps have caught that the human who killed that poor little dragoness, the fellow who's under the pony
princesses' *personal* protection, is my enemy. And if you had a strong interest in doing something that would upset ponies very, very badly, why, I might just have a gift for you that would enable you to do it."

I had been thinking about how to hand out Greed and Cruelty. Also, how to create a lot more chaos than Ember and Starflame were going to generate. They were going to go on a diplomatic mission, and diplomatically ask Celestia to hand Anon over, and Celestia would diplomatically say no, and eventually after a lot of posturing that would be that. Torch didn't want to go to war with the ponies over the death of a child he never knew, and while there had been moments I could possibly have manipulated him into it, Ember had a cooler head on her shoulders. Whoever picked her name picked well.

It's not, you understand, that I *wanted* dragons to go to war on ponies – though it would be almost unbearably ironic if that happened due to my actions. What I was kind of hoping for was that I'd have a chance to start something so big that Anon would be convinced this was my Ultimate Plan, and maybe, I don't know, fake my death or something after making it *look* like I tried to start a war between ponies and dragons. I don't know exactly what I was hoping for – I never do, really. I pick up threads that look like they might be interesting and I tug on them to see what happens. When it all comes together at the end, I look like a chessmaster *par excellence*, someone who thinks through all the options and has a contingency for everything, when the truth is, I don't usually know exactly what the plan is until five minutes before I enact it. Sometimes I don't know what the plan is until half an hour after I've started enacting it.

So I hadn't solidified anything yet, but I was sorta kinda contemplating giving Garble one of my Elements. Greed ought to be a shoo-in for any dragon, but this guy cared enough about bringing harm to ponies that he wanted to go to war with them, so there was a chance Cruelty might fit.

"Yeah?" His whole manner changed. Instead of being sullen and rebellious, now he was sleazy and full of false camaraderie. "Hey, dude, if you want to put the hurt on ponies, I'm your drake. I had to migrate through Equestria. I hate those things, all pretty and sparkly and 'yay friendship!' and it just makes you wanna barf, you know what I mean?"

"Oh, I do," I said, nodding. "I definitely do."

"You wanna hear something unreal? There's a dragon, little wuss about as tall as my kneecap, that those ponies managed to make into a total weakling. Kid was hanging with us and being kinda cool, actually; I mean he was too little to be any good at anything, but he was trying. But then he's all like, 'Nooo! Don't smash that phoenix egg! All life is precious blah blah I sound like a pony!' What a waste."

I snapped my talon, not because I was doing magic but because I'd just realized something. "Wait, I know you! You were in the episode about the dragon migration!"

"The what?"

One of the episodes of the show from Anon's world, which I watched, featured Spike going on the Great Dragon Migration, for about a day or two. He ran into this Garble fellow, got hazed a bit and then initiated into the group, until the group wanted to smash a phoenix egg and Spike took exception to the idea. I have to say I agree with him. How is smashing an egg either funny or fun? Now, hiding it so that the frantic mother runs around in circles for half a day desperately looking for it, only to return it to exactly where you took it from... that's good comedy. But smashing an egg... I have smashed a great number of dragon eggs in my time, because when you want to rile up dragons enough that they chase you mindlessly into a tornado full of razor-sharp obsidian and monofilament carbon wires, making it rain dragon eggs was one of the few things I found that would invariably get
all of them into a single-minded rage. It was never fun, or funny. It was war, it was awful, and I hope
I never have to do anything else like it again.

I didn't say that to Garble, but my mind was racing. He was a Defined Antagonist as understood by
Anon, someone who'd been an antagonist in an episode. Admittedly, it being an episode about
Spike's life, Anon had probably paid little attention to it, but when he saw Garble, he'd make no
attempt to make Garble like him. He'd cast Garble as a minor villain, exactly like Blueblood, Trixie
and Gilda. This made the thought of giving him an Element even more attractive.

"Never mind. The point is, I want to know, why do ponies rustle your jimmies so badly? Did a pony
steal your sandwich one time? Why do they upset you so very much?"

"They just suck!" Garble said hotly. "No, they didn't do anything to me... like I'd ever let a pony do
something like that to me. They just think they're as good as dragons, and they're total prissy wusses.
And how come they have all those gems, and we don't have any? I don't even know why I came
here. I thought the Dragon Lands would be awesome but it's just a lot of rocks. I mean, I like the
volcanos, but there's no gems. How come prissy little ponies get gems and we don't?"

I didn't point out to him that most likely this was because prissy little ponies didn't eat their gems, and
thus any that they mined stayed around for hundreds or thousands of years, whereas dragons could
easily use up all the gems in an area within a generation or two. "So you're jealous of them."

"I'm not jealous! Ponies don't have anything I couldn't take for myself, if the Dragon Lord hadn't
said we're not allowed to go to Equestria and steal stuff from ponies. Like it would even be stealing."
He licked his lips. "If they don't wanna give me gems, that's fine. I could just take meat instead. Bet
they'd be wishing real hard that they'd given me the gems when I said to, then."

Well. That changed matters. A dragon who disliked ponies? Par for the course; few dragons respect
ponies. A dragon who wanted to steal gems? Aside from Spike, which one of them doesn't? But a
dragon who threatened to eat sapient beings was a very different story.

Dragons need to consume magic, frequently. They can take it in the form of gems, which are highly
concentrated, and that's how they prefer it. They can chow down on magically conductive
substances like gold and silver, though they need a lot more of that than they'd need of gems. Or they
can eat living things. All living things in our world are fairly saturated with magic, but some things
have more magic than others. Plant matter has fairly little magic, most of the time; earth pony-infused
plant matter is much richer in magic, but dragons don't have access to a lot of that, unless they're
Spike. There are also magical plants, but a lot of magical plants have magical defenses against being
eaten. Animals have more magic, some of them being very, very magical, such as hydras. Then there
are sapient animals, who also range from not-very-magical to, well, me. But any creature with
sapience has more magic than a non-magical sapient creature.

Small dragons can satisfy themselves with plant matter, particularly if it's grown by ponies and
supplemented by the occasional gem. Very large dragons either need to consume a large quantity of
gems... or a large quantity of animals. And most animals large enough to feed a dragon are sapient.
The dragons of Dragon Island prey a lot on very large sea creatures of low intelligence – sharks,
swordfish, tuna – and large land nonsapients such as pigs. All of them recognize they'd get more
bang for their buck if they ate sapient low-magicals, such as cows and sheep, but cows and sheep in
Equestria are under pony protection, and aren't stupid enough to live outside Equestria, not on this
continent (they have their own homelands, Bovinia to the south of Neighsia and Neighropa more or
less between the two, and Agland to the north of Albion, located on the same island to the west of
Neighropa, but dragons don't go there anymore, because I am awesome.) And all of them also
recognize that the most juice they could get out of eating animals, equal to a gem, would be to eat a
magical sapients.

The trouble is, the local magical sapients know dragons. Ahuizotls are partially aquatic and live in underwater caves where dragons can't get in – a Western dragon can dive into the ocean holding its breath, but unlike us Eastern draconics, Western dragons don't have water as one of their elements and can't breathe the stuff, so they can't break into an underwater cave system. Llamas have lived as if they were in mortal danger from their neighbors since the quetzalcoatlts started tearing their hearts out; like zebras, they're excellent at defensive spellwork using natural substances, and like quetzalcoatlts, they can use runes and group rites. Quetzalcoatlts have fallen far since the days when they terrorized this region of the world themselves; my presence taught them fear and caution and how to hide. Buffalo are huge, and brave, and will shoot a dragon's eye full of gem-tipped arrows if one tries to prey on them. Coyotes are also really, really good at hiding, as are deer. (Deer are weird, because not all of them are magical, but the ones that are can give ponies a run for their money... they're just vastly outnumbered by ponies.) Diamond Dogs burrow underground and are rarely seen aboveground, and would bargain for their lives by offering gems, so no dragon would actually ever eat one. Caribou live too far north. And who can actually find a changeling to eat one?

But ponies! Non-violent, soft, civilized ponies who live in village enclaves where they don't really have adequate defenses against a bunny stampede. Or, for that matter, slightly more violent and less civilized ponies living in enclaves on the outskirts of Equestrian territory, who are well equipped to defend themselves against the occasional manticore or panther, but are totally out of their league when it comes to dragons. It would be so, so easy for any dragon with territory anywhere near the Dragon Lands to swoop in and eat a pony or two, and ponies are so magically powerful they're the equivalent of a small pile of gems. Besides, they're delicious. (Oh, don't look at me like that. Remember I eat meat that I magically conjure, which is copied from real creatures but was never alive? Of course I've experimented with eating pony flesh. If it makes you feel better, I've had draconequus a lot. I am unexpectedly delectable, I must say.)

The reason they don't do this is that the Dragon Lord won't let them. And the reason the Dragon Lord won't let them is that the last time they tried, Celestia used the gravity of the sun to create a tsunami that washed over the Dragon Lands and half-drowned the inhabitants, and that was without Luna. The time before that, she had the Alicorn of Desolation to help her, and earthquakes that sunder islands and cause some of them to plunge into the sea is within the definition of desolation. It's not like dragons haven't tried this stunt, more than once. And Celestia and her allies have always responded swiftly and mercilessly – well, okay, they show far more mercy than I ever did, but enough that the dragons always recognize that a war with ponies is one they won't win. Organized, militaristic dragons like the ones in the Dragon Nations could do it, but those guys spend all their time fighting each other. The anarchic dragons, though? Heck no.

If I gave Garble one of the Elements of Disharmony, and he used it to try to eat a pony – or Anon, for that matter – it would justify Anon's brutality, and he would probably come down here with Celestia's blessing and slaughter every dragon on the island, because Celestia knows the Dragon Lord can control his dragons, and doesn't know that an Element of Disharmony would disrupt that control. At the very least, Garble himself would be hacked to pieces by Anon, if Torch could convince Celestia that Garble was a rogue dragon and not under his control. While Garble would kind of have it coming, I don't want to engineer a lot of death and murder. Some pony, somewhere, might end up eaten, and then Garble would die, and maybe a lot of other dragons, and Anon would look like a big hero even with the blood dripping from his hands, and no. I wasn't going there.

"Hmm. Well, I think I see the problem here."

"Yeah?" he asked eagerly.
"You're terminally stupid," I said, and booped him on the nose. "Sorry, kid, but if you don't get
 treatment for it soon, I don't see a lengthy prognosis in your future."

"What?" he asked, outraged. "Are you calling me stupid?"

"Yes. Yes, that is indeed what I'm doing. Do try to keep up." He drew back a breath to breathe flame
at me. I conjured marshmallows on a stick and toasted them in the flames, being sure to not let my
physical body be affected by the flame in the slightest. Then I ate one of the marshmallows and
offered a second one to Garble. "Marshmallow?"

He knocked the stick out of my paws. I glared at him. "Rude!" Then I turned the ground he was
standing on into marshmallow. Sticky, goopy marshmallow, and being that he was, like all dragons,
dense and very heavy for his size, he sank like a stone. I made the marshmallow almost as tall as he
was, so he'd sink in to his neck. Shooting flame at marshmallow just makes it stickier and goopier,
although also more delicious.

"Hey!" He tried to fly, but the marshmallow held his feet fast. That, and I'd just taken his wings.
"Hey, you can't do this to me! Stop this!"

"I can't? I think I just did," I said. "Now what's the magic word?"

He said something very, very rude, which was most certainly not the magic word. "Oh, I'm sorry,
that's not it," I said. "Want to try again?"

This time he suggested an anatomical location into which I could insert my magic word. My eyes lit
up. "Oh my! That does sound like fun!" I said. "But no, still not the magic word, and I'm sorry, but
I'm bored with you now. Enjoy the marshmallow!"

Then I teleported away. His wings would reappear on his body the moment I was gone, but since
he'd started sinking, his weight and density already had him up to his waist, too deep for wingpower
to pull him free. If he flambéed the marshmallow before he sank all the way in, he'd increase his
sinking speed by making the marshmallow more liquid, but if he waited until he came to a rest, he
would have a hard time positioning his head so that it pointed down at the marshmallow, given that
the marshmallow was going to ride right up to his jaw and maybe just a bit more. Eventually his
body heat would cook the stuff enough that he'd be able to get free, but it would take a while.

So I'm thinking now about my strategies for my Element.

Greed could go to anyone who won't use it to eat ponies. The difficulty of my fight with Winnie
notwithstanding, Greed's one of the more harmless of my Elements. Cruelty, however, is one of the
two worst. Most beings I could hand Cruelty to would be capable of doing incredible damage with it.
I imagined my banished Sirens with Cruelty (not that I could pull them back with the dimensional
gates closed, but they were an example), and didn't want to think about what sort of hellish
conditions they could create. I thought of Chrysalis, or any changeling. No. Brr. I thought of a
random wrestler-turned-motivational-speaker who'd actually managed to turn Fluttershy just as cruel
and nasty as my disharmonizing had, according to the cartoon. That guy didn't even qualify as a
villain by any reasonable standard – he taught a technique, Fluttershy took it way too far, she asked
for her money back, and he begrudgingly gave it to her because he'd promised 100% satisfaction and
she wasn't satisfied. Tempting, but I didn't know much about him, and giving a guy who'd
demonstrated the ability to turn Fluttershy cruel, when I myself had had to use brute magical force to
pull that one off... No. There was no way I was giving that Element to someone more adept with
cruelty than I am.
I still don't have any great candidates for Greed, but I think I've decided on Cruelty. I have to give it to someone who is good at being cruel, obviously, but I also have to give it to someone who cannot do any serious damage by being cruel. Which means the obvious candidate is Diamond Tiara, the filly whose destined life talent is apparently wearing a tiara really well. Her sidekick Silver Spoon, a slightly smarter filly, is also a candidate, but she's mostly Diamond's yes-filly and rarely comes up with any really nasty ideas herself.

Diamond Tiara is truly talented in the art of making ponies miserable; she's actually managed to embarrass Celestia. She hates Anon, who bullied her in the course of trying to teach her that bullying is wrong. She's got the resources of a wealthy father, and the experience and advice to draw on of a mother who is actually a master of the art, and she actually seems to have some leadership talent. But at the end of the day, she's a filly. She can't create a society based on discriminating against foals without cutie marks. She can't rile up mobs. She can't take over Equestria.

All she can do is exert her financial and social power over foals in Ponyville to irritate Anon. A lot. Oh, she'd probably do most of it by targeting her blank-flank nemeses, the Bearers' little sisters. (Wait, is Scootaloo actually Rainbow Dash's sister? I'm thinking maybe... no?) But she does specifically hate Anon, so she'll probably do something to undercut him. Hmm. Far be it for me to tell a Bearer of Disharmony how to do their job, but I might mention to her the groundwork I did in trying to make Rarity jealous of her friends. A well-placed lie released in Sugar Belle's hearing (is that her name? It was something like that), to be carried back to Rarity, could do a lot of damage.

So that's settled, assuming the kid accepts, but why would she not? However, this raises a bigger issue. I think I know now how to use Hatred.

See, I have a kind of internal ranking for how dangerous these things are. Greed and Arrogance are probably at the low end, then Deception, Rage and Selfishness, then Cruelty, then Hatred. And Hatred in particular has always struck me as too dangerous to use. When Hatred was hooked into Yggdrasil, it brought the windigos and the Second Fimbulwinter and killed my species. When Sombra used Hatred, he was able to counteract and overpower the Crystal Heart, turn the Crystal Empire against outsiders, pass off the princess he murdered as a traitor pawn of Celestia and Luna, and make earth ponies rise up against pegasi and unicorns, driving many of them out of the Empire and allowing Sombra to gather up the rest and enslave them. Once he had all the pegasi and unicorns, it was easy work to enslave all the earth ponies as well. By the time he was done, all of the crystal ponies lived in terror of Sombra, but when he started out, they gleefully supported him against the "corrupt, decadent" Princess Amore. Hatred's very effective for generating disharmony, but it has a bad habit of generating mobs who murder the innocent, as well.

If I was going to use it... I'd need to give it to someone who will not let it get out of hand. Because hatred grows. Hatred generates more chaos than any of the others, which might change my opinion of it if the chaos it created was any good, but no, murderous mobs under no one's control aren't my idea of a good time. I prefer flying pigs. Hatred is very, very hard to control, and anyone who's good at using hatred generally has no motivation to keep it under wraps, because they themselves usually hate what they're targeting.

But I know someone for whom too much hatred is actively poisonous, someone who most assuredly hates, and in particular hates my enemy, and who has a lot of resources and reasons to owe me one, but also who cannot afford to allow indiscriminate hatred to consume a society. And if she didn't want it, I know someone else in more or less the same boat, who has the same reasons for not wanting hatred to get out of hoof. (Plus the experience of having suffered from mob mentality and a society consumed with hatred and fear, but these folks are not known for their empathy, so that might not help.) And with two such candidates in mind... I think it's time I bit the bridle and went to go retrieve Hatred.
Because siccing a dragon or two on Anon will be a challenge for him, and siccing a mean filly will be an annoyance... but if I sic an enemy he thought he defeated forever on him, he'll *have* to turn his attention away from me to focus on the older enemy. And with his attention off me... maybe I can use that to come up with something, anything, that can actually take him down.
EVERYTHING IS WONDERFUL

I'm calm now.

I've learned some things. Some of them very, very upsetting things. Some of them very interesting things. And then there's the things that just make me blink and shake my head.

I've gone and watched more of the short films (they call them "cartoons" ... yes, the same word as the word for those silly political sketches where Princess Celestia has the head of a fish and is swimming in an ocean labeled "Taxes" or something like that) in Anon's world. You see, a thought occurred to me, as I was writing the last chapter of this journal.

Anon knew Pinkie was supposed to find the Mirror Pool, and warned her against it. There must have been an episode about it. Yet, despite his warning, she found and used it anyway. Now, I'd known from seeing them for myself that the changeling invasion and the return of the Crystal Empire were episodes in this cartoon, but Anon had no motive to shut either of them down – he got to be a big hero, fighting big villains. On another hoof, though, he did try to stop Pinkie from having The Episode With The Multiple Pinkies. And, most importantly from my perspective... he failed.

Now, I don't know. Maybe he didn't really try all that hard. Maybe the thing that's really calling the shots wanted the episode to happen even if consciously it seemed that he tried to stop it. But, I thought, what if the episodes are fixed points that have to happen, and while Anon can change their outcome and can insert himself, he can't actually prevent them from happening? If that were the case, then knowing what the future episodes that he's probably seen and I haven't are would be really helpful.

So I decided to go back to Anon's world. And then, because it's not a plan of mine if it doesn't go running off on a barely related tangent, I thought, but wait, I've never been through the specific gate Anon came through. If I found that, and went through it, maybe I'd learn something about him, something that might help me defeat him!

Except I couldn't.

I knew, from spying via the Panauricon and my interrogations of Applejack and Rarity, how Anon had come to our world... more or less. He'd appeared somewhere in the Everfree forest, and single-handedly fought his way out to Ponyville. While I'd like to put this down to more of Anon's nonsense, this isn't actually that implausible. Ponies, as herbivorous prey animals who can run very, very fast, tend to come down on the "flight" side of fight or flight unless cornered, almost every single time. Humans, as physically fairly pathetic omnivores who had to figure out how to create weapons before they could get a decent meal, are more evenly balanced between fight and flight, and are close personal friends with Fire.

In other words, Anon took out a bunch of timberwolves with a lighter, a small device that starts fires, which is apparently a fairly common personal tool that humans carry around with them most of the time. How he managed to not burn down most of the forest is another issue, and that might have more to do with his usual shenanigans... on the other hand, a lot of humans are trained from early childhood in how to handle a fire, or train themselves by setting fires and then getting in trouble for it. (I believe I've mentioned before that I love these guys, Anon notwithstanding. How do you not love a species with no flame invulnerability whose children routinely play with fire?) Meanwhile, other species, such as manticores and hydras, are so used to ponies who run away, they will often back off if another creature brandishes a sharp stick at them, let alone a stick that's on fire. I myself learned long ago that non-sapient predators are still plenty smart enough to run away from a torch.
So Anon came from somewhere in the heart of the Everfree. After two or three months or so (not the best at telling time, here), I'd imagine any damage caused by the reckless use of fire would have grown back over, since he didn't apparently start a major forest fire. But I shouldn't need physical evidence; a gateway to another dimension that's been actively used in the last several years, let alone last few months, should stand out like a beacon to me. Particularly if I've actually been to the dimension in question. Which I have.

When I went to Anon's world, I didn't go through his gate. I just opened a pathway myself, after determining that there was only one dimension I could open a path to. I could tell it was his because dimensions have a... let's call it a smell. It isn't really, but it behaves more like a smell than like any other of your senses. Anon carries the smell of his own dimension, and when I opened a pathway to the only place I could go that wasn't our dimension, it had the same smell. I ought to be able to sniff out any gateway that had ever been opened to that particular dimension, since I'm familiar with the scent, and if I go looking for a gateway to a place I'm familiar with, it should practically glow with the color of the smell I'm looking for. (I did tell you it isn't really a smell.)

But I couldn't find it. At all. And believe me, I went up and down the Everfree. Twilight Sparkle would have been proud of me... I even used a system. Okay, my system was a series of concentric spirals that overlapped with other series of spirals going the opposite way, and I'm pretty sure Sparky would have chosen stripes or sectors or something, but the point is I had a system, because one of the things I love most dearly about chaos is that it's totally inefficient at accomplishing anything "useful" in a limited amount of time, and sadly, sometimes that means I have to... ugh... employ something orderly instead, when I've got a specific goal and limited time to achieve it in. (Trust me, I try to avoid this whenever possible, but sometimes you just can't.)

Now, by the nature of what I am, I'm attuned to any kind of unusual magic, which includes gates to other dimensions. There are very few powers capable of hiding such a gate from me, and very few powers capable of sealing one thoroughly enough that there's nothing left for me to see, and most of them are the same powers.

Harmony could do it, and Harmony would have a motive to thoroughly seal one – Harmony hates these things. But now that it's down to just one tree, and that one caged in by my chaos engines, Harmony probably doesn't have the power to do it without the help of its Element Bearers. Harmony's power is amplified by having other instances of itself, other Harmony Trees, to work with, and thanks to yours truly, it doesn't have any. Well, there's the Crystal Heart, but that's not really a Harmony Tree exactly, and besides, it still can't talk to it all that well with the Everfree and the chaos magic that permeates it in the way.

Order could do it, and is in fact a lot less opposed to opening the things than you'd think. Unlike Harmony, which really really really wants to maintain the status quo, Matrisse never had a problem with using any tool it could get its crystalline metaphorical claws on, even before it went insane, and would have had no ideological problem with opening a gate and grabbing an entity from another universe to solve a problem it perceived. But Matrisse is still in pieces. There's no way pieces scattered all over the globe could possibly coordinate enough power to oppose me, particularly not in the Everfree, which is the heart of chaotic power in the world, right now, due to my chaos engines.

Chaos could do it. I think I'm currently the only Chaos Avatar, but I successfully hid myself from my predecessors on more than one occasion when I went spelunking through the past, so if there's a time traveler, a cognate of myself, a non-cognate Chaos Avatar from another dimension where I'm not the one who has the job, or Screwball, it's theoretically possible for any of them to use the ambient chaos magic of the Everfree to power a spell that hides something from me. And any of them might have a motive to pull Anon into this world to kill me, because Chaos Avatars don't get along; most of us feel there should be only one, and are willing to kill to make that happen. I'm fairly sure it's not
Screwball; she's still living in Canterlot Gardens, babbling nonsense on the rare occasions when she bothers to talk to anyone, and on most days she seems to think I'm her father. True, there are occasions when something of her memories as Brightest Star or maybe even Maelstrom surface, and she tries to kill me, but that hasn't happened since before I was first turned to stone.

The thing is, if it was Chaos behind this... Chaos isn't good at being stealthy. Could another Chaos Avatar or very powerful chaos mage, such as Screwball, hide themselves from me for a while? Sure. Could they enact a plot to kill me, or disrupt Equestria, or something, while hiding? Probably. Could they keep it up for months? Well, I couldn’t, so I consider it really, really unlikely. Also, Anon's a terrible agent of Chaos. Why disrupt the entire world and then hide it from everyone so they can't even tell it happened?

And Disharmony could do it, and it's slightly more plausible that there could be a separate Disharmony avatar running around who isn't me, because, well, Disharmony pulls stunts like that. Judging from the degree to which my own Disharmony Elements have been opposing me, finding out that all of this is the work of a separate Disharmony Avatar who came into existence while I was in stone wouldn't shock me. But wouldn’t such an entity know about my interest in recovering my Elements and be more actively opposing me? I've got five out of seven of them, now; another Disharmony Avatar should have made a move to stop me from gathering the Elements by now, rather than just sending Anon to bumble around and threaten me with a sword.

Theoretically there are other entities who could oppose me. An alicorn of Time, Space, or Time and Space, for instance. I don't know if any such alicorn exists or has ever existed, but generally speaking, alicorns are really noticeable to the guy whose job is to sense and maintain the supply of magic. An alicorn of Psyche could possibly explain everything, or almost everything anyway; most of Anon's powers can be explained by manipulating minds, and if any alicorn was capable of hiding herself from me, an alicorn of Psyche would. I've got a mind, chaotic as it is, and while I can defend myself from Luna's dreamwalking, that's partly because Luna herself trained me in dreamwalking when we were both kids, and I was teaching her how to handle the chaos of particularly bizarre dreams. I might have no defenses against an alicorn I don't know exists. But call me an intelligence chauvinist, I just can't believe any alicorn whose domain is Mind would use such a supremely stupid individual as her tool, even if she was a fallen alicorn like Nightmare Moon, or like Honor was. I mean, isn't using an idiot as your agent when your domain is Mind kind of like what if Nightmare Moon had employed ponies with sun cutie marks?

Maybe there are even others I haven't thought of. I doubt it – I'm a very smart and creative draconequus, and I think I've covered all the possibilities – but sure, I suppose it's within the range of possibility that there could be another such entity that could stand up to me. And there's always the possibility that whatever it is that gives Anon his power isn't something from our world at all. The point is... whatever it is that gave Anon his power is probably the same entity hiding his entry point to our world from me, and that gives me some ideas I could follow up on as to what that entity might actually be.

Anyway. So once I figured out that finding Anon's exact gate wasn't in the cards, I went and crossed over to his dimension my own way. And this is how I learned what the future should have held for me, if Anon hadn't interfered.

Let me see if I can possibly describe how I found this out.

So I mentioned the last time that in Anon's world, there are thousands of short films being sent to personal, household crystal boxes which display the films, and that these films are sent on wires or by energy beams from space. That, however, is not how I got the information I got, the last time. The same films are recorded onto disks, rather like vinyl albums except that they're made of some kind of
crystal and played with a light beam rather than a needle.

