

The Third Generation

Chapter Twenty One

By Candle Light

Kimono thought she had gotten over the emotional burden. She thought for sure that she had come to terms with the fact that her son had been taken by Discord, and that he had become just another pawn in his army... or worse.

But he had lived! Tears welled in her eyes as she looked at her counterpart, who still wore an expression of utter shock.

“D-d-discord’s your ancestor?” Spike the baby dragon spoke up, looking frightened, taking a step back from her.

“Not helping, Spike,” Applejack told him, as she put a hoof to Twilight’s shoulder. “Ah’ll admit, that’s one heck of a doozy. But none of this changes who you are, Twi. Ah hope you realize that.”

“I... I know it doesn’t,” said Twilight, though her shocked expression remained unchanged. “It’s just that, for all these years, I’ve been wondering about my heritage, thinking that it might hold the answer to why I was born with such unusually-strong magic abilities... and now that it’s all here on a crystal platter, to have it be *Discord*...!”

Kimono caught her counterpart off guard as she pulled her into a tight embrace. “And *me*,” she said softly. She held her tight. She never wanted to let go. Eventually, she loosed her grip enough to look Twilight in the eyes, her own still moist with tears. “I don’t think you quite understand just what this means to me. My foal... I had him sent away to Canterlot. I thought he would be safe there... but Discord, he knew. He let me catch a glimpse into his mind when he put me under his spell; a last way to taunt me. He was going to find him, and make him his slave... but not only did my son survive, he became the forefather to an entire family...” The tears began to well anew.

“Kimono, I-I...” Twilight stammered. She didn’t quite seem to know what to say to that. But then, she broke into a smile, and returned the hug. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t stop to think about *your* feelings.”

Kimono sniffled. “It’s okay. It’s a lot to take in, I’m sure. To be honest, I always suspected you were my descendant, what with you looking exactly like me and all.”

“Guess that explains that,” Applejack said. “Never seen two distant relatives look so alike, though. You two could pass for twins.”

“I’m *so* happy for you, darling!” earth-pony Rainbow Dash said as she moved in to hug Kimono.

“Me too,” said other-village Pinkie Pie. “I just can’t get over it; you had a son!”

Star Catcher walked over as well, looking as though she was about to join the hug, then hesitated. Kimono just smiled at her. “Thank you, Star Catcher. Thank you!”

“I... it was luck more than anything,” said the pegasus. “I’m just glad it turned out well in the end.”

“Wait, what’s *this* about?” Twilight asked.

“I...” Star Catcher shifted uncomfortably. “*I* was the one who delivered the baby to Canterlot. It was my idea, actually. I made sure to take the long way around, traveling through the forest only by night. I was terrified, always thinking Discord’s lackeys would take us by surprise. The only thing that kept me going was hearing the little one laugh. The son of my best friend...” The look Kimono and Star Catcher shared at that moment made Twilight think that maybe there might be a deeper history behind the two of them. An unspoken friendship stronger than she had first realized.

“In other words,” grown-up Rarity said, “one might say that *you’re* the reason Twilight is here today. I think we’re all in your debt.”

“I... thank you,” Star Catcher said. Twilight could tell that those words meant a lot to her. “But... don’t thank me too much. You see, when I came back to Ponyville, Discord was already there, waiting for me. And, well... one touch from his paw was all that he needed to read my mind and tell him what I had done, and where to find the child. We meant to hide him, but instead – from what I can piece together from Celestia’s memories – we drew his attention to Canterlot. Provoked him into sending an all-out assault. Thankfully, the Canterlot guards managed to stave it off, but many good ponies lost their lives that day. I’ve been wondering what happened to the child after that ever since I got my memories back. If he’d come to harm from the destruction that *I* brought upon him...”

“Star Catcher,” Kimono said firmly, “you have *nothing* to be ashamed of. If you hadn’t stepped up, Discord would’ve gotten him for sure. You gave him a chance at life, and fate provided the rest.”

“Yeah, don’t blame yourself for what happened a thousand years ago,” said pegasus Rainbow Dash. “It’s literally ancient history now.”

Star Catcher’s smile widened, beaming at them. “You’re right. I can finally stop worrying. Your descendants live, Kimono!”

To the side, the poofy-maned Pinkie Pie looked as though she was about to explode. Which she *almost* did. “This is so *stupendously extrasupertastically wonderful!*” Pinkie Pie whooped, bouncing up and down. “This calls for a celebration! We could do it right now! I’ve even got the Party Cannon all ready to—”

“Slow down, Pinkie,” Twilight told her. This was *not* the time for a party. “I think we’re all forgetting one very important thing.” She turned back to the book, pointing at the strange symbol where Discord’s name should be. “The Elements of Harmony wanted me know that Discord is my ancestor. They could have shown it to me through a vision, or just just written in down in text, but they went out of their way to let me find out on my own. There must be a reason for this... if only I knew what this symbol meant. I can’t shake the feeling I’ve seen it before.”

“It rather looks like one of those old magic symbols to me,” Rarity said, examining the mark with a critical eye. Kimono leaned in for a closer look as well. “Granted, I’m no expert in such matters, but didn’t they use such marks in some magic art or another? Sigils, or something?”

“In alchemy, yes, but this doesn’t have any of the usual attributes of an Alchemic Mark,” Twilight replied. “But I think you’re right that it’s linked to magic somehow. I don’t recognize it from any of the magic branches that I...” Twilight made a sudden gasp. “No, wait! It does remind me of something – the symbols I saw at the door to the castle in the Frozen North, left behind by the ancient pony race from Equestria’s beginning!”

“What does it mean, though?” Fluttershy asked, leaning closer for a better look at the odd symbol.

“Not a clue. Maybe...” Using her magic, Twilight grabbed the book and started flipping through the pages. Most of them looked empty. In fact, *all* of them were empty. Twilight stared at the last empty page, but instead of looking dejected, her eyes were widening. Finally, she closed the book, and turned around to face the others.

“I think I see it now,” Twilight said. “I wasn’t sure what to make of this before, but now I think I understand the bigger picture; this symbol in the book was the missing link. Discord, the Elements, the ancient pony race; they’re all connected! That’s why the Elements didn’t just show me to the book to begin with; they wanted me to have the right context. Or at least... they did the best they could; it’s almost as if their mind is... shrouded by its own power, in a way, and can only break through in short bursts when I’m using them.”

“Oh, I get it!” Spike spoke up. “So, when they heard you ask about it directly, they must have figured *this* was a much quicker way to get their point across.”

Twilight couldn’t help but smile. The baby dragon hadn’t been her assistant for all these years without having some of Twilight’s analytic mind rubbed off on him. “I think you’re right. Except, they don’t want to convey information, but emotions. They want to make us *invested* in this on a personal level. Think about it; regardless of whether or not they’d showed me the vision, we would have found this place sooner or later. I think they were *waiting* for me to ask – for me to be ready – so that I would be sure to see it all through to the end.”

“Fair enough,” said pegasus Rainbow Dash. “So, what are we supposed to do now? Zap an Ursa to get another vision?”

“No need for that,” Twilight said. “I understand now. This revelation wasn’t supposed to be a message for us, but an invitation. The Elements are inviting us to take this mystery to them.”

The wand inside the Crystal Rainbow Castle emitted such a strong force, Celestia had trouble keeping her thoughts straight. It battered against her protective magic, trying to make its way into her spirit and turn it against herself, and only thousands of years of wisdom and experience allowed her to stand so close to it without giving in to the chaos.

She quickly came to the same conclusion as Kenbroth; destroying the wand would most likely rob the spell of its focal point, canceling it. She planned to do just that... but not yet.

All the disembodied voices, louder than ever, battled for her attention simultaneously, making it hard to make out individual conversations. She strained her ears, her magic – her very being – trying to find the answers she was looking for. After minutes of listening, Discord’s voice finally came into focus.

“—so cold, didn’t our friendship mean any—”

“—pay. Ooh yes, I’ll make them all see just how—”

“—is none of your concern, not that you’d understand even if—”

“—no need to worry, uncle Discord is going to take veery—”

“—you’re about to mean the world to—”

“—hello, Celestia.”

Celestia jumped, as she felt a tug of chaos at her heart. She stepped back from the wand, suddenly feeling terrified. Her voice shaking, she called out, “Discord? Are you there?”

No response. Of course there was no response; she very much doubted there was any actual sentence to this spell. She breathed heavily, letting her nerves settle down. The last bit must have been from the time when she and Luna had fought him on the plains outside the village.

This opened up a frightening possibility; if this spell was indeed fueled by a sense of betrayal, then maybe, throughout all those years of war, *that* was what Discord had felt all along. Betrayed, that the sisters hadn’t done more for him. Could the frustration towards the villagers for their supposed betrayal have taken root long before, when Discord was still a harmless child to the world? Could it be that he *blamed* them for the way he’d turned out?

