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// 19: An Eidolon Named Night// Story: What Bound Them// by
Headless//-----//

In the darkness, Tailspin struggled.

Spike wasn't moving. She hadn't been able to see much of what had happened, so his exact condition was a mystery, but she knew that it couldn't be good. The cloak and blankets that the others had wrapped her in had obscured most of her vision. But she could hear everything, and what little she could see had been more than enough.

Now, she was lying in blackness, trying to fight off the waves of exhaustion that were battering away at her resolve. Her body wanted to sleep, and she knew that, this time, she wouldn't wake up. The cold and the pressure had ripped away what little strength Compass Rose's spell had bought her. She was done, completely and utterly.

But she had a few moments left, and she was needed. So she gasped and squirmed, trying to worm her rear legs free of the crushing pressure of the ropes.

Slowly, her eyes adjusted to the night. It wasn't entirely dark here. The walls of the building they had crashed into were sturdy, but Spike was a dragon, and he had momentum on his side. The massive double doors hadn't stood a chance. There was a gaping hole in them now, and that let in some dim light from outside. It was murky and weak, barely enough to enable her to see the barest outlines of her surroundings, but it was there.

Her vision seemed to be reducing itself to tiny pinpoints. Everything else was a swirl of blackness. Even then, she could see her breath misting the air in front of her. Even in her dizzy, weakened state, she thought that the little puffs looked pathetically weak, and they were getting weaker.

She forced herself to take deeper breaths and felt her muscles protest. Just a few minutes, she thought. Just a few minutes. Please. So I can be sure they're alive. So I can say goodbye.

With a grunt of effort that was really no more than a squeak, she pulled her rear legs free. Immediately, gravity reached up and snatched her, and she felt herself begin to slide off of the dragon's back.

She couldn't have stopped herself if she wanted to. Her legs wouldn't respond in time. Besides, even if the impact would hurt, it was the fastest, easiest way to the ground.

She landed on her side. As expected, it hurt, and she felt the wind knocked out of her. Her head swam, and she felt her heart skip a beat. Then another. For a moment, she was certain that she

was about to go under for the final time, but, as if in answer to her silent pleas, the rhythm started again.

Thank you.

The world became a blur, consisting of nothing but disjointed sensations and the certainty that she would be able to sleep soon. At one point, she became aware that she was crying. It was an odd way of crying. Tears were leaking from the corners of her eyes, but that was all. She didn't feel her breath hitching. She couldn't even feel herself shaking any more.

She even felt warm.

Then she realized that she was sitting against something. It took her an eternity to realize what it was.

Spike had curled over Pith and Compass when he struck the doors, trying to shield the two of them from the blow. He had undoubtedly absorbed a lot of it - his scales were stronger than any armor, and he had grown to something almost twice the size of a minotaur before impact. She found herself wondering how many of his bones, if any, remained unbroken. Probably not many.

When he had landed, he had somehow managed to twist himself to the side, holding both of his arms out in a desperate attempt to avoid crushing the ponies he was holding. It probably hadn't worked. But that was where she was, now. She was sitting with her back against one of the dragon's outflung arms.

To her amazement, Tailspin found herself smiling. Tears were still rolling down her cheeks, and she knew that she was going to die there, cold, alone, and surrounded by dead friends. She would never even get to say goodbye to Pith, or to hear him say all the stupid things that he thought should be said when they both knew them already.

But all she could think of was that, up until the very end, Spike had tried to shield them, and Pith had tried to find an escape for them, and Compass had kept trying to find the path. They had all tried, in the only ways they could. Because they had been friends.

Friends to the end, she thought. I'm glad I knew all of you.

The pegasus' head fell back against the scales behind her. In the darkness, she shut her eyes, ignoring the tears, and laughed.

Something was leaving her now. She could feel it. She could even track its progress, count down to what she knew would be her last breath.

Just four now, she thought, feeling her head swim. Just four. And then I can finally sleep.

She was dimly conscious of a new sensation. It was a feeling of slight pressure against her legs. With three breaths left to her, she managed to lift her head and peer at the source.

There was something in her lap. It was a piece of ornate gold jewelry, with a ruby shaped like a heart set into it. In the eternity between her third and second to last breaths, she remembered what it was, and smiled again.

He never did let her go, really, she mused to herself. She didn't know or care how it had gotten into her lap. At this point, what did it matter? One of her forehooves - she was too disoriented to be sure whether it was the right or the left - came up to settle against the gem. He truly-

-loved her.

There. In the very deepest facets of the ruby, there was something. Something strong.

Just one breath left, now. If she just let out that breath, she could sleep. It would be so easy, and she had been so exhausted for so long. But she could remember Pith Helmet's expression when she had told him what the cocoon had done to her, and what it meant would happen. She remembered how he had begged.

In the darkness, Tailspin closed her eyes and drank.

