

League of Discord  
Chapter 9: Sunset Over Everfree

War hadn't been seen in Equestria for countless years, but Celestia had always kept her old armor maintained as a contingency. Now, it was time once more for the Sun Goddess to don more than just her ceremonial jewelery. The golden armor shimmered even in the darkness, and anypony who would have looked in the light at her would probably have been too blinded to see her immaculate white coat and shimmering mane contained by the enchanted relics of war. Across from her, a dark blue alicorn mare sat with a remorseful look on her face. "You don't have to do this, Celestia. Let me help. We can gather the Royal Guard. Think this through!"

Princess Luna's pleading fell on deaf ears. "I have! I have...believe me. I swore upon my very life that I'd keep harm from coming to my subjects, and this time, I fear Discord means more than just a little mischief, and since your powers are diminished from your recent purification, I am the only one who can stand up to Discord. Equestrian Intelligence has already tracked him to our old castle in the Everfree Forest. I need to stop him before he can cause any harm, and before he can regain any measure of his former strength." Celestia sighed, worry crossing her features. "He has Twilight Sparkle, Luna. If anything were to happen to her... Her parents would never forgive me. I would never forgive myself. I practically raised her. I can't..."

Luna nodded. "I understand, sister, but Equestria needs you. You kept the Royal Guard around for just this sort of event. Don't do this alone, please."

Celestia nickered. "Did you not see how easily the two foreigners swept aside my elite guard? I did what I could, sister, but these aren't war ponies, they're glorified police officers! I made a mistake. I was foolish and short-sighted and now there's less than ten capable warriors in all of Equestria. Two of those are confirmed enemies, and I can't risk putting my ponies in the hooves of foreigners that might betray us just as easily. I've made as much preparation as I can, and even if our military is lacking, I'm still one of the most powerful beings on the planet...Hopefully at this point, I am the most powerful. Discord shouldn't have had time to regain his strength yet. He'd have to stay in hiding. At least he never was very good at long-term planning. He always relied on brute force, and this time it should work to our victory. Have faith in me, Luna. I can fix this."

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Twilight's vision blurred as she felt the prick of a syringe in her flank, and her focus and all accompanying escape spells shattered instantaneously. She barely registered fuzzy and distant voices in her ears.

"Forgive me for my lack of faith in your strategic competence, Discord, but this is probably the most obvious hideout imaginable, taking into account this place's history." Swain was beginning to have misgivings about trusting in the hideous creature, but he had already committed, and there was no feasible way to back out now.

Discord laughed, playful arrogance shining through his response. "Of course it is, Swain! How else would they find us? You see, Twilight here has a double value. In addition to being the third largest

source of magical energy native to Equestria, she's also, as you know, the personal protege of dear ol' Celestia herself. Celly's already going to be stressed out enough about my return, but with what amounts to her surrogate daughter in our possession, all of those pesky little emotions that she keeps out of the way of ruling Equestria are going to be there in full force, clouding her judgment. That being said, she's still a pretty smart cookie, so she'll want to deal with me before I can regain my strength. Luckily, our beloved Singed here, nice new look by the way, is a genius, and with his concocted chemical catalysts I should have no trouble siphoning magical energy directly from Miss Sparkle! Then, when silly Celly strikes, I'll be more than a match for her. As it stands, she'd have a hard time confronting me right now before besting me, but with her student's energies at my disposal... Well, let's just say I have the most horribly ironic fate in store for her."

In the background, Singed grunted at the mention of his name, wrapping yet another bandage around himself as another tuft of his coat fell to the floor. The long-term side effects of his most ingenious creation had to be compensated for, and with his now-bare skin taking on a blackened, somewhat rotting appearance, the bandages would have to do in keeping himself from being exposed to the elements too much. Of course, if he was going to return to his traditional look, perhaps a few other pieces could be added to this ensemble... Absentmindedly remembering the schematics for his patented Mana Barrier, he commented, "Ironic usually means impractical, in my experience."

Discord nodded sagely. "Well, yeah, that's normally the case, but we can make a special exception here because immortals like myself and Celly tend not to stay dead by the traditional means. It's much easier to contain us than to kill us, you know."

Twilight felt vaguely unsettled by all of this, but couldn't manage to bring her thoughts together enough to puzzle out why. As she raised her head and squinted at all of the blurry movements around her, Discord let out another chuckle and moved toward her, extending a lion's paw. "Now, Miss Sparkle, I'd like you to kick and scream as much as you want, because this will only hurt a lot."