It came before Celestia could finish her thought. A sudden wave of chaos washing over her like a tidal wave. She tried strengthening her defenses, but the sudden outburst had already toppled her mind, sending it into a spiraling madness. She felt the protective shield shatter. She could barely even think. But even in such a state, she could not mistake the laughter that filled her ears.

The Princess fell to the floor, battling with all her remaining power to keep the chaos out.

“You’re *kidding!*” Night Gale yelped. “Discord is your *ancestor?!!*”

“I know, right?” said Twilight. She had led the group back to the crystal chamber where they had performed the Squink. “I haven’t exactly come to terms with it myself. I wonder how Shining Armor is going to feel about it.”

“Are you going to tell the public?” asked Night Gale. “This may paint you in a different light for some ponies. Imagine the headlines: ‘The Princess’ Prized Student, Descendant of Destructive Demigod’. You know how Canterlot ponies are with their rumors; there’s gonna be talk of you plotting with Discord for the throne, and all sorts of nasty stuff.”

“Let them talk; I learned long ago not to let other ponies’ opinions get to me. But those things can wait; all that matters is that the Elements of Harmony have something they need to say to me, and I won’t rest until we find out what it is.”

“Sounds to me like the sooner we get the Elements talkin’, the better,” said Applejack. She patted her necklace, “So we’re blastin’ these trinkets to get you another vision, then?”

“Exactly,” Twilight nodded, glad that her friend was quick on the uptake. Twilight still had a hard time wrapping her head around the fact that she was about to, in essence, meet with the Elements of Harmony themselves. It gave her pause, made her think. “Throughout this whole adventure, it all keeps coming back to the Elements of Harmony. *They* are the force behind the Time Capsule. *They* are the reason our counterparts look so alike. We’ve even learned that they’re the force that keeps

Equestria safe from cosmic energy. I say it's time we stop beating around the bush.”

“Just one question,” Applejack said. “What're we gonna aim ‘em at? There ain't no Ursa around, thank Celestia.”

“At me. It's the only way.”

“Are you sure it's safe?” Fluttershy spoke up cautiously. “I mean, we don't want you to be turned into a statue or anything. I mean, since you're related to... you know.”

Twilight blinked. She honestly hadn't thought of that, but now that Fluttershy mentioned it, that wasn't outside the realm of possibilities. The fact that Twilight could manipulate chaos magic where mages throughout history had failed could, in retrospect, only be attributed to her heritage. What if the Elements' ultimate goal was to seal her away? To make her trust them enough to seek them out, lure her into into a trap, to make sure there wasn't ever going to be a second Discord?

Twilight shook her head. “Celestia told me to trust in the Elements, and I intend to do just that. If they decide my existence is too dangerous... so be it.”

“Nuh-uh, that ain't happenin’,” Applejack objected. “Elements or not, Ah'm not about to risk the life o' any friend o' mine.”

“But—”

“*We're* trusting the Elements, Twi. If they want one of us, they'll get all of us. It comes with the set.”

The gang of friends looked at each other, and then back to Twilight, nodding. Twilight gave them an uncomfortable look. “But I'm the only one who gets the visions. There's no reason to risk anything happening to all of you, too.”

“It's not about the visions, Twi,” pegasus Rainbow Dash said impatiently. “We just don't wanna leave you hanging while you put yourself on the front line all on your own.”

Twilight looked into their determined eyes, and felt a burst of gratitude in her heart. Suddenly, she felt silly for objecting. As Bearers themselves, of course they trusted the Elements just as much as she did – and as her friends, of course they'd want to stand by her and share the risk, no matter what. She smiled at them. “I understand. Together it is, then.”

“Take as long as you need,” Star Catcher told them. “Our village can—ugh!”

“Star Catcher?” Twilight gasped, as the pegasus fell to her knees. “What happened? Are you alright?”

Star Catcher didn't reply right away. She was breathing hard, as if trying to keep the chest pains in check. Eventually, her breathing steadied. “I'm... I'm alright now,” she finally said as she cautiously pushed herself back up onto her hooves. “I'm not sure what's happening, but it comes in bursts. Maybe it's the magic acting up again.”

“We should take you back to Canterlot, darling,” said earth-pony Rainbow Dash, eyeing her friend worriedly. “Your health is more important. Surely, the Elements won't go anywhere.”

Twilight lit her horn, and moved in to give Star Catcher a check-up. Twilight was stunned by just how much raw magic could fit in this *pegasus*' body, but she didn't seem to be having any problems reining it now that Celestia had... done whatever it was she had done up on the mountaintop. She focused instead on the piece of Discord within Star Catcher; it was only slight, but she thought she felt it vibrating slightly. "It's the chaos," she told the others. "But I don't know what's causing it. She seems fine now, but if it gets worse, we might have to take her back to Canterlot for a full check-up."

"Don't worry about me," Star Catcher assured them. "Don't let me ruin the moment. In fact, I think it might do me good to bask in some harmony right now."

Twilight hesitated, but then nodded. "Alright." She motioned for her fellow Bearers, and the six of them walked back up to the center of the room, forming a circle.

"Ready when you are, Twi," said Rainbow Dash, flaring her wings as she took up her position. One by one, the others nodded in agreement.

Twilight nodded. This was it. The moment of truth; whatever happened now was up to the Elements. Heart pounding, she activated her crown, and the room exploded into light. Streaks of rainbow extended from the Elements around her friends' necks, connecting to each other and Twilight's crown. The brilliant beams of light shot up from their bodies, turning around before it hit the ceiling, and came back to Twilight in full blast.

And so, Twilight became the Elements of Harmony.

Celestia could barely tell if she was alive or not. But since she was capable of thought, and sensing pain, there must still be *something* left of her.

The world of black-and-white had disappeared, replaced by a landscape of swirling light. She recognized this place, but from where...? Ah, this was what she had seen when she and Star Catcher had melded, their memories merging.

Only this time, she was just Celestia, writhing in pain, struggling not to lose consciousness. She wasn't alone, however; Star Catcher's presence *was* there, on the other side of the magiscape.

This, she realized in a moment of clarity, was the physical manifestation of the bond between them, forged by the Elements of Harmony throughout those thousand years. This was the magic of friendship in its purest, physical form, a magic conduit through another plane of existence. The royal sisters shared such a bond as well; and theirs was, for good reason, considered to be the strongest in Equestria... but this felt stronger still, sturdy and unbreakable. And yet, artificial. A forgery without a soul.

Eventually, she became aware of the black streaks of fog that were oozing from her body. Chaos magic, leaking into this realm through her, from the chaos-corrupted wand in the castle. They moved slowly, sluggishly... was the tunnel's magic pushing them back? If it was, it wasn't enough. There wasn't a thing Celestia could do to stop them. Eventually, they would reach the other side. It would reach Star Catcher and the others...

The Echo was receding before Twilight's very eyes, like a rippling waterfall flowing backwards, accompanied by the sounds of thrashing waves on an ocean.

On the balcony of a castle made entirely from crystal of all the colors of the rainbow, looking out over a city that stretched half-way to the horizon, stood six ponies. At least, Twilight assumed they were ponies; in reality, they resembled lizards as much as they did horses. Though they had four legs and the regular shape of a pony, their hooves were squared and their heads triangular. In place of a Cutie Mark, jewels seemed to be attached to their flanks in intricate patterns.

One mare was wearing Twilight's crown, and the other five – two stallions and three mares – wore the necklaces of the other five Elements. The creatures shone brilliantly with magic in a way Twilight had never thought possible, reflecting the color of their scales: pink, orange, green, indigo, yellow, and lastly the crown-bearing rainbow, shining brightest of them all.

And then, quite abruptly, the Elements' light dimmed, and the grand veil of darkness that served as a border into the Echo – the cosmic realm – was gone, opening up a landscape that was barren and lifeless. But barren as it was, it shimmered like gemstones. On the far horizon straight ahead were mountains, and to their left, over the hills, there was the ocean, glittering in the sun with almost the same radiance as the land.

"We did it," the pink one spoke, almost whispering. Their language was nothing like Twilight had ever heard, and yet somehow she understood every word. "It actually worked!"

"So this is Harmony..." said another one; the mare of green hue. "Did *we* really make this happen?"

"We *all* made this happen," a yellow mare said. "It was the magic of friendship between every Equinus from all six tribes, that summoned harmony into our world." A tear ran down her chin. "I never thought magic like this could actually exist. Never dared hope..."

"We have done good this day," the rainbow pony with the crown said, her voice deep but kind. "The path to the ocean is clear, and the cosmic beasts will bother us no more. Nonetheless, we must not underestimate the danger that still lies beyond the waters. The real challenge begins now."