Every year, between 13 and 26 films based in the same fictional universe and continuity are released, for each of these "television" stories, and these are referred to as a "season". The first season of the fictional adaptation of our world started with Woona's return from the Moona and ended with that tantalizingly chaotic Gala; the second started with my own debut, and ended with the Changeling invasion. The third started with the return of the Crystal Empire. The last time I was in Anon's world, I managed to acquire a box of disks recording the entire first season, another box for the entire second season, and a smaller box containing the Crystal Empire episodes and some completely unrelated stories from the first two seasons. I'd _wanted_ to get the whole third season, because I had even at the time strongly suspected that Anon had seen the whole thing, but they hadn't been available on the crystal disks (which for some reason are called DVDs), and the episodes, which had shown once a week while they were being released, were no longer being shown.

What I hadn't realized at the time was that there was an easy way to get all of the episodes to come to me on the wires without having to worry about going to multiple stores looking for the correct disks. (There's a stigma against adult men buying those disks, for some reason; the fact that the entertainments are intended for small fillies somehow means that stallions who want to watch them are viewed as perverted or childish. Or fathers, which was what I claimed to be. Fortunately I look old enough in a human body to pull that off. Also, there are lots and lots of these disks for sale, and most stores didn't have the specific ones I needed.)

Imagine that there is a central library, but it contains television films, not books. Imagine that you can transmit a request to this library for a film, like sending a message by telegraph or courier pony, but it arrives _instantly_. Imagine that instead of a pony (or in this case, a human) fulfilling your request, it's a machine familiar, similar to a golem but very, very limited in its capabilities, and all it can do is respond to your request and send you the film you wanted... which then starts playing on your crystal screen. Instantly.

All of the episodes for this television series were available from this service. It's not a free service, but it will give you a free trial, and that was enough for me to get what I needed. As it turns out... they'd all been available from this service the _last_ time I was here, too, and I was kicking myself for not realizing that before. I'd seen all the ones from the first two seasons, so I just started with the start of the third season and watched all of them.

The first two were a two part episode about the return of the Crystal Empire. In which, as I've said earlier, Spike and Cadance were the ones who defeated Sombra. I noticed something else; the whole thing was plainly a test being run by Celestia, albeit a test with very high stakes. In the timeline that should have been, I imagined that Celestia and Luna were probably hidden outside the Crystal Empire, waiting to move in and take over if Twilight failed. Twilight was told, specifically, _not_ to use the Elements and _not_ to involve her friends, and saved the day by ignoring Celestia and relying on Spike and Cadance. Given that Twilight had previously _cast mind control spells_ in order to try to come up with a problem she could report on to Celestia because she was just that anal about having to have a report for Celestia every week, I figured Celestia must have decided to test Twilight against her one major flaw as a leader, her total dependence on Celestia herself. I know Celestia; she's not a big enough idiot to test a mentally unstable unicorn with the stakes _actually_ being a city's worth of ponies, so I assume she had preparations in place if Twilight failed. Of course, no such preparations were implemented in our world; Celestia had complete and mindless confidence in Anon.

Then there was the one about Pinkie and the mirror pool. Pinkie was slightly less of an idiot in the episode, only in the sense that she hadn't been warned against it and willfully went against the warning. The spell I'd suspected Anon had been able to give Twilight because he'd seen Twilight come up with it in a show turned out to be exactly as I thought. So even with her natural intelligence
level, Twilight has blind spots. Like not realizing that the spell that banished magical constructs back to the Mirror Pool wouldn't work on an actual pony.

After that, a pointless episode about some cousin of Apple Zoom showing up and joining forces with Diamond Tiara and her sycophant. Probably I'd want to give Diamond her Element before that happened, to increase the odds that she'd actually be able to use the event against Anon in some way.

The next one surprised me a great deal. It showed that in the actual timeline, without interference from Anon... Trixie really was as stupidly obsessed with showing up Twilight as she was under Anon's influence, and she really had gone for the Alicorn Amulet, and ended up being corrupted into a dictator who ruled Ponyville with a slightly less than iron hoof. Well. I wondered if it would turn out in future episodes that Gilda, Blueblood and the Flim Flam Brothers were just as stupidly obsessed with the Bearers as they'd been in our world, and if I'd been blaming Anon all along for the personal failings of my minions. Since Trixie was still planning on fighting a duel with Twilight, it seemed like that episode was going to happen to at least some degree as well. They weren't going to defeat her the same way, obviously, but I had no illusions; I'm sure Anon will find some way, and it will probably involve making Trixie look like an idiot.

The next one was an especially pointless one about Scoopyloo or whatever her name is trying to impress Rainbow Dash and getting a talking to from Luna. Yawn. Next, a new potential minion on the horizon – a pony named Lightning Dust who managed to be even more reckless and self-centered than Rainbow Dash, who would end up endangering various ponies in her quest to prove how awesome she was. If I ever managed to find Selfishness, I'd found the perfect candidate, assuming that Anon didn't defeat her by either killing her or making her think he himself was so incredibly awesome that she succumbed to hero worship. Maybe I could intercept and recruit her before those events even happened in our world.

After that, some sheerly amazing pointlessness involving Applejack having a family reunion, and then Spike running around trying to fulfill a supposed life debt to Applejack because she saved him from something. I wondered if Anon's self-centeredness would defeat his apparent dislike of Spike; either he was going to rescue Spike and make Spike run around as his servant, or his lack of interest in Spike would lead it to happen as it had originally. Or, if I could succeed in opening Spike's eyes as to what was going on, maybe I could prevent it from happening at all.

And then—

I have to admit, after I saw this one, I had to climb out the window of the hotel I was staying in and find somewhere else to hole up for the night. (This was perhaps ill thought out. Humans have no wings, nor flight fields, nor magic, and I didn't really have enough magic in their world to fight their gravity with much success, and I happened to be on the fifth floor of the hotel. However, after I smashed every single item I could find that was breakable in the entire hotel room, it wasn't as if walking out the front door was an option.) I didn't see the remaining three until a few days later, but that was just as well; it took me that long to calm down and stop plotting to return to Equestria and kill Anon that very minute.

You see, this episode was about me. Specifically, Celestia deciding to release me due to "having use for my magic" if I could be trusted to not turn the world upside down with it every single day (the use she had for it was never explained in the episode), and deputizing Fluttershy of all ponies to "reform" me. Which she did. By befriending me.

In the episode, I said I'd never really had a friend before. This is absolutely true. I've had a mother, a father figure, biological brothers and an adopted sister. I've had a lover, and a mentor. I've had groupies, cultists and minions. But I've never in my life had a friend. And Fluttershy, the pony who
in this world, even under Anon's influence, managed to see far more of my weaknesses and my
loneliness than any pony has any right to, who flat out told me she'd be willing to reach out to me if I
was willing to stop being a villain... did exactly that. In a future that now will never happen, because
of Anon.

Oh, I suspect the episode was collapsing time, speeding things up to make their adaptation of my lost
future happen in 22 minutes, because I'm sure I'd have needed more evidence of actual friendship in
real life. Others have offered me love and sex to stop spreading chaos; why would I take an offer of
friendship to do the same thing unless I was convinced it was real? And considering that Fluttershy
in the episode admitted that she was letting me do what I wanted so she could gain my trust, and
considering that I have excellent hearing... no, I wouldn't fall for that. But at the end... she promised
she wouldn't use her Element against me, and kept the promise even after I betrayed her, when she
said she wasn't my friend anymore... at which point apparently I must have realized (would realize?
Would have realized? Alternate futures are hard on the tense agreements) that her offer to be my
friend was genuine, and that I was in danger of throwing something away that I'd never successfully
gotten anyone else to give me in my entire two millennia plus of a lifetime.

I admit it, all right? Yes. Yes, I would. If I thought it was real. If it would end the hostilities between
me and Celestia, and give me a friend, someone who cared about me more than they cared about
what I could do for them or what I could be persuaded to not do... yes. I can't say the word "reform"
without snickering or putting air quotes around it, because I'm not a criminal, I'm Chaos, and that's
not going to change ever. But to decide not to turn the world upside down every day? I'm doing that
now, for far, far less a reward than having a friend. I'd already decided, for my own reasons, that if I
take over again I'll tone things down and let Celestia and Luna mostly run things, most of the time,
because I like ponies having better teeth and being able to come up with amazing and ridiculous
contraptions that barely depend on magic, and I think I will have to tone down the chaos if I want
those things to continue. So if Celestia had the Bearers free me, and one of them chose to be my
friend? Not out of lust, not out of a desire to control me (again, this doesn't appear in the episode
myself, but I know I wouldn't have been convinced unless I felt certain that that wasn't what was
happening... and why would she have kept her promise, after declaring she wouldn't be my friend
anymore, if her only motive was to control me? I have to assume there would have been more, in real
life, that they never bothered to show... but then, I knew for a fact that they skimmed out on showing
me, because they left out almost everything from my perspective when I'd first broken free, plus
leaving out all of my taunting of Celestia, plus leaving out some of my best pranks on Ponyville. In
real life, few events can be fully shown, from every perspective, in the course of a 22 minute
episode, or even two of them.)

I cried, off and on, between swearing revenge on Anon, and screaming in the street and kicking over
garbage cans or smashing random windows with equally random bricks. I didn't sleep at all that
night, after slipping out of the hotel window. All I could think about was the fact that in the future
that Anon had altered, Celestia would have had me freed, a Celestia who didn't hate me pointlessly
and didn't believe I'd murdered her father, and I would have had a friend. For the first time in my life.
A pony who I could genuinely believe would offer to be my friend, because she'd come awfully
close even under Anon's influence. And Anon had taken this future from me, and I'd have to defeat
him, survive it, and do so in a way that didn't make all of the Bearers hate me and want to destroy
me, to get it back. And maybe I never would, even if I did do all of those things.

Like I said. It took me a few days to calm down enough to even think about watching the last three
episodes. Also, some creative evasion of the police. I'm a rather distinctive looking human if I do say
so myself, and, well, I did a lot of damage to that hotel room. But eventually, I managed to end up in
a completely different city, and a completely different hotel, and there I watched the final three,
expecting complete anticlimax.
Well, the first two of the last three did not disappoint in the degree of how disappointing they were. The Bearers go to the Crystal Empire to help Cadance win the right to host the Equestria Games. Yawn. Spike takes care of the pets while this is happening, and gets predictably overwhelmed. Double yawn. But the third one... well, I'm not going to be as outraged on Twilight's behalf as I am on my own, obviously, but what Twilight has lost to Anon is as staggering in its own way as what I have.

In that last episode of the future that Anon has denied us all... Twilight was supposed to become an alicorn.

Alicorn of what? I don't know. Maybe magic. Celestia, in the episode, claimed that Twilight got to be an alicorn by creating new magic, but that's... not precisely how it works. Alicorns don't get to be alicorns by creating new magic; I create new magic every day, and where is my princess tiara? (Okay, I am wearing one right now, but honestly, Equestria should have handed me one a long time ago, if creating new magic was the way it's achieved.) No, alicorns get to be what they are by creating new magic or expressing an extreme of magical power that relates to the principle they embody. Creating a new spell to mass produce hayfries won't make you an alicorn, unless you're going to become the Alicorn of Fast Food. In the episode, Twilight fixed Starswirl's botched alicornization spell, after swapping around all of her friends' cutie marks without the corresponding talents, but with the memories of having such talents, which frankly is such amazing and delightful chaos it almost makes me want to cry that it won't happen in real life, except that I'm all done with crying over what Anon has taken from me.

Can Anon prevent these things from happening in the future? He couldn't prevent Pinkie from getting into the Mirror Pool. But he's turned Celestia against me, so the events of my episode can't possibly happen. And he prevented Twilight from learning the crucial lesson she needed to learn, passing the test in the Crystal Empire that proved her to be more than Celestia's sycophant. Even if Celestia wanted to make Twilight an alicorn now, how could she dare, when she doesn't know if Twilight can stand on her own four hooves or not? (And right now, under Anon's influence, Twilight can't. Even Celestia can't, really.)

I've already hated Anon about as much as I can hate anyone, for everything he's done to me and to ponies I care about; I don't think the knowledge of the future I've lost can actually make me hate him more, but for a while, at least, it threatened to overwhelm what passes for my reason and make me go attack him directly, again. I managed to stay in the other universe, where Anon can't directly affect me (I think), until the impulse passed. And now I'm back, and I'm managing to hold it together, more or less.

I can't really share any of this directly with my minions. I can't show them the episodes unless I take them to Anon's world, and frankly, I don't want to take any chances that it might get back to Trixie that the Alicorn Amulet does not work the way I told her it did. Elements of Disharmony don't work together, but they might share gossip. I'll admit that more than once I've thought of kidnapping Fluttershy and bringing her to the other world to show her the episode where she "reforms" me, but the fact remains, I can't "reform" by her lights until Anon is defeated. He wants me to be a villain, and if I tried to stop being a villain, evidence suggests he'd overwhelm my mind and I'd just start being a villain again anyway... and I can't explain Anon or what he's doing to any of the Bearers. The closest I managed to come was to drop some hints to Spike. Maybe after all of this is over and Anon is defeated, I'll show Fluttershy what could have been... or maybe I won't, because why would she believe I hadn't made it all up? There are more things I can't do with my powers than I'm willing to admit to the Bearers, but creating an illusion of an alternate reality, or bringing a pony to an actual alternate reality but then creating an illusion of a disturbingly accurate cartoon rendition of our world, are both well within my capabilities.
No, as usual, it's going to just be me bearing this knowledge... me and my trusty journal that I share everything with, nowadays. Which nopony's likely to read until I'm dead. What a cheerful thought.

You and me, journal. You and me against the world. And especially against Anon.

I used to have a tiny small part of myself that would think, well, okay, I hate Anon passionately and everything he stands for but I gotta give the guy credit for one thing, I wouldn't be free today if it weren't for him. And it's true, but now I know I wouldn't have had to wait another 120 years or so for all the Bearers to die before I gained my freedom. Celestia would have given it to me, in another year or so, tops. And I could have had a friend. Something I've never had. Disharmony wants me to destroy friendships, and it's fun and I enjoy it and it generates lovely magic for me, but I've gotta admit, part of me always felt they had it coming, because why did ponies get to have friends when I had never had any?

Oh, an even more horrifying aspect of all this just occurred to me. Anon's almost certainly seen these episodes. Right? He was a fan of the show and he left his world and arrived in ours long after they were done being broadcast, because now that I've been to his world twice I know the timeflow is even and that I can calibrate well enough to determine when Anon must have left, and it was after the third season of episodes was over. So he knows that in the reality he's replacing, Celestia trusted me enough to have me freed. He knows that Fluttershy was going to befriend me and I was going to give up total wanton chaos for her sake. And he decided that no, he was going to treat me as a horrible irredeemable villain anyway, and make up stories about the awful things I must have done to Celestia and Luna, and make them believe those stories. Even if he doesn't know he has that power... how does he even reconcile having had those beliefs, when he knows what was supposed to happen?

He wanted me to be a villain. He hated me enough that he saw me make a friend, he saw me "reform", and he said to himself, no, that's not what should happen to Discord. Discord deserves to be treated like pond scum and then killed, because he's evil. Regardless of the evidence that I was not, in fact, evil. Not completely, anyway.

Gilda wants to know why I'm suddenly so mopey the last few days, since I got back. I can't very well explain to her how upset I am at having lost the chance to make a friend who was a pony, not after she and I have both agreed that friends are baggage that drag you down and hurt you. Which, I mean, they probably are, judging from what happened to her, at least if you're not a pony and you try to make friends with one, but I'd have liked to try.

But Gilda's right; now that I'm done with this journal entry I need to shake the mope off, and go recruiting! There's a little filly who needs to add another jeweled accessory to her current ensemble that I need to go chat with.

I began silently observing Diamond Tiara in the morning, when she got up. She went through a tedious routine of having a servant brush out her mane and coat before she was permitted to enter the Grand and Glorious Presence of her mother, Spoiled Rich (née Spoiled Milk. Most earth ponies adopt the same second name on marriage, but it's usually the stallion who changes, such as Carrot Field becoming Carrot Cake. I can see why a pony named Spoiled Milk would rather be named Rich, though. Although to be fair, what were her parents thinking? Or her husband's parents, for that matter; Filthy Rich is also a terrible name to be saddled with. It's not hard to figure out why they named their daughter Diamond Tiara.)

Spoiled Rich proceeded to spend the lengthy, rather sumptuous breakfast in lecturing her daughter. Actually I'm not even sure I can dignify it by calling it a lecture. It was more like a tightly controlled rant. About the deportment expected of young fillies of the Rich family, the areas where Diamond was expected to apply her education, and the inferiority of blank flanks. No, seriously, I'm not
making this up. Blank flanks. Like she was an arrested adolescent perpetually trapped a week after cuteceañera. I can't help but wonder if this is Anon's work – surely an entitled, narcissistic, bullying filly is more than capable of coming up with "blank flanks" as a reason to bully her classmates on her own, without encouragement from a frankly psychotic mother? I've never before heard a grown pony give a fig for whether an unrelated foal has a cutie mark yet or not.

Admittedly in Celestia's Brave New Equestria, it's now apparently a very unusual thing for an adult not to have a cutie mark, so adults have been known to engage in some concern-trolling when they meet a fellow adult with an unadorned flank. Back in my day, it was common for adult ponies to have failed to acquire their Mark of Locked-Down Destiny And Loss Of Options; a lot of ponies were jacks of all trades (a term which didn't exist back then, either, because it wasn't assumed that if you are a generalist who's good at many things but not a specialist at any, you must be a donkey because no pony could possibly fail to have one, and just one, single solitary special talent.) Nowadays, adults have cutie marks, or other adults avoid them, don't give them jobs, and tsk at them a lot. But foals? Seriously, mocking a foal who hasn't gotten a cutie mark yet... who does that? (Spoiled Rich, apparently.)

There were so many hilarious things I longed to do to Spoiled Rich, but I heroically forebore; it wasn't going to win Diamond over to my employ if I humiliated her mother completely, as much fun as it would be. So I waited as she listened to her mother's lecture, nodding in all the right places in the universal foal style of "I am actually daydreaming about something interesting and tuning you out, but I have to pretend to be listening". Finally, she was released to go to school, meeting up with her minion Silver Goon shortly after leaving her family's estate. Given her parents' ostentatious display of wealth, I was rather surprised Diamond wasn't taken to school in a carriage drawn by servants, but then, Ponyville is an earth pony town and earth ponies frown on signs of physical weakness and/or "laziness", at least from ponies who aren't disabled.

The first thing she said to Silver Spoon as soon as they had trotted out of earshot was "I am so sick of my mom."

"What's she done this time?"

Diamond Tiara rolled her eyes. "She wants me to do something to get back at the blank flanks. Like, every day, it's all about how I'm so smart and so special and I need to prove it to everyone because I'm a daughter of the Rich family and by the way, I need to put those blank flanks in their places, and I'm like, Mom, what do you think I've been doing? I don't need a lecture from her to tell me what to do about three uppity foals who think they're so great just because two of them are related to the Bearers of Harmony! But it's not like I can do anything to them anymore, with that jerkface monkey of theirs. But my mom doesn't even get that!"

"Doesn't she even know what he did to us?"

"Of course she knows. Daddy was there, remember? He even thanked the stupid monkey. But Mom doesn't care. She's not going to go to the Princess and get Monkeyface punished for laying paws on you and me, because he's a stinking Hero of Equestria, so it's my job to try to work around him." Diamond sighed explosively. "I don't even want to be doing this stupid stuff. I don't want to even be in this stupid school with all these plebes and hick farmers. You and me should be in a prep school in Fillydelphia, getting ready to go to Mareton School for Business! We have our cutie marks. In olden days we'd be mares now! Why do we even have to go to this stupid school?"

"Well, neither of us have had... you know. The Big E."

Diamond snorted. "ES-trus. You can say it. It's not a bad word."
Silver Spoon looked embarrassed. "Mom wants me to be ladylike."

"Your mom is soft. Does she think your great-grandma got control of that land and got the Diamond Dogs off it and got loans to start a silver mine and turned it into the biggest silver mine in Equestria because she was ladylike? She's a good manager and all, but she doesn't have a lot of drive. I bet the mines will do better once you're in charge, Silver."

"Maybe. I'm just saying, right now we're not mares. There's a lot we've got to learn, and I don't want to go away and live in a dorm with a lot of fillies I don't know, do you?"

"It'd be better than this." Diamond kicked a rock. "Stupid jerkface monkey. Stupid blank flanks. I wanna do something! Like when I was class president, or when I was running the Foal Free Press!" She kicked another rock. "Maybe I ought to get my mom to get the rule about term limits removed, because I'm pretty sure I can beat Twist in the next class president election just like I beat her the first time."

"But she can't run next time, because of the term limits."

"Well, then, who's gonna? One of the blank flanks? A colt?" The two of them snickered at the very possibility that a foal of the male gender could possibly win a school election. Oh, the naivete. Not to mention more of Anon's handiwork; sexism as blatant as that should have been a hundred years in the past, although there were certainly undercurrents that discouraged stallions from politics in recent memory. "If I get the term limits taken off, so you can be president for more than a year at a time, then both Twist and I can run." She sighed. "But that's a long way off."

I was not particularly interested in a discussion of elementary school politics, so I chose this moment to pop in. "Hello, ladies! Heading off to school on this fine morning?"

They both screamed and attempted to run away, but I might have done a teensy little bit of space warping, so their attempts to gallop away from me resulted in them galloping toward me. Diamond was the quicker of the two to react, rearing up, wheeling on her hind legs, and galloping in the opposite direction, for what little good it did her since that just brought her back to where she'd started from. "Stop it!" she screamed at me. "Let us go, or else!"

That was hilarious. You just haven't seen comedy until you see a tiny little school filly, hardly more than two heads tall on her fours, glaring up at a ten-head-tall god of chaos and making threats. I chortled. "Or else?" I asked, chuckling. "Is there a noun that goes after that phrase?"

"Huh?" Diamond Tiara might have had a keen reaction time, but obviously she hadn't been paying a lot of attention in language arts.

"Or else what?" I clarified.

"M-My daddy's very powerful around here! You don't want to cross me, or you'll make him an enemy!"

I laughed outright. "Your daddy? You mean the fellow I turned into a cat when I first broke loose and made Ponyville my Chaos Capital, right?" I hadn't turned him into a literal cat any more than I'd turned Big Macintosh into a literal dog; I'd just made him think he was a cat, because a wealthy businesspony acting like a cat is much funnier than a cat acting like a cat, and in the midst of my chaos I doubted that I could get a cat to act like a businesspony even if that was what he was normally. So Filthy Rich had gone around chasing mice, drinking milk out of saucers, and licking his hooves, all the while dressed in his usual tie and cravat, because that was comedy gold. I had transformed him to make him significantly plumper than usual, because he's a businesspony, which
makes him a... wait for it... fat cat. Oh, I crack myself up sometimes.

"Please don't turn us into weird things," Silver Sponge was mumbling frantically, prostrate on the ground with her hooves over her head. "Please, please, don't do anything weird to us, please..."

I teleported her into my arms, which I held in a cradling position, and I looked down at her with a broad avuncular smile. She shrieked. "Oh, never fear, my dear filly, I'm not here to—"

"LEAVE HER ALONE!" Showing more courage than common sense, Diamond Tiara attacked me, raining blows onto my legs with all of the strength of a tiny little filly a fifth of my size. It was adorable. "LET GO OF HER RIGHT NOW OR YOU WILL BE SORRY!"

I set the shrieking Silver Spring down on the ground. "Oh, come off it," I growled. "I haven't harmed her one single bit! You fillies are so excitable."

"Leave us alone," Silver moaned, her voice shaking and plainly on the verge of sobs. "Please, please, leave us alone..."

"You heard her! Leave us alone!"

"And as I said before... or what?" I glared down at Diamond Tiara with my best intimidating scowl. She quailed for a moment, and then rallied, glaring right back at me. I do so love the ferociousness of a brave pony, particularly ones who are ludicrously outmatched. I mean, a six-head-tall on her fours alicorn is still outmatched when she faces me, but that at least looks like a fight she could conceivably manage to hold her own in if I make a stupid mistake. The two-head-tall earth filly was beyond hilarious. It was like being attacked by a declawed, toothless kitten who doesn't realize how outmatched she is... or knows it, and fears it, but thinks that if she fakes it hard enough I won't notice.

"I'm going to tell Anon," she said, with that kind of fiercely smug expression ponies get when they think they've checkmated you. "Even if Daddy can't do anything about you, he can."

"Really," I said in my most deadpan voice. "You're going to go crawling to the guy you just referred to as a 'stupid monkey', to beg him for help. After the way he humiliated you." I sighed deeply. "And here I would have thought that the daughter of Filthy Rich would have some pride in herself, and some sense of dignity. Apparently not. I suppose I'm just wasting my time, thinking of offering you power."

Diamond blinked. "Offering me... what?"

"Power. My dear child, do you seriously think I'm here just to torment you? You're a child. When I want to torment ponies I pick on adults. Children are entirely too used to being pushed around by entities more powerful than they are for reasons that seem incomprehensible. The chaos I inflict on adult ponies when I step in and turn their worlds upside down? That's something foals like you have to deal with all the time. There's nothing entertaining about doing something to a foal that their own parents probably do on a regular basis."

Diamond's scowl got deeper, though at least Silver Spin stopped whimpering. "My parents don't inflict chaos on me!"

"Really? What about the time Anon physically overpowered you and tormented you, and your father's reaction was to say you deserved it and he respected Anon for teaching you a lesson? Was that at all anything you'd have expected your father to do?"

The disharmonious emotions that surged through her would have had most foals bawling their eyes out, but Diamond Tiara was made of sterner stuff, it seems. Her eyes got a little glittery and moist,
"Daddy had to do that! Anon's a hero of Equestria! If he didn't – if he stood up for me, then – then the newspapers might—"

"Don't be silly, child, no one would look down on a stallion for defending his daughter. Even against a Hero of Equestria. But I admit, while your convoluted rationalization is absurd, you are getting at a deeper truth, hidden below your ability to perceive it. You're right that your father had no choice, not against Anon's mind control powers."

Silver Sidekick chose this moment to pipe up. "Anon doesn't have mind control powers..."

"Really? Then how would you explain why he sold out his darling daughter after she was attacked by a mutant monkey?"

Diamond was staring at me in shock. "Is... is that why it happened?"

"Absolutely. Your daddy couldn't have stopped himself any more than he could have not chased mice when I convinced him he was a cat."