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Luna approached Ryze at a full gallop. The latter hurriedly unburied himself from the mountain of books under which he had been entombed upon recognizing the Princess of the Night. "Your Majesty, what brings you here? I was just making some headway on-

"There is no time, wizard. Two of yours, Swain and Singed, have broken into our vaults and freed a malevolent being known as Discord. My sister is preparing to do battle with him as we speak. Unfortunately, my recent subjection to the Elements of Harmony has left me too weak to do combat against the likes of Discord. However, if being rulers for all this time has taught us anything, it's contingencies. My sister doesn't trust you, but right now you and the rest of your group are the only others in this land capable of making a difference against Discord, since Twilight's capture means that the Elements of Harmony cannot be harnessed." Luna paused to catch her breath before regaining the royal composure her sister was always prattling to her about.

Ryze took a few moments to process the heap of information that had been unloaded onto him. "So... Twilight has been captured, and you're out of commission mostly, meaning that two out of three of Equestria's main defenses have been compromised. Do you have a standing military?"

“Well...before I was banished to the moon, my sister and I thought that since we had basically stamped out war, a standing military could be toned down in favor of police and the Royal Guard, though apparently there's not much difference in capability between the two. My absence hasn't been kind to the Royal Guard's training and discipline.”

“That's stupid. The point of a standing military isn't just to deal with threats as they arrive, it's to discourage new threats from attacking.” Ryze growled in annoyance. “Well, it looks like we need to take stock of our assets then. Stupid as he is, Ezreal is a competent fighter when it gets down to it, so long as he has that trinket of his. Riven hates Swain and Singed, and she's one of the most decorated soldiers of Noxus. Nasus is a living juggernaut by himself. I'm pretty decent in a fight myself, but I think I should stay here and try to teach some of the more talented unicorns some combat magic. Won't really have time for finesse, but seems that having a natural focusing implement means that a few corners can be cut for now. However, I think I should point out now that Swain and Singed cannot be killed. Our absence from our world is probably causing all sorts of political instability as it is, and if word got out that one group of champions was involved in the death of another, the consequences would be profound upon the authority of the League.”

Luna nodded. “Even diminished, I should still be able to contribute to a combat scenario at least to some degree. After all, I do move the moon on a regular basis. It is settled then. Stay here and do what you can, and I will go rally your companions and the remaining Elements of Harmony. If we could recover Twilight, that would enable the most practical method of dealing with Discord. Thank you for your help. I am hoping that my sister will reach Discord in time to stop him, but my instinct tells me to plan for the worst.”

“Reasonable. Let us hope your instincts are wrong.”

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A tree crashed to the ground as Celestia exploded into existence. Before her stood her the home of her foal years, the Castle of the Royal Pony Sisters. Once a magnificent testament to the ingenuity of the lost alicorns of Equestria, now it stood as a grim reminder of the feud of two sisters. The crumbling walls and overgrown courtyard served only to increase Celestia's discomfort as she ventured into this museum of her past. Around her, crumbling skeletons of the ancient dead kept their millennium-long vigil, and occasionally a collapsed passageway would hint at the city that the castle had once been a part of. Celestia steeled herself, and pressed onward. As she approached the ornate double doors and pressed a tendril of telekinetic energy against it, she felt a magical surge resonate through the castle, and heard an eery laugh echo throughout the stone tomb that she once called home.

Reality began to shift around Celestia as she slowly stepped into the throne room. The colors warped from the gloomy dark to an unnaturally bright and cheery tone as magical fires ignited in pedestals long extinguished. The princess instinctively recoiled as a skeleton approached her, and with its permanent smile mocking her, spoke in a stuffy, overly-formal voice. “Right this way, Your Majesty. We've been expecting you.” Overhead, vines were shifting and moving, beautiful blue flowers blooming from pods along the snaking plants.

Celestia growled. “Enough of this, Discord! Our conflict remains between us. There's no reason to desecrate the remains of those fallen honorably.”

“Oh, Celly, you're no fun at all.” Discord's disembodied voice sounded mildly disappointed as the skeletal chauffeur clattered to the floor. “I was only trying to be a polite host, you know. You never did appreciate the efforts I went to in order to please you.”

Celestia sneered. “Only a mad, foolish creature like yourself would stack a courtship on top of a coup de état on top of trying to kill my sister and I to plunge the world into eternal chaos.”