"Come on, Andromeda, loosen up a bit," the orange stallion told the rainbow one. So her name was Andromeda. "Do you realize we just saved the world? I think all the heavy stuff can wait for awhile."

"I... I suppose it can," Andromeda agreed, returning a smile.

"Still, it makes you wonder," the indigo mare said, not taking her gaze off the rocky vista beyond the city's border. "Are we really doing the right thing by just up and leaving this place? Sure it's lifeless now, but I dunno, I get the feeling that, given time, life will start to grow again."

"I can feel it too," said Andromeda. "This land *will* be reborn, but it will take far more time than we have. But take heart, my friend. Our spirits are forever one with Harmony, and once we have outlived these bodies, to Harmony we shall return."

"A peaceful afterlife, eh?" said the pink stallion. "I can't think of any better reward for a job well—"

He was cut off by a sudden surge of energy from within the castle behind them. They turned around in surprise, and Twilight's point of view shifted to allow her to see what they saw. They exchanged worried looks, and ran back into the castle, dragging Twilight's consciousness along.

In the room beyond, adorned with six crystal pillars surrounding an indentation, the figure of an Equinus stood draped in a dark glow, black lightning crackling around it. The six Element Bearers only stared at it, stupefied.

Andromeda was the first to speak. "Dritl? What have you done!"

"I'm sorry, mother," the dark figure said. "Had I told you of my intentions, you never would have gone through with it."

"Told us what?" exclaimed the pink stallion. "What's happened to you?"

"The chaos!" Dritl gasped out. He looked to be in physical pain. "*That* was the missing link in the magic formula. Harmony can't be brought into this realm on its own; it needs an anchor point. It needs an entity of chaos!"

"My son!" Andromeda gasped. "You didn't!"

"It was the only way," Dritl said solemnly. "I've become the vessel for the chaos. If I hadn't, it would've been let loose on the world and undone everything we've worked so hard to achieve."

For a moment, no one spoke. They could only look upon the dark Equinus in horror. "We have created a monster," the green one whispered finally.

"I'm sorry," Dritl said again. "I'm slipping, mother. I don't know what I'll become, but I'm not sure I'll be able to hold the chaos back for much longer. While I'm still able to keep it at bay, you must end me!"

"But Dritl, I..."

"The chaos is bound to *me* now; the moment my heart stops beating, its power will die, leaving harmony to reign supreme! It's the only way, mother. I have made my peace."

"Perhaps *you* have," his mother replied. "But *I* have not."

Another surge of dark energy filled the room, cutting splinters off of the crystal wall. Her son looked at her grimly. "Either you do it now, while I can still hold myself back, or someone else *will*, at the cost of immeasurable casualties. Don't make this any harder on us..."

The two locked gazes, each moment seeming like an eternity to Twilight. When Andromeda finally spoke, the steadiness in her voice had returned. "No... I won't kill you, son. There *is* another way. Vivec, Calacia, Terra," the crown-wearing mare called her companions' names, "Delta, Lumos! On me!"

The Element Bearers seemed to know just what to do, because no sooner had she finished speaking did their necklaces light up. A beam of light, colored by their respective owners, shot from the Elements, gathering upon Andromeda's crown. And in that moment, Twilight was one with

Andromeda's thoughts, just as she was one with the Elements. The knowledge of the spell was new to Andromeda, but she was confident that Harmony would guide her and bend their powers exactly to her will. A myriad of different energies twisted and turned inside of her being, even absorbing some of the chaos, as the spell took form.

A spell that, in fact, Twilight recognized.

A rainbow-colored beam of light extended toward Dritel. He let out a yelp as his body started glowing white, mixing with the black in strange patterns. For a few seconds, it became too bright for anyone to see... but then there was a *thump* sound, whereupon the light subsided, and Twilight's thoughts became her own.

The body of Dritel lay lifeless on the ground. Above it hovered a small ball of dim light and distorted air.

The indigo Equinus was the first to speak. "What... what *was* that?"

"I have extracted his spirit from the body," said Andromeda, "and trapped him within his own mind."

"So is he... gone?"

"Yes... but no. I have created for him a world of happiness and peace, where he shall live out the rest of his existence in an ever-repeating cycle, free from the hardship and discord of our world." Andromeda walked up to the lifeless body, staring into the faint ball of light. "Left alone for long enough, the chaos within shall wither; only then shall he be allowed to pass on in peace."

The others only gave her solemn nods. Andromeda knelt down by her dead son. She lit her horn and lowered it onto the body. It burst into flames.

"Here?" asked the indigo Equinus. "Doesn't he deserve a proper burial?"

"His body became the vessel of chaos. If so much as a flake of his scale falls onto the wrong horn, the magic of chaos might be reborn." Andromeda looked at the burning corpse, the jewels comprising Dritel's Cutie Mark cracking and disintegrating. She didn't shed tears, but her expression alone was enough to fill Twilight with an unspoken sadness.

"Rest in peace, Dritel, my little Equinus. May Harmony one day allow you into its eternal embrace."

The landscape faded away, and Twilight thought for a moment that the vision was coming to an end. But instead, a new vision took its place; an overview of the land of Equestria as a whole. Only three months after the genesis, the original Element Bearers wielded the magic of Harmony one last time in order to create a gigantic bridge of light across the ocean, upon which their people wandered away from the land. Even from this bird-eye view, the creation was one of the most stunning things Twilight had ever seen. Nearly a year later – or a few seconds to Twilight – the bridge vanished, along with the Equinus legacy. All that remained to remind this land of their existence were the empty shells of the city, watched over by Harmony, like a ghost haunting the desolate landscape. As well as the tomb of Dritel, hidden away in a cave deep within the barren landscape.

Time suddenly seemed to speed up, showing Equestria as a blur before Twilight's vision, as vegetation started to grow and animals emerge. It took less than a hundred years before Equestria was completely covered in green, and the first ponies started to appear. Twilight had a hard time wrapping her head around the evolution at play. The Elements were experimenting with life, as though they were putting pieces on a board, but leaving them to their own devices. There was no order, no creatures keeping nature in check. All of Equestria was one big Everfree Forest.

And it was happening so fast! By the whim of the Elements, animals and plants came and died, some staying centuries while others disappeared within the span of years, and so it continued for hundreds of years. Of all the creatures born onto this land, ponies were the most tenacious, managing to survive as a species through whatever the Elements could throw at them.

But after about five centuries, the Elements were done experimenting, removing their touch from the land, content to just watch over their creation and let their power fall into eternal sleep. Time sped up another notch, passing a century a second. Through her connection with the Elements, Twilight could feel the changes in the land, washing over her like a flood. She caught glimpses of the first pony city, the great pony war between the races resulting in the division of the land, the creation of the first unicorn order of magic – events she had read about in passing, more legend than fact. The power of the Elements expanded her mind, letting her process far more knowledge than she otherwise could have handled – but even so, the sheer amount of information threatened to tear her mind apart.

And yet, she could not look away – didn't *want* to look away – as this was knowledge that historians everywhere had always dreamed about. And as Twilight was given visions of the *true* happenings behind Hearth's Warming Eve – the story of unification between the three tribes – she felt with all her being that *any* amount of pain was worth this incredible gift.

But not long after she thought that, time stopped. Or so it felt to Twilight; it took her a moment to realize that it had only been returned to its natural flow. She could tell that exactly four thousand nine hundred and sixty-one years had passed since Equestria's birth, and most of the landscape looked just like Twilight knew it, with the notable exception of the area where the Everfree Forest should have been.

Quite abruptly, Twilight's point of view shifted, zooming down onto a remote part of Equestria, lodged between two mountains. An utterly unremarkable place where Twilight had neither been nor noticed on the map before. In this era, it turned out to be a thick jungle.

Twilight's vision swam through the canopy, down to ground level, zig-zagging between trees and bushes... there, seemingly at the center of the forest, hidden away in the crevice of a cliff, was a ball of dim light, distorting the air surrounding it. Dritel's Time Capsule.

And then, suddenly and incomprehensibly, it was gone.

For a moment, nothing happened... then suddenly, the entire area shook, and a gust of wind erupted in all directions, sending a ripple through the vegetation. From the source of the gust rose a cloud of black. It floated motionlessly in midair for a minute or so, then it started moving away from the cliff. It glided over the jungle, and wherever it went, the woodland creatures took notice and followed. For some time, it went around in circles, aimless... until it stopped. A myriad of creatures were gathered around it, many of which Twilight recognized from the records of extinct animals, and some that she hadn't seen or heard of at all.

And right before Twilight's vision, a scene unraveled that would have made Fluttershy's heart stop. The head and tail of one particularly large snake fell right off, its middle-part body being pulled into the black cloud. Then, with a roar of pain, a bear's paw came loose from its leg, and with a screech from above, the same happened to the talon of a giant eagle. The leg of a lizard, the antler of a reindeer, the hoof of a donkey... one by one, each animal slumped down in pain as it was robbed of one of its body parts... but to Twilight's surprise, all of the animals suddenly stopped screaming. As if caught in some sort of hypnosis, they only sat there, staring transfixed into the dark cloud of magic.