"How can Anon have mind control powers?" Silver Pooch asked me disbelievingly. "He's not a unicorn. He's a human! They aren't even supposed to have powers!"

"Have you, perhaps, ever noticed that literally everyone except for the two of you seem to think he's the bees' knees?" I floated above Diamond, coiling my body around so my face was looking straight into hers. "Which suggests that either the two of you are completely wrong... or that something is affecting everypony's mind but yours."

"Well, obviously then something's affecting their minds! But how do I know that's not you?" Diamond snapped.

I rolled my eyes. "Dear child, in case you have forgotten, I hate Anon. And the feeling is mutual. He's tried to kill me, multiple times. Why would I brainwash anyone to think of him as a noble hero?"

"Because that doesn't make any sense, and not making sense is a thing you do?" Diamond said triumphantly.

"Just because ponies think something doesn't make any sense doesn't mean there isn't a good reason for it," I said, irritated. "I have no desire to see Anon succeed at anything, trust me."

"But if Anon has mind control powers, why aren't we affected?" Silver Spin asked.

"Because Anon doesn't like you. The same reason his powers don't affect me, honestly. He needs everypony he likes to think of him as a great hero. But he thinks of you — I pointed at Diamond — "as a pathetic bully, and you —" at her sidekick — "as a mere sycophant."

"I'm not a pathetic bully! I'm the heir to the Rich family!" Diamond snarled. "And Silver Spoon is the great-granddaughter of Silver Bits, the founder of the Silver Bits Mining Company! Just because Anon doesn't know anything about business or industry —"

"My dear, you're preaching to the choir here," I said, wearing an adorable choircolt outfit. "Anon knows very, very little about our world, and thinks he knows it all. But because of his mind control powers, and that idiotic sword of his, everypony who should have some common sense is instead forced to agree with him, and treat him as if he's the most important person on the planet and the most knowledgeable about everything. And that is why I've come to you. Because the fact that Anon doesn't like you, and has therefore left you sufficient free will to hate him, makes you, potentially,
capable of helping to protect Equestria from him... with my help, of course."

"Yeah, well, why should I believe you?" Diamond challenged. "I know you're a bad guy. What makes you better than Anon?"

"I left you alone." I'd left all of the foals alone. Partly out of gratitude – their class bickering with one another had been the impetus that finally gave me the last bit of energy I needed to break free. The last little bit had come from the Cutie Mark Crusaders, but Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon making fun of *them* in the gardens had been part of what had left them stressed enough that my influence was able to make such best pals feud over the meaning of my lovely visage. Partly because of what I'd said to Diamond earlier – unbalancing foals or making them see chaotic illusions is actually kind of pointless, because foals are no stranger to being unbalanced or to seeing imaginary things, generally speaking. "And I may have made your father think he was a cat, but I never interfered in his relationship with you." He had, in fact, rolled onto the floor and then rubbed his head against his daughter's forelegs, purring. While Diamond had been somewhat upset at the time – I seem to recall multiple pointless screams of "WHAT'S HAPPENING?!!", as if repeating it more loudly and insistently was going to help a cat answer the question – there had been little question of her cat daddy's love for her. It's not that I can't break apart parents and foals, and back in the old days I used to do it all the time – being tossed out of your family home by your parents might have been unpleasant for a foal, but there were pie bushes everywhere, so none of them would have starved – but after more than a thousand years in stone... well, I really just hadn't wanted to. Most of the ponies I'd unbalanced that day, with the exception of the Bearers, had found the changes I'd made to their psyche to be delightful and liberating... if deeply humiliating after they'd come back to themselves. But I hadn't been out to be as cruel as I could possibly be, that day; I'd just been so happy that I was finally free, and I'd wanted to share that happiness, and the joy of chaos. The Bearers were different; I'd *had* to disable them, and even there, I'd pulled my punches. Chaos isn't permanent. The five I'd unbalanced would have reverted to themselves eventually; only Twilight Sparkle was supposed to be permanently crushed and rendered incapable of having friends, ever.

"You still turned him into a cat!"

"Well, I won't apologize," I huffed indignantly. "He *enjoyed* being a cat. Your father works hard and has to use his brain all day, crunching numbers, making decisions... don't you think it might be fun for him to be able to let go and worry about nothing more than whether or not he can get a bowl of milk when he wants it?" I straightened up. "But I *will* say I don't plan to do it again. I wanted revenge on Princess Celestia, you see. I'd been bound in stone for more time than you can easily imagine, unable to move, to talk, to see – so when I got free, I felt the need for a little payback. You're no stranger to that desire yourself, I've seen."

"But my father never did anything to you!"

I shrugged. "You can't hurt Celestia by hurting Celestia. She'll endure *any* hardship for the sake of her 'dear little ponies.'" I pitched my voice high, mocking Celestia's. "In order to hurt her, I had to make her feel her ponies were being hurt... even though very few of you actually *suffered*, strictly speaking. But I'm over all that! The only one I want revenge on now is Anon. And that's why I've come to offer you a chance to make him suffer." I leaned down. "What I did to you and your father wasn't personal, and I have no intention of repeating it. What Anon did to you, and to your father, was done to *hurt* you, you specifically, because he likes the blank flanks better than he likes you. He wanted you to suffer, and he mind controlled your father into agreeing. Are you just going to take that? Going to roll over and let a coatless monkey ruin your life?"

"Well, what am I supposed to do about it?" Diamond snapped. "He's a lot bigger than me and he's got a lot of powerful friends! If I bucked him between the legs I'd probably get suspended from
school and grounded for a year, and I'm an earth pony, so I don't have fancy-schmancy unicorn magic and I can't very well hit him with a lightning bolt."

I floated in air again and coiled myself to make a half-circle around her. "Diamond, Diamond, Diamond," I said in my most disappointed voice. "How unimaginative. How disappointing. The filly who ran Gabby Gums' column in the Foal Free Press has no idea what she could possibly do to Anon?"

"I'm not running the Foal Free Press anymore, Featherweight is."

"True, true. But what if you had, in your possession, a magical item that allows you to persuade other ponies? Specifically, to persuade other ponies to think the worst of anyone you choose to target?"

"I'm an earth pony. How am I supposed to use a magic item?"

"By being yourself." I teleported to a standing position in front of her, holding out the item in question. The image of a caribou bull's hoof on a cow's head had faded, so that now the image of a hoof on a head was stylized and it wasn't clear what species or gender either belonged to. "This is the Element of Cruelty... an Element of Disharmony, opposite to the Elements of Harmony and equally as powerful, albeit in a different way. You don't need to be a unicorn to bear this Element any more than Applejack needs to be one to carry her Element of Harmony."

Silver Splurge took this moment to put her two bits in. "Anything named the Element of Cruelty sounds like you'd only have it if you were a bad guy."

"Yeah, good point, and since you are a bad guy, and you're trying to get me to work with you... I'm not stupid, Discord! And I'm not going to be a villain!"

"In Anon's mind, you already are," I said bluntly. "Of course it sounds bad. It's an Element of Disharmony, and you ponies have been taught all your lives that disharmony is the worst thing ever. But consider this. What if a charismatic leader of ponies was convincing all of them to jump off a cliff – or dive into the rocks below, if they're pegasi? Can harmony truly do anything, when ponies all agree that someone who is objectively terrible and dangerous for them is in fact wonderful and should be obeyed without question? Harmony is about agreement between ponies. Wouldn't it be a noble act, to stop an evil leader that ponies trust and believe to be good, by mocking that leader? By cruelly harassing and haranguing them until they show their true colors? If kindness and generosity and loyalty all conspire to make an evil pony seem good and noble, and honesty and magic are fettered by that leader's power... what could stand in the way, but the cruelty of the truth? Or even exaggerations of the truth, if that's what it takes to save ponykind."

"What are you talking about? Anon's not a leader of anything."

"No, he's worse than that." I transformed into a bird, and tweeted in her ear. "Anon didn't just mind-control your father. He's controlling the Princesses and the Bearers of Harmony." I transformed back. "Now you can say a little bird told you Anon's dark secret." I grinned.

"That sounds really implausible," Silver Slurpee said. "I don't like him and I think he's a jerk, but you're trying to make it sound like he's evil."

"That's because he is. What else would you call a fellow who knows what will happen in the future, and denies ponies their rightful chance to be a hero so he can take their places and make everyone worship him? What else could you call someone who mind-controls mares into falling in love with him? Who makes the Princess of the Sun think herself too weak and incompetent to fight off a foe on
her own, so that she has to summon Anon for any kind of threat? To say nothing of the fact that he enjoys physically harming and terrorizing young fillies. What part of any of that makes him sound like he's *good*?"

Diamond scowled at me. "So if he's so tough, what good am I supposed to do? Either you aren't strong enough to beat him, which means I don't have a chance, or you just want to watch ponies do it instead of you, which means you're probably lying."

"Oh, but you have an advantage I don't, against Anon. You're *fillies*. He can't kill you. He can't even do you any serious harm." I scowled. "His weapon can kill me, and almost has, on more than one occasion. But he can't use it on you. Even Anon can't make ponies overlook a grown adult and supposed hero doing any *real* harm to young fillies." I hoped.

"You've got a point... but what does that mean I can do to him? Just because he can't, like, kill me or break my legs or something... he can still hurt me. He has. And if I taunt him in public, he will. And what good would it do? Grownups won't listen to kids. I'd get my daddy to go after him, but if he can mind control my daddy into thinking Anon's right and I'm wrong, then what am I supposed to do?"

"Simple. Make him hated." I leaned down and dangled the Element of Cruelty over her head. "With this, you'll be immune to his mind control tactics; he likes to make his opponents foolish and overconfident, but he won't be able to do that to you. You *may* be able to protect your mother and father, as well, and almost certainly you should be able to protect Silver Spook, over there."

"Hey! My name is Silver *Spoon!*"

"The Element of Cruelty makes it easier for you to inspire cruelty in others. Right now, everypony in town thinks Anon's a great hero. But what if somepony dug up some dirt on him, and started spreading it around? What if there were rumors, and they made him look awful, and the power of the Element made it so you could overcome his power, so that the mind control that makes everypony love him faltered, and your power made them hate him, instead? He can't bear that; he'd throw a lot of his power into reversing it, and that might weaken him, and free the ones he has the most control over. Perhaps the Princesses themselves would finally be freed, because he was spending all his power here in Ponyville instead of continuing to direct it at them. Who knows?"

I had no idea if Anon had limits like that – he has limits, I know that much, but could a plan like what I was describing actually strain them? I have no idea, but I'll never find out if nopony ever tries it, now will I?

Diamond looked thoughtful. "I'd have to have a way to get the rumors out to the grownups. They never listen to kids, but they read all the Gabby Gums columns."

"Take the Foal Free Press back over?" Silver Splash said.

"No, Miss Cheerilee pretty much has total control over that, and besides, if I'm gonna spread rumors about Anon... nopony can know that they're coming from *me*, or he'll just go tell Daddy to make me stop... Oh, I know!" Her eyes lit up. "Silver, this is perfect! We'll get Daddy to fund us and we'll create an *underground newspaper!*"

My great love of anarchy in all its forms meant I knew exactly what she was talking about, but I was rather shocked that a sheltered Ponyvillian filly from a wealthy background would. "An underground newspaper?" I said, eyebrow raised. "Pray tell, what would transmitting newspapers through underground caves do?"
Diamond Tiara gave me an appropriately withering look. "An 'underground newspaper' is one that isn't authorized by anyone in power, duh," she said. "How do you not know that?"

I laughed. "I know it perfectly well," I said, ruffling her mane and making her tiara fall onto her face, which drew an even more hilarious expression from her. "I wanted to see if you knew. And you did! Good for you, and I think it's a marvelous idea!" I teleported in front of her, holding the amulet out. "So. Is that a yes?"

"What do I get if I'm working for you?"

I smirked. "Oh, trust a businesspony's daughter to ask that one. The answer is, nothing. Any direct aid I give you could ruin you if it was traced back to me. What you get is the joy of ruining Anon's life. I might give you a tidbit or two of information to feed your rumor mill, but if you were expecting me to give you your very own human to ride around on or something like that, then no."

"Why would I want my own human to ride around on?"

"Well, human girls want ponies to ride around on, so why wouldn't pony fillies want humans? Seemed logical to me."

"Don't quit your chaos job. Your logic isn't very good," Diamond sniped.

"I wasn't planning to, but thank you, I'll take your no doubt vital opinion under advisement. So! Ready to save Equestria, and your father, from a jerk with mind control powers, and have fun doing it? Or are you too greedy to take it on if I don't offer you ice cream or bits or something?"

She heaved a sigh. "I guess if I asked you for something you would probably turn it into something stupid that I didn't want anyway, but... wait, no. I want a disguise spell, like in an amulet or something, one for me and one for Silver, that makes us look like grownup mares. And we should look beautiful, but be totally normal earth ponies who won't look weird to anypony but also they don't look anything like us. Because if we're doing an underground newspaper we're going to need to find places to sell the newspaper and that means pretending to be grownups because even when I have bits grownups don't take me seriously and we don't want anypony finding out I have anything to do with this newspaper. And you have to give it to us or we won't be able to do anything about your stupid Anon and that means we can't take your stupid amulet."

That... was actually a far more intelligent and reasonable condition than I expected from a filly. "Very well, miss. You drive a hard bargain, but I suppose I have no choice." I manifested two hoof rings, foal sized. "Wear one of these, and see what happens."

Of course, the fillies tested them. I had resisted the temptation to make the disguises striking or unusual in any regard, and you have no idea how hard that was, but Diamond was right, their disguises needed to blend in. So Diamond became a blue earth mare with a gray mane and the cutie mark of a newspaper; Silver became a green earth mare with a blonde mane and a spring for a cutie mark, because I couldn't resist throwing something funny in.

After confirming that they sounded like mares, and looked like mares, and when they walked around they couldn't see anything suggesting that the other one wasn't really a mare, and that they actually had the reach and weight of mares rather than fillies, they took off their rings, and Diamond agreed to be Cruelty's Bearer. "Just give me the stupid thing already. Hey, can I put it behind one of the diamonds in my tiara?"

I shrugged. "Let's find out." I snapped my talon, and the Element reappeared behind the center diamond. It was large, bulky in comparison to the tiny diamond, and completely out of place. I loved
Diamond checked in a mirror I thoughtfully provided her. "No, that looks stupid. Okay... give it to me as a necklace, I guess. But that icky picture on it has to go. Gross."

"What, the symbol of cruelty? You don't want to show off to the world how you crush your enemies under your hooves?" I said mockingly.

"No, I don't, because I don't need to be wearing a sign around my neck saying 'look at me, I'm working for a villain!' Make it something else."

I replaced the hoof with a diamond, pressing down on a stylized pony head. Diamond studied it. "I guess... this isn't totally awful," she said. "But it's still weird. What if we put it in a locket so you'd have to open it to see the symbol and then I could put a picture of my daddy in front of it so no one would know what it really was?"

Now I was impressed with my choice. I'd never thought of that, myself. "Done." I snapped my talon, and she was finally satisfied with the appearance of her necklace. "Go forth and bring pain to your enemies, young harbinger of Disharmony!"

"Drama llama," Diamond huffed. "Come on, Silver!"

"We are so totally late for class," Silver moaned.

"Who cares about class? Mom has gone off to her social club by now and Daddy's at work. So both of us are calling out sick today. We've got articles to write!"

Ah, the energy of youth. So excited about their new project. It reminds me of times when I talked Celestia into skipping out on meeting with our tutors so we could go exploring (this usually involved bringing Luna, who would otherwise have tattled on us, in order to bribe her into silence.)

Which, indirectly, reminds me of all the reasons I hate Anon. Goodness. I need to go do something to get my mind off all this hatred. I mean, it's not mindless hatred, I very much have excellent reasons for it, but it's ruining my digestion.

Maybe I'll go listen to the Panauricon for a while, see what juicy gossip I can dig up. I can't rely on my minions for everything, after all.

This is hilarious!

Already my little minion is proving herself. That didn't take long at all!

My efforts to make Rarity jealous, way back when, have finally borne fruit. Remember back when I was interviewing the Elements, and I convinced Rarity that she was Anon's least favorite out of all her friends? Well, after some time percolating in the background, that cup of coffee seems to finally be running over. Our dear fashionista has demanded that Anon prove to her that my cruel and callous words were, in fact, lies, and that he loves her as much as he loves any of the others, by taking her out to dinner in Canterlot, to an extremely fancy, trendy, purveyor of haute cuisine. Quite aside from the fact that this probably means Anon won't get anything to eat – fancy Canterlot food tends heavily to flowers, and artisanal hay from the finest of magically bred herbal grasses, neither of which humans can eat, and not a whole lot else – Sweetie Belle apparently told the rest of the Crusaders about this, and Diamond's spies were on the job. (Yes. She pays informants to spy on the Cutie Mark Crusaders. She always has; I didn't talk her into it.) So Diamond promptly went to Sugar Cube Corner, ordered a milkshake and a muffin, and taunted Pinkie Pie about this.
I have to hand it to Diamond, she knows how to find weak points almost as well as I do. Rainbow Dash would have been too arrogant to care that Anon's spending time with just one of her friends and not her; she's a lot more secure in her belief that she's the best than she might appear. Fluttershy would have been too kind and self-effacing to say anything. Twilight is allergic to looking as if she thinks she's better than her friends, so she would never have objected. Applejack was the pony I couldn't convince to be jealous of how much Anon supposedly loved her other friends more. But Pinkie? Deep down inside, Pinkie Pie seems to be secretly convinced that unless she works nonstop at making her friends love her three hundred percent of the time, they'll all hate her instead. Really, it's quite laughable how desperate she is for her friends' attention. Doesn't she realize how ridiculous she looks? If I did have any friends, which is hardly a problem I'd ever expect to have or particularly want, I certainly wouldn't be so insecure.

In any case, Diamond managed to successfully convince Pinkie that Anon might possibly hate her, and certainly loves Rarity more than her, and that she needs to go do something spectacular to prove her love and win Anon back from her supposed friend, right now, or lose him forever... on her first day on the job! This filly's going places, I tell you. None of my other minions hit the ground running quite like that. I must say I'm pleased with my choice. And how wonderful is it that the disharmony I set in motion months ago is finally coming to the foreground! Who knows, if things I started can run in the background for this long, maybe there's hope for my plunder vines! (Probably not, but a draconequus can dream.) So Pinkie is also going to go to Canterlot. I'm not sure what she's planning, but it's Pinkie Pie. I trust her to come up with something suitably chaotic for even my tastes.

Oh, how dearly I want to watch it happen! I know I shouldn't. It's dangerous; he's undoubtedly going to bring that damn sword of his. I could get just as much bang for my bits by planting a few ears, if it's just information I want. And if they catch me, aside from the not inconsiderable possibility of being skewered, I also have to consider that my sudden appearance will likely remind Rarity of exactly who told her that she was Anon's least favorite. Being that she'd been a bit under my spell at the time, I have gotten the distinct impression she doesn't actually remember that she heard it from me, and of course if she remembers she'll probably decide that it was all an evil plan of mine to sow strife between her and Anon. (And since technically that is exactly what is was, I can't even hold that against her.) So I really should not go in disguise to watch the fireworks.

Which, of course, means that I'm going to.

Oh, I am so very pleased that I didn't miss that. The looks on everyone's faces! I would have been quite put out if I had to miss entertainment like this.

I went to said fancy Canterlot restaurant, L'Enchantment, as a fly on the wall. Literally. Compound eyes are quite amazing; I highly recommend them. A less amazing aspect of being a fly was that I kept being distracted by the wonderful smells of the rotting garbage in the dumpster outside, and I kept having to remind myself, "listen, self, you are Discord. Lord of Chaos. You don't need to go buzzing around rotting meat."

I had forgotten about Rarity's generosity thing. Even in the middle of demanding that Anon pay an outrageous sum of money to take her to dinner, she still went out of her way to choose perhaps the only haute cuisine restaurant in Canterlot that serves meat eaters. Only chicken and fish, like most establishments in Equestria that will serve meat, but Canterlot is landlocked and quite far away from any major bodies of water – aside from salmon that swim up the river running down the Canterhorn to spawn, there are really not so many fish to be found anywhere near it, and of course they fly in magically preserved fish from the eastern coastal cities but once you cast magical preservation spells on fish, they never taste the same. On the other hand, there are actually quite a few chicken farms a short distance down the mountain from Canterlot proper, so eggs and chicken are generally fresh.
There were plenty of wealthy ponies there, eating the aforementioned flowers and artisanal hay, but there were also a couple of griffin ambassadors, and a minotaur (technically they're not omnivores, because they don't have to eat meat to meet all their biological needs... but they can eat meat, and like the other species in the Taur nations they are part-ape chimeras, and apes are omnivores. The other species, centaurs and ikaroi, need meat more, but minotaur culture, which focuses on toughness and the ability to commit or stand up to violence, favors it for largely psychological reasons.) There was also a slender, delicate noble-looking unicorn mare who was delicately and nobly devouring a chicken dinner. (With tiny little bites on her tiny little fork, but the speed with which that thing kept returning to her mouth! I wouldn't have been surprised if her cutie mark was a steam shovel.)

So Rarity was there eating the artisanal hay and a plate full of flowers, which were probably arranged to look beautiful if you like boring, harmonious flower arrangements, and Anon was having some sort of chicken and pasta dish. Rarity was giggling as Anon regaled her with stories from his world. I think they were stories of things that didn't actually happen, that came from video games; I have rather less familiarity with human video games than I do with human films, theater and comic books, because the spells I used to observe the entertainments of other worlds didn't allow me to interact with those entertainments while I was in stone, and there is nothing more boring than watching a person, whether human or pony, play a video game when you not only can't touch the controls yourself, you can't even heckle the player. But I'm quite certain that Anon never actually fought an alien invasion of his homeworld, nor did he and a group of his pals do battle with chimerical beasts similar to those found in the Everfree, because in fact in his world there's no such thing as a chimera. We can't exist without magic. It turns out, in worlds without magic, every creature has to be made up of solely its own kind of organs and no other animal's. How dull!

In the middle of a lengthy story about how he dug rocks out of the ground to build a house that then got trashed by other humans and an exploding mobile plant that looks like a green vertical pig (most of this story was interminably dull, but I resolved to find out exactly what a "vertical pig" looks like, because the idea of roaming plants that follow you to your house and then explode was delightful enough as it was but the notion that they look like vertical pigs sounded like pure comedy gold), Pinkie showed up. With multiple musical instruments. She was wearing a short, fluffy ruffled skirt, white with pink polka dots (I approve of polka dots, but does a pink pony really need to wear pink ones? What, is she afraid that ponies will forget her name?), and when she arrived, she ran in, went to her hindleg knees in a way ponies really should not be able to and slid across the room on said knees, and without further ado, pulled out a fiddle, a drum set and a flute.

And then she started to sing, while playing the fiddle and the drums (somehow... there was chaotic magic involved, that's all I can tell you. Turns out a fly's compound eyes might be excellent for seeing every angle of a situation, but not so great for seeing magical patterns.)

"My heart is paralyzed
My head was over sized
I'll take the high road like I should
Maybe it's not meant to be
That she's better for you than me
You love my friend most, and that's good

Well that's okay, but I can't leave until I've had the chance to say

That I'd save you from a bugbear
Endure Fluttershy's stare
If you'd just love me as much as you do Rare
Please don't leave me, I'm no good at goodbyes!
I love you just as much as cupcakes
So I can't live with this heartache
Anything you want that I can bake for you, I'd make
Help me, help me, I think I want to die
If you're going to say goodbye"

Both Anon and Rarity were staring at her as if she'd grown three heads. There were tears welling up in the poor dear's eyes, but gamely, she went on with her second verse:

"My heart still feels the sting
You are my everything
I'll never find a love like yours
I know it's plain to see
You prefer Rarity
She's elegant, and I'm a bore

Well that's okay, but I can't leave until I've had the chance to say
I don't have to be your only
But please don't leave me lonely
I know she's beautiful and I'm just homely
But please don't leave me, I'm no good at goodbyes!
I'll play the second fiddle
But love me just a little
You can have us both and you be in the middle
Help me, help me, I think I want to die
If you're going to say goodbye"

She then played a complex flute near-solo, backed minimally by the fiddle and the drum. Everypony (and everyone not a pony) was staring at her, and at Rarity and Anon, who were both completely shell-shocked.

One thing I've never understood about the pony concept of lyrics is that they like to repeat them, pointlessly. After her solo, Pinkie started reprising the verses she'd sung after her "chance to say" lines. Couldn't she change it up some? Not that I've ever been a fan of the way ponies break out into song at the drop of a mike – it's a side effect of all the harmony magic, and it's deeply irritating – but if I were to suddenly break out into song, I'd make sure all the verses were actually different.

Now, as I've mentioned, I can sense disharmony. I can also sense the absence of it. Anon was just radiating complete confusion, and Rarity... I couldn't tell what Rarity was feeling. It was something that was causing her pain, but aside from that it wasn't in the range I can detect... which implied to me one of those soppy empathetic pains that was going to result in her bursting out with heartfelt apologies to Pinkie Pie and then the two of them learning an important friendship lesson about caring, or something. None of that was on my agenda, so I decided to do something about it.

One could reasonably guess, probably, that Anon, the person, didn't really want his marefriends fighting over him. I mean, maybe? Having attractive individuals that you're romantically inclined towards feuding with each other over who gets the best access to you can be a turn-on for many (myself included, I must admit)... but Anon is the sort that thinks himself a paladin of virtue and righteousness, and for such a person it seems out of character to want disharmony between one's nearest and dearest. On the other hoof... feuding between marefriends makes great drama. I already knew that at least on one occasion, Anon's power seems to have favored creating interesting drama over doing what Anon would probably have wanted – it granted me entirely ridiculous and implausible levels of swordsdraconequusship so that I could fight Anon with a sword for no
particularly good reason, even though I'm sure Anon would have preferred to skewer me from the
getgo. So I decided to find out whether Anon's power was being controlled primarily by his desires,
or by the desires of whatever subconscious part of his mind or whatever entity might be creating a
story out of all of our lives. I knew my power was no match for Anon's – but if his power cared more
about creating an interesting story than about satisfying every passing whim of his, I thought it might
well let me get away with it.

So I pushed disharmony outward, just as I used to do to the foals who had class trips to see me, when
I was still in stone.

Various ponies, and the griffons and minotaur, began whispering to themselves as Pinkie sang
through her final, repetitive verses... not necessarily very discreetly. Things like "has that mare any
idea how much she's embarrassing herself?" and "poor pathetic thing, how desperate do you have to
be?" But also, "who does that unicorn think she is, trying to keep a stallion all for herself? Hasn't she
ever heard of herd sisterhood?" and even "what a cad! He could at least have invited his old
fillyfriend to herd with the new one!" And, to my delight, "isn't that the human? Ugh, he's just as
repulsive looking as the rumors say he is," and "don't talk where he can hear you! Don't you
remember what they said? Humans are relentless and if you offend them they'll chase you down, kill
you and eat you!"

