

“Ah’ don’t understand. What happened?” Applejack asked.

“It should have worked.” Rainbow Dash said, looking at her friends. “I mean the elements of harmony...they kicked Nightmare Moon’s butt and she was like the most evil thing to ever hit Equestria!”

“I don’t know.” Twilight said. “We...maybe we need to face it directly? Maybe the elements are more powerful when they’re right up against the thing we’re fighting.”

“Twilight, I don’t know if you noticed or not but...we were right up against an enemy.” Rarity said, pointing to the spot on the floor that the shadow beast had occupied. “It was here, in the room with us. We all saw it. We saw it destroyed.”

“Wolves.” Pinkie Pie said.

The rest of the group turned to look at her.

“It’s like wolves. You can drive them away with fire but you still have a problem.”

“Pinkie Pie, I love it when you’re random but I don’t think now is the right time.”

Rainbow Dash said.

“I’m not being random silly. What happens if you’re in the woods and surrounded by wolves? You build a fire. Well that’s all well and good but they’ll still be out there, waiting for the fire to die down. And you can’t go out and get more wood because of the wolves.”

“So we make sure we have plenty of wood?”

“It’s not about wood! I’m talking about whatever we just fought.”

“So you’re saying we just fought...a wolf?”

“I see where she’s going with this.” Twilight said. “The fire only buys you more time. You still have to drive the wolves away.”

“How do we do that?”

“I don’t know.”

“And the thing about wolves...when the sun comes up fire doesn’t scare them anymore.” Fluttershy said.

“Exactly. So what happens when you have to face them?” Twilight asked.

“Ya either run an’ hope yer fast enough, or fight an’ hope yer strong enough.” Applejack said. “They’s yer only two real options.”

“No. There’s a third. You get eaten.”

The ponies looked at each other as the grim statement sunk in. Each of them wondered how long they had until this particular foe stopped being afraid of the fire.

“If nothing else...if nothing else we’ve managed to buy ourselves some time. Right now, it’ll have to do.” Twilight said.

The promised book arrived shortly after. The flying stunt team stayed long enough to see that it was received before winging their way back to Canterlot. Rainbow Dash looked a bit disappointed that her heroes had left in such a hurry until Rarity suggested Princess Celestia might need their services. The group gathered around the table where the book lay. Magic, old magic, magic that seemed barely constrained by its pages emanated from it. A small note was adhered to the cover.

By special order of Princess Celestia this copy of the Hyracotherium has been released from our archives. Any knowledge found within is to be considered secret. It would be unwise to attempt any of the magic that lies herein. We also don’t recommend trying to read the gibberish in the back. If it says something should not be spoken aloud, trust us, don’t speak it aloud. Good

luck.

Muskoxatonic University staff

Twilight opened the cover and turned to the table of contents. She looked down until she saw a chapter entitled cutie marks. The friends leaned in as she turned to the correct page and began to read.

“The cutie mark is a magic that is considered to be as old as ponykind itself. At first, only those who possessed extraordinary talents would earn a cutie mark. Those who did became marked as a step above their fellows. Theirs was the place to rule, to weave spells of incredible power, to act as champions. In a time when the world was wild those with a marked flank led and protected everypony.

“While most ponies were satisfied with the way things worked, as cutie marks were not passed down lineage but rather appeared on the truly gifted, a few sought power and recognition for themselves. Some of them...ew, that’s disgusting.” Twilight said, turning the page away from the graphic illustration.

“Others sought pacts with demonic forces and ancient beasts. At the time of this writing all had been slain, excepting one. One monster, as old as the world itself perhaps, had become such a threat to every living creature that a greater defense was needed.”

“Does it say what this thing is called?” Applejack asked.

“Not yet. Let me keep reading.”

“The most powerful magicians of the world gathered and with the blessing of the rulers of Eohippia-”

“Where? I’ve never heard of such a place.” Rarity said. Twilight shot her a look and continued in the text.

“-rulers of Eohippia cast a spell to give every pony a cutie mark. In this way all those living might enjoy a measure of protection against the foe, as the discovery of the special talent signifying a cutie mark...yes we know that already,” She skipped past the paragraphs on how cutie marks worked, “This knowledge of self acts a buffer against the ability of the monster to spread fear.”

“Doesn’t seem like it’s working very well.” Rainbow Dash said.

“Hush. Despite the great magic of the cutie mark it was known at the time of the casting that it could only act as a temporary measure. Eohippia’s six greatest champions assembled to go forth and end the menace. Thus ends the history of the cutie mark. Well that was useful.”

Twilight sighed and laid her head on the table. She shoved the open book away.

“Ah’ think it was.” Applejack said.

The unicorn lifted her eyes towards her friend.

“Ah’ mean think about it. Six champions, six elements of harmony right? See if there’s anythin’ in there about them.”

Twilight’s eyes lit up and she pulled the book back towards herself. She flipped back to the table of contents and was soon reading again.