Even when the cloud started spinning, faster and faster like a hurricane, the animals did not move. The trees and their giant leaves flapped violently by the winds it caused, to the point where some were beginning to creak... but before they could break, the world was still again. The darkness had dispersed.

And in its place was Discord.

Most of him, anyway; where Twilight was used to seeing the head of a pony, there was the head of a bear. The new-born Discord swung his stolen limbs, exploring the movements, and let out a roar. Then a few barks. It sounded rather funny, actually, like he was trying to form words using vocal cords not meant for the task. Disappointed by his discovery, he looked down on the ground, at the amputated animals. Some form of emotion flashed through his bear face – though Twilight couldn't determine which – and then he raised his claw. The bear grinned, and snapped his fingers.

And just like that, the animals had merged. An eagle with a snake head, a lizard with a bear paw and antler horn... though none of his creations were as mixed up as his own body, he seemed happy enough with the fact that the animals weren't going to bleed to death. If Twilight could have felt her mouth, she would have grinned at yet another one of history's mysteries being solved; ancient pre-Discord texts described the Draconequus as mythological creatures of legend, as made up as the Headless Horse. Discord had matched the mythological creature's description, a Chimera held together by chaos magic, so well that it was later believed that the Draconequus were real all along. But Twilight had just witnessed the truth; Discord wasn't just *part* of the race; he had *created* it.

Discord flew into the air, breaking through the canopy. Twilight involuntarily followed.

“Trust me, sister, I hath a good humor about this one.”

Twilight did a double take, as the perspective suddenly shifted yet again. Walking down the road of a small village in the middle of the jungle were Princesses Celestia and Luna. Their manes flowed with magical luster no differently than they would more than a thousand years later, telling Twilight that this was long after their coronation, though the way they spoke – an archaic dialect which, even with the Elements' translation, was still barely understandable even to Twilight – made it very clear this was not yet modern times.

Luna had a look of skepticism on her face. “If thou say so. ‘Tis about the only place we hath not yet looked. I begin to wonder whether or not these ‘Elements of Harmony’ doth even exist.”

The two sisters walked up to one of the five houses in this small village, where an elderly pony with a small, white beard sat on the porch, smoking a pipe. Twilight thought she recognized him from somewhere. “Good day, sir,” Celestia said politely. “Wouldst thou be Mr. Cutting Bone?”

The old stallion's eyes opened wide. "Well Ah'll be, if it ain't the Princesses themselves!"

"We hath heard thou art the expert of this area," Luna said, cutting to the chase. "We wouldst like to request thy assistance in braving these woods."

"Well, with all due respect to ya, why would ya be needing an old kook like me to be guiding' ya, what with you being the most powerful beings in all o' Equestria and all?"

"We wouldst prefer to spare ourselves the trouble of searching the jungle ourselves," Luna told him. "There art but a few specific places we wouldst like to visit."

"Gee, Your Highnesses, Ah'd love to be helping you out, but see, Ah've abandoned the business long ago. You might've noticed this town be a mite empty; well, that's because all the young'uns be out there gatherin' food for the winter, and old grampa here was being left behind 'cause he weren't being fit for duty no more. You might wanna be waiting for mah granddaughter to come back; she is being a a chip off the ol' block, she is. Ah don't doubt that she'd—"

Cutting Bone was interrupted by a loud bear-like roar, and before any of them had the chance to get over the initial shock, Discord landed next to the house. The Princesses took a few steps back, and the old stallion jumped off his chair and quickly hid behind it.

"A... a Chimera?" exclaimed Luna.

"Neigh... 'tis a Draconequus!" Celestia was eying it with awe. "I thought they were naught but myth. Such incredible energy... couldst *this* be the source of the magic spike we didst sense earlier?"

Discord looked at the sisters, then at the old stallion. The bear-face grinned, and pulled the frightened stallion out from behind the chair, holding him up with his eagle claw. And with a *plop* sound – making the Princesses gasp – his head fell off. Discord grabbed his own bear head with his paw, and it too dislodged from his body. A pony head in one hand, a bear head in the other, he juggled them back and forth a few times before finally putting the bear's head on the old stallion and the pony head on himself. When he plucked the antler and horn from the bear's head, and reattached them to the stolen pony head he now wore, Twilight could finally see the resemblance to the Discord she knew, although his head didn't look like it had completely melded with his body yet.

The patchwork creature blinked. He took a deep breath.

When he spoke, his words came were not of this era, but of the time of the Equestria's creation. And this time, the Elements did not translate them.

"Wh-who art thee?" Celestia ventured. "Name thyself!"

With a smile on his face, Discord replied something incomprehensible. His tone, Twilight noticed, was not quite so quirky as the malicious trickster she knew; there was a seriousness in it that made him sound like a different person altogether. He seemed genuinely happy about gaining a voice, and to have met other ponies.

"Never hast I heard of such a language," Luna remarked, flabbergasted.

“Canst thou understand me?” Celestia tried again. “My. Name. Is. Celestia.” She spoke slowly and clearly, pointing a hoof towards herself, then towards her sister. “This. Is. Luna.”

But Discord didn't reply, regarding the two with wonderment on his face. Then he snapped his eagle's claw, and suddenly, the Princesses became potted plants, identical to the ones that sat on the porch of the house. Twilight wanted to scream, but remembered a second later that this was only a retelling of events of the past, so naturally, the Princesses would be alright. And sure enough, Discord quickly decided that he would rather have the two of them be ponies, and turned them back.

“By Star Swirl's Beard!” gasped Luna. “Didst we... didst he just turn us into *plants* for a moment?”

Celestia looked confused beyond her wits. “How didst a being of such extraordinary powers remain hidden for so long? Or hath he somehow been transported hither from beyond the Equestrian borders?”

“Whatever the case, methinks he hath taken a liking to us,” Luna noted, bemused, as the Draconequus began winding his snake-like body around the Princesses. He snapped his claw again, and giggled as Celestia's hair turned into a bunch of carrots.

“So it would seem,” said Celestia, warily looking up at her new head-adornment. Two seconds later, her mane was back the way it was. “Powers like these cannot go unchecked. We must take him back with us to Canterlot.”

“Methinks that wouldst not be wise, Celestia,” Luna objected. “Bringing an unknown force into the center of our nation couldst have dire conse— what in the world?!”

One moment they were on the ground, and the next, they were upside down. So was the village. Discord seemed to have gotten a taste for experimenting, and was casting his magic left and right, turning houses into snow globes and trees into snakes, only to turn them into other animals, and then to stone.

Luna's expression darkened. “CEASE!” she roared, her Royal Canterlot Voice in full effect. She grabbed Discord with her dark-blue magic aura, levitating him up to her face. “Thou shalt cease this behavior *immediately*, or I shalt be the one to turn *thee* into stone. *Is that understood!*”

Like a child being scolded by his mother, Discord's eyes sank, and the corner of his mouth started to quiver. He snapped his fingers, and the houses was put back in their places, gravity corrected. But some of the houses still appeared melted, so he snapped his fingers some more, until all was back to normal.

“Good boy,” Celestia praised in a kind tone. He stroked his muzzle against Celestia, as a dog would, followed by more ancient language, frustratingly left foreign to Twilight's ears. “Do not worry, thou wilt be coming home with us.” She pointed a hoof at herself, then off to the sky. “Thou, with us. Understand?”

Discord, surprisingly, seemed to understand just fine. The two looked at each other kindly, an understanding between them. Twilight found it oddly disturbing: the god of chaos, Princess Celestia's mortal enemy, had once been her friend. Luna walked up to them. “Thou shalt hear no more objections from me, sister. It is as thee hath said: powers such as his must be kept under close surveillance.”

Celestia walked over to where the pony whose head had been swapped for a bear's was flailing about, no doubt trying to understand what had just happened to him. She lit her horn and engulfed the pony-bear hybrid in a sedation spell, then gently lowered him to the ground as he slipped into unconsciousness. "Sleep here, old one, until we are able to send help." The Princesses exchanged a nod, and then Twilight watched as Discord, Celestia and Luna flew into the air, leaving the village behind.

Twilight found herself eagerly awaiting the next revelation. What had happened to make Discord turn on them? As the scenery melted into a rainbow blur, she expected to see Canterlot.

Instead, she saw the two Princesses standing in a scene that seemed to be taken from an abstract painting. If what Discord had done with the world during *Twilight's* battle over a year ago was bizarre, it was nothing compared to this: houses were floating upside-down with propellers, the grass straws seemed to be dancing with top hats and canes, tens of thousands of pink soap bubbles filled with bouncing apples floated in the sky, and Canterlot... well, it had become a bee hive. The looks on the Princesses' faces were those of pure horror.