When Pinkie was done, she looked up at Anon with huge, pleading eyes. The kind of eyes nopony
can say no to, unless they're completely heartless, like me. But it was Rarity who broke the sudden
silence... Rarity, who had undoubtedly heard the whispers, whose emotional state had changed from
something that was probably empathy and therefore inaccessible to me, to total humiliation and some
degree of anger. "Pinkie, what were you thinking?"

"I just sang a song about what I was thinking! I could sing it again..."

"No! How can you – this is ridiculous! You were never the one who was less in Anon's eyes; I asked
him to take me here to prove that I'm not less than you! Or any of the others!"

"But neither of you invited me! You're having a private party and I wasn't invited! You know I
would have wanted to come along if you'd asked me!"

Anon facepalmed. "Pinkie... I was just..."

"No, this is ridiculous!" Rarity shrilled. "Everything must be about you all the time, mustn't it,
Pinkie? You saw that I asked Anon to take me here privately, without inviting any of the rest of you
along, and somehow in your mind this means that Anon is leaving you? We may have a herd, but we
don't have to do every single thing together!"

"But you're so much prettier than I am and so much more sophisticated and you're smarter and better
educated and you can run a business all on your own out of your own place that you bought and you
don't need to live with other ponies so they can remind you to go to bed at night! I know Anon must
love you more!" Her eyes brimmed with tears again. "I just don't want him to leave me so he can be
with just you! I know I'll be second place, or if I count all the others, maybe sixth place—"

"This is ridiculous! Anon clearly loves you more than he loves me!" Rarity shouted. "You're friendly
and sociable and undemanding and your generosity in the bedroom far surpasses my own, despite
my supposed Element, so how could he not love you more than me? I don't appreciate you rubbing
my nose in it by pretending you think he favors me over you!"

I was beside myself at how well this was working – under normal circumstances I think Rarity
would rather die than shout about her friend's bedroom prowess in the middle of a fancy restaurant.
Disharmony is truly the gift that keeps on giving. She could obviously hear enough of the quiet disapproval and mockery all around her that it was inflaming her to states of humiliation, and therefore anger, so severe that she was embarrassing herself even worse and not even noticing.

"Girls—" Anon tried to say.

"No, I will have my say! You are a wonderful man, Anon, but I know you can't possibly love all of us equally, and I know I remind you of the stuck-up human girls you knew in high school—"

"Hey, I never said that!"

"Of course you didn't, you're far too much a gentleman, but we all know it to be true." It's too bad flies can't grin, because mine would have been huge. Rarity remembered the lie I'd told her, but apparently had no recollection that it had come from me. Perfect. "But the fact that Pinkie would humiliate all of us, but especially me, with this grotesque display of neediness—"

"But I didn't come to humiliate you, Rarity!" Pinkie pleaded. "I just want Anon to love me!"

The manager of the restaurant turned up and spoke discreetly to Anon, though maybe not quite discreetly enough. "Sir, your lady friends are making a scene and disturbing the other guests. I'm going to have to ask—"

"Yeah, yeah, I get it. Just bring me the check," Anon sighed, running his hand over his face.

"He already loves you! He loves you far more than he loves me! Do you seriously question that, or is this some sort of hideous mind game intended to take even more of his attention than you already have?"

"This isn't a mind game! I just wanted him to know I love him as much as you do, and even if he loves you more I still need him!"

"Here you go, sir. We'll box up your food. I do apologize—"

"They're the ones who ought to be apologizing. I can't believe they're acting like this. Here." He handed the manager his marque of credit to pay the bill.

"So you had to come to Canterlot and interrupt our private dinner and ruin our evening?"

"He has to know how strong my feelings are! If I just waited for you guys to get back to Ponyville and just told him, that wouldn't be enough! He needs to know I'll completely embarrass myself in public just to let him know I love him!"

"Pinkie! Rarity! Shut up!" Anon snapped, loudly. "I love both of you, all right!? Now the maître d' is throwing us out of here because of the scene you're making, and neither of you needed to do any of this in the first place—"

"Throwing us out?" Rarity turned pale – well, paler. "I am a laughingstock! I'll never be able to show my face in the world of haute cuisine in Canterlot again! This is the WORST POSSIBLE THING!" She pitched over in a swoon, forcing Anon to dive to catch her.

"It's all my fault! I'm sorry!" Pinkie wailed.

"Sir, I do apologize..." It was the maître d' again. "But do you have another method of payment? Your marque doesn't appear to be funded..."
Anon turned toward the maître d’, as if in slow motion. "What?"

"There is no funding available through this letter of credit," the maître d’ said. "If perhaps you have another form of payment—"

"Try it again! It's got to work! I've got a line of thousands of bits!"

"I'm afraid that isn't possible, sir, it's coming back as... well..." He whispered to Anon, but loudly enough that I'm sure Rarity and Pinkie could both hear. As could I. Flies actually have no real sense of hearing, but of course I was using my own magical senses, and with them I can hear when I'm a stone statue, let alone when I'm a fly. I didn't stay a fly very long, though, because what the maître d’ said made my need to laugh hysterically so overpowering, I had to teleport to the roof to let the uncontrollable guffaws out. What the maître d’ had said was, "Line revoked."

Revoked! Anon's letter of credit with the Equestrian treasury was revoked! Oh, I hoped to dear Chaos it had been made retroactive – that would stick Anon with the bills for everything he'd bought on credit. Even if it was just from this point forward, though... I couldn't have timed it more perfectly if I'd tried.

As soon as I'd gotten the hysterical laughter out of my system, I went back in as a fly. Anon was arguing with the maître d’ that his letter of credit couldn’t be revoked, that there had to be some mistake, contact the ponies at the Treasury... which, of course, they couldn't do, because it was far too late at night. Banking and bureaucracy and particularly banking bureaucracy are daylight activities, a fact that I'm sure makes Luna feel deeply reassured about her equality as a diarch. Rarity was arguing that she would just pay the bill and they could investigate in the morning, and Pinkie was arguing that she should pay the bill because Anon had taken Rarity out so it wouldn't be fair to make Rarity pay and besides it was Pinkie's fault the dinner had been ruined, and then Rarity was arguing back with her that it was absurd for Pinkie to pay for a dinner she hadn't even ordered or been present at, and meanwhile Anon was pulling the "do you know who I am?" card and trying to intimidate the maître d’. Who wasn't intimidated, because if you run a restaurant that serves minotaurs and griffins you learn to stand your ground, though I was a little surprised that Anon's plot powers weren't causing the maître d’ to cower in terror and give Anon whatever he asked for. Perhaps Anon's powers had decided it was time for Anon to face an exciting challenge!

Actually, there's no perhaps about it. That has to be what was going on, because there is no other possible explanation for why this was the moment when Ember showed up with a posse of Lunar Guards that presumably Luna had deputized to her, with Starflame plainly visible in the sky, circling above, and demanded that Anon be taken into custody for the murder of the dragon child Faith.

And to think if I had done the sensible, logical thing, I would have missed all of this!

I'm so excited! I can't stop wiggling with glee. I love my minions! Particularly Diamond Tiara and Blueblood, whom I have to thank for this wonderful, wonderful night, but the fact that Gilda seems just as excited as I am is also impressing me. I mean, I know it's not going to come to much of anything in the end, but... Anon's been arrested! The dragons showed up when Luna was in charge, and Luna insisted that Anon be placed in "protective custody" until morning when Celestia would be able to deal with this, and none of the begging and wailing and pleading from Rarity or Pinkie Pie amounted to anything because Luna knows perfectly well that if she doesn't put Anon in protective custody, a pair of angry dragons might just decide to kidnap him rather than going through diplomatic channels to get him extradited. (Or, at least, she knows that this is what should reasonably happen. I'm not sure it would – if she let Anon go, his reality warping powers would probably ensure that he would end up fighting the dragons and killing them rather than being captured. But killing the beloved daughter of the current Dragon Lord would most likely trigger a war, so even if Luna knew
this, she'd still lock him up.) Sure, his jail cell is a comfy, large VIP suite in Canterlot Palace rather than a dank dungeon chamber, but you can't have everything.

Supposedly Celestia will be holding his extradition hearing in the morning. I have to go. No, really, I have to. It's a physical need. But since I'm deeply concerned with my ability to hold my disguise if, say, something happens that requires me to cackle maniacally or fall to the floor holding my stomach as I howl with laughter, I'm taking Trixie. With her Element of Deception amplifying my natural command of beguilement, I should be okay. I can't bring Gilda, though, much as she wants to see Anon get his comeuppance... she'll fight with Trixie and they'll interfere with each other and then the jig will be up. Sorry, Gilda. I'll drop some magical eyes and ears around so she can watch on her TV.

I'm sure this will come to nothing and it'll all blow over and Ember will end up joining the herd, or leaving Equestria with the belief that Anon is wonderful and totally justified, and they'll resolve the whole issue with the letter of credit... but this is the first real blow I've managed to strike against him. This is the first time I've done more than mildly inconvenience him for ten minutes. Oh, I'm as giddy as a schoolfilly on her first date! What to wear, what to wear... dear me, what do you wear to attend the humiliation of your hated nemesis, when you're going to be stuck in pony form? This requires thought.
As it happened, the very next day, Applejack's young cousin showed up at Sweet Apple Acres, which nicely prevented her from being able to go attend Anon's hearing. All the rest of them were going to be there, which probably shouldn't have filled me with as much glee as it did, but there is nothing more likely to put a big smile on my face than when I get to do things directly under my enemies' muzzles and have them be none the wiser. I attended as Twister, who after all is a unicorn of sufficient wealth and sophistication that he has two marefriends who work at the Palace. My plan had been to wear my best orange zoot suit, restyled for a pony shape of course, but Trixie convinced me that wearing bright orange to a venue where most stallions wear somber, boring colors would make it significantly harder for her to ensure that no one noticed me.

"But I want to be noticeable," I argued. "Perhaps you're content to languish in dull obscurity, but I'm Discord! I'm the life of the party! Everypony should be looking at me!"

She sighed. "As much as Trixie would enjoy seeing such stupidity earn its rightful reward... I will never be able to prove to Twilight who the better unicorn is by freeing her from Anon if Anon kills you, you idiot. Nopony should be looking at you, because you're not Discord, you're Twister, an obscure weather-working unicorn from Las Pegasus. Remember?"

"Well, is there any rule that says that Twister can't be memorable?"

"Yes, the rule of misdirection. You don't want to draw any attention to yourself while you're trying to lie and pretend to be ordinary, because you're honestly terrible at pretending to be ordinary, so the less anypony pays attention to you to notice how terrible you are at it, the better."

"I can pretend to be ordinary if I want to! I just don't want to."

"I can work at a rock farm if I have to, but I don't want to and I don't pretend I'm any good at it," Trixie retorted. "Trixie is too intelligent, sophisticated and powerful to have any talent at such a mundane and boring task. And you are much too freakish to have any real ability to pretend to be normal."

"Why, thank you. That's the sweetest thing you've ever said to me, Trixie," I said, wiping the tears from my eyes.

So Twister went to Anon's hearing dressed in, ugh, a dark brown suit. At least it didn't blend in with his gray coat – Twister's got a very limited subset of my glorious palette, as he's only gray and black. Trixie had tried to convince me I should wear a gray or black suit so it would match my coat or mane, but honestly, how can anyone stand being so colorless? I accepted dull brown as a compromise, but there are some limits to which I won't sink.

Trixie and I got into the Palace with ease. Trixie can pull off haughty Canterlot upper class unicorn with very little trouble – instead of being the Great and Powerful Trixie, or Trixie Lulamoon, she was Beatrix Moonstar. Canterlot fancy dresses frequently cover mares' cutie marks, and Trixie has, as nearly as I can tell, as many alternate identities as I do, and paperwork for all of them. (Ugh. I made Trixie forge Twister's papers. There are some things no self-respecting Spirit of Chaos should ever have to do.) A little bit of magical "these papers are obviously correct and perfect" projected through the Element of Deception, and any slight oversights were overlooked.
The first actual hurdle came when I decided I needed to talk to Blueblood about what had been going on behind the scenes. I hadn't seen Ember and Starflame's negotiation with Luna, since I was too busy watching the hilarity that was Pinkie Pie and Rarity feuding over Anon, and I wanted all the juicy details. Had Luna resisted? Thrown a temper tantrum complete with thee's and thou's and the Royal Canterlot Voice? Been coldly practical? Inquiring draconequii want to know!

But I overlooked a small problem. Both Blueblood and Trixie are Bearers of Disharmony. And while I didn't precisely tell Trixie to follow me, I didn't tell her to stay behind, either.

Court hadn't started yet and important ponies were milling about, chatting. I could see the Bearers, minus Applejack, looking nervous and miserable and in Pinkie's case bawling hysterically in Rarity's embrace saying it was all her fault. Which was of course ridiculous – Pinkie's antics may have humiliated Anon, but they had nothing to do with him being here, facing a hearing regarding his involvement in the death of a dragon. I pulled Blueblood aside to talk to him, phasing myself, him and Trixie slightly out of reality so no one could overhear the conversation. Immediately, he raised an eyebrow and sneered at Trixie. "Is this... pony... with you?" he asked, managing to make the word "pony" sound like some sort of dire epithet.

Trixie glared at him. "Well, if it isn't Prince Snobulous," she said. "I thought I heard your whiny voice."

Blueblood pretended to ignore her. "Discord, surely you could do better than a talentless, pathetic, lowborn unicorn like this one. Why is she even here?"

I tried to keep a stern expression on, but failed. I couldn't stop grinning. I just really like disharmony, okay? "Do you two know each other?" I asked.

"Unfortunately," they both said at the same time, with identical expressions of distaste on their faces. I chortled.

"I see you do! And so well that you finish each other's sentences, how delightful! Congratulations to the both of you!"

This time they looked at me with identical expressions of combined distaste and disbelief. Blueblood said, "Surely, you are not suggesting what it sounds as if you are suggesting?"

Trixie was blunter. "If you want to congratulate Trixie for surviving several years of school with this loser, you can say it like you mean it and make him go away."

"Loser? Says the traveling magician who lives in a wagon?"

"Better to live in a wagon and roam the land practicing my talent than to not have one at all!" Trixie sneered. "Or, I'm sorry, have you actually done any exploring lately? Of anything, aside from the under-tails of court-following floozies?"

"Some of us have responsibilities to the realm," Blueblood said haughtily, "and can't just go wandering off on a selfish whim. Others, apparently, won't be missed anywhere if they wander away."

"This is so exciting!" I bubbled gleefully. "Old school friends, reunited at last!"

"We are not friends!" Trixie snapped.

"No prince would stoop to befriending such a base and lowly pony," Blueblood sneered. (He sneered a lot during this incident. In fact you can pretty much imagine that any time I'm not..."
describing an expression that isn't sneering, he was sneering.) "In fact, I'd call her a peasant, except that a peasant actually has value to society, producing food for their betters to eat. This one is even less use to the world than a peasant."

That, I took exception to – both because nobles are actually completely useless for the most part, far more so than farmers and miners and other "peasants", and because it was a poor reflection on me if my chosen Element Bearer was really as useless as all that. "Now, now, Bluey. Trixie is valuable to our cause of defeating Anon, just as you are."

"What possible use is he?" Trixie snapped. "Trixie has a wide repertoire of actual spells and a fair degree of magecraft! What have you done, aside from sit around in a palace being pampered your whole life? At least I entertain ponies!"

"Given that you were expelled from Princess Celestia's school, I find your claim to have studied magecraft doubtful in the extreme," Blueblood said snootily. (Yes, he was still sneering. But now he was sneering snootily.

Trixie sneered right back. "Like a good mage even needs to go to a school! Everything Trixie needed to know to become the Great and Powerful unicorn she is today, she taught herself, without being spoonfed by hidebound Canterlot noble-flank-kissers!"

"Are you insulting Her Highness, my aunt, the light of the world? Every unicorn who teaches at Princess Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns was hoof-selected by Princess Celestia herself!"

"Yes, well, maybe she ought to ask her sister to do some of the hiring, because I don't think she can tell the difference between a good mage and a good flank-kisser anymore! No matter how wise and powerful a Princess may be, if she's surrounded all the time by useless parasites who do nothing but sit around get fat on the taxes from hard-working ponies, she's going to lose her perspective!"

"You are calling me a parasite? Me! Prince Blueblood, direct heir to the ancient throne of Unicornia, nephew of Princess Celestia herself?"

"Oh, come off it, she's not married and her sister's been on the moon for a thousand years, so you're not either young enough or old enough to be Princess Luna's son. Or smart enough, honestly. So you can't really be her nephew."

Blueblood lowered his head and hoofed at the ground, snorting. "Apologize to me at once, or I will demand satisfaction in the dueling arena!"

"Trixie only lowers herself to duel with unicorns she respects." Which was sort of news to me, though I suppose it shouldn't have been – she wouldn't have been so obsessed with proving herself against Twilight Sparkle if she didn't respect Sparkly-poo at least just a bit.

A trumpet started up, snapping me out of my reverie of delight in watching the two of them go at each other, and a crier shouted. "Hear ye, hear ye! Lady mares and gentlestallions, make way for Her Highness Princess Celestia!"

"Oh, fudge," I muttered. I had been so wrapped up in watching Blueblood and Trixie go at each other that I hadn't had time to ask any of the questions I wanted to ask. And now the two of them were glaring at each other, bristling. Even if they hadn't had some sort of personal history of annoying each other, the fact that they were both Disharmony Bearers meant that it was very unlikely I'd be able to get them to shut up, stop feuding with each other, and pay attention to the court proceedings we were all here to see.
"And speaking of unicorns you respect!" I interjected. "You know what would be really very helpful right now, would be if Twilight wasn't here to speak on Anon's behalf!" Normally Anon's power didn't let Twilight display much of her innate intelligence, but I had no doubt that with Anon's life and freedom on the line, his power would allow her to pull out all the stops to find some obscure law or precedent to save him. "And only one of her friends is in Ponyville right now, so this would be the perfect moment to go take over Ponyville and demand she come duel you!"

"Duel? Twilight Sparkle?" Blueblood laughed nastily. "As if you'd last five minutes against her! Sparkle may not be nobility, but her House is an ancient one and well-regarded in Canterlot."

Trixie scowled at him. "And that is why it'll be all the sweeter when she is forced to recognize that Trixie is the more talented unicorn," she snapped. She turned to me. "When you asked me to come here, you wanted my assistance in disguising you. I hope you're not planning on relying on this useless bundle of paper pedigrees to keep you hidden in Trixie's absence!"

"I can manage on my own if I must," I said. "Getting Twilight out of here is far more important, and taking her on while Anon can't come to her aid will ensure a fair fight, mana a mana." I've never quite understood where that expression comes from. Shouldn't it be mana vs mana, or mana on mana? For that matter, what's wrong with "magic vs. magic?" Using the term mana here seems somewhat pretentious. But no, for some reason it's mana a mana. It might be Esponyol; I'm not an expert speaker of every Neighropan language.

"Well. This does seem like an auspicious time for Trixie's light to shine." She posed dramatically. "Teleport me to Ponyville."

"What's wrong with taking the train?"

Snout in the air, Trixie said grandly, "The conqueror of Ponyville, bearer of Disharmony and direct agent of the Spirit of Chaos, should not be reduced to taking a train. I'll provide the appropriate effects for my own dramatic entrance, but you teleport me into the town square."

"Do you take orders from this peon, Discord?"

I looked at Blueblood. "I take suggestions from any one of my minions who has a good idea, and since this sounds like a good idea, I'm going to take the suggestion. Do you have a problem with that?" With my tone of voice I suggested that he'd better not. Wisely he backed off.

I snapped a talon and teleported Trixie, resisting the urge to play some sort of practical joke like making her hat neon pink or excessively floppy or bigger than her head; she was right. She would look better and more dangerous, and thus more likely pull Twilight's attention away from Anon's situation, if she made a dramatic entrance. I did include a small earring, consisting of a miniaturized version of one of my ears, glued to a ring, on her hat, but that was mainly so I could hear what was going on. I've got plenty of Panauricon listening ears in Ponyville, but having one directly attached to Trixie's hat would make sure I wouldn't miss any of the action.

As soon as she was gone, Blueblood deflated slightly. "I apologize if my conduct toward that... pony... was unseemly, but I have no idea why you've taken her for an ally," he said. "Though I never had the misfortune of being in the same class as her, due to my status as a more advanced student—"

"You mean, that you were older than her."

"Yes, a more advanced student, that's what I said."

"Fortunately for you, you don't actually need to know why I've taken her as an ally," I said. "Just
that I have. So I expect you to behave yourself." I couldn't control a giggle. "Or, entertain me by
sniping at her for an hour or two the next time you see her. That was delightfully fun. But I don't
need to hear your opinions about her when she's not here. If you haven't got her retorts to bounce off
of, you just sound boorish and worse, boring."

Blueblood breathed deeply. "Someday, draconequus. Someday this human cretin will be defeated
and sent home in defeat, his nonexistent tail between his legs, and when that day comes and
Equestria no longer needs you, there will be a reckoning."

"Mm." I munched on a piece of bluegrass with a straw hat on my head. "Sure thing, pardner. I
reckon ninnies like you'll get a good long taste of sweet, sultry Chaos."

Blueblood looked horrified. "Stop that right now! Ponies will see you!"

Oh, yeah, right. I was Twister and shouldn't be manufacturing hats and bluegrass out of nothing. I
pouted and made my props disappear. "Fine, fine." Ponies all appeared to be filing into their seats.
"Let's go get a good seat, shall we?"

The proceedings weren't open to the public; most ponies were simply left out of the trial chambers,
including many nobles. Blueblood's rank as a Prince, however, got him in, along with a companion
of his choice. "You should have impersonated a mare," he groused. "If anyone asks why I brought
you to court—"

"What, I can't be your newest coltfriend?" I batted my eyelashes.

Blueblood scowled. "Keep your voice down. Even I can't necessarily weather such accusations with
my reputation intact."

I opened my mouth, and closed it again, remembering one of the other distasteful pieces of Anon's
transformations of our world. "It's possible you don't realize this, but that's Anon's doing too," I said
quietly.

"What is? Your crude, pathetic attempts at humor?"

"The fact that your reputation would be at all damaged if ponies knew your gate swings both ways," I
said.

"I—what! How dare you! I never--!"

"Blueblood." I zippered his mouth shut. Unicorns can do that spell too, so I wasn't worried about
giving myself away. "I've seen your entire life, remember? I know everything, and I'm not in the
slightest taken aback or bothered by any of it. What I'm trying to tell you is that before Anon came
along you didn't have to hide it. You were just as free to openly take paramours among pointers as
among setters."

He managed to undo the zipper. "You are the crudest, most uncouth—"

"Shut up and remember why we're allies, and what you're fighting for. He didn't just brainwash you
into an Eevil Villain twirling your mustache at the thought of overthrowing your aunts. He took from
you and every other stallion in Equestria the freedom to love, or at least to get frisky with, anyone at
all you might want, of whatever gender or species. The disgust with xenophilia and homosexuality?
That's him. Equestria wasn't like that before."

"But I remember..." He trailed off, presumably realizing that he didn't remember. He remembered
remembering, I'm sure, but when I purged him of his false memories, the actual implanted memories
of a life in the closet had gone when the real memories of his friendship with Shining Armor and Daring Do had come back.

"Do you now?"

"It hardly matters," he said, sighing. "Even if I remember the world as it truly was, no other pony does. The damage to my reputation would still be severe regardless of what I remember."

"Well, then I'm a friend from your club. It's just as well, you're far too symmetrical to be my type." I grinned at him. "I like ponies who have ridiculous manes all over one side of their face and not the other. Like your dear auntie."

"That's disgusting."

I made an exaggerated expression of shock. "You think your aunt is disgusting? How very strange! Most unicorns think she's easily the most beautiful pony in Equestria!"

"I mean, that a creature like you would dare to find her attractive."

I chortled. Oh, the stories I could tell him. But then we got to our seats and the herald tooted the horn again for Celestia's imminent arrival, so I didn't get a chance. Pity, I love watching white ponies turning spluttering-lobster red.

Anon was up in the front. He wasn't wearing handcuffs. Usually, an accused criminal brought before the crown would be wearing hoofcuffs, and a magic suppressing horn ring if a unicorn, or wing binders if a pegasus. No doubt Anon had given his word of honor or something stupid like that, though. Twilight was sitting next to him, looking extremely nervous, and the rest of them were in the front row.

Celestia and Luna both filed in, Luna looking remarkably put together for a pony who I knew for a fact couldn't have gotten any sleep last night. Alicorns are odd creatures; I knew from attempting to spy on Celestia's dreams that there had been years when she had slept at most three hours a night, and hadn't slept at all for most of them, because she had struggled with the moon. Nightmare Moon had been bound into the moon and unable to escape it or exert her magic outside of it, but she had been able to play havoc with Celestia's control for the first hundred years or so, until either she got sick of it or Celestia got good enough at moon-slinging that Spooky Scary Moona couldn't stop her. I don't sleep through the night, but I couldn't go for months without sleep... not without turning the world to cheese, donuts and skateboards, anyway. When I get very, very tired, not like exhausted from overexertion but like a week without sleeping, chaos just starts doing whatever it wants with only minimal consultation with me, and I can't stop it. So I'm slightly impressed at the ability alicorns seem to have to declare sleep optional, or at least older alicorns – I have no idea what happens if Cadance doesn't get any sleep, but considering that an alicorn in her first pony lifetime is still fertile, that magical sleep doesn't count against a pony's age, and how much she and her boytoy are going at it, I imagine there will be a bouncing baby royal pain soon enough, and then I guess we'll find out!

"We are gathered here today because a hero of the realm faces some very serious charges, brought by these emissaries from the Dragon Lands," Celestia said. She gestured with a hoof at Ember, who was seated on the other side of the front row. "This is Princess Ember, daughter of the Dragon Lord Torch, here as an ambassador from the Dragon Lands, and with her is her assistant Starflame." This time Celestia gestured up with a wing and looked up at the same time. All of the ponies in the room did as well, to see a full-grown young-adult dragon perched on a platform that shouldn't have been able to stay up there with her weight, but Celestia had cast the same spell on it that the engineers who built Canterlot had cast all over the part of the city that hangs over the mountainside. Not that any of the ponies in the room would have known that, aside from the alicorns and maybe Twilight, but I
could easily tell.