“The elements of harmony, the most powerful magic known to ponykind, are more than just simple crystals signifying the spirits of friendship. Each element is a magical conduit to the soul of the Eohippian champion that created it.”

“So...we’re channeling the souls of dead ponies? Creepy.” Pinkie said. Twilight ignored her.

“When the Eohippians faced the Knacker-” Twilight held up a hoof to forestall

interruption “-in the field they did so with the knowledge that they could not destroy it entirely. To drive it from the world altogether would require greater magic than the champions themselves possessed. However, after the battle had been fought a way was found to imprison it. Knowing that in the course of time the Knacker might recoup its strength and return to menace the world once more, each champion bound their soul to an element. The modern words for honesty, loyalty, generosity, kindness, laughter, and magic are all descended from the names of the original champions. This was done so that if future generations ever had need of their power the champions could act through the elements and renew the bonds that held the demon.”

Twilight wasted no time in finding the entry on the Knacker. She gasped when she turned the page, the rough sketch at the top bearing a strong similarity to the creature they had seen. The picture wasn't as disturbing as what they had seen but it was impossible to deny the malevolence of the thing.

“That's it...that's the Knacker.”



“The Knacker. Of all the enemies of life it is perhaps the deadliest and most directed in its evil. Some entities earned their reputations for their mindless destruction or simple brutality. The Knacker is intelligent, cunning, and manipulative. It twists the minds of its victims to produce the most fear possible, working its way into its victim until the soul itself is corrupted. Once it has accomplished this the victim is then used as a puppet to assist in its cause. Because of the nature of the monster the only suitable way to free those who have fallen under its influence is-” Twilight paused, and reread the last word. “-death. According to legends passed down from the long extinct elder beings to the first ancestors of the dragons, the Knacker cannot attack the living directly unless it has a host body. The legends spoke of one so corrupted they rejected self entirely, thus leaving a void for the monster to occupy. The Knacker was imprisoned by the champions of Eohippia after it reappeared sometime towards the middle of the third dynasty. In the two months it was active the magic of the cutie mark was given to everypony, and had the champions not managed to stop it life itself may have been wiped from the world.”

The ponies looked at each other as Twilight finished reading. The impact of the faded words felt like an overloaded set of saddlebags settling on their backs. The purple unicorn closed the book and pushed it into the center of the table. The gaze of each went to their respective element. A soul, a living soul, bound within for all time, to be used as a weapon against an

ultimate evil. And it wasn't even lethal. It was sobering knowledge.

"So...what now?" Rainbow Dash broke the silence.

"We try to contact the souls of the creators. If anyone can tell us how to fight this thing they can." Twilight said.

White light filled the room. Each pony shared each other's presence. It was comforting. The group again felt the strength and peace of their bond.

"*Now go deeper.*" It might have been Twilight who said it.

As one the friends willed the power that flowed between them to increase. The library started to twist, the books slowly disappearing one by one. And old pony walked backwards through the door, chatting with a young stallion. The books continued to pop out of being until the shelves were completely emptied. The interior shifted, furniture being carried out by stout ponies. Walls smoothed themselves, the shelves carved into them reverting to natural form. The tree itself started to regrow from the center of the room, carpenters undoing their work. The wood that encased them began to shrink, layers unwinding like an onion growing in reverse. When the tree had shrank to the point where the group could see more than bare wood they found themselves watching settler ponies moving away from some kind of official looking platform being taken down.

The sun and the moon sped in reverse above them until day and night blurred together. Civilizations rebuilt themselves and rapidly dwindled away into scattered tribes. The movement of the stars overhead slowed...slowed...stopped. The group found themselves in a small clearing in a dense forest. Six stallions made of light and clad in antiquated armor stood before them.

"*We bid welcome to the bearers of the elements.*" They chorused. The words didn't sound like they had come from their exact location. It seemed as if the trees around them were speaking in one unified, slightly distorted voice.

"Are you the Eohippian champions?" Twilight asked.

"*We are.*"

"Can you tell us-"

"*We can tell you many things bearer of magic. We can tell you that our gift to the world has been used in ways it was not intended for. We can tell you the deepest secrets of your God Empress. We can tell you all that we have seen from within our crystalline prisons.*"

"What do you mean misused? We had to use you...I mean the elements...I mean...whatever! We had to, in order to stop Nightmare Moon!" Rainbow Dash said.

"*Did you?*" The stallions swung their empty eyes towards the rainbow pegasus. They stared as she shrank before their gaze. "*And why is that, element of loyalty? Because your Celestia did so before?*"

"Because there weren't no other way!" Applejack stepped between the glowing forms and her chagrined friend. "What was we supposed to do, just let that crazy mare turn all of Equestria dark forever?"

"*Eternal night is preferable to eternal darkness.*" The stallions said as one.

"Please...please we're sorry but you were the only way we knew how to stop Nightmare Moon." Twilight said. She laid a hoof on her orange friend's shoulder. "We didn't know at the time that the elements of harmony contained your souls. All we knew was that it was the most powerful magic in Equestria."