"We hath created a monster," Luna whispered.

"Yes," agreed her sister. "And 'tis our responsibility to set things right. Come, Luna, we hath a long battle ahead of us."

And suddenly, Twilight was back in the crystal chamber with the others. Many of her friends wobbled, and Applejack shook her mane. All had stupefied looks on their faces.

"Did y'all *see* that?!" exclaimed Applejack at last.

"Discord was a teddy bear!" Pinkie Pie giggled.

"Wait, *you* all saw it too, this time?" said Twilight, glancing at her friends in turn.

"Sure did," Rainbow Dash replied. "Just having a hard time wrapping my head around it. Did the entire history of Equestria just flash before my eyes?" Twilight nodded. "Just checking; my head kinda hurts right now."

"It certainly did explain a few things about Discord," said Rarity. "It makes sense that he would have done something like that to get his body. But seeing it in person, that was most disturbing. Fascinating, but disturbing. Are you alright, Fluttershy darling?"

"I-I think so," stammered the yellow pegasus, though her face said otherwise. "I guess I wasn't ready to see Discord again. And those poor animals..." Twilight couldn't blame her. Animal torture aside, Fluttershy probably bore the deepest emotional scar from when the six of them had faced off against Discord.

"What *I* want to know is," Twilight said, "was that *it*? I mean, don't get me wrong, it was probably the most incredible thing I've seen in my entire life, but... what does it have to do with my heritage?"

“Yeah, that was kinda random,” Rainbow Dash said. “What about *you* guys?” she added, as she turned to face their counterparts. “Did *you* see anything?”

No reaction. They didn’t seem to have heard her. She waved a hoof in front of the other Rainbow Dash’s eyes. “Hello?”

“My stars!” Rarity gasped. “They’re petrified!”

Twilight walked up to give them a closer look. Sure enough, all of the non-Bearers – even Spike – had been frozen in place. Carefully, Twilight tried tapping one of them... but her hoof just went through.

“Whoa... okay, *that* was unexpected,” Rainbow Dash remarked.

“W-what’s happening?” Fluttershy stammered. “Did we accidentally do something to them?”

“I... I don’t think it’s them,” said Twilight, her brow furrowing uncertainly. Something wasn’t quite right... and after a moment’s thought, she suddenly realized what it was. Even though they were standing in the middle of a large chamber of solid crystal, their voices didn’t echo, nor did their hoof steps. “I think it’s *us*! We’re still inside the Elements!” Twilight heart skipped a beat as she realized the impossibility of what must have happened. “We’ve been suspended in time!”

“Uhh, usually Ah’d take your word for it when it comes to magic,” said Applejack, “but even Ah find that hard to swallow.”

“I know, right?” Pinkie Pie agreed. “Twilight and I looked *everywhere* for a time-stopping spell back in Canterlot, but we never found one!”

Applejack blinked and tilted her head. “Hold on, sugarcube, why would you—?”

“It was a silly idea to begin with,” Twilight cut her off, deciding this was not the time to tell them about that rather embarrassing story. “But this *is* the Elements of Harmony we’re talking about.”

“Stranger things *have* happened, I’ll admit,” said Rarity. “The Elements certainly do have a flair for the dramatic. I suppose all we need to do now is to wait for them to reveal their big sec— *wha-hah?!?*”

Rarity let out a startled shriek, as a seventh pony suddenly, silently appeared in their midst, and all of them jumped, scurrying back. Twilight’s first reaction was to wrack her brain trying to figure out just what Princess Celestia was doing here... but she quickly realized that, although the pony had the same ever-flowing mane as her mentor, her face and the lack of wings made it clear it was definitely someone else. She looked familiar.

Calming down from the shock, she became aware of the new pony’s most imposing feature of all: her presence. Just looking at the ethereal-looking pony filled Twilight with a sensation she couldn’t quite place, like a mix of awe and fright. The majestic pony gave a sweeping look at the six of them, until her eyes finally fixed on Twilight. The being took a step toward her, and Twilight’s instinct was about to make her back away, when the pony spoke.

“Twilight Sparkle.” Her voice was deep and authoritative, but as with Princess Celestia, it held an unmistakable kindness. Twilight felt certain she had heard that voice before, but her brain was

failing her right now. “My dear, brilliant Twilight Sparkle. How I have longed to meet you.”

There was an awkwardly long moment before Twilight could bring herself to answer. “Wh-who are you?”

“I have had many names,” she said. “Once, I was known as Andromeda. Today, you know me as the Elements of Harmony.”

Realization snapped into place in Twilight’s head. *That’s* where she’d heard the voice. “The original Element of Magic,” Twilight almost-whispered. She could see the similarities between this towering pony and the lizard-like Equinus from her vision; the colors were the same, and so were the eyes.

“You are confused, I can tell,” said Andromeda. “You wonder how it is that I stand before you. You wonder what it is I have to tell you, having summoned you here in this fashion. It is only natural. Where to even begin?”

Twilight wasn’t sure what to say. She *was* starting to see the bigger picture, but there was still so much left in the dark. She decided to say nothing for the moment, and let the being continue. “You see, from the moment my body perished, my spirit became one with Harmony. My brethren and I were to be embraced by Harmony’s grace for eternity, asleep in a dream so sweet... but I alone could not. I alone could not avert my eyes from the world I had helped create, the world where my son Dritel still lived. I alone forced myself to stay awake, for as long as it would take to see my son return to the world, and throughout the eons, my mind became one with Harmony.” The being suddenly got a wistful look on her face. “How long it has been since I last let myself be Andromeda...”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Rainbow Dash cut in, with as confused an expression as Twilight had ever seen on her. “You mean the Elements of Harmony... are Discord’s *mother*?”

Rarity looked about ready to fall over. “Goodness me...”

Andromeda smiled and shook her head. “Dritel was already a grown stallion by the time I became involved with the Elements. Had we not delayed our endeavors as we did, he too might have come to share the connections, and things might have played out very differently. As it stands, his sacrifice saved us all... and my weakness may well have undone that sacrifice.”

“Your weakness?” Twilight’s mind raced. What kind of weakness could she possibly... Twilight gasp, suddenly understanding. “It was *you* who broke the Time Capsule holding Dritel!”

Andromeda nodded solemnly. “There is but one way to break a Time Capsule, and that is through direct intervention from within, by the only force able to interfere with it: the Elements themselves. But such is the nature of the spell that, although I could not see what he saw, I could sense his emotions, *feel* the happiness of the place that I made for my son... but I could also sense that there was one thing he was missing. The one thing that I, in my haste to create the spell, had neglected to take into account. Friendship. Other sentient beings to make his life complete. It wasn’t just a want, it was a yearning, a loneliness that plagued him more and more with each passing cycle.

“And so, when the world reached an era of peace and prosperity... I released him. It was to be a clean slate, his memories washed away by the Capsule, and it was my belief that the Princesses would treat my Dritel right. And if the worst should come to pass, I believed they would have the strength to stop him. But I underestimated everything. Being so close to Harmony for such a long

time had dulled my senses to chaos, so I could not tell that, although nearly half of its strength had ebbed away, what remained had no equal in this world.

“Because of my naivete, there exists a monster in Equestria without peer. One whose emotions are akin to those of a foal, and whose whim might undo life as we know it. It would have been so, were it not for the good fortune that Canterlot was built upon the ruins of one of the castles which created the Elements, having a strong enough connection to Harmony that I was eventually able to guide the Royal Sisters to the Elements’ resting place. Though it took nearly a decade to get the message across.”

“B-but you won, didn’t you?” Applejack spoke up. “Discord’s nothing but a stone statue now!”

“It is but a small victory in the scale of eternity. Think, my little pony, how did Discord escape last time?”

“Because the Princesses were no longer connected to the...” Twilight began, but realization made her choke on her words. “Because when the Bearers change, their hold on Discord diminishes. That means, when it’s time for us to pass the Elements on...!”

“Ah wouldn’t worry, ma’am,” Applejack brushed it off. “We’ll just have to make sure the next generation renews the spell nice and tight. Ponies aren’t stupid enough to take chances on somethin’ like Discord ever again.”

“Perhaps not, Applejack,” the being spoke, gazing into her eyes, “but remember, all it takes is one mistake, one instance of miscommunication, and all will be lost. Tell me, are you willing to take that risk?”

“Well, now that you put it that way...”

“Remember how I destroyed Dritel’s chaos-corrupted body? It was to make sure that no part of him would be passed on. But while a piece of his hoof could have been used to create weapons, a piece of his spirit has the potential to be *far* more devastating. And passed on it has, through Kimono’s son, and through *his* sons and daughters. *This* is why your heritage matters, Twilight; each and every one of those in your family that is connected to Discord, regardless of how distant, carry within their very essence a piece of chaos. It is, as you might have guessed, the reason such extraordinary magic ability runs through your family; no ordinary unicorn could hope to contain such magic.”