Whether it was because of the precarious look of the dragon's perch, or simply the presence of a huge (to ponies, at least; compared to Ember's father she was a reed next to an oak) dragon, ponies did not react well. There was much screaming and attempting to leap out of their seats. Luna decided to solve the problem by deafening the audience. "SILENCE IN THE COURT! SIT, OR FACE CONTEMPT!" Fortunately for me I know what it means when Luna draws a deep breath before opening her mouth, so I had quickly conjured myself a pair of earplugs, but the ponies in the audience were reeling. Except for Blueblood, who obviously knew Luna well enough to have cast a silencing charm on himself. Clever.

As the ponies recovered from the ringing in their ears, Celestia said, in a slightly louder than normal tone of voice, "My little ponies, there is no reason to be concerned. Starflame is here to support Ember in her mission to ensure that justice is done, not to attack ponies."

A pony both braver and stupider than average called out, "How do we know it isn't lying to you, Princess? Maybe they are here to eat ponies and they're just pretending!"

Celestia smiled that warm, friendly, maternal smile of hers. "I think the dragons are well aware of the fact that any dragon who eats a pony will die by my horn," she said pleasantly, "so I am quite sure that Starflame means no threat to any of us."

Now that was the Celestia I remember. Friendly, smiling and well aware that she's deadly enough to afford to be friendly and smiling. Although I've rarely known Celestia to be quite so blunt about how deadly she is, at least in front of her subjects.

"I have no interest in eating ponies," Starflame said from her perch. "Princess Celestia has been very hospitable, and offered me delicious gems. Any dragon would prefer gems to pony meat."

This was perhaps not the most politic thing she could have said. A couple of the more tightly corseted noblemares fainted.

Ember cleared her throat. "The issue at stake here is serious," she said. "You ponies have a dragonslayer serving your nation. If anyone should be afraid, it shouldn't be ponies."

"I didn't even know she was intelligent!" Anon said. "I was just trying to protect mares who'd been enslaved!"

Celestia cleared her throat. "I'd prefer to follow protocol and introduce the charges formally, rather than just randomly shouting them out, if you don't mind."

 Ember actually blushed. "Sorry."

"Read the charges into the court record, if you please," Celestia said, gesturing at some unicorn flunky with a scroll.

"If it please your Highness," the flunky with the scroll said. "The charge placed against Anon, the Bearer of the Element of Protection, is of sapicide – the murder of a sapient being, in this case, a dragon."


"Yes." The flunky cleared her throat. "The murder of a dragon child. Princess Luna herself witnessed the death of this dragon. This hearing is to assess, not whether Anon was responsible for the dragon's death, but whether his actions were sufficiently justified by the circumstances to warrant
"Farcical," Starflame said from up above. "We saw her body. Princess Luna admits he killed her. There is no possible justification for murdering a child. Just hand him over to us and be done with it."

"Does she not mean 'hoof'?") Blueblood whispered to me.

I waved my own hoof before remembering that it was a hoof, and therefore wasn't really a good demonstration of the principle that dragons have hands. "She's a dragon. Their forepaws are hands. Like Anon has, but with much stabbier claws."

Luna actually growled. "Princess Ember, please tell your assistant to show the respect this court deserves."

"Luna. No need," Celestia said calmly. Oh, so they were playing Good Princess, Bad Princess? I'd always loved watching them play that game. "Starflame is certainly aware of the discussion we had prior to declaring the need for this hearing, regarding the extenuating circumstances surrounding the dragon's death. We will not simply turn over a hero of the realm, who was acting in good faith to protect helpless mares and reindeer cows, to dragons to mete out their idea of justice. There will be a fair discussion of Anon's situation and the reasons he made the decisions he did before any judgement shall be made."

At that point, Applejack entered the court diffidently, her hat pressed against her chest by one hoof. She was lathered with sweat to the point where it dripped off her, and her orange coat had turned almost as red as her brother's from obvious exertion. She whispered something to one of the guards posted at the door.

Celestia, managing somehow not to convey the 'Oh for heavens' sake what now?' I was sure she was thinking, turned toward the guard. "Yes? Is there a matter that requires our attention?"

Applejack managed to walk in, somehow, despite keeping one forehoof on her hat so she could keep it respectfully pressed to her chest. "Your Highness, I just need to have a word with Twilight? There's some bad stuff happening in Ponyville."

"Ponyville?" Twilight leapt to her hooves. "What's happening?"

Anon reached toward his Element, which for some stupid reason they hadn't removed from him despite it being a powerful magical weapon. "Princess Celestia! I respect this court and everything but if there's something happening in Ponyville—"

"Sit. Down." Celestia didn't shout, but she didn't need to. "Twilight, take your friends, aside from Anon, to Ponyville and contain whatever this threat may be, then return as quickly as you can. Anon, I do apologize, but I cannot offer such an insult to our esteemed dragon guests as to simply let you go. If Twilight reports that you're needed... we'll address that issue if and when it arises."

I smirked. If Celestia had let Anon go to deal with Trixie (I was fairly certain the problem Applejack wanted to report was Trixie, and also, that she'd plainly galloped all the way to Canterlot because she wouldn't have had time to have taken a train since I teleported Trixie to Ponyville), the dragons would have been enraged, and there would have been chaos, right here and now in this court. Anon's "I am the hero" field had either not warped Celestia so badly that she couldn't see that, or it wanted Anon to face a nice dramatic trial to give him a threat to overcome. I hadn't thought of this earlier, but one thing I've noticed about badly written fiction is how often the noble hero, beloved by all, is suddenly and for no particularly good reason unfairly set upon by the same ponies she has sacrificed so much to save, forcing her to prove herself against horrendous injustice. It always ends
up working out for the best and the hero is generally lavished with groveling apologies afterward, so I had no illusions that this was really going to result in Anon taking a vacation in the Dragon Lands and getting an extra toasty tan. (Tanning is a thing that human skin does when it's exposed to sunlight; it gets darker. Pale humans are obsessed with getting them, despite the fact that for some reason they look down on humans who are born with the darker skin colors. Oh, you have no idea how much I hate having to explain my jokes!) But even though it wasn't likely to end in his destruction, this trial would definitely end up being a distraction to Anon. Kind of sad that with all my power, that was the best I could manage against him, but it was going better than anything else I'd tried up to that point.

All right, Dear Readers, at this point I need to confess something.

I am really really bad at sitting still and paying attention.

Yes, yes, I know this comes as a horrible shock to all of you. "The Lord of Chaos can't pay attention to boring, orderly proceedings! Gasp! Who would have thought?" But it's true. A sad, sad disability that I haven't been able to overcome in two millennia, mainly because I haven't really tried, and don't see the point to trying, generally speaking. But it does mean that in this case, I can't tell you every minute detail of the court proceedings, because oh sweet chaos was it ever boring. You'd think that a story involving the murder of a child, sex slavery, and blood and gore aplenty would be riveting, but somehow these ponies (and the two dragons) managed to turn the whole thing into a horrible snorefest.

So let me summarize, based on what Blueblood told me, because he is a fundamentally boring individual and thus was able to pay attention. The dragons described the condition of Faith's body, the nature of greed growth, and demanded that Luna tell the court about the murder under magical compulsion to tell the truth. Luna threw a fit that her word as a princess and the former Element of Loyalty would not be accepted as good enough (I did pay attention during this part, because it was hilarious) and Starflame asked politely if some other pony had been Nightmare Moon, at which point Celestia ruled that everyone giving any testimony would have to do so under magical compulsion to tell the truth, and made the dragons give all of their testimony all over again under truth-telling spell before Luna spoke.

The thing about an honesty spell is that it compels you not to lie, not to leave things out or choose your words carefully. Luna's testimony was accurate as far as it went, but she emphasized Faith's monstrous size, lack of speech during any portion of the combat that she or Anon saw, and the fact that she appeared to be freely aiding the despicable slaver Dainn. She also waxed eloquent about the terrible condition the slaves were in when she and Anon and her troops arrived, the degradation they were forced to suffer, and went onto a lengthy diatribe about how the caribou should have been crushed centuries ago, with a very, very strongly implied dig at her sister about why Celestia hadn't militarily intervened in a magically powerful culture living on territory that ponies, including alicorns, would be severely disadvantaged in, and risk the future of Equestria and the security of the sun itself on an expedition to protect a tiny hoofful of ponies and a bunch of females from other sovereign nations that themselves weren't doing anything to go rescue them.

And this is what I mean by the general worthlessness of truth spells. Because Luna doesn't think about realpolitik and things like why it might be a bad idea to charge recklessly into battle against a foe that's actually more powerful in the territory they're fighting in, she was free to make it sound like her sister was callously ignoring the horrible depravity of the caribou and their abuses of ponies and others, rather than making a hard and painful choice because of the absence of a handsome and powerful Chaos avatar who can directly see magical channels and break them to help her, due to her horrendous lack of foresight in having turned such a valuable potential ally to stone. No, I'm not bitter.
Then Luna started in on the wild speculation. "We would be remiss not to inform the court that during the battle, Discord was present," she said, "and we believe he may have had something to do with the dragon child's state of voracious mindlessness. He spoke to us as if she was a minion he was trying to protect. It is our belief that, while Discord did assist our side in the battle and was in the end the one who delivered the death blow to Dainn, he did so largely for the purpose of creating chaos, and secondarily for the purpose of retrieving a powerful artifact of disharmony. In our opinion, he drove the dragon child mad, causing her greed growth and her inability to tell her enslavers from her rescuers any longer." Ember and Starflame looked at each other as if they were seriously considering this.

Rage welled up within me, and I was about to point out how biased and ridiculous this opinion was, when Blueblood stomped on my hoof. I turned and glared at him. "What was that for?" I whispered angrily.

"Control yourself," he whisper-snapped. "Regardless of what slander they say about you, if you show yourself it will prove your involvement in this trial, and Anon will walk free while they continue to vilify you."

I took a deep breath. He was right. I didn't like that he was right, but Twister, random Canterlot unicorn, was not a member of the Royal Guard and therefore was not in any kind of position to be able to testify as to what happened. And if I showed up and told everyone the truth about what had happened... not only would they not believe me, but Blueblood was right that they'd all promptly decide the whole thing was my fault and exonerate Anon. It didn't help that Ember and Starflame knew I was the one who'd sent them here after Anon; dragons don't have any more positive opinion of me than ponies do. They'd find it very, very easy to draw the conclusion that I sent them here just to cause random chaos and suffering for my enemy.

Which, to be completely fair, is the reason I sent them here, so it's not that they'd be unjustified. But just because I have no particular interest in justice being done unless it helps my agenda doesn't mean that in this case, justice isn't genuinely on my side! Luna made it sound as if the dragon kept viciously attacking Anon, without pointing out that once Anon had her down on the ground without her wings, there wouldn't have been much she could have done if he'd gone back up on Luna's back to go after Dainn. It was his choice to keep hacking at her until she was dead.

In order to stop focusing on the various lies and slanders Luna was spouting (that she actually believed, thus why she was able to say them under a truth-telling spell), I took a break to head to the little colt's room, where I manufactured a headset and took a listen to the goings-on in Ponyville.

The Great and Powerful Mistress of Deception had summoned a completely fake ursa minor and had it doing her "bidding", terrorizing ponies and threatening to destroy their homes. I gathered that she'd gotten it to destroy the water tower, somehow; later on I found out she'd done it by planting explosives invisibly, before I'd even asked her to come on this mission, and set them off when her illusory ursa took a swipe at it. So Trixie had apparently been thinking about how to get this Ponyville project under way and get Twilight's attention for some time, not that this surprised me, but I'm always pleased to see a minion taking initiative.

Rainbow Dash had already arrived on the scene and been defeated; I could hear her abrasive voice shouting various insults, and Trixie retorting that she'd take Rainbow Dash's voice from her if it weren't so much fun to hear how angrily impotent she was to do anything to stop Trixie. They didn't conveniently explain verbally exactly how Trixie had gotten Rainbow Dash; I found out later it was with a net, levitating and bespelled to be invisible. As I listened, Applejack showed up. The girls had plainly forgotten everything Twilight learned from Ogres and Oubliettes about not splitting the party, since Anon had shown up. It's rather boring to listen to combat from a distance, so I pulled up a
screen and teleported an eye into the area to watch the battle. It didn't last very long; Applejack's a talented combatant (I should know, after she and Rainbow Dash broke half the bones in my body), but she was no match for Trixie's illusions. Being a straightforward sort of gal, she went straight for roping Trixie, and managed to lasso an illusion... shortly after which, the real Trixie tied her up with her own rope. I think I've mentioned before that fights between earth ponies and unicorns rarely end well for the earth ponies anyway, which is exactly why Twilight shouldn't have allowed any of her party to gallop ahead.

I checked up quickly on the other four. They were a good ten minutes behind. Pinkie Pie probably could have left the others in the dust, but of course the party pony knows better than to break up the party, so she was staying with Twilight, Rarity and Fluttershy, none of whom were in nearly as good shape as Rainbow and the two earth ponies. Since I didn't feel like sitting in the bathroom waiting for them for the next ten minutes, I returned to court, but kept my eye hovering, recording so that I'd be able to watch the whole show once I was bored with court again.

Blueblood filled me in. As soon as I'd left, the subject of my possible involvement had been dropped. Did Anon's power know I was here, even if he himself didn't? Had that been an attempt from Writer Anon, as I'd begun to think about whatever intelligence might lie behind his power, to force me into showing myself and allowing Anon to get in a big dramatic battle against me, or to have every pony and dragon in the room beg his forgiveness as they realized that I, in my absolute Eeeevil, had framed Anon for the heinous crime that he'd actually committed? (Clever of me, framing a guilty human. A lot harder to prove it's a frame that way, after all.) The subject had since turned to Anon and how wonderful he was, and Celestia was in the process of delivering a speech as Anon's character witness.

Wait. I realized then that this court made absolutely no sense. Normally, Celestia judges court cases that are brought before her, as the highest authority in the land. Since Luna's return she's occasionally recused herself and allowed her sister to do it. But if Luna was a witness and Celestia was a character defense, who was actually judging this thing? I was delighted, though also trepidacious. The idea of a completely chaotic court with no judge appealed to me, as you might imagine, but on the second hoof, following no rules seemed more the hallmark of Anon and his total ignorance being imposed on reality than something my foes would have adopted on the grounds that chaos is freedom.

Celestia had apparently just started to go on about how great Anon was. "...friendship report telling me of this being of a new, never-before-seen species, I admit I had misgivings. Particularly since he was from another world, where they don't have magic. I didn't know how a being without magic could possibly get along in our world, and whether a being from a completely different world could possibly understand Harmony. I worried for my ponies, but I trusted in Twilight and her friends. But then came Cadance's wedding.

"I was completely deceived by Chrysalis. I saw her cruel and uncharacteristic behavior, but I couldn't recognize it for what it was. I thought she was simply stressed; many a bride has been known to behave in an uncharacteristic way during her wedding preparations." She smiled wryly. "Only Twilight and Anon could see the monster's behavior as evidence that she could not be the real Cadance." According to the cartoon in the other world, Twilight hadn't guessed Cadance wasn't really Cadance; she'd just decided that Cadance had become a horrible person who didn't deserve her brother since the time that Cadance had been her foalsitter. But since Anon had seen the cartoon, he'd have known "Cadance" was a Changeling. "I treated Twilight quite unfairly, and when Anon challenged me on the subject... I admit, I did not behave as the fair and just ruler I have always tried to be. I was angry at Twilight for her defiance and what I saw as her cruelty to the one I thought was Cadance. And when a magicless mortal of a lowly species I'd never before seen persisted in challenging me..." She lowered her head. "I'm ashamed to remember this, let alone to relay it to this court, but I must be honest. I had him thrown in the dungeons." Oh, if only she'd left him there.
"Before that time, Anon was merely a magicless friend of my student and her friends, from another world. Unusual, certainly, but I had no idea what destiny had planned for him. While Anon was in the catacombs below the Palace, he found the Element of Protection, and used it to free Cadance, and Twilight after Chrysalis imprisoned her there. We all recall how I was ignominiously defeated by Chrysalis – a fitting lesson for my hubris in not listening to either Twilight or Anon and being completely deceived by Chrysalis." I had never heard Celestia publicly admit that something bad that happened to her was "a fitting lesson". And considering how often I dressed her up in tights, made her jump out of cakes, put clown makeup on her, covered her with silly string, and got her to belly dance for my entertainment in exchange for my not doing something I probably wouldn't have done anyway... if Celestia was going to learn any lessons in the hubris of underestimating an opponent, that would have been the time. "If it hadn't been for Anon rescuing Cadance and Twilight, all would have been lost. They freed us all, and Anon used the Element of Protection for the first time, to defeat the vast hordes of the Changeling army and save Canterlot."

This was interesting, at least. I hadn't known any of the details of where the Element of Protection (gah, I still want to wash my mouth out with turpentine every time I say that) came from or how Anon acquired it. This did confirm for me that the power that had rewritten reality definitely came from Anon, not from his stupid pseudo-Element, since I'd felt the changes building for a week before they came to a head, and he hadn't gotten the Element until the last day of that – but it was also possible that the Element amplified his powers and allowed him to finalize his changes. The greatest burst of chaos had come the day of the wedding, and while the invasion itself was plenty chaotic... my research suggests that it might have been specifically that day that changes like "Equestrians herd" had been made. Impossible to tell when it was that all the stallions turned into mares, since none of them remember what they were or that they changed, even if their gut feeling tells them something's wrong.

That was an exciting thought, actually. What if Anon hadn't been strong enough to change all of Equestria just by entering it? What if he'd had to come here, and maybe build up magical power, maybe start setting up a really complex spell with enormous energy requirements that took days for his power to build for him, until the day it made the Element of Protection and then that thing catalyzed all the changes into happening at once? That would explain what I'd felt. It also said, once again, that Anon had limits. That if he tried to set up a world-changing spell like that again, I'd feel it before it happened, so he couldn't possibly do it to me without warning and suck me into his new reality. I mean, I don't know what I'd do to disrupt it if he did start doing such a thing, and if I'm not locked in stone I doubt very much I'd be immune to the change once it hit, but at least I'd have some warning to do something.

"Once the Changelings were defeated, Anon defended Twilight to me, pointing out how very foolish I had been in dismissing my own student's perceptions. Her friends could be forgiven for thinking Twilight was simply jealous of her brother's fiancée, but I knew better – I knew how Twilight had loved Cadance, as a child. Anon showed me my arrogance and shamed me – despite my power both as a ruler and an alicorn, despite the fact that I had already misused that power to throw him in the dungeons, and for all he knew I might strike him down for his words. I heard him, and I saw myself in his words as someone I never wanted to be – someone self-centered, cruel, too in love with their own power to remember that they are merely a pony and can make mistakes like any other." She lowered her head. "I wept. I had lost my sister for a thousand years to this sort of arrogance, and I came so close to repeating the same mistake, and losing my student, my niece and possibly even my kingdom. If Anon hadn't shown me what I was becoming, I don't know what would have happened."

I did. Nothing terrible. Twilight would have forgiven her for being hoodwinked by Chrysalis and life would have gone on. Celestia's self-flagellation over what had been a couple of small mistakes while under the influence of foreign magic – dismissing Twilight's claims because the Element of
Deception had left her absolutely certain that Chrysalis was her beloved niece Cadance, and throwing Anon in prison for lèse-majesté, which, given that the nation he comes from in his world is pretty aggressive about refusing to acknowledge that royalty deserve any kind of respect for being royalty, had probably involved a fairly egregious level of disrespect by the standards of our world – was completely out of proportion. The fact that Anon made her cry by criticizing her behavior made me want to slap him. (I mean, I usually want to slap Anon, or worse, but I really really really wanted to slap him.) I got madder and madder just thinking about it. I disrespect Celestia, tell her she's being an idiot, treat her like she's no better than any other pony in general and mock her for her personal failings, and she turns me to stone. Anon does it, and she cries and begs for his forgiveness.

She went on and on talking about how Anon's purity of heart and his desire to protect Twilight and his other friends had moved her and his critique of her behavior had held up a mirror and she'd flinched at the sight and blah blah blah and I wanted to vomit, scream, or maybe set the entire courtroom on fire. Not like fire fire, more like transport fire that would transport them all to the bottom of the sea and turn them into fish, or seaponies, or something. Except for Anon, who could stay human after the transport. I was this close to snapping my hoof (yes, I can actually do that) and doing... I'm not sure what, but nopony (or human) in the room would have liked it. Blueblood hissed at me. "Control yourself!"

Below me, Celestia was continuing to wax on and on about how horrible she'd been and how noble Anon had been for opening her eyes to her own mistakes. Oh, if I had only known that the way to win back Celestia's heart was just to deliver her a "The Reason You Suck" speech after she'd just suffered a humiliating defeat, I'd have her wrapped around my finger by now! "How can I possibly stand here and listen to this garbage?" I hissed back at him. "If Celestia didn't want to go for a swim in a sea of chaos, maybe she should have thought of that before fawning all over that guy like this!"

I raised a hoof to snap it, take back my true form, and do something humiliating to everypony. And especially to Anon. So Blueblood bit my mane directly behind my head and dragged me out of the courtroom with his mouth, while I flailed in shock and yelled "Ow" and "Let go" and things like that but didn't actually turn him into a turnip for some reason.

As soon as he had me out of the room, he let me go. "What were you thinking?" he snapped at me.

"What were you thinking? I'm the Lord of Chaos! How dare you treat me like this!" I snarled at him.

"I dare because we are allies against this creature and you're plainly losing your mind! Look at your eyes!"

He then produced a mirror from a pocket dimension. The pocket dimension spell is very, very sophisticated and challenging for a harmonic magic user; Chaos makes it very, very easy, but I knew how tough it was for unicorns to pull it off. Twilight can't do a pocket dimension, judging from her reaction whenever Pinkie pulls anything out of one of her own. My opinion of Blueblood's magical skills went up, grudgingly. Though it didn't at all surprise me that if he did have the chops to master a seriously complicated and potentially dangerous spell that requires a fair degree of power, he'd waste it on carrying around a pocket mirror.

My eyes were red on yellow. For a moment I admired their beauty in the mirror, and how their unique coloring and the perfect asymmetry of my pupils offset my boring fake pony visage so well. And then I remembered that I was trying to look like a boring, normal pony, and boring, normal ponies do not have lovely eyes like mine. Which was why, when I had come here as Twister, they had been normal, boring pony eyes.

"Oh," I said.
"Yes, oh. What is the matter with you?"

As any good mage knows, eyes are the windows to the soul, and to one's magic. They're the hardest part of the body to use magic to disguise. Even Chrysalis fails to hide her green magical aura in them, sometimes. I'm usually more than capable of taking a form and keeping it when I want to go in disguise. The fact that my eyes had reverted to my true self meant that Blueblood was right. I'd lost control. Somehow.

I blinked, and reverted them to the disguised form. "What happened in there?"

"Why are you asking me? Surely you'd have more insight."

"I was so angry." I took a deep breath. "Everything she was saying just made me want to turn every single one of Anon's bones into baby powder and then freshen my tushie with it."

Blueblood winced. "Your crudity and uncouth nature notwithstanding... I was enraged as well. My noble aunt, the immortal princess of the sun, reduced to tears because some disrespectful ruffian attacked her when she was vulnerable! But no matter how angry you might be, you cannot reveal yourself or Anon will almost certainly go free! Do you want that?"

As we spoke, I was calming down. "No, of course not." It was beginning to become obvious what had almost happened. "It's his power. It makes me so angry at him, I want to attack him, so badly I forget why I can't afford to do that."

Blueblood raised an eyebrow. "So when you told me that the Element of Arrogance might protect me against Anon even when his power proves too much for you to resist... that was the truth?"

"I don't always lie, Blueblood. Just when it's funny. Yes, you have greater resistance to Anon right now than I do. Of course that might have something to do with the fact that he sees you as having a bit part in his epic saga, whereas I'm the main villain, so the focus of his powers is on me." I took a deep breath. "Much as I really, really want to see Anon go down in flames, or at least get a spanking, I think the evidence suggests that I don't dare stay here."

"Yes, it does seem as if you're likely doomed if you remain," Blueblood said. "Since the moment you reveal yourself, you exonerate him."

"And I can't have that." I sighed. "I'm going to have to leave it to you. Here, have an earring." I gave him an earring with a tiny ear-shaped pendant, just like I'd given Trixie, so I would be able to listen in on the trial, at least.

Blueblood scowled. "I would never of my own will wear something so repulsive. An ear? What couture nightmare is this?"

"Oh, you're so picky." I turned my ear into a jewel. It was still shaped like an ear, but now it was a glittering diamond in the shape of my ear. Blueblood was mollified.

"That's better. Still hardly what I would have chosen, but no longer in such terrible taste that it would harm my reputation." He tossed his head artfully, letting the motion place his mane just so. This was a pony whose vanity managed to put Rarity's to shame, after all.

"Well, I'll be off, then. Time to check up on Sparkle Fun Pony and pals and see how they're doing with Trixie."

"I'm sure that charlatan needs all the help she can get," Blueblood snarked.
I teleported back to the Grotto and used the Panauricon to check up on Trixie. I didn't want it to be immediately obvious that I was supporting her; they knew that Gilda was allied with me, but if Anon had seen the same episodes I had, he might well believe that Trixie had nothing to do with me, as long as she didn't give the game away.

In the original timeline, Trixie had rather handily defeated Twilight and her friends and taken over Ponyville, but she'd been amplified by the Alicorn Amulet. After defeating a few of Twilight's friends, she'd forced Twilight to agree to a duel. She'd performed a spell that involved blatant violations of harmony – altering the apparent age of a pony – in order to prove to Twilight that she was the "highest level unicorn". Twilight, being a law-abiding citizen who'd agreed to the terms of the duel, had fled Ponyville, leaving it to her nemesis, until her friends had helped her figure out how to trick Trixie. It hadn't been Twilight's finest moment in the original timeline, is what I'm saying.

In this timeline, Trixie didn't have the kind of firepower the Alicorn Amulet had given her – but she hadn't needed it, either. Because she'd already defeated Rainbow Dash and Applejack and was holding them hostage, she got Twilight to agree to a duel immediately... and then used the Element of Deception to *fake* an age spell, turning a sycophantic colt who'd been one of the two responsible for getting a real ursa minor chasing after her the last time into an apparent infant. Then for good measure she'd thrown in a gender-changing spell, making the other one of the two colts appear to be female. And then, just to make things particularly obnoxious, she'd turned Rarity into a cat. All three are pretty enormous violations of harmony; changing a pony's gender only works if the pony's soul or whatever you call it is *already* out of harmony with their body, the way that Cheese Louise's is now. Changing a pony's age is impossible for ponies to do, actually; Chaos can do it, and there are potions that can be used to de-age a pony, but straight-up unicorn magic simply cannot do it. And swapping a pony's species is hard. For unicorns, anyway. It has to do with the difficulty of displacing the magic or converting it to something else. There are spells that can do it, but you generally need to be an alicorn to pull them off, and there are magical artifacts, but neither Trixie nor Twilight had any of those.