"*Magic made to fight another. Celestia knew this when she gathered the elements from*

our original resting place. She had read the histories. And yet when she asked us we came. We came and we banished her wayward sister. All that we asked was that she return us to where we belonged. She did not."

"But... why? I mean the Hyracotherium said-"

"Because she feared the return of her sister more than the return of an old legend. Surely, after twenty thousand years, such a thing would be long dead. Yet when she locked us in our last resting place to fight against the inevitable return of the one called Nightmare Moon she unmade her own world."

"We..." Twilight said. She looked at her friends, an expression of confusion on each of their faces. "What are you talking about?"

"We were the gates to the prison of the Knacker. One by one we were removed. Do you think the place you call Everfree has always been wild? It was once tame and wonderful. Without us to contain the demon the land began to twist and spawn monsters. If we had been returned our light would have held it where it belonged."

"What if we put you back?"

"It is too late. It has worked its way from the deepest reaches of its cell until it could touch the minds of the living."

"But we saw it... a part of it at least, driven back."

"Yes, you did. You purified a small area of your world and yourselves. You and any others with you when you called us forth will be protected from its corruption there, for a time."

"Excuse me!" Pinkie Pie said, waving a hoof in the air. "Excuse me glowy ghost pony thingies!" She giggled a little bit as the souls turned towards her. "You sound all blah and down for being... anyway. So, how do we fight it?"

"The same way we did."

"And that waaaaaasss..."

"We faced the beast itself. It promised oblivion. We accepted."

"So you let it kill you?" Twilight said. She held up a hoof as Pinkie Pie opened her mouth. The energetic pony sat down with a little harrumph. "Sorry Pinkie."

"We did not die. We accepted an eternity of non-being. Without fear, without despair, without hesitation we threw our own essence at it. Our sacrifice allowed us to move beyond where it could touch us. We had become incorruptible. That was our strength. It fled back towards the bowels of the earth with us chasing it. When it retreated into the lair it rose from we bound ourselves to the very land itself."

"What if we went to this prison or lair or whatever you want to call it and used the elements?"

"It is possible."

"That it would imprison it again?"

"That your own sacrifice would be powerful enough to forge the bonds anew."

"Our sacrifice?"

"You would have to bind yourselves as we did. To accept an eternity of guardianship without hesitation or doubt."

"That's the only way?" Twilight looked at her friends. "I don't know if we can do that."

"Then your world is lost."

"Can we have a minute to talk about it?" She asked. The champions nodded in unison. The bookish unicorn gestured for a huddle and the friends formed into a circle. "OK

so...thoughts?"

"I don't know about the rest of you but spending an eternity doing...whatever it is these champions or whatever they call themselves have been doing sounds pretty lame." Dash said. The other ponies looked at her. "What? That's just my opinion. I mean stopping this knacker thing is pretty important and all but there must be another way."

"Ah'm guessin' if them Eohippoans...Eohippies...whatever they're called say it's the only way, an' it seems like they'd know havin' done it first, chances are we'll have to do it." Applejack said. She looked at her brash blue friend with a hangdog expression. "Even if it means we get to spend the rest of time like them. Ah don't like it much more than you but somepony's gotta do it."

"If they say it's the only way, I'm willing to do it." Rarity said. The orange earth pony swung her gaze from Dash towards the unicorn with a look of surprise. "What? Why are looking at me like that? If this thing is truly as powerful and dangerous as the history books and the ponies that imprisoned it in the first place say, and it certainly seems like it is, then isn't giving ourselves to save the world a small price to pay?"

"If it makes the nightmares stop I'll do it. If that's okay with everyone else."

"Fine. I can't let the rest of you spend eternity without me." Dash said. "But don't think for a minute that I won't remind everyone of how boring standing around as a bunch of light is."

"I think we can live with that." Twilight said with a smile. She turned towards Pinkie Pie. "Are you in Pinkie?"

"Hmmm...the end of all light and laughter in the world or getting to spend eternity partying with my best friends while some creepy darkness monster has to sit in the dark by itself?" Pinkie tapped her chin with her hoof, big blue eyes looking up towards the stars in an expression of thought. "This is a tough one. Can there be a song involved?"

"As long as it doesn't start another stampede." Twilight said. The friends laughed as the silly earth pony blew a raspberry at the reminder of her failed song. Still giggling slightly they all turned towards the champions. "We accept."

"Then we will show you where you must go." Each champion stepped towards a different pony. *"We felt the thing's strength when you called upon us to fight it. You have a few days left in which to prepare. Rest well and make your peace with the world."*

The glowing forms touched their noses to their counterparts. An image of a tunnel slanting away into the darkness of the earth appeared inside the minds of the group, a narrow and long overgrown path winding away from the spot into the trees burning with a strange darkness. The view rose to an aerial perspective, the path pulsing like a malignant vein across the Everfree forest. The map took on greater prominence as the clearing faded out until it was the only thing visible. The connection of the elements broke and the six friends found themselves lying in the library. They shared a look of understanding and set out to gathering bedding. In a few minutes they were fast asleep.