Twilight nodded. She’d concluded as much from the moment she’d realized her heritage, but it was nonetheless a strange feeling having one of the greatest mysteries of her life spelled out so casually. “So even mom, and Shining Armor...?”

“Do not fret, my love, for these pieces are dormant, and without the proper trigger, they cannot be made to grow. Only *you* were able to harness its power, if only for a moment.”

“Converting cosmic energy into chaos...”

“Your birthright, your tuition, your connection with the Element of Magic; these things have shaped you into one of the most powerful beings in Equestria,” said Andromenda, never taking her gaze off of Twilight. “Powerful enough to manipulate chaos itself. But you wielded only a fragment of what lies dormant within you. It is no threat to your world, but neither will it help us.”

Twilight was about to ask what Andromeda meant by that, when the being's aura suddenly flared up, pressing against her with enough force to topple her over from the unexpected magic surge. Her friends were quick to her side, helping her up. Once on her hooves, she took a deep breath, and forced herself to look back into Andromeda's eyes. Only when she did, did Andromeda continue. "Twilight Sparkle." Her voice seemed to vibrate through her entire body. "I want you to answer me truthfully and from the bottom of your heart. Do you trust me?"

The question caught her so off guard, she almost tripped again. Did she *trust* her? "Of course I..." But then she paused. She kept staring into those eyes. Those deep, mysterious eyes. Did she *really* trust them? "... I *do* trust in the Elements," she finally said, "but... there is still so much I don't understand. About you; about everything. Why is the chaos within me so important? And if everypony in the family has it... why *me*?"

At this, the being actually smiled. "A good answer. Yes, I believe it is high time you knew why *you*, out of all your kin throughout the ages, were hoof-picked to be the bearer of this destiny. For you, it all began with a certain event many years ago, triggered by a phenomenon you know as the Sonic Rainboom."

Twilight knew immediately what she was referring to. "The day my magic went out of control."

"The day we all got our Cutie Marks," Rarity added. Coincidence was an understatement; the moment Rainbow Dash had pulled off that massive shock wave of rainbow through the sky, all six of them had realized their destinies at once, earning them their symbols on their flanks. As though they were destined to become the best of friends before they had even met.

"Have you ever wondered how it is that a rainbow appears when a certain speed is met?" asked Andromeda. "It is because when the sound barrier is broken, there is enough energy to send a ripple through the sleeping magic of the Harmony, which covers all of Equestria and keeps it safe from the other realm. By this tiny spark of harmony, set in motion by pure chance, your magic was violently awoken, and in that brief moment, I was able to reach into your soul and leave my mark. It was my very first attempt to reach out to one of your heritage, to leave a message that would eventually lead you to me.

"But the connection was shallow, and my intervention only served to further upset the magic within you. Knowing this, I did something... irrational. Something that was more instinct than rational thought. I altered your body and soul – ever so slightly – so that you would grow up to look like the mirror image of your ancestor Kimono. Perhaps I thought it might give the ponies of Canterlot a clue, linking you to the pony trapped within the Time Capsule. Hoping in vain that her legacy had been passed on, even in the smallest fashion. In the end, it was little more than self-indulgence, so that I could once more look upon the only pony who had ever truly loved my son."

Twilight felt light-headed. She had never been satisfied with the explanation that their similarities were purely genetic, but she had expected... more. Perhaps all her past accomplishments had blown up her expectations, but the truth felt to her rather anti-climactic. It wasn't a symbol for a greater destiny, nor a clue to a mystery. Just a passing whim of the Elements.

"Wow," Applejack spoke up. "Ah never realized she meant so much to you. Kimono, Ah mean."

Andromeda gave Applejack a look filled with sadness. "More than you know." For the first time, she moved from the spot where she'd materialized, walking over to Kimono's still form. There was

genuine emotion in her eyes, and in that moment, Twilight almost thought she looked like a normal pony. It was the same expression, she realized, that she had given Dritel's fallen body. "For one blissful moment, I thought she would be the one to set my son's confused heart right. And for an eternity after that, I thought I had lost the closest thing to a daughter I would ever have."

"But... surely you must have *known* she was safe within the Time Capsule," Twilight asked before she could rein in her curiosity.

"Of course I knew. But the magic he created was not entirely the same as what I made for him all those years ago. In many ways, it was an imitation, but he had somehow acquired a remarkable understanding of the spell's inner workings – possibly from having become aware, at some level, of his own Time Capsule's true nature while trapped within it – and had added another element of chaos to the Capsule he created. Whereas before, I could sense Dritel's emotions, this extra layer of chaos clouded my senses from the ponies inside. All I could feel was *his* presence, his darkest emotions left behind. It seemed to taunt me, giving me the message that if I broke the spell carelessly, his plan would be set in motion. So I let it be. Even this twisted version of the spell would, given time, wash away the chaos, breaking on its own accord."

"But you didn't wait that long, did you," Twilight said. It wasn't a question. "What made you change your mind?"

"Kimono called out to me," said Andromeda. Twilight's eyes widened. "I know not how it happened, but one day, she regained enough self-consciousness, and awareness of the true nature of her existence, to offer a prayer to the Elements."

Andromeda turned back to the Bearers, and closed her eyes. And suddenly a bubble of light – not unlike the one Pinkie had once summoned with her Squink – appeared above her head. But there was no picture in it, only sound. Somepony was speaking.

"Elements of Harmony," Kimono's voice resounded. *"I don't know if you're truly real or not, but right now, I choose to believe. It's really all I can do right now. If you can hear me, please, I beg of you, you mustn't let the spell break! Discord, the god of chaos, has lodged magic into me and a few others, and right now, whatever magic is creating this world of illusion is the only thing that's keeping these pieces dormant, separated. I remember it now, what we used to be, what he did... and the moment he placed his claw on me, I understood the spell. Once the seven pieces are reunited, Discord will return!"*

"So please, just... protect the spell. Don't let it fall, no matter what. It is... it is better this way. I can feel myself slipping; soon, I'll forget again, and a new cycle will begin. It's ironic, really... by robbing me of everything, he has given me a paradise, where I can be together with my friends forevermore. So don't worry about me. Just keep Equestria safe. Please, I beg of you..."

The light bubble disappeared. Twilight and her friends were speechless. Andromeda continued, "So she said, but I felt a sadness in those words that shook me to the core. I could not bear it. And so, once again, I took a chance on the world. I broke the spell, and before the pieces of Discord's spell could react to one another, I scattered the ponies across Equestria. It had to happen in the blink of an eye, and each of them had to appear somewhere far from one another, so I had very little control over it. But I had seen the kind of mare you had become, Twilight, and trusted in your righteous nature, your curiosity, to see this mystery through."

"Ohh, so *that's* why you made them look like us!" Rainbow Dash said, piecing it together. "It was

to give us a clue, get us interested, wasn't it?"

But to Twilight's surprise, Andromeda shook her head. "Not quite. Connected though we were, the chaos would not let me see, let alone influence, their spirits. They were nothing more than a faint presence serving as a cruel reminder that they were alive and well, but beyond my reach. What ultimately connected them to you, the Bearers, was nature itself. A natural phenomenon that is at the very core of chaos and harmony. Chaos longs for harmony, and harmony longs for chaos; though the two *can* exist separately, when given the chance, they will seek each other out. That is how the connection was established. Luck was on our side."

Twilight was truly fascinated by this knowledge. It all made perfect sense; it would also explain why Pinkie Pie, with her 'Squink' ability, with its close connection to the Elements of Harmony's true powers, had reacted so strongly to the cosmic shards of Nightmare Moon. But it didn't answer the one big question that gnawed on her mind. "If that's the case, what about Kimono? *She* was the one Discord infused with the most chaos, but she isn't my counterpart; at least, not in the same way. I understand why the *others* wouldn't necessarily share the same Elements as their counterparts, but I'm the Element of *Magic*, just like you. If Harmony and Chaos attract, then *Kimono* should've been the Element of Magic, not Star Catcher, and she would've ended up looking like me anyway..." her voice trailed off. Another piece of the puzzle was falling into place in her head. "We're not connected by the Elements at all... are we."

Andromeda looked her straight in the eyes. But the intense aura, that towering presence, didn't seem to be there. "It is, perhaps, my greatest shame. A thousand years before, I had made my peace with the fact that I would likely never see Kimono again. And thus, when I felt that she was about to be connected to Princess Celestia through the the Elements... I came to realize I didn't want it to be so. The veil of chaos shrouded my senses from the other five, but Kimono... she was different. The amount of chaos trapped within her, connected to a being as powerful as the Princess, would have been able to pierce the spell. Her soul would become near-indistinguishable from Kimono's.