So this appeared to be an overwhelming show of force, leading Twilight to run off with her tail between her legs, abandoning her friends and presumably returning to Canterlot to beg for Anon's help. I couldn't have *that*, so I cast a spell of confusion on Twilight, causing her to run straight into the Everfree Forest. I wasn't planning to monitor the fun – much as I'd love to watch Twilight stumbling around in confusion, lost in an endless maze of trees, I had other things I needed to do. And I didn't want Twilight dead. In the old days I might have cast a confusion spell on a pony and not particularly cared if it ended up leading them straight to the belly of a timberwolf, but Twilight is rather fun to irritate, and if she died, I'd have no hope of getting Pinkie Pie to join me (or that other future, the one from the other timeline, where Fluttershy actually became my friend... not that I really have much hope for that one anyway, but if there's any chance I might have a friend someday, I'm not going to cut off my options.)

I put a second spell on her, tied to the first spell so it would wear off shortly after the first one did, that made her more or less invisible to predators. It would also make it hard for ponies to see her, making it unlikely that anyone would rescue her. She'd spend a day or two running around the Everfree, probably forced to eat grass and drink from streams to stay fed and hydrated, but nothing was going to try to eat her.

I had other places to be. The catacombs under Canterlot Palace had been a base of operations for Chrysalis, before she'd launched the invasion. Now that I knew that that was where the Element of Protection had been found... I needed to have a little chat with my second favorite bug queen. (Second favorite because Fantasia is objectively much hotter. Admittedly Fantasia got a lot closer to killing me than Chrysalis ever has, and the queen of Triskele Hive was much funnier than either Fantasia or Chrysalis, but in this case I gotta give it to the good-looking one. Fantasia has a different-
colored horn from her body and decorates herself with jewelry and hairnets, and we all know what a sucker I am for variety in a creature's appearance.)

Chrysalis was a lot better.

My impromptu surgery, removing the parts of her carapace that had been seared by the Element of Protection, seemed to have done the trick; her carapace was regenerating as expected. She wasn't entirely recovered yet, but she was walking. When I popped in, she was being assisted in walking in what looked like some kind of rehab by a changeling that looked like an ordinary worker but had the magical resonance of a royal Changeling. The changeling in question took one look at me and bristled. "Who are you? What are you doing here?" he asked, in a voice that might have sounded kind of snarly if it hadn't been so high-pitched and kind of... well, let us say, extremely non-threatening. Not that I generally perceive changelings as threatening, ever, but some of them at least have impressive voices.

"Stand down, Thorax," Chrysalis said. "This is Discord. He's the one we owe our new home to."

She didn't sound pleased to see me, merely obligated.

"But your majesty! He's an intruder!"

"Yes, and a very annoying one, but we have very little power to do anything about it. Stand down, I'll deal with him."

"Pharynx would have—"

"Pharynx is dead, and attempting to be fierce in the face of danger now changes neither your cowardice in battle nor the fact that he's dead." She looked up at me. "Discord, meet Thorax, the only changeling to survive the battle with Anon unscathed. Largely because he was hiding under a tapestry in Celestia's throne room."

I shrugged. "He who hides or runs away lives to fight another day," I said. "Your Brave and Noble warrior ethos doesn't impress me much." I patted the changeling, who was growling at me and sounded exactly like an adorable puppy if an adorable puppy was a bug pony, on the head. "So you ran and hid from Anon! Excellent choice. I find I spend a lot of time doing that myself nowadays."

"It wasn't right," Thorax whined. "He was killing my hivemates! He murdered my brother! I should have fought back!"

"Yes, and then you'd be dead too, with none of that pesky survivor's guilt to worry about," I said. "Clearly a much better choice."

Chrysalis sighed deeply. "I should never have brought you into the battle in the first place," she said. "You've never had the temperament for it. You make a far better medic than you ever did a warrior."

"Oh! A Changeling medic? This is new! Since when have you had medics?"

"Since nearly every changeling in fighting form in my entire hive was either killed or gravely injured," Chrysalis said. "Since you were kind enough to transport us here, Thorax has been going out into the Crystal Empire in the guise of a medical student and bringing back medical knowledge, which is almost more important than gathering love is, right now." She glared at me. "Seeing as how someone thought it was a good idea to put another hive into this territory, forcing us to try to recover our former strength as quickly as possible before Forgotten Sky realizes we're also here."

I put two talons to my lips. "Oopsie. My bad!"
"Why did you think that was a good idea?" Chrysalis snapped at me. "If they realize our presence, they'll try to absorb our hive! With our numbers so low, we'd be hard put to defend ourselves."

"Remind me where that is my problem?" I asked. "I never promised you a rose garden, just a chance at survival. But! I miiight possibly consider evening up your odds some... if I get some answers."

"Oh, of course, I have nothing better to do than answer your questions," Chrysalis said. Sarcastically, in case you didn't get that.

"Clearly you don't," I said. "What were you doing before I arrived to brighten up your day? Walking around and around in circles? My, that seems exciting."

"It helps her get better!" Thorax said hotly, defending what was probably a treatment he'd come up with, if he was the closest thing to a medic the Changelings had. "Yes, it's boring, but it exercises the muscles and gets the magic flowing through the body to promote healing, and —"

I zippered his mouth shut. "Yes, yes, yes, I'm familiar with pony medical science, such as it is," I said. "Now, the grownups are talking, so why don't you run along and play?"

"You're dismissed, Thorax. Come back when this buffoon has gotten bored with annoying me and has left us," Chrysalis said.

"Get bored with you? Oh, how could you imagine such a thing, Chryssy? You're such a delight! Between the sarcasm, the misplaced pride, the noble attempts to deflect my attention away from your changelings... although, I will admit, the queen of Forgotten Sky grovels much more nicely than you do, plus, I'm sorry to say, she's a lot hotter. I mean, I know you changelings can look like anything you want to look like, but au naturel, she looks exotic and you look like you've just risen up out of a swamp. Have you ever considered brushing your mane? It would do wonders for your overall appearance!"

Her near-death experience hadn't done any damage to Chrysalis' ability to roll her eyes dramatically. "Ask me your questions and then leave. I have things to do."

"Yes, walking around and around in circles! Sounds quite exciting." I yawned ostentatiously, leaning back against the air, which was very comfy.

"I'm sure nothing compares to your whirlwind daily itinerary of being the most incredibly irritating creature in existence, but we mere mortals must make do with what we have," she snapped, but her sarcasm fell a little flat because in fact nothing about her existence could possibly compare to mine. I mean, even with Anon breathing down my neck, my life in general is still vastly more entertaining and fun than Chrysalis'.

"Yes, yes, but I'm not here to talk about how much more wonderful it is to be me than to be you," I said, coiling myself in slow circles above her head. "I need details about Anon. Apparently, Celestia threw him in the dungeons for questioning you, when you were Cadance?"

"Not for questioning me. For questioning her. Twilight questioned me; Anon insisted that Celestia was a fool and making a terrible mistake by not taking Twilight's words to heart."

"Did he tell Celestia that you were a Changeling?"

"No. How could he have known that?"

The memory of the cartoon's existence grounded me; I teleported to a bipedal posture on the ground before I quite knew what I was doing. My chaos often does that, responds to express my emotions
without my consciously deciding to do so. "Oh, trust me. He knew," I said sourly.

"Then why didn't he tell Celestia?"

"Because he didn't want to miss the opportunity for blood, was my guess. But something about the timing isn't right. When you saw him before the wedding, did he have that little jeweled sword around his neck yet?"

She scowled. "What little jeweled sword?"

I created an image of Anon. After a moment, I enlarged his ears to ridiculous proportions, gave him rabbit teeth and a dullard's expression, and drew a fake mustache on the image's face. Chrysalis cleared her throat. "As entertaining as it may be to see you mocking our mutual enemy... I believe you had a question about his sword you were **trying** to ask?"

"Oh, yes! Right. I got a bit distracted there." I pointed at the Element of Protection around his neck. "This is the thing he killed your Changelings with, but normally, it's in this form – small, and around his neck. Did he have it, before? Because Celestia says he found it in the catacombs, but if he didn't have it before being thrown in the dungeon, how could he have known he was going to acquire it and be able to attack you?"

"I don't know," Chrysalis said, exasperated. "But no, he definitely did not have anything like that, that I could see. And I have a very good eye for accoutrements like that. All Changelings must; wearing the wrong necklace or earring can give an entire impersonation away."

"And did any of your Changelings encounter him in the catacombs?"

"No. We had pulled out by the time Celestia sent him to the dungeons; I had Changelings emplaced all over the palace and all throughout the city. We weren't occupying the catacombs anymore; none of us knew anything about him until he re-surfaced and started killing us."

"And the entire time you were occupying the catacombs under Canterlot Palace... did any of you ever see anything like the Element of Protection? Even in a shapeless crystal form, or as an inert rock?"

She shrugged. "There are many, many inert rocks under Canterlot Palace. I saw nothing special. We did find considerable evidence of Diamond Dog mining, but one expects that in any underground tunnel network in Equestria, outside of the Badlands or any area occupied by a dragon."

That probably wasn't significant; Celestia might well have hired Diamond Dogs to dig out a foundation for her palace, when she had the place built after Luna's little vacation started. Diamond Dogs should have stripped the place of any gems, though, which meant either the Element of Protection had been hiding under the appearance of a mere rock, the way the true Elements of Harmony had after Celestia had denatured them, or it had ended up there after all the Diamond Dogs were gone. Or, possibly, that Anon had had it all along and just hadn't been wearing it where Chryssie could see.

"And you don't know where Anon was when he found this thing?"

She sat down on the ground, obviously weary. "It's hard for me to remember... the actual battle, I will never forget. The slaughter. So much Changeling blood... so little I could do..." She lowered her head. "But the other events of that day have largely been blotted by the horror of that battle. I think... I used a scrying mirror to appear to Twilight and Anon – I meant for it to be Twilight, to taunt her, after I'd had her taken prisoner, but Anon had joined her. I... don't think he had it then. I didn't see it.
"But I... didn't consider him very important, or dangerous, so I didn't pay very much attention to him."

"Not your finest moment."

"As if you did any better when you first encountered him."

"I didn't end up carved to bits." In the first encounter, anyway.

"So he found it sometime after you indulged in a bit of villainous taunting, but before he resurfaced with Twilight and Cadance."

"He didn't appear at first. It was originally Twilight and Cadance. I revealed myself, and showed Cadance how much Shining Armor was under my control. I fought Celestia, and won. My Changelings took the field, and battled against Twilight and her minions." I chuckled a bit. Twilight would absolutely hate hearing her friends referred to as her "minions". Truth hurts, doesn't it? "And then Anon appeared with that sword. He shouted something about protecting his friends, and then... and then we began to die."

So he might have been with Twilight and Cadance when he found it – in which case, they'd probably remember where, and I could possibly trick one of them into telling me – or, they took the fast road to the surface via Cadance's wings, as they had in the cartoon, but Cadance might have been too weak to carry both Twilight and a human. If that was the case... they'd have left Anon behind to find his own way out, because he didn't have any weapons that could fight the Changelings and stopping the wedding with their magic would have been foremost in the mares' thoughts. And while he was down there alone, Anon found the Element.

I didn't know what difference it made, or why it mattered to me so much to reconstruct how Anon found the thing, and where. My intuition was telling me it could be significant, and I generally listen to my intuition in matters like this. Chaos prefers hunches to careful deductive reasoning.

Well. I was already here in the Crystal Empire, and I had other reasons for being here as well. Maybe dropping in on Cadance would be a fun thing to do!

But I had other errands here to take care of first.

"Well. I might have a present for you, if things go well, and if you're a good little bug and take your vitamins and do your exercises like your boy Thorazine tells you to."

"It's Thorax."

"You should really cover your mouth when you cough. I don't want to breathe in your nasty germs." I made a face and turned myself green and ill-looking.

She ignored me. "What do you mean by a present?"

"Well. You did so spectacularly poorly with the Element of Deception, perhaps I'm a fool for even considering this... but I might, just possibly, have a different Element to share with you, if you'd like."

Her eyes went wide. "Is that so? Which one? How many are there?"

"None of your beeswax, yet." I picked up a glob of changeling goo and flung it at the wall. "First, I've got a little trip to the Crystal Palace to find something I misplaced a long time ago. And then, if I find it... we'll talk."
"I'll be holding my breath," she said dryly.

"Oh, don't do that. Blue is absolutely not your color. It would clash so badly with your greens! You can wait on tippy-hooves if you'd like, though."

And with that, I left her.

So this is going to be loads of fun, I can just tell.

Back home on the ranch, Trixie's still ruling Ponyville with an iron hoof, Anon's still stuck in Canterlot under guard, Twilight's still wandering around in the Everfree, and Spike is stuck in Ponyville, believing that Trixie has a force field around the town that prevents him from sending messages to Celestia. She really doesn't have a force field, it's all an illusion. She made him fire his flame at empty air rather than the letter he'd written, and then made him think he needed to belch, and when he did, there was the letter he'd never sent in the first place, looking like it had bounced back. I'm very happy with my minion; she's coming up with all kinds of creative applications for Deception that even I might not have thought of.

I'm glad she's managing to keep things in a holding pattern for now... because I have to challenge Sombra for my Element of Hatred. Sure, he's dead, but Sombra was a sufficiently crafty and talented unicorn that I'm not sure that's going to stop him from giving me a hard time. On the other hand, it can't possibly be as bad as the caribou were, right?

After I'm done with that, then I guess I'll drop in on Cadance and try to get some more intelligence on where Anon picked up his crystal shard of stupid. And if I can get all of that done this evening, then tomorrow it's back to Canterlot to watch more of the show! From a scrying window this time, so Anon's magic can't get me to do something idiotic. So much to do! Dear me. A pony may work from sun to sun, but a draconequus' work is never done.

Chapter End Notes

"Mana a mana" is a parody of "mano a mano", a Spanish phrase that means "hand to hand" but is often mistranslated as "man to man".
Sombra Is A Very Scary Pony And I'm Glad He's Dead

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Editor’s Note:

I don't normally do this, but this time I had to. You would not believe how much I had to get Discord to let me cut here. He went on for pages and pages about the entire history of the world, how centaur magic works, Tartarus being a gateway that connects to other places on our planet as well as to a prison for really evil creatures and a lot of pegasi having migrated here through that gate, the existence of alicorn cows, the complete ecology of the Far North, the history of ponies getting addicted to something called Harmony Violets and why that proves that harmony is bad, and the history of ponies pre-Equestria, all because he didn't actually want to write about what happened to him in the Crystal Empire.

Normally I don't cut anything he writes, mostly because he won't let me but also because I guess if he meanders a little and includes stuff that has nothing to do with his war with Anon... it's reasonable that chaos might mean he has to do that kind of thing. Ponies are trained to write succicently, with as few words as they can get away with, but even Twilight's been known to wander off topic a little. But there was no way I wanted to copy out something like twenty thousand words that had nothing to do with anything except in Discord's head.

I saved the pages of information I cut; they're still in Discord's original rough draft. Really fascinating stuff! It's funny; when you ask Discord questions or talk to him about things that really happened, he generally lies, makes jokes, refuses to answer, or gives non-answers. Like before I knew about the chaos avatar Ar, I asked if dragons had ever used chaos magic, and he did this whole dramatic thing about how I was trying to replace him, called me his Sith Apprentice, whatever that means, and managed to never answer the question at all. But when he writes... well, I can't prove that he's telling the truth, but there's nothing in anything he says that sounds like an obvious lie. And it's really interesting stuff. But completely irrelevant to his fight with Anon.

To be honest there's some stuff in here that isn't really relevant either, mostly stuff about King Sombra, but Discord wouldn't let me cut any of that. At least there isn't as much of it as there was of the other stuff, the stuff he did let me take out.

This is stupid.

I can't stop shaking. But nothing happened. Not really. It was all illusions. I mean, if you don't count the part where I could theoretically have been skewered by Twilight's Big Bumbling Brother Fool Forever, except that he was too dumb to kill me when I was helpless and all he managed to do was wake me up. But that didn't really happen either. I mean, the part about him killing me, since, as mentioned, he was too big of an idiot to actually do me any harm. And I don't generally spend my time ruminating on things that didn't happen, even if they could have been really really bad if they had. And especially I don't spend my time quivering in my boots (or outside of my boots, either) over illusions. None of it was real.

I will give it to Sombra – those were some seriously realistic illusions. Remember, I'm an expert on realistic illusions and realistic dream-states. Spend a thousand years in sensory deprivation, hallucinating, and you'll get good at telling when something isn't real too. It takes some serious power to fool me. At the end, when she was starting to slide into Nightmare Moon territory and she
was turning vicious, Luna used to try to warp my dreams into nightmares and torture me for some kind of revenge... for being alive when she's convinced the "real me" is dead? (Did I mention this? Luna thinks the real me is dead. That is, when I died the first time, I stayed dead, and the "me" who I am, who came back from the dead, is the Spirit of Chaos – which is true – and is identical to the Spirit of Chaos who killed her mother – which is false, that was Mayhem – and is lying about being her foster brother Discord. I don't know where she gets this from. My name is Discord. How does she not get that I was always destined to be what I am? But I digress.) For some of the things I said to her when she'd come visit me in dreams? (I want to clarify, just so you all know, that Nightmare Moon was not my fault. Sure, I poked at Luna's insecurities... a lot... and yes, I'll admit that I went out of my way to push the narrative that everyone loved Celestia and no one loved Luna. But I wouldn't have had those insecurities to poke at if they weren't already there, and I didn't have the power to do anything to her mind magically. If I did contribute anything to her fall, I did it with nothing but words. Which would actually make me amazing, if I could make someone open up to the Nightmares and fall just by flapping my lips, or in this case my imaginary lips since my actual lips were in stone, and I am amazing, but I'm still pretty sure it was mostly her own fault.)

Anyway, I always knew it was a dream. Always. Luna's very, very good at her job, and some of the stuff she inflicted on me was pretty darned horrifying, but I didn't fall for any of it. The best she could manage was to lure me in with a pleasant dream I wanted to believe in and then start the horror show, except even that didn't quite work because while I was happy to let myself be soothed with pleasant dreams (I was stuck in stone. I'd take any form of entertainment), I did know in the back of my mind that it wasn't real. I just didn't care, until the bad stuff started, and then I'd use my own power over my own dreams to turn them back on her, or play up as if I was terrified and then laugh in her face.

If Sombra had been there in any of the illusions he cast on me... I would not have been laughing in his face.

I can't believe how off-guard he took me. I've seen the TV show, the reality we should have had if it hadn't been for Anon, where the archway that paralyzes ponies with their worst fears played a prominent part. (It should surprise no one that Twilight's greatest fear was disappointing Celestia and Spike's greatest fear was being kicked out by Twilight. Oh, the mommy issues those two have.) I knew Sombra's specialties. I fought him, back in the day. (He took himself so very, very seriously, I don't know how I was supposed to resist throwing lemon cream pies at him. Eventually he figured out that he could drive me off by completely misusing the Crystal Heart to broadcast harmonized fear and misery, because it turns out that if everyone feels the same negative emotions, it's still harmony, but for a while his own fear of the Heart prevented him from keeping me out of the Crystal Empire, and you'd better believe I made good use of my time. You haven't seen anything until you've seen the Dark Overlord of Fear with a clown nose and oversized inflatable horseshoes.) So I should have known what I was getting into. I should have known it was an illusion.

The first time made no sense, and when things don't make sense and I didn't cause them, that generally means my understanding of the situation is imperfect in some way. But it took me so long to question. And then when it happened again, I didn't question at all.

What you need to know is that our entire world is full of an ecosystem ponies hardly ever see, creatures animal, vegetable and mineral whose purpose is to purify and clean magic.

Raw magic, as I've said before, is chaotic. It's supposed to have no prior imprint, no history of intent marked on it, but the emotions generated by dark magic in particular, and by any truly powerful, emotion-driven casting, can remain engraved on the magical energies, altering them, generally for the worse. I like my chaos to have no preconceived notions of what it wants to do whatsoever, thank
you. So, just as I exist in order to ensure that nothing interrupts the existence or flow of magic, there's an ecosystem of creatures that exist to keep magic that's not in use cleanly chaotic.

Here in Equestria, the West Coast – which you've probably never been to, because Celestia declared it off-limits to settlers for exactly this reason – is home to the Harmony Violets and the tatzlwurms. I mentioned Harmony Violets when I was talking about fighting Winnie. They are small flowers that draw in magic and purify it of dark and any other intentional elements. (Intentional elements being emotions imprinted on magic. Magic that wants to play a funny prank on you because I was just working with it is also an intentional element, as is magic that wants you to make friends and sing kumbaya while holding hooves in a circle. It's just that dark intentional elements are a lot more common.) They do this by harmonizing the magic, which is not the way I would have chosen to do it, but whatever. Any parts of it that cannot stay in harmony with the pure empty-headed intentionless will of the violets are excreted through the roots, where the tatzlwurms – creatures that look like animals, but are actually plants – live. Tatzlwurms are about the length of a snout (my snout, not yours; they're not that short) and are predators that feed on magic and magical creatures, but they're small enough that the only sapient magical creatures they could possibly be a threat to are Breezies. They eat the dark magic and other such intentional elements that the Harmony Violets pass down to them, as well as magical small creatures such as parasprites, twittermites and the like, and fully consume them. Usually by sucking them in with tentacles, but they can also spray goo that paralyzes magic.

Celestia declared the area off-limits to pony development because these creatures are an important part of Equestria's defense system against clouds of dark magic floating across the ocean and invading our borders, and ponies were harvesting Harmony Violets at one point, threatening to drive them extinct. Ponies can hardly be blamed; Harmony Violets can cure pretty much any magical illness, and disrupt chaotic or dark magic, and from what I hear they taste pretty good (I wouldn't risk eating one. See “disrupt chaotic magic”, in the previous sentence.) Many ponies found that making their loved ones eat Harmony Violets after I'd messed with their personalities just a bit could clear them right up and restore them to boring, I mean normal, I mean I was right the first time. Meanwhile tatzlwurms might actually be a threat to ponies, and even to me, if someone nefarious were to gather enough of their magical paralysis goo. I wouldn't even be telling you this except that you're not going to be reading it unless I'm dead or in stone. So that's why you can go have a picnic on the west coast shoreline if you want, but you can't build a house, or a Hayfries Shack, there.

Well, the far north, where all of the world's magic is sucked in toward the pole, has a lot of these kinds of creatures. The World Serpents, crystalline snakes made by Loki in the days before he went off the deep end, are one example; they crawl through the frozen ground below Arctica eating dark magic that was pulled underground by the pole. Dragon eggs serve to absorb a lot of loose magic, and dragons lay them in Arctica and Antarctica (where the same thing happens to magic, only southward instead of northward.) And at the top of this food chain are a race of true crystal ponies, the Umbra.

Now that the Crystal Empire has come back, you're probably all familiar with the so-called "crystal ponies", who mostly look that way because of extensive exposure to the Crystal Heart. Umbra... are not like that. They're more like the lupequus of folklore, except that instead of being ponies that turn into wolves under the light of a full moon, they're ponies that turn into crystals when they are too low on magic to remain ponies, and when they're full-up on magic they can transform into pure magic. More like Nightmare Loon did than like I do; when I turn into magic I'm usually a specific shape, not an amorphous cloud of darkness. The way they were originally supposed to work was that Umbra would feed on dark magic, thus draining it out of an area; they themselves then become large pools of dark magic, but it doesn't corrupt them because they're born to do that, just like chaos magic drives ponies insane but not moi.
This didn't work out.

When Yggdrasil was still alive, beaming its pernicious harmony all over the Not-So-Frozen-Back-Then North, the Umbra were a thriving, well-balanced race, not seething overpowered pits of mobile dark magic. They were most active during the long winter night, in the Far North; they're not exactly harmed by sunlight, but it doesn't do them any favors either. When Mayhem corrupted Yggdrasil, split the reindeer civilization into normal reindeer and evil caribou, and unleashed the windigos on the ponies living in what is now the Crystal Empire – which is, in fact, the original homeland of all North American ponies, the place you came from before the founding of Equestria; betcha your Hearth's Warming pageants in elementary school never told you that—the amount of dark magic being generated began to unbalance the Umbra. Too much of a good thing is rarely a good thing itself. They started overdosing on the dark magic, becoming entirely too prone to violence against each other, as well as against frost dragons, dragon eggs, caribou, and other entities that could either fight back or had angry moms who could fight back. So their numbers were getting kind of thin.

Now, the other thing you need to know is that even when Yggdrasil was alive, the latitudes of the ancient pony homelands – Unicornia, Crystallia, and, eventually, Stratopolis, after the pegasi got here – were always quite volatile. Magical ley lines flow through our entire atmosphere as well as underground, but just a short distance north of the borders of Equestria, those lines start to dip down in preparation for going underground at the North Pole. This makes the weather quite changeable and violent up there. Yggdrasil kept it calm and peaceful until the windigos killed it, at which point the weather in the old countries became literally intolerable. Churning, perpetual storm fronts that would need alicorn magic to contain them came in. The civil war that broke out between the three pony races wasn't only due to the direct actions of the windigos and the Element of Hatred; they were being forced into proximity to each other as well, the weather driving them into tiny enclaves where they could take shelter.

The founders of Equestria left around this time, thinking south would be better – which it was, somewhat, until they brought their feuding with them and made things utterly intolerable. In the North, the three pony nations had to give more and more ground to the storms, until finally in desperation they were all hiding in the caves in the crystal mountains, killing each other for territory. The pegasi got the worst of this; they're not at their best in caves.

So a small group of especially desperate pegasi fled even further north, trying to reach Yggdrasil. They got there, discovered it was dead, and discovered that there was one living fruit just lying on the ground, covered in snow, where Mayhem had never bothered to notice it. That was the Crystal Heart. The fact that this particular group was tight-knit enough to survive the Element of Hatred and windigos trying to corrupt them against each other meant that they were, ugh, harmonious enough to activate the Crystal Heart, which created a bubble of artificially decent weather around them. Also, their leader, Wind Singer, became an alicorn, renamed Aria di Vento because in those days, it was generally understood that princesses had to have fancy names. (Something got lost in translation; the new name actually meant Song of the Wind.) When they returned to their homeland, the king of the unicorns – King Palladium, father of Princess Platinum, who I'm pretty sure you all know from your school Hearth's Warming pageants – was near death (this wasn't surprising; most of the ponies were near death, and he wasn't young). So the new Princess Aria married his son, Prince Iridium, and became the new ruler of the Crystal Empire, uniting the tribes.