Discord materialized, splaying on top of a dust covered throne. “Your words wound me, Celestia. Maybe if you hadn't been such a judgmental prick, I wouldn't have been in such a bad mood then. You judged me for nothing more than existing as my nature dictates! I hold no grudge though, and today, it's all business. As much as it pains me, I've had to hold back a few of my natural quirks to get a job done, but with you gone and Equestria back in the hands of it's best ruler, I'll have time to relax later. I've learned a lot about ruling from you, you know. The first thing I'm going to do is make some more friends. Why, I've even been spending all day bonding with your precious student, Twilight Sparkle. For someone studying friendship, she's been very fussy about socializing with me.”

Celestia roared in fury charged, her horn igniting as the Sun Goddess called upon the power of her title's namesake. Discord laughed mockingly as he effortlessly moved out of the path of a beam of fire hot enough to vaporize flesh. Discord continued to dance around currents of arcane power projected from his foe, snorting and cackling in demented laughter. “Your aim was better last time you tried to kill me, Celly. Getting rusty without me to keep you on your toes?”

The enraged princess took a step back, her breath calming. This had always been his way, creating chaos within as well as without. Every being capable of sentient thought in Equestria had a special talent of some sort, though not all had a mark to represent it. Discord's was identifying the mental weakness of others and using it to cause mental dissonance within other beings; Celestia's temper and her protective nature had been the targets of Discord's attempts many times in unrecorded history. This time, she wasn't going to let it work. He would not get the satisfaction of rage from her. Rallying her thoughts, she prepared herself for a calm, calculated assault upon the avatar of chaos.

Discord saw his toy's change in demeanor, and his shoulders sagged in melodramatic exasperation. “Already? I was just beginning to have fun too.” Discord snapped his fingers, and instantly Celestia found herself wrapped in vines as their azure blossoms began spewing a fine powder onto her. “The poison joke was always my favorite creation. An innocent little flower that could take an intimate thought or an offhand comment and turn it into a little prank. I like it so much I decided an enhanced version would be just the thing to play a little prank on you. You know, all that time I spent in your gardens gave me an appreciation of nature so...profound I just couldn't help but want to share it with you. So, cheer up, little Celly. You're about to have a long time to examine the local flora.

Discord giggled at his handiwork. He had poured a lot of Twilight's magic into these plants, and they hadn't failed to deliver. Hopping forward to look his new prize in the eye, he couldn't stifle his laughter. “What's wrong, Celly? You seem a little stiff. Loosen up! I know royalty is supposed to be able to keep its composure at all times, but you don't have to go all stone-faced on me!” Discord fell to the ground, rolling in merriment as he decided where to put his new statue.

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“The Elements of Harmony are a powerful, ancient magic contained within a series of artifacts

before Celestia and I were even born. In old times, my sister and I would use them to purify powerful monsters of evil intent, though some could not be redeemed and instead were consumed or imprisoned by the magic of the Elements. After some of the energy from those more powerful entities coalesced into a sentient being of dark matter called the Nightmare, I was infected and my sister was forced to banish me to the moon using what limited power she could draw from the elements by herself, until such a time when a full team of bearers could be assembled, of which five are present now. When all six bearers of the Elements of Harmony are present, the full power of the artifacts can be unlocked. To give some perspective, with myself and my sister bearing the elements between us, no entity of evil we encountered was able to stop us, and that was with the elements being at less than a third of their full strength. I was in telepathic conversation with my sister until about an hour ago, which is when she went to do battle with Discord. I can only assume she has failed. We must save our grief until a later time though.” Luna paused to gather her thoughts. “It is time to enact the contingency plan that we formed upon my arrival. However, with Celestia defeated and unable to escape Discord, we have no means of distracting him long enough to recover Twilight Sparkle.”

The room was silent as everyone contemplated what could be done. One voice hadn't spoken during the entire duration of all of the planning that they had done upon Luna's arrival in Ponyville. Nasus' calm demeanor never flickered as he stood. “Swain and Singed have brought to this world the same conflict that I have sacrificed home and fellowship with my kin to put an end to on Valoran. They have captured an innocent bystander and unleashed a foe to peace and happiness upon the land. I cannot allow this to stand. We will venture into the Everfree Forest to retrieve Twilight Sparkle. Do your work as best as you can to locate her.” Nasus growled, and the foundations of Ponyville's Library shook slightly. “I will be...a...distraction.”