"But I couldn't do it. At that moment, I felt with all my heart I could not bear go through the eons knowing that the pony made to be like my daughter was but a fake. So I cut off her connection to the Elements in Equestria. Made it so I would never sense her presence again. I accepted her fate, and was content to watch over her children, and her children's children, and every generation since."

"But you couldn't let her go, could you. And that's why I..."

There was a glimmer in Andromeda's eyes. Twilight could almost imagine it was a tear.

And suddenly, everything fell into place. She understood so well, it brought tears to *her* eyes. Twilight's appearance was far more than a whim. It was the manifestation of Andromeda's love for Kimono – the closest thing she had to a daughter – and the sorrow of having lost not one, but *two* of her children to her own mistake. It seemed as though fate kept taunting her for it, giving her glimpses of hope, just to have them snatched away. Hope that an Equestria in peace would allow her son to live a normal life. Hope that Kimono would ease his heart. Hope that the Princesses would be able to stop him.

Was it any wonder, then, that in a moment of desperation, she would be driven to one, final act of self-indulgence?

Twilight wiped her eyes. "I understand, Andromeda. And I trust you."

Andromeda's eyes grew wider, her expression changing. Then she broke into a smile, and the feeling of joy seemed to radiate throughout the whole magic space, filling Twilight with happiness. "I thank you, Twilight Sparkle. I suspect you will never truly grasp just how much this means to me. By giving me your trust, you have given me one last glimmer of hope. One last chance to redeem myself."

"Tell me what you want me to do." No more questions. She was ready to do what the Elements asked of her.

"Put an end to Discord," Andromeda spoke, emphasizing each word. "Make it so that the chaotic being my son has become will never threaten this world again." Twilight nodded.

"In other words, all we need to do is get our flanks back to Canterlot and zap the statue with some more Harmony, right?" Rainbow Dash said, eager for some action after all this talking.

"No. This is something only Twilight can do, with the gift I shall bequeath upon her. But heed this: the world will be free from the threat, but Chaos shall forever remain. It is, inevitably, a risk I must once again take. But I believe in you, Twilight Sparkle. I have shown you the world's history, so that you may understand the depth of your responsibility. I have made it so that you understand the nature of Chaos, so that you may properly wield it. And by coming to me willingly, despite the uncertainty, you have proven to me beyond a doubt that you have the heart and drive needed to see Equestria into a new age of peace and prosperity."

Twilight gulped. Was she actually going to do what she thought she would? Before any of them could question it, Andromeda lit her horn. A brilliant rainbow light erupted from the tip, and Twilight felt a surge of harmony through her body the likes of which she had never experienced before. Andromeda began to walk towards her, and Twilight determinedly stood her ground against the sheer force of the Elements' presence.

"If you would," Andromeda said, "tell Kimono that I love her."

Andromeda lowered her horn onto Twilight's.

Her magic went berserk.

Twilight barely even noticed her friends being knocked to the wall by the shock wave. This was the exact same sensation as all those years ago, the day she had gotten her Cutie Mark, only amplified tenfold. It wasn't so much painful as it was extremely uncomfortable. The magic within her was being peeled away, layer after layer. Twilight started to panic. She was going to lose her magic. She was being stripped of her very being, the essence of her soul...!

But then, she felt a new power surface from the depth of her spirit. Chaos. It erupted like a volcano within her, consuming her... or did it? No... she felt the layers of her magic return to her, and with every passing second, her grasp on the chaos magic grew firmer. Twilight realized with a mix of excitement and fear what was happening; Andromeda was infusing harmony directly into her soul, in order to force the chaos that slumbered inside of her awake. The harmony would then help her keep the chaos in check, and Twilight's arcane magic would act as a funnel, giving her full control.

The eerie feeling faded. She looked around for Andromeda, but she was gone. The others, including the counterparts, were getting to their hooves. They were back in the real world.

Kimono was the first to look up, letting out a gasp. “Twilight! Your mane!”

A glance to the side was enough to see that her mane was no longer her own. It was flowing on its own accord, like those of the Princesses’. But it didn’t seem to have the same luster, the same radiance; the grayish dark-purple hue reflected no light, and swirled in a chaotic pattern. But more than her mane, she *felt* different. The chaos was hers to do with as she pleased.

She had, in essence, become Discord.

The very moment the beam of harmony had struck Twilight, everypony had been flung violently backwards, leaving Twilight in the center of the room. The surge of energy cut through Star Catcher like a knife, and she felt herself gasp in pain as she slowly got up on her hooves.

What she saw made her forget about the pain for a moment.

“Darling!” exclaimed the earth pony Rainbow Dash. “Are you alright? What happened?”

“You look... weird,” little Rarity remarked. There was no laughter in her voice this time; in fact, she was backing away.

Star Catcher couldn’t blame her. A dark ooze was leaking out of Twilight’s eyes, and her horn was crackling softly with black lightning. There was no way Star Catcher could mistake that feeling. “Chaos magic...!”

Twilight looked over her friends, and then took a deep breath. Her hair reverted back to its original state. The magic subsided, but did not disappear entirely.

“Twilight,” Kimono spoke, walking up to her with a tense expression. “Tell us what happened. Everything.”

“Well, basically,” the hyper-Pinkie began, “a long, long time ago there was this—”

Twilight held up a hoof to her mouth. “*I’ll* tell them, Pinkie. This is something Kimono needs to hear from me, and nopony else. But first, we need to get back to the carriage; I’ll tell you everything on the way back to Canterlot.” She looked Kimono right in the eye, and smiled. “Everything’s going to be okay, Kimono. The Elements gave me the powers to put Discord away for good.”

It was enough for Kimono, at least for now. She smiled back. “So, is it over now?”

Twilight nodded. “Just about. Once we deal with Discord, you can finally go back to living your lives in pe—”

It came so suddenly, Star Catcher let out a loud yell. A pain so searing, she lost her balance, and couldn’t stop herself from falling to the floor, screaming. The crystal chamber seemed to melt away before her eyes, and suddenly, she was looking at another place entirely. Though it wasn’t a place, so much as it was a realm of senses, a giant expanse of nothingness bordered by swirling streaks of light.

A long, dark streak of magic loomed before her, flowing ever closer. Star Catcher tried to run, but

she couldn't move. She tried to force her mind back to the real world, but it wouldn't listen.

In the end, there was nothing she could do to stop the chaos from washing into her body.

Kimono didn't have time to rush to Star Catcher's side before her body froze, forcing her to stand there and watch as a dark mist expanded out of the pegasus, whose eyes were wide in shock and horror. The mist enveloped the entire chamber, and grew thicker. A moment later, she was trapped in darkness.

And suddenly, the pain returned. It wasn't as grueling as it had once been, but when she heard her friends' screams of agony coming from all directions, the ache in her heart grew, along with an uncomfortable, indescribable feeling in her stomach. It moved through her body and, for a short moment, lodged in her chest.

That's when she recognized the feeling. She knew exactly what was happening.

Discord's spell was being activated.

The pain was gone as suddenly as it came, as a glowing orb popped out of her chest. It seemed to light up the darkness in a sort of inverted light, revealing her horrified friends, each with a similar orb floating beside them. Kimono felt she could move again, but she didn't. She just stared at the orb, floating like a miniature sun. The orbs flew away from them... and into Star Catcher. The pegasus yelled out in pain as they vanished into her body. The darkness broke up, becoming mist again, and in only seconds, it was absorbed back into Star Catcher.

The darkness was gone. The deafening silence was broken only by Star Catcher's ragged breathing.

Luna shot up from bed, jumped out the window and flapped her wings as hard as she could. The moment she was outside the castle's anti-teleportation spell, she transported herself to the edge of the second Ponyville.

She paused before the giant sphere of pure black that enveloped the town. It seemed to be pulsating, sending waves of chaos through her body. She shook her head; this wasn't the time for doubt. Her sister was in danger!

She ran through the barrier, and though she could not deny that the magic surrounding her hurt like a cheese grater to her skin, she forced herself to put the pain aside and keep going as she took flight, soaring as fast as she could toward the castle. The inverted scenery seemed to ripple before her eyes, making it hard to see, but she could feel Celestia's presence, and let it guide her. Luna touched down right by the castle doors, and threw them open.

She scanned the room inside. Celestia lay on the floor, her mouth hanging open, her blank-eyed gaze staring at nothing. Luna's heart grew cold with panic, but she wasted no time lifting up her sister onto her back and, holding her there tight with magic, ran out the castle and lifted off.