They were quickly able to use the Crystal Heart to control the weather, making it tolerable in the immediate area of the Heart – which is why the Crystal Empire, once an actual empire, was reduced down to a single city. But they had to re-activate it every year, in the springtime, since the winter would generally wear away at the defense the Heart produced. This was the Crystal Faire, a festival during which the entire city would have a huge party, and re-apply the Heart's protection through the big party invoking in them so much love and harmony and happiness and gag me with a spoon.
Funny thing about ponies and parties. Pinkie Pie has a point – no matter how depressed and miserable ponies are, it's generally pretty easy to cheer them up with a party. Even I managed to get ponies to chin up and embrace chaos, at least for a night or two, by throwing parties. Of course mine were... rather different than Pinkie's. But I digress.

Once the caribou started generating magic that they locked to themselves, unusable to anyone else, the Umbra didn't do so well. There wasn't enough loose dark magic available in the Far North to help them overcome the damage they'd done to themselves by consuming the imbalance of dark magic generated during the pony civil war and general period of windigoes. And here's where the problem of having creatures magically evolved to naturally clean up the stuff you want to get rid of comes in. As long as there was plenty of free dark magic available in the North, the Umbra were fine, and they did their job. Dramatically increase the available amount because everyone was at war with everyone else, and they become addicts, hungry for more and more. And then the supply dropped, as ponies got themselves under control and the caribou locked up their own supply. Yaks and griffons were never magic users, the reindeer don't use dark magic at all... what's a creature that feeds on dark magic to do?

The problem here is that Umbra are sapient. Tatzlwurms are not smart enough to go out and try to find more dark magic. They eat what the Harmony Violets filter down to them, and they paralyze and eat magical creatures. They can't go stir up strife and cause pain and fear in order to increase the available dark magic. Sapient creatures can, and the Umbra did. They roamed through the frozen wasteland, finding pony or reindeer settlements and causing the inhabitants to turn on each other in fear, or riling up yaks (a very easy task) to attack them.

Then they made the mistake of going after the Crystal Empire.

At this point in time, I was roaming around, free as a bird, doing anything I liked anywhere I liked... except the Crystal Empire. The barrier that keeps out horrific storms caused by the churning chaos of magic coming down from the atmosphere to plunge toward the earth also keeps out my chaos. Celestia and Luna would occasionally run there to hide out from me, and I let them do it, as long as they didn't stay there too long, but I wouldn't let any other Equestrian ponies leave the country. Otherwise they'd have all voted with their hooves to flee the chaos and then who would I have had to play with?

The Umbra tried to get in, multiple times. Ponies would have been a lot more valuable to them than most of the prey they generally found; they can impersonate ponies pretty well, considering that they are a species of pony, albeit a really weird one, and ponies are more magical than most other races. So they were motivated. Plus, the same barrier I had up to keep ponies from escaping Equestria was keeping them from migrating into my country, so the Crystal Empire was the only game in town. (They could have broken through my barrier, more easily than they could the one generated by the Heart... but they wouldn't have liked what it would have done to them. My barrier had a bad habit of turning species into other species, and anything pony-like would have probably ended up as a mouse or a frog. Actual ponies could get through it without anything untoward happening to them, because I'd set it to let ponies in but not let anyone out – if ponies wanted to come experience my chaos, the more the merrier! But an Umbrum is not a real pony, exactly.) Finally, they thought they had it... the protective shield was fading and they thought they'd break through then. But the reason the shield was fading was that they were preparing the ritual to renew it. When the annual renewal of the Crystal Heart's protection happened, the Umbra were, for the most part, frozen into their crystalline forms... after trying to escape underground as magical constructs. So they weren't just crystallized. They were turned into veins of crystal within rock.

Never run away when a fruit of Harmony has locked onto you and is about to zap you. As terrible as the consequences will be when it hits you... there are worse fates than being a statue. Like being a
Their Queen, the most powerful of their race, was pregnant at the time. She managed to magically shield her baby from the Heart, weaving a protective shield around him and teleporting him out of her body with the last of her magic. Thus she was crystallized on the surface. Her son was teleported into the Crystal Empire, where somepony found a baby foal on their doorstep and took him to the then-Princess, Amore, to find his parents. Of course, she couldn't, so she sent him to a temporary home for foals while she tried to find him some foster parents to take him in.

No one wanted to. I wonder why not.

I believe Sombra found out what he really was (and murdered Amore, and took the throne) when he wasn't much past the standard age for a cutie mark. I haven't paid that much attention to his history, so I couldn't say for sure. I know that he reigned for around the last 30 years or so of my reign, and some time after that before Celestia and Luna felt themselves strong enough to deal with him... and he definitely did something to Luna that weakened her and let the Nightmare get a foothold within her, before the sisters launched their final attack and, sore loser that he was, he sent the entire Crystal Empire to the far future. Umbra don't age, as long as they have a healthy supply of dark magic to draw from, and Sombra had that. I don't actually know how long it was after I was turned to stone that Celestia and Luna defeated him, or rather, didn't.

Sombra wasn't as powerful as an alicorn, but he studied magic intensively, he practiced constantly, and the torment he kept his subjects in stirred up a lot of dark magic, which he was very, very good at channeling. His uses for that power were rather banal, although I suppose he had reasons – he enslaved the Crystal Ponies and forced them to work in the mines because he was trying to dig out his people, the rest of the Umbra. I suppose I can relate. I'd have made ponies work in mines too if I'd thought I could save my mother and older brothers and the rest of my draconequus tribe that way. Although I wouldn't have had to enslave them. Ponies were very, very eager to work for me when I offered them jobs. I never had to enslave a single pony; hardly any of them, aside from Celestia and Luna, would refuse a single request I made. And yet Celestia and Luna claimed they were living in torment under my rule! I ask you, would tormented ponies be so very eager to make mango cheese smoothies and grilled lemon sandwiches for their tormentor? Maybe they'd have been less enthusiastic about mining; I never asked them, since getting ponies to dig in a mine for something I could snap my fingers to summon would be a pointless waste of time. There's nothing fun about digging in a mine.

The replenishment of the Crystal Heart's protection made the child Sombra sick near death, every year. But he lived through it because he didn't have enough dark magic, as a child, for it to crystallize the magic within him and turn him to stone. It just hurt... the way the Tree hurt me, before I was the Avatar of Chaos, when I was just a mortal chaos mage. As an adult, he feared it... but eventually figured out that it was the only way to keep me out, and I'll say this for Sombra. He wasn't shy about facing his own fears. So he figured out how to harness it to the darkness he'd caused in the Crystal Empire, fueling it with the fear and pain and despair of his slaves. Like I said, if everyone feels the same thing, that's harmony... doesn't matter if what they're feeling is awful or wonderful. Sombra brought about order (that was one of the reasons I kept poking him), and order can enforce a harmony of suffering.

But you all want to know about the Element of Hatred. Sombra left the Empire as a colt of cutie mark age (although Umbra don't get them, so he would never get his.) He wandered about, discovering his affinity for dark magic without understanding what the forces he was playing with actually were. He found the stone his mother had been turned into, and she cryptically directed him to go to Yggdrasil... where the Element of Hatred still lay nestled at the roots of the dead Harmony Tree. When he brought it back, he discovered how easily he could use it to make caribou, yaks,
griffins and even reindeer turn against each other and attack one another... which made him stronger.

Once he returned, he was able to re-awaken his mother enough to have a conversation with her, in which she showed him his true power and told him what had happened to her and the rest of his kind. So when he returned to the Empire, he used Hatred to turn the mostly earth pony population of the Empire against their unicorn rulers. They viewed him as their champion and savior when he killed Princess Amore, who he claimed had been hopelessly corrupted. Unicorns, who could potentially have challenged his rule, were either driven out, forced to enter Equestria or sent out into the northern storms to die. Some had their horns broken. Pegasi started making noise about seceding from the Crystal Empire and going to try to rebuild Stratopolis; Sombra's goons arrested a number of them and broke their wings, and Sombra himself, who was at that point using his own magic to hold off the storms rather than the Crystal Heart, wove them into a barrier no pegasus could safely cross.

By the time he showed his true colors and began enslaving the ponies who had cheered for his rule, it was too late. There were no ponies with both the strength and the will to fight him. I don't like tyrants, so I showed up to make his life more entertaining on multiple occasions and publicly humiliated him, as well as carrying off some of his slaves and bringing them to Equestria because they declared they'd rather pledge allegiance to me and my chaos than live under Sombra, but... I'm ashamed to admit, I had the power to defeat him completely and kick him out of there, free all the ponies and bring them back under my raining umbrella, but I didn't. He was even more fun to taunt and torment than Celestia and Luna; I didn't want to ruin my toy so quickly. And then he figured out how to harness the Heart, and I couldn't return.

I don't know all that much about what he did or didn't do after he figured out how to activate the Heart with dark magic instead of light, since from that point on I couldn't get back in to the Crystal Empire. (It's not that there's a barrier. It's that a mage who knows what they're doing, in control of a powerful artifact of Harmony, could seriously harm me, up to and including turning me to stone again. I didn't dare go within range of the Heart while the Empire was ruled by unicorn mages who knew what they were doing, and I didn't dare go within range once Sombra figured out how to harness it.) But I know that, while unicorns and pegasi repopulated during his reign, none had the will to fight or stand against him. He was ruthless, cruel, smart, and would engage in mind control spells if somepony did show some signs of resistance... if he didn't just torture them to make the population more fearful of him.

I know that in the cartoon, Cadance used the Heart to shatter him while he was in his magical form, drawing on harmony from her new subjects, after Spike jumped to her with the Heart in his hands. In that version of events, Twilight and Spike, while looking for the Heart, found a staircase hidden by dark magic, and when they went down it, they encountered a room guarded by a door that shows you your worst fears. They then figured out that the Heart was someplace else, and went and got it. Sombra was almost fully manifested and completely inside the perimeter, well within range for the Heart to attack him full force; he was annihilated, except for his horn.

In our reality, Anon knew where the Heart was all along, because he'd seen the cartoon. He had Twilight cast a spell to reveal its location, they brought the Heart and performed the ritual, and Sombra, who was still outside the city at this point, was able to protect himself, shielding himself from the energies of the Heart. Anon ended up having to go out in the storm and fight him with the Element of Protection, because the crystal ponies had gotten the barrier up but Sombra was flinging spears of black crystal through the barrier – it was intended to keep out evil magic, not projectiles. The end result was the same, of course, and Anon made sure to slice the horn to bits. Not sure why. Maybe he thought the horn would have eventually regenerated into a full Sombra in the cartoon. I'm not at all sure it works that way.

I, personally, knew Sombra well enough to know that he wouldn't simply leave a powerful spell on a
door that goes nowhere interesting, just to be a decoy. He'd have known that there are too many ponies and other entities who can sense magic; Celestia and Luna, for instance, would have known the Heart wasn't behind that door if there was nothing there at all. To work as an effective decoy to lure ponies trying to find the Heart, he'd have had to make sure that something of similar power levels was hidden behind that door. After all, he wouldn't have known that it would be Celestia's protégé, not Celestia herself, who'd be searching. (Plus, while the cartoon didn't show it, and the Twilight of our world didn't do it, since Anon didn't expect her to – I strongly suspect that in the actual events that would have happened if Anon hadn't interfered, Twilight would have been casting a spell to find powerful magic items, and that was why she was so certain the Heart had to be behind that door in the first place.)

Sombra had quite a few magical artifacts. But the Crystal Heart is the fruit of a Harmony Tree, equal in power to an Element of Harmony. (More powerful, technically, since it can act on its own – it channels harmony from a large population, not from specially designated bearers.) Something that shows up magically as being of equivalent power? I wonder what that could be. Hmm.

So I decided that would be the first place I would check, and I was fairly sure I'd find it. A quick in and out, no alert raised, no one the wiser.

I took the train in. Teleportation into an area protected by an artifact of Harmony is kind of like cannonballing directly into freezing water. Once I was acclimated to the harmony field I'd be able to teleport, use my magic and do whatever I wanted, but I needed to let myself get used to it before using my magic.

Well, most of my magic. I was in the form of Twister on the train. Which set off some uncontrollable shivers and a lot of muscle tics as we crossed through the invisible shield of Harmony that the Heart generates, and a few concerned ponies asked me what was wrong. I told them I had a debilitating disease called bonitis, and it caused painful spasms that could only be relieved through massage. In fact the spasms weren't painful at all – more similar to the shivers that go up your spine when you're listening to a pony telling a moderately scary story, and I'm used to them, anyway, as most of the time they signal a magical imbalance or rapid shift. But ponies, being such a friendly and generous species, weren't willing to let me suffer a moment longer than necessary, and I had three ponies massaging me with their hooves from that point until the moment the train stopped. (One stallion, two mares. The stallion was an earth pony, and was using maybe a little bit more force than an actual unicorn suffering spasms would have wanted to take, but I like it rough sometimes. Especially when I'm in another body and can't feel as keenly as I would in my draconequus form.)

Once we reached the station, I wandered around a bit. Probably I could have jumped straight into using my magic, and in the past, I'm sure I would have. I'm not normally one for prudence, or patience. But the fights with Anon have changed something in me; I find myself holding back, calculating odds, making plans... wanting to be sure. As if surety and chaos could coexist. It's frustrating; I don't think I like what I've become, but I no longer have the nerve to jump into situations, cocksure and certain of being able to roll with the punches and come out on top. I suppose too many near-death experiences can sober even the most reckless draconequus. Before I started throwing around the kind of power that would make me detectable to the Heart, I wanted to be absolutely 100% certain that I was fully acclimated and would have no trouble with my magic unless the Heart specifically targeted me. If it did... well, there wasn't going to be much I could do about that.

In the square in front of the palace, I saw a giant statue of Anon. For several seconds I stared at the thing, unable to quite believe how incredibly dumb that was. A statue of Anon? Really? Of course, they didn't know that he'd warped the timeline and that he'd actually put them in more danger doing
things the way he had – Sombra could have killed somepony, flinging dark crystal shards through the barrier. I believe he did, actually, injure a few before Anon went out to challenge him. In the original timeline, no Crystal Ponies were harmed at all before Sombra was destroyed. But the Crystal Ponies didn't know that an original timeline even existed. The only ones who knew about the cartoon were Anon, and me.

If it had been dark outside, I would have summoned up a need to urinate just so I could have peed on that statue. But in broad daylight, I couldn't take the risk without using my magic to turn invisible or something, and I was trying to avoid using magic yet.

You may wonder how I got into the palace without using my magic, or if perhaps I had to wait until I was fully acclimated? No, dear readers, I didn't have to use a single jot of my chaos to get into the palace. They had tours. Yes, the Crystal Palace actively lets its citizens and tourists in to wander around their seat of government. At least Celestia always confined the tours to the gardens. Cadance actually lets ordinary ponies go strolling through the halls of government. I don't think she feels nearly as secure about being a princess or even a ruler as she pretends she does. Wonder if I could talk her into establishing a democracy? Democracies are marvelous; they're the most chaotic form of government possible. Everypony spends all their time shouting at others, rulers are selected by a popularity contest, and nothing gets done. Albion has one with their Parliament, and earth ponies traditionally ruled with them, but Equestria hasn't had one on a scale larger than a city since, well, ever. Not even when I was in charge, since I didn't let any ruling body form over anything larger than a city. I tolerated city-sized democracies because democracies are inherently chaotic, but anything bigger than that and there needs to be a lot of order baked in for the government to work as a government – bureaucracy, procedures, protocols, oh, it's all so dull.

Of course, the tour didn't go anywhere juicy, but that wasn't a problem for me. I told one of the tour guides that I needed to use the bathroom and I'd catch up. As soon as I went around the corner, I dropped Twister and climbed the wall. Negating gravity to make myself lighter and making the crystal wall just soft enough that my claws could hook into it was a small change, no more taxing than being Twister had been. I then used the ceiling to stroll right into the throne room. Since Cady The Pinkness and her hubby were still holding court, I couldn't just drop down the spiral staircase hidden under the floor by one of Sombra's spells, and as much as I'd have loved to distract them out of there with some dancing, singing toads or flying toasters or something, I didn't dare do anything that might tip them off to my presence.

The Crystal Heart takes more of an active role in defense than the Elements of Harmony do; there are things it can just do without a user focusing through it to make it do that thing. The barrier of light-magic Harmony around the city is one of those things. The weather control it performs to keep the storms of the Not-Yet-Completely-Frozen North is another. But attacking me was outside the range of anything it could do without prompting. However, there were an alicorn and a highly trained military unicorn near it at the moment, and I knew from watching the TV show that Cadance has some scary battle reflexes. Just because in our timeline she's never had a chance to use them doesn't mean they're not there, and this far away from Anon I was fairly certain she and Shining Armor would be able to take me on directly, without having to wait for him. (Distance is weird, with Anon. I was able to tell the dragons all about his murder of Faith; I wasn't quite able to tell Spike what was going on with him, even though he was all the way in the Crystal Empire at the time; I wasn't able to tell Celestia anything when I confronted her in Canterlot and Anon was in Ponyville. I'm not 100% sure physical distance matters, except to the degree that when I'm actually in his presence he can directly influence me. It seems just as likely that it's psychological distance that matters. Celestia's very important to Anon; Spike a lot less so, and he didn't even know about the Dragon Lord's existence. I haven't seen any evidence that he cares all that much about Cadance and Shining Armor; he doesn't seem to despise them and put them down like he does Spike, but he doesn't seem to focus any of his attention on them except when the plot requires it, either.) I couldn't risk letting either of
them know I was here, because either of them could theoretically cast a spell through the Crystal Heart to attack me... and I might be able to fend that off, because the Crystal Heart isn't necessarily as powerful as the Elements of Harmony. But... I might not. Not willing to test it, anyway.

I didn't know how long I was going to be stuck up here, waiting for court to end. The prospect of several hours of mind-numbing boredom stretched before me, rather painfully. And then I had a deliciously evil idea.

Love is chaotic, but I don't cast love spells because I don't believe in love. (I believe it exists. I just think it's basically worthless.) Lust, however... lust is well within my purview.

Within a few moments, I imagine the Pink Princess was probably starting to find her hubby's shapely muscles a bit distracting from her duties. In a few minutes, I saw her shifting uncomfortably on her throne. Half an hour after I cast the spell, Princess Cadance declared that she wasn't feeling well and was ending court early for the day, and with huge puppydog eyes she pleaded with her husband to attend her in their chambers. I smirked. Newlyweds. It had been a bit of a risk, casting a lust spell on the Princess of Love, but I figured that she'd been sheltered enough by her upbringing under Celestia's tutelage that she wouldn't recognize it for what it was, and would simply assume that Shining Armor's shining flanks were... overly inspirational at the moment. Or that estrus was coming on. Alicorns are erratic; I could always smell it on Celestia, in the first century or so before alicorn age-related infertility came upon her, and I knew she wasn't cycling so much as having it come on her at random.

Court was closed for the evening, the great doors closed, the magical lights snuffed, the curtains drawn over the windows. Perfect.

Ponies would need to cast a dark magic spell through the central crystal behind the throne to make the staircase appear. I just needed to float through the floor, and there it was.

I don't know what Sombra's fetish for stairs was. The spiral staircase was even more ridiculous than it appeared to be in the cartoon, and that was saying something. Fortunately for me I didn't need to actually walk down the steps. I could have flown down, but what fun would that have been? Instead I summoned a toboggan, gave the stairs the property of a snow-covered hill with that great icy crust that's perfect for skiing or sledding, and went tobogganing down the stairs with a very loud "WHEE!" Don't worry, the magical barrier that forms the floor of the throne room is quite soundproof.

The bottom was almost a full trot down, but on a toboggan, I covered the distance very, very quickly. It had been a long time since I'd gotten to do anything sheerly, physically fun; I had to talk myself out of teleporting back up to the top of the slide so I could do it again before going after my Element.

Well. The Element of Hatred wasn't going to collect itself. I surrounded myself with a protective shield against Sombra's fear spell; I hadn't carefully analyzed it, but I already knew what it did and I could see it, and its general structure told me that it was more or less exactly what the cartoon said it was. I sauntered through the door, the fear spell washing off of me like papier mache off the back of a duck. (Seriously, have you ever tried to wrap a duck in papier-mache?) The room wasn't large. At the back of it there was a chest, and I could clearly sense the Element of Hatred inside that chest.

I chuckled to myself. This was going to be a piece of cake.

WAKE UP, Sombra's voice echoed in my ears.

Startled, I looked around myself. Sombra was more than quite dead; why was I hearing him?
THE DELUSION HAS GONE ON LONG ENOUGH, CHAOS LORD. WAKE, AND REMEMBER WHERE YOU TRULY ARE.

And then I woke up. But I didn't open my eyes. I couldn't.

They were made of stone.

Of course my first reaction was to assume it was some kind of illusion, or that a petrification spell had been cast on me. In a total panic, I first tried to cast a spell to undo the petrification, and when that didn't work (and didn't even feel like there was magic flowing in the first place, which was exactly how it had felt when I tried to cast spells to free myself the first and second times I'd been turned to stone), I tried several different illusion dispellments, my sense of panic growing the entire time. Sombra couldn't possibly have the power to cut me off from my magic, I thought... which meant that the voice telling me to wake up had been telling the truth. My freedom, my battle with Anon, those had been hallucinations, a very lengthy and vivid dream. The reality was that I was still a stone statue.

I may have screamed hysterically for an extended period of time. It's hard to say. When I'm in stone and I perceive myself as screaming, but there's no sound because stone can't scream, am I actually screaming or not?

I threw everything I had at the stone – the same as I'd done the first two times, with the same results. Nothing. Nothing worked. I couldn't move or even feel that I had a body, I couldn't see or even perceive that my eyes existed. Normally I'd be able to hear things while I'm in stone, but I couldn't hear anything either – which might mean that while I'd been sleeping, Celestia had had my statue moved someplace quiet and secure, to make it even more unlikely that there would ever be enough chaos to free me. The thought made me despair, until the thought occurred to me that if Anon wasn't real, things should proceed as they had in the cartoon and I would eventually be released to Fluttershy's custody to be "reformed", and make a friend. That made the idea of being imprisoned again bearable... until I remembered that I'd seen the cartoon during the hallucination and there was no reason not to assume it was as big a figment of my imagination as the entire battle against Anon.

I don't know how long I was there. I alternated between screaming and sobbing for what seemed like a very, very long time, much longer than I'd have been able to keep up either one if I'd really been doing it with a physical body and not just doing it in my head. Eventually I calmed down – or rather, gave in to resignation – just long enough to think to myself that it could be worse. I could be in the Frozen North, where Loki had died. (I didn't question Loki's death. Unlike everything else that had happened, I didn't need to be free and mobile to learn that a former chaos avatar had died in stone; the fates of my predecessors is something I know, in some part of me, even if I haven't accessed those memories yet.) If I was still trapped after the last time I'd been turned to stone... the Bearers were still mortal. Unicorns can use spells to live a very long time, and earth ponies draw strength from the earth itself to extend their lifespans, but the moment the extremely reckless Rainbow Dash died or got herself killed, which was likely to happen long before the rest of her friends kicked it, the bonds of harmony would shift and I'd be able to free myself again. And if her death wasn't enough, it was unlikely any of them but Twilight would make it past 100-120 years, tops. I wouldn't have to wait a thousand years, this time.

Then I started to feel cold.

The last thing that had happened that I knew I'd been in stone for had been the wedding and the Changeling invasion. That had been in springtime. Only in the depth of the coldest parts of winter does it ever get cold enough in Canterlot for me to feel it. If I was feeling cold... I was someplace much colder than Canterlot in springtime. And unless I'd managed to lose three seasons while I was
hallucinating... that meant I wasn't in Canterlot anymore. I was someplace so cold that even in spring it could seep through the stone and make me feel it.

Only the Frozen North seemed to fit that bill. Or Antarctica, but they'd be the same in effect; both poles pull magic in and force it underground. And if I was there... I remembered how Loki had died. I'd be sucked dry of my magic, slowly, painfully, while the cold continued to seep in and torment me. Draconequii die when it gets cold enough, but I wouldn't be able to die until enough of my magic had been siphoned away that my consciousness couldn't remain supported within stone. I'd just feel the cold the entire time until I was dead.

So I started screaming again.

It takes a very, very, very long time to exhaust yourself from screaming when you don't actually have a mouth or lungs.

Eventually I'd... well, I didn't get my emotions under control so much as I was too drained to keep feeling that peak of terror and rage, and I dipped down into self-pity and despair instead. And then I got tired of that, and started trying to think of ways to escape my prison — even though I knew from a thousand years of trying that it couldn't be done, the idea of slowly freezing as my magic was torn from me until I died was enough to make me try again anyway. And then I fell into despair again because nothing I could think of was working. Rinse, repeat.

Enough cycles of that, and I was exhausted, and it was beginning to sink in again how incredibly boring it is to be in stone. As long as I'd been panicking or despairing, I'd been too consumed with my own emotions to worry about a lack of entertainment, but as soon as I was too tired to feel anything other than resignation, the boredom set in. I wasn't going to die quickly, and I didn't want to spend whatever I had left being bored.

So I tried to do any of the things I was used to being able to do while I was trapped in stone. Look into alternate universes. Fall asleep and walk in dreams. Sense disharmony.

I couldn't get the first one to work. I assumed, because I was having trouble quieting my mind and being calm and focused enough. Working any kind of magic while in stone is like having to thread extremely slippery, squirming spaghetti strands through needles. I'm still working with chaos, but I need a much heavier hand with it, and much more concentration, to make it do what I want through stone, and there are strict limits on what I can do. So I decided to try to fall asleep instead. Maybe I could get back to the dream I'd been having before Sombra's voice told me to wake up. Or start a new, better dream, without Anon in it. That'd be even better.

But I couldn't fall asleep. I calmed myself, I meditated, I tried to consciously generate a lucid dream for me to drift off into, but sleep didn't come.

Sensing disharmony, as a source of entertainment, was my last resort. It's not all that much fun. I pick up on the most terrible things that ponies, or anyone, does to anyone. Species going extinct because pony magic is redirecting the resources they need to live into pony territories. Murder. Rape. Deliberate cruelties. It's not stuff I really enjoy exploring or knowing about, but it's better than endless emptiness.

Except that the moment I opened myself up to sense disharmony, I could feel the Element of Hatred blazing at me.