She landed with her sister a good distance away from the village, and put her down gently on the ground. "Sister?" she spoke, unable to keep the dread from her voice. "Speak to me, sister!" But

Celestia wasn't moving. Not twitching, not breathing. Luna acted on instinct, putting her horn to her sister's chest to examine her magic core. It was erratic, left in a mess. Whatever it was the storm of chaos had done to her, it had completely disorganized the magic pathways, ruining her body and mind.

Princess Celestia was dead.

Luna sat back heavily, her expression blank as she tried to process what had just happened. Her sister... gone. How could it have happened? How could *she* have let this happen?! Why couldn't she have reached her sooner? Luna's head sunk, finding it hard to form coherent thought. She had failed her. Again, she had failed her...!

But as her eyes came to a stop on Celestia's blank face, a spark of determination flared in her. *No... NO!* Desperately, Luna reached out with her senses again, putting all of her power behind the spell as she peeled back the damaged magic channels layer by layer, searching for any sign of... There! A faint spark, trapped within the damaged pathways, fading rapidly. But it was enough. There was still a chance to bring her back...!

With infinite care, Luna caught the faint spark within a bubble of her own magic, cradling it, sustaining and shielding it, as she began straightening out the scrambled magic channels one by one. No pony else could have done what she was attempting; only Luna, with whom Celestia was closest, could figure out this puzzle.

Once she was satisfied that each channel of the magic network had been untangled and restored, she carefully released the faint spark of her sister back into the nexus of the pathways, and sent a shockwave of concentrated arcane magic through Celestia's heart.

It didn't work.

She sent another, this one stronger, infusing it with every ounce of magic she could muster. *You have to live! You have to...!*

Celestia jerked and gasped, her barrel heaving as she inhaled a deep lungful of air, like a drowning pony who'd managed to fight their way back to the surface. Luna slumped to the ground, and let out a huge sigh of relief. Her eyes were wet with tears of joy. She had not lost her sister today.

"Luna?" Celestia's voice was hoarse. Luna looked up to see her sister already struggling to get back onto her hooves.

"Lay still, sister. I just saved you from death's embrace."

"Was I...?" Celestia said, looking disoriented.

"The chaos nearly destroyed you. Tell me, sister, what in Equestria *happened* back there?"

As if to answer her question, there was a sudden sound in the distance, like muted thunder. She swiftly turned around, just as a pillar of black and gray shot through the sky in the direction of Canterlot Castle.

Luna's heart froze. She knew that magic. But how could that be?

“No...!” Celestia spoke. There was a terror in her voice that shook Luna. “We’ve failed.”

Just as Luna was about to ask what she meant, a crowd of ponies suddenly flashed into existence on the field outside of Ponyville.

It was the residents of Ponyville. Not *this* Ponyville, but the one closer to Canterlot; the Bearers’ home. More than six hundred ponies, all looking around in confusion. “Princess Luna?” said Mayor Mare, who stood at the forefront of the crowd. “What is this—”

She didn’t even have time to finish before there was another flash. This time, the hundred-or-so villagers of the other Ponyville appeared on the field, on the opposite side of the Princesses. A third flash came moments after, and this time, behind the Princesses, the guards from Canterlot Castle appeared, along with Kenbroth, Shining Armor, Princess Cadance, the Apple family, even Trixie.

In the far distance, the pillar of darkness faded.

“Come on...!” Twilight whispered to herself. Holding back the panic was far more difficult than keeping the chaos in check. She scanned Star Catcher’s broken magic channels, sending jolts of magic where needed in order to fix them, but time was short, and this was one of the most complex magic networks she had ever seen. Thankfully, she had seen one exactly like it before: in Princess Celestia, who had shown it to her as part of her studies.

Drawing from the experience of years gone by, she pieced the channels back together, one by one. It felt like a long, harsh process to her, but somewhere in her mind she realized that not even a minute had passed.

When Star Catcher gasped, followed by violent coughing, everypony sighed in relief.

“She’s going to be fine,” Twilight told them. “But we need to get her to Canterlot as soon as possible.”

“No,” Star Catcher, only just awoken, said in a low voice. “The village... Discord...!”

Twilight felt her stomach grow cold. She didn’t understand; Kimono had said the spell would be activated when all *seven* pieces were reunited. They weren’t anywhere near Ponyville... and the chaos had gone through Star Catcher, not the castles.

Wait a minute... Star Catcher... and Celestia. Oh no. She couldn’t have! “Star Catcher’s right,” she told the others. “We need to get back to the village, now! Applejack, take Star Catcher.”

Confused but obedient, they followed Twilight through the castle and out the gate. Twilight’s mind raced; if what she suspected was true, they couldn’t get there fast enough. Even at full speed, it would take Night Gale at least an hour to get to the village. If only she could manage a mass teleportation like Luna...

She came to a stop. She felt the chaos swirl within, and realization struck. She *could* do a mass teleportation! She waved a hoof at the others to stop them from boarding the carriage, then set to work. She was astonished at just how easily the magic flowed; given how much pain it had caused Kimono and Star Catcher, she had thought it would be an uncomfortable practice, but it was as easy as breathing. In fact, instead of simply transporting them to the village, she almost instinctively

went one step beyond, bending space itself.

Before the ponies' stunned expression, there was now a tunnelway of chaos, appearing to the naked eye as a swirl of dark, distorted streaks of magic. Twilight admitted to herself that she might have gone overboard, but there was no time to dwell on it. "Come on, ponies, through here. It'll take us to the village."

"Uh, wh-what just happened?" a pegasus from second Ponyville spoke up, whistling furiously.

"Why are we back at the village all of a sudden?" asked another. But then her face brightened up. "Look! The barrier is gone!"

"Oh, thank goodness!" said one of the earth ponies. "And there's the Princesses! They must've brought us here!"

"Does this mean we finally have our village back?"

"But who are *they*?"

"Look, there's Spike!"

Luna's instinct told her she owed these ponies as much of an explanation she could give. "We did not summon any of you here." This only earned her confused looks from everypony around her. "I only arrived here a few moments ago myself, in order to rescue my sister."

"Rescue?" Shining Armor said. "What happened?! Is she alright?"

"I am fine," Princess Celestia answered as she pushed herself back onto her hooves, leaning against her sister for support. "But we can't worry about me. We don't have much time; Shining Armor, Princess Cadance, erect the barrier spell, quickly!"

There was a moment of hesitation, but a short one. The couple began lighting their horns... when suddenly, a surge of chaos erupted between the Princesses and the groups, appearing to the naked eye as a swirl of dark, distorted streaks of magic. Many ponies gasped, backing away. Luna steeled herself. Discord was coming, she was sure of it.

Luna readied a spell, determined to buy them as much time as it would take... but the ensuing surprise made her drop the magic.

"Twilight?!" Luna exclaimed. It flew in the face of all reason, but it was indeed Twilight Sparkle leading her friends through the portal of Chaos that had appeared before them, her mane flowing in a nonexistent wind like Luna's did. Star Catcher was being carried on Applejack's back.

Twilight's very being seemed to emit the same loathsome magic as Discord wielded. "What has happened?" Luna demanded. "Why are you... *how* are you wielding *Chaos*?"

Twilight didn't reply right away; instead, she looked around, eyes widening as she saw that she was surrounded by the villagers of both Ponyvilles, as well as Canterlot Castle. She let out a small gasp as she lay her eyes on Celestia, seeing her mentor's face strained with fatigue.

“Darlings!” earth-pony Rainbow Dash exclaimed, turning to her village. “Why are *you* all here?”

“We’re not sure,” one of the unicorns – Wysteria – replied. “One moment we were resting in Canterlot, and the next, we were here.”

Shining Armor looked as though he was going to say something, but no doubt his sister’s strange form gave him pause. Celestia gave them a look, and he and Cadance quickly resumed casting their barrier magic. Twilight turned her attention to Luna. “Discord’s spell has been activated. It was designed to be set in motion the moment all seven pieces were brought together.”

“*Seven* pieces, you say?”

“The village itself was the final piece. And Celestia was there, while Star Catcher was with us. They share a special connection created through the thousand years they both represented the Elements of Magic.”

“But then...!” Luna breathed, understanding the implications. She looked overhead; the Captain’s spell was beginning to take form, the dark purple magic spreading out downwards from far above Shining Armor’s horn, shaping itself into a dome. She now understood Celestia’s urgency. *Please, may the spell finish in time...!*

The magic froze, two-thirds finished. And then, as though flipped by an invisible giant hoof, the dome was thrown into the air, hitting the ground near the village and shattering into hundreds of shards that vanished into thin air.

“‘A’ for effort, my little ponies!” a voice boomed across the landscape. That familiar, flamboyant voice. “But I’m afraid you were just a *teeny* tiny bit too late.”

Luna gazed upon the faces of her people, slowly being consumed by fear and shock. Slowly, she turned around.

There he was, floating in midair. The creature responsible for everything.

Discord held out his arms in a triumphant gesture. “I’m back, everypony!”

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