I blinked. (I didn't. My eyes were still stone.) The Element of Hatred had been in the Crystal Empire, locked away by Sombra. That was true before the first time I'd been turned to stone. If the Crystal
Empire had really been restored – which it might have been, I could have sensed the magical shift of an entire city returning to our timeline even while dreaming – then it was possible the artifact had been retrieved. Unlikely, though. I'm not 100% sure Celestia even knows what it is. More importantly, alicorns of Celestia and Luna's strength would be more than capable of detecting the disharmony emanating from an Element of Disharmony if they bothered to scan the thing at all… which meant that if they had locked it in some vault with me, they were much, much bigger idiots than I thought. I needed disharmony to charge up my magic and free myself; why would they separate me from sources of chaos or disharmony but then leave me with one of my own Elements?

Or, I thought, it's possible that Sombra had a second illusion spell prepared if someone got through the first one… say, someone who was powerful enough to dispell his first spell, and had reasons to want an Element of Disharmony, which could potentially include the nigh-all-powerful Avatar of Chaos if he ever happened to get out of stone… a second spell that was perhaps designed to feed on the fear it itself generated so it would stay powerful and active as long as the victim was actively terrorized, which since the spell was designed to show you your worst fear, would probably be a very long time, unless maybe the thing they most feared was a long, slow, boring death that would include plenty of time within it for resigning oneself and achieving a level of calm and peacefulness that Sombra would have never imagined that specific individual to even be capable of because it had taken hundreds of years in stone in the first place for that person to learn how to calm themselves that way...

I opened my eyes. Actual eyes, this time, exposed to the dim actual light within the chamber.

Just in time, too, because there was Anon, with his sword.

He swung it at me. Yelping, I dodged backward just in time. I guessed that they must have summoned him to kill me while I was paralyzed by the spell.

"Discord!" Anon shouted. "You can't escape this time!"

"I'm fairly sure I can," I retorted, and teleported.

As I did I felt some sort of space warp around me, and when I reappeared… I was still in the chamber with the Element of Hatred, and Anon. He swung at me again, and I dodged again. The chamber wasn't tall enough for me to escape by floating to the ceiling, and if I couldn't teleport out, I didn't want to risk phasing through the floor either. Somehow I had to get past him and back out the door. I'd be able to escape up the stairs, since I can fly and Anon can't, and once I was out of here the space warp would no longer affect me. Of course I wouldn't get the Element of Hatred that way, but if I ended up dead I wouldn't get it either.

"Stand still!" Anon yelled.

"What a wonderful idea! I'll just stand around and let you skewer me! That sounds like oodles of fun!"

"You might as well give up! You're never getting out of here alive!"

That sounded… oddly villainous for someone as dedicated to imagining himself as the hero as Anon. I mean, I've watched a lot of stories with heroes and villains. Very few of said villains are ever as suave and entertaining as I am, and they tend to have certain repetitive tropes… such as telling the hero to give up and die. Not that heroes are immune to this, but they're generally on the order of "Wait!" or "Stop!" or the "Stand still!" that Anon had just used on me. Was Anon's "I am the hero" field finally breaking down in the face of his frustration at being unable to kill me? "Do all the other bad guys follow your advice?" I asked. "Because it seems to me that taking suggestions from the guy
who's trying to kill me would be... oh, I don't know... stupid?"

I turned the floor to butter – apparently my powers weren't inhibited, only my ability to teleport out of the room – and Anon slipped and fell on his face. I laughed hysterically, but made sure not to close my eyes while I was laughing. Closing my eyes while I'm fighting someone never ends well for me.

He got up with an even more murderously furious expression, but I was having a hard time taking the danger seriously because he was covered in butter. "You'll pay for that, Discord!"

"Do you take PonyCard? I'm afraid I left my bit purse at home."

Anon snarled and lunged at me. Still giggling at the contrast between his enraged expression and the butter dripping down from his hair and nose, I skated out of the way, reaching one of the side walls. Anon spun to cut me off, keeping me from getting around him to get out the door. I coiled like a spring to go under the arc of his sword, and then before he could bring it back around again I released the spring and leapt over him, uncoiling in the air, hooking my claws into the ceiling as I passed over his head, and using them as leverage to twist my body and change my own arc. I landed on the door side of him while he was still slicing through the space I'd just been in against the wall, and flung myself toward the door.

And bounced against an invisible magical force field I hadn't detected until I hit it.

Sombra never did things without reasons. This was a trap set for me, specifically. He wanted to be able to hold me in the room with the Element of Hatred until he could come to destroy me, presumably with the repurposed, dark-channelling Crystal Heart, though I couldn't rule out that he'd had other artifacts or spells that could have done it. And Sombra thought in layers, and didn't generally make the mistake of underestimating an opponent (he'd underestimated Anon, but Anon's field had made him artificially stupid, most likely. In the original timeline he'd come within seconds of winning, and he hadn't made any mistakes so much as he'd been starting from the seriously underdog position of being mostly dead.) If Anon wasn't here trying to kill me, I might be able to identify and break the spells on the door or the anti-teleportation spell, but I wasn't going to be free to concentrate as long as he was attacking me.

Well. I was still nearly omnipotent even if I couldn't get out of this room, and Anon, for all his reality warping powers, is mortal. (I assume, anyway. He seems to need to eat and sleep and use the bathroom like any ordinary pony would, and the slight cut on his face he'd gotten in the battle against the caribou had still been a visible if mostly healed scar when he was arrested at the restaurant. He doesn't seem to have alicorn-like fast healing.) I am not. I don't get tired if there isn't something draining my magic or otherwise interfering with me, and while I can't use the Element of Hatred, the fact that there wasn't a bearer in the room using it meant that the disharmony magic it radiated was going solely to me. All I had to do was keep dodging Anon until he got tired. It would happen eventually.

So we danced for what felt like hours. I turned him into various entertainingly funny animals, but remained watchful, since the first time I'd done that had been the time he'd managed to cut off my tail. He broke the laws of physics in stupidly heroic ways, like flying at me with the sword in his beak while he was a chicken. (Without magical assistance, chickens cannot fly. They can jump pretty high with wing assistance and they can fall with style from a decent height and remain uninjured, but I wouldn't have expected a chicken to even pull that much off with a large, heavy crystal sword in his beak.) It turns out that how much wood a woodchuck can chuck is irrelevant if he has a sword he can chuck instead; I narrowly avoided getting the Element of Protection through my throat, that time. Making him a trout should have shut him down right away, since trout can neither swim nor breathe
in air, but he was an implausibly strong trout with the positively ludicrous ability to hold the sword in his fins, and he just kept leaping at me until I turned him into a bonsai tree... an enchantment that broke almost instantly, because turning animate, moving creatures into inanimate, motionless ones is a betrayal of chaos and personally upsetting after a thousand years in stone, and my magic just twisted out from under me and wouldn't let me keep him that way.

Between turning him into animals, giving him clown shoes and a big red nose, trapping him in a bubble of bubble gum that covered him with sticky gum when it popped, and other such transformations, I also turned the floor to glue, made the ceiling rain rocks (that didn't work so well, since he smacked them away from himself with the sword and made them hit me, and after his performance with the baseballs the time that he cut off my tail, I should have remembered this), turned the room freezing cold and bakingly hot, made an entire conga line worth of female human teenagers dressed as attractive and sexually alluring members of a group of high social status in schools (they call them cheerleaders, and they wear minimalistic clothing and perform gymnastics and chants to raise the spirits of athletic performers, and for some reason most male humans in their teens want to date one) appear so they could point and laugh at him, made an elderly human woman appear and start smacking him with her purse because humans who think of themselves as heroic have inhibitions against attacking elderly human women (and, to be fair, he didn't kill her – he disarmed her by cutting the purse strap and then throwing the purse across the room, forcing her to go chase it, and I dispelled her then), summoned some of my nutcrackers and trouser snakes from the battle with the caribou, teleported his clothes away (and then put them back on him, because euw, I don't need to be seeing naked Anon's pathetic little exposed genitals... what's wrong with human beings anyway? Why don't they have a sheath for that stuff?), and mined the ground with marshmallow fluff land mines. None of it stopped him for very long. Even when I focused on keeping a particular enchantment in place, holding him back, it seemed that as long as he was holding the sword none of my spells on him could last very long.

You may ask yourself, why didn't I attack him with something more deadly? if I could create land mines that covered him in exploding marshmallow fluff, why not real land mines that would blow his body to bits? Why didn't I manifest a gun and shoot him? Why didn't I raise the temperature to the point where his human blood would boil in his veins? The answer is I didn't think of it. Firstly, I don't normally kill my opponents. I haven't killed a living, breathing matter-based being deliberately, with my magic, since I drove all the dragons in Neighropa to madness. (Or maybe the time I killed a bunch of noble pony assassins by turning them into styrofoam dodecahedrons and then stepping on several of them, but I think the dragon thing came after that.) I've killed a number of extradimensional entities since then, but they were bodiless energy beings. So I don't generally think in terms of killing. Secondly... well, it wasn't Anon's stupidity field, but something else was acting on my mind, preventing me from finding a way out of the situation, and that included killing Anon.

Though when I strung ribbons between the walls, at human ankle height, I didn't do anything to stop him when he tripped, and fell on his own sword.

I saw the puddle of blood. I saw it sticking up out of his back, for a moment, before it started shrinking. And I stared in disbelief. Had my dire enemy just accidentally killed himself? Given Anon's I-am-the-hero field, how was that even possible? Had Sombra left behind some sort of spell that interfered with Anon's reality warping, and the only reason he'd managed to kill Sombra was that Sombra had perhaps had to channel the spell through an artifact – like the Element of Hatred?

I collected the Element of Hatred anyway, because I couldn't believe Anon was dead so easily. I mean, it wasn't easy; I'd been fighting him and dodging him for what had felt like hours. But it had been possible, which was a lot more easily than I'd thought it would have been. I'd been in despair at my chances of defeating such a creature so many times, and the best plan I'd been able to come up with was to distract him with a seemingly long-range villainous plot to buy myself time and annoy
him, and now he was dead?

I wanted to believe it. Oh, how I wanted to. But there was that nagging sense of disbelief. Even though he was face down on the ground in a puddle of blood and his sword was no longer visible and he wasn't moving and I couldn't see any evidence of breathing, I knew I wouldn't feel secure until I could see his face, until I could confirm that the light of life had gone out of his eyes.

I've seen enough horror movies that I should have known better, but I walked over to his body, leaned down, and flipped it over with my paw.

His sword was in his hands. His front was bloodstained but there was no evidence of damage to his armor. And his eyes were open and tracking me and the sword was moving and oh chaos no—

I tried to dodge, but it was too late. The sword swiped through my middle, disrupting my magic and spilling what was now non-magical draconequus intestines all over the floor, in ropes springing out of me like a jack from a jack-in-the-box. I fell backward, screaming. Anon got to his feet and swung down at me again. By instinct, I threw up an arm to protect myself, and then looked down at it stupidly as it fell to the floor, lopped off.

He took his time in cutting me to pieces, using his sword on my limbs and tail first, hacking them off in bits. Harmony burned me and dissolved me but not quickly enough to save me from the sword lopping off the burning part and making the next part start to boil away. He cut off my ears, and my antlers, and my snout, and sliced across one eye, half-blinding me. The other one he left intact so I could see his mad, savage grin as he started stabbing my chest and belly, over and over. At the end, he raised the sword over my head and brought it down, viciously hard, driving it directly into my skull, and I died.

And then I woke up.

A fear spell can kill a pony, if it's done right; cause sufficient mortal terror and a pony can drop dead of a heart attack. Perhaps even an alicorn can; certainly Luna behaves in dreams as if she knows the entities within could theoretically kill her. But I can't die that way because I don't actually need my physical heart to stay alive as long as I have my magic – even if I'm under the influence of a spell that makes me think I don't have my magic, as long as I actually do. Sombra couldn't have known that – he didn't come close enough to beating me, any of the times we fought, for him to learn how resistant I am to dying of bodily damage, and he wasn't old enough to have fought any of my predecessors.

I'd broken free of my first worst fear, only to fall into my second – the fear of dying at Anon's hands. I figured out later that the reason I hadn't thought to kill him had been that the spell had orchestrated things so that I couldn't. The whole thing was set up to make me think I'd won, but still be afraid, and have my fear and disbelief itself trigger the illusion of dying horribly. The scenario had nowhere to go after my death, though, particularly since Sombra couldn't have known that I can resurrect myself. A pony would probably have actually died of fear at that point, but I didn't.

I did, however, find myself wrapped in chains that were powered by the Crystal Heart, bound on the floor of the throne room and surrounded by Twilight, her friends, Cadance, Shining Armor, and Anon.

"He's waking up, Twilight!" Cadance shouted, nervously. "You need to hurry!"

That did not sound good at all. I started trying to squirm out of the chains, since the magic of the Crystal Heart was preventing me from simply teleporting out of them or unraveling them. The girls were all wearing their Elements, and Anon's Element of Protection was around his neck, not in full-size sword mode.
"You ought to let me take care of him," Anon groused. "What if this doesn't work? What if he fakes it and then it turns out it had no effect?"

"It'll work," Twilight said confidently. "If the Elements can turn him to stone, they can bind him to a reforming spell."

"NO!" I shouted. In the cartoon, Twilight talked about using a "reforming spell" on me, but never had the opportunity because I was smart enough to pull the spells that fell in that category out of her books and eat them before she had a chance to look them up. In reality... there are only some spells that can be considered "reforming spells" that could possibly work on me and achieve the goal Twilight would be aiming for, even with the help of the Elements. "Be Your Best Self", for instance, would just make me more chaotic, because it compels its targets to try to be the best self they can imagine being. "Please Like Me" makes targets crave love and friendship more strongly and thus promotes conformist, pro-social behavior, but it wouldn't work on me because I know perfectly well ponies won't love me or be my friend no matter what I do. It might make me depressed and angry but it wouldn't reform me.

But there are spells that could do it, if they were cast with the power of the Elements. Spells that would essentially scoop out my personality and replace me with a cheerful, pony-like cipher.

I was using all my power to try to break the chains, and all of my physical flexibility and strength to try to escape the chains. Shining Armor wrapped me in his shielding spell, preventing me from physically struggling, while the mares and Anon charged up the Elements. The seven of them floated into the air, eyes glowing.

I am kind of ashamed to admit that I begged. It didn't help.

When I alter a pony, when a Nightmare affects a pony, it doesn't create a different personality, a different ego in the mind to run around doing things while the former ego is trapped inside. It affects the pony's personality, the way they think. They may be horrified afterward, when they're restored to themselves, but while it's happening they have no consciousness that they've been affected in a way they don't like. The time I tried disharmonizing myself to see what it was like, I ended up weepy and clingy, begging Celestia to take me back and be my love again. That was deeply humiliating when it wore off and I remembered doing it, but I had no idea while it was happening that there was anything unusual about my emotions (even though I remembered casting the spell on myself. I think I thought it just didn't work and my sudden feelings of grief and loss over losing Celestia were just a coincidence.)

This wasn't like that. But it wasn't quite like being possessed by something that's making you a puppet, either. I had that happen to me once, in another dimension where my magic was weak; some sort of parasite got into my brain and started controlling my body. It had access to my memories, but I had no access to anything it was thinking or feeling. It had more or less completely locked me out of my body, and was trying to get me back to the portal I'd created, where its access to my memories must have convinced it that it would be omnipotent if it could get me back home where my magic was (I presume; it's not like it told me what it was doing, or why.) Unfortunately for it, it had no concept of what it means to be the Avatar of Chaos. As soon as my magic came flooding in, it lost control of me and I turned it into an ant and infected it with Cordyceps. (If you're not a botanist... look it up. It's not a reference to my name, and frankly I find the behavior of that particular fungus to be entirely too orderly to want to take credit for it.) (Oh, wait, technically I guess that means I did kill a living, matter-based being more recently than the dragons. Ants don't survive Cordyceps infections.)

After the Elements cast their spell... I was a passenger in my own brain, watching what the new
entity that had been created by the Elements was doing, but I could feel everything he felt. I felt the desire to apologize to the ponies and Anon, groveling to them. I felt the guilt that consumed the other me for all the "terrible things" I've supposedly done to ponies over the centuries. I felt how much he hated himself and his, my, unique appearance. He took the form of a pony because the idea of looking like myself was horrifying. And worst of all, he worshipped Anon as much as any of the others did.

I was still me, but I couldn't do anything. I could feel everything he felt and hear everything he thought, but I couldn't affect any of it. It was worse than being in stone, because I couldn't lose myself in hallucinations and daydreams... I had to live every moment trapped in a body that now belonged to a being I hated almost as much as I hated Anon. I couldn't even scream or cry inside my head; apparently the only reason that works when I'm in stone is that I'm not getting any feedback from my body telling me that I'm not doing it. As long as my "reformed" alter ego was strolling around with a stupid smile on his face, all I could feel was my face smiling, as much as I wanted to do anything else.

And I might still be stuck there if Shining Armor hadn't decided to blast me with his magic.

Without warning, a searing pain slammed into me and threw me across a room that I hadn't even been aware of being in. I landed in a pile of burned feathers, fractured limbs and bruised muscles, all of which healed more or less instantly because there was nothing inhibiting my magic. The main problem I was suffering from was intense disorientation, because moments ago I had been mentally throwing up as the thing I had been turned into was in Ponyville learning from Anon how to fish, as if I hadn't been catching live fish to play with and then toss back since I was six years old. Now I was... back in the chamber with the Element of Hatred.

I looked up just in time to meet another near-stunning blast of magic and recognize that it was coming from Shining Armor, who was right outside the door to the chamber, not quite close enough to trigger the fear spell but close enough to see and attack me. There were several crystal pony guards behind him, but no Cadance. Now, Shining Armor is overprotective of his loved ones, as might be expected from a pony whose specialty is protective magic, but I didn't think he was stupid enough to take on the Lord of Chaos all by himself with a handful of guards, and not involve the alicorn he happens to be married to. No, it was far more likely that that he was trying to distract me while she headed for the Crystal Heart.

That was not a thing I wanted to stick around for.

I was still disoriented, but never let it be said that the Master of Chaos cannot roll with the punches. I teleported into midair, turned Shining's next blast into gummy worms, grabbed my Element and ran. For a moment I thought, wait, I can't teleport out of here, there's a force field, and then I remembered that that hadn't actually happened. So I teleported all the way back to the Grotto and promptly had a complete nervous breakdown.

While I'd been trapped by that fear spell, I'd been imprisoned in stone, murdered by Anon, and turned into a caricature of myself, and I'd lived months in that particular prison, feeling every alien and disgusting emotion that the impostor created by the reforming spell had felt. I don't know how long I was actually trapped there – long enough for someone to figure out I was there, which was probably quite some time considering that I'd been inside a chamber protected by a fear spell at the bottom of a trot-long spiral staircase hidden by dark magic, so it wasn't exactly as if anypony was likely to accidentally trot by and notice me. It could have been days. Weeks. I hoped not, I'd have missed out on Anon's entire trial.

But I was going to miss out on a bit more of it, because I needed to curl up in a ball and
hyperventilate for an hour or two.

I went looking for Gilda after I thought I could maybe mostly keep myself under control, but she wasn't in the Eyrie of Awesomeness and I didn't have any idea where she might be if she wasn't there. I had the most bizarre impulse to go to Trixie or Blueblood, since I knew where they were. I needed to be around ponies to ground me, to remind me that this one was real. After a thousand years of sensory deprivation and hallucinations, being subjected to a fear spell that dumped me into three different real-as-life illusions was... not doing my mental health any favors. In the old days I had my groupies and I had my entourage, ponies who lived in my encampments and did things for me like making food so I wouldn't have to conjure it, because I can't surprise myself and I get bored with always knowing what food I'm going to have for dinner tonight, and if I came back from some battle with eldritch horrors or some particularly unpleasant worldwalking episode shaking and unsteady, I could surround myself with ponies who knew me. They weren't my friends, most of them would probably have happily killed me if I'd been that vulnerable that they thought they could pull it off, but they knew me and they'd do what I said.

But Trixie and Blueblood aren't enough under my control that I can trust them with seeing me when I'm close to falling apart. Even Gilda would have been a risk, though Gilda's seen me when I've been beaten up by Anon, so I have a little bit more trust in her.

There's no one who knows me who I can be really safe with when I can't stop thinking about what it felt like to be slowly sliced to bits, or turned into a parody of what I am.

So I went with my usual remedy. I went to my club. But after the time I'd been with Tats, I couldn't bring myself to go through another encounter as Twister, lying about who I was, being a pony. I used to have nightmares about being forcibly turned into a pony, when I was a child, and in that last illusion of Sombra's, the me who'd been twisted into a horrible conformist shape had voluntarily become a pony and rejected being what I really am. I could fake being a pony in public, but I needed what I'd gotten last time. I needed to be with somepony who at the very least knew what I was.

I did the same thing I'd done before. I let it be known that I was matchmaking for a friend of mine who was a hyperchimera, looking for someone discreet who was into extreme xeno. This time I landed a pegasus stallion by the name of Flight Risk, a daredevil thrill-seeker who made Rainbow Dash seem positively sedate. Never did learn what he did for a living, because I didn't care. I introduced him to the fun of sex with chaos, made three duplicates of him where all four of them could feel what the others were feeling but they could operate as independent entities, made an extra one of me, and we had an orgy. With Tats, I'd wanted tenderness and to be just a little bit submissive because of what I'd seen while I was with the caribou. After such realistic visions of being in stone, and being murdered, and finally being mind-controlled into something I'm not, I needed the kind of sensation saturation that could wipe out my ability to remember the recent past, and I needed chaos. Flight Risk was more than up for it, literally as well as figuratively.

He was everything I needed for a little while. I even considered letting him remember the encounter so I could come back for a round 2 at a future date. But, sadly, common sense prevailed, as little as I like having to employ any sort of sense, let alone the common kind. After he fell asleep I pushed his memory into dreams, the same as I'd done with Tats. He'd consumed enough substances over the course of the evening that I thought it very unlikely he'd remember any of his dreams by morning.

Gilda was back at the Eyrie by the time I returned. "Yo, where have you been? Stuff's been going down in Ponyville. The purple nerd hasn't been seen in days, Dash and her weirdo friends think that they're stuck inside some kind of fake force field, and there's some blue bitch strutting around like she owns the place."
"That's Trixie. She's another one of my minions."

"Doesn't seem like she's all that."

I sighed. "Elements of Disharmony can't work together. You think she's not all that because both of you are bearing Disharmony Elements, but so far it sounds like everything's going great. How about you?"

Gilda shrugged. "I can't do much without interfering with the blue conehead, right now; Dash and all her friends are stuck in Ponyville. There really isn't a forcefield, you know; I checked. Is there supposed to be?"

"No, Trixie's main talent is for illusions." The word made me remember what I was trying to forget, and I shuddered. "Gah."

"Yeah, illusions are stupid," Gilda said, as if she was agreeing with some statement I'd made.

"Don't talk to me about illusions right now," I said. "I want to watch something. Do you want to watch something?"

"Watch something? Like what?"

And that was how I introduced Gilda to the pleasures of a movie marathon, as I set up a movie theater in the Grotto and pulled in three or four mindless B-movies for us to watch. I don't even remember what I picked, just that they were all terrible in hilarious ways. Gilda was annoyed at first, since she had for some reason been expecting quality flick picks out of me, but she soon got into the spirit of heckling the screen with me. We went through several buckets of popcorn and a bucket of fried chicken (it's like breaded, fried mushrooms, except it's chicken meat. You won't understand, it's an omnivore thing.)

I'm exhausted now but I don't want to go to sleep. I've been writing this for two days. Haven't slept since the illusion spell, and that was two days of writing, a movie marathon, and a wild orgy ago. Even with all that, I can't stop remembering the illusions. And I feel so humiliated, because I broke the first illusion by figuring out the inconsistencies; I should have guessed Sombra might dump me into a second one, or a third. I should have known. I should have tried dispelling them as illusions. But it wouldn't have worked; I only dispelled the first one because spending enough time in stone left me in a position to calm my mind, and then there was no more fear to feed the part of the spell that kept me paralyzed and unable to use my actual, real-world magic. The other two scenarios kept me at a high level of stress or terror or utter horrifying despair for the entire time.

But I still should have known.

And I'm not even sure now. If I try to sleep, will I wake up again to some new horror? Or will some implausible but awful fate befall me as soon as I let my guard down, like when I checked to make sure Anon was really dead and he killed me? Will it turn out I really have been in stone all this time and all of this has been just a series of dreams within dreams?

I can't go without sleep forever. Sooner or later I'll have to give in.

It's already night again. Gilda's turned in for the night; I won't be able to get her to watch more stupid movies with me.

I'm going to go sleep with her. (Not in the sexual sense; Gilda has very poor taste and is not into me. I mean, it doesn't help that she's a lesbian and I'm usually male, but I can take female form, and
others have gotten past that anyway. The problem is that Gilda has a nice strong streak of xenophilia but she's specifically into ponies, as well as other griffins, and I'm not enough like either one for her taste. And right now, I wouldn't change myself for anyone.) I'm sure she'll squawk about it, but she's basically a cat, right? Ponies like to cuddle cats, cats like to be cuddled by ponies, I am too big for a normal-sized cuddly cat, but a griffin is just the right size. Maybe if I have a nice cuddly griffin to hold onto while I'm sleeping, I'll be able to remember that I'm not in any of those nightmares anymore.

Hey, but at least I got the thing, right? I've got the whole set now. Except for Selfishness. I keep forgetting about that one. Funny how it hasn't turned up yet, but then, it's not like I'm looking that hard.

Chapter End Notes

I didn't really cut 20,000 words, but I really did plot a lot of lengthy digressions before recognizing I needed to cut the damn things.

I'm not satisfied with this chapter. Too talky, not enough showing, and I feel like the last nightmare wasn't visceral enough. But it's already been half a year since I posted a chapter, or more really, so it's more than time.

I do not actually literally follow the comics' story regarding Sombra. Like many such stories, it happens too damn fast, and I wanted Discord to have encountered Sombra, so the whole thing about Radiant Hope going to Celestia's school got thrown out for not fitting the timeline, and besides, I honestly don't like "but Sombra did have one real friend!" I think him fully engaging with the Umbra's agenda would have been more likely if he had no strong feelings tying him to anypony in the Crystal Empire. So I took what I wanted from the comics and tossed out what I didn't.

There is a reason why tatzlwurms are small and the flowers they're attached to are also pretty small, and it is that in "Three's A Crowd" Discord did something really stupid, which will eventually be revealed in "Love, Friendship and Chaos" if I ever finish the damn thing.

Discord doesn't know that there would have been a statue of Spike instead, because he hasn't seen season 4.

"Bonitis" comes from Futurama.

End Notes

For updates and notes about my work, visit my Livejournal at alara-r.livejournal.com, or my Tumblr at alarajrogers.tumblr.com.
Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!