Every part of Compass Rose's body hurt. Her ribs felt as though they had been crushed, her legs felt like they would never move again, and her neck felt as though someone had tried very hard to break it. Even the hairs of her coat ached. But nothing compared to the unabated head-splitting migraine-crossed-with-an-industrial-saw feeling in her skull. Her horn was pure torture.

Wherever she was, there was magic all around. It wasn't good magic, either. Even half-blinded as she was, she could sense the similarities between this magic and the cruel power that Queen Chrysalis had wielded. This magic took, and never stopped taking. It was hungry and corrosive. She could feel the waves of it crawling over her coat like an army of insects that she couldn't shake off.

It took her a while to realize that she could sense other things, as well, using her more mundane senses. The most obvious of them was a sensation of warmth, and the sound of things crackling.

Fire.

She opened her eyes, and was immediately rewarded by a stab of pain as light far too bright for her flooded her pupils. After a few seconds, when she could raise her eyelids above a squint without groaning, she raised her head.

They were in what looked like an entrance hall of some sort. It put her in mind of the castle in the Tangle, but this one was, somehow, even larger and more ornately decorated. She would have considered it even more beautiful, if it hadn't been for the shadows.

The darkness in the hall seemed somehow thicker than it should be, as if it were an entity in its own right rather than just a descriptor applied to an area where light was not. Odd shapes seemed to shift and dance within them whenever she looked away, but always vanished before she could turn back.

She shook her head vigorously for a moment. There was a fire to her back. That needed to be investigated.

Slowly, groaning with the effort, she turned over.

This entrance hall shared another trait with the castle in the Tangle: there were massive, ornate tapestries draped over the walls. Somepony had taken one of them down and heaped it up on the stone floor, then set fire to it. It didn't burn well - thick, black smoke poured out of it, drifting upwards and into the cavernous recesses of the room - but it did provide a bit of warmth.

Spike was lying a few yards away, on one side of the fire. The dragon looked as though he hadn't moved after hitting the ground. He was still massive and powerful-looking, but he also looked beaten, like a prize fighter that had lost, and lost hard. His mouth was open, and she could see that several of his fangs had been broken. Several of the ridges that trailed along his spine had also shattered, and even a few of his scales looked as though they had splintered with the force of impact.

It was his wings that were the worst, though. Compass felt a sympathetic lurch from her stomach when she saw what had happened to them. One was curled up under his torso, pinned to the stone and mostly obscured from view, but even lying like that, she could tell that the skeins of flesh between the bones of it had been ripped horrifically. The other one, the one that wasn't pinned under him, was worse. Not only was it as badly torn as the other, but it was turned back on itself. One of its joints had been twisted in entirely the wrong way.

Compass wasn't certain how well dragons healed, but she found it difficult to imagine that Spike would ever get airborne again.

A soft sound caught her attention, and she twisted her head around to look for its source. It took her a moment to spot it - the fire was in the way. It also didn't help that the red of Tailspin's coat was the same hue as the fire.

She blinked.

Tailspin's-

It took her a moment to get her hooves under her, and when she finally managed it, she found it difficult to even attempt to stand. She settled for lifting herself up on her forelegs and squinting over the flames.

It was Tailspin. The pegasus was crouched over Pith Helmet, who was lying full-length on the stone floor, and grunting softly as she twisted something around one of the stallion's legs.

"Tailspin?"

The flame-coated mare paused, then turned to look at Compass over her shoulder, grinning broadly. There was a glint of gold and crimson around her neck. "Hey," she said. "I'm glad you're awake. It was getting lonely."

Compass simply gaped for a few seconds. Just a few hours ago, the pegasus had looked skeletal and gray. Now her coat was back to its original brilliant incarnadine, and, while she still looked thin, she no longer looked as though anypony could play xylophone on her ribcage.

Finally, she managed to ask, "How?"

Tailspin lifted a hoof and pointed to the ruby necklace. "This," she said. "I ended up with it after the crash. I don't really know how, but I'm not complaining. It's... magic, or something close."

Compass' horn throbbed again, and she winced. "I guessed. I just didn't know it was healing magic."

Tailspin frowned and lowered her gaze, squirming awkwardly on the spot. "It's not."

"What?" Compass finally managed to push herself upright. Her legs shook under her and her muscles felt like they were on fire, but she managed it. "Then how are you... like this?"

The pegasus grimaced and turned back to Pith. Now that she was upright and could see over the fire, Compass could tell that the thing being wrapped around the stallion's leg was a makeshift splint.

"The cocoon did something to me," Tailspin muttered. "Something that your magic didn't heal. It made me like the changelings. I need to eat like they do."

Compass blinked. "You mean you feed on-"

"No," the pegasus said sharply. "I need to, but I don't. That's why I wasn't healing. I was starving myself." She paused, sighed, and added, "I didn't tell you because I didn't want you to blame yourself. I'm sorry."

The anger she seemed to be expecting didn't come. Compass just felt confused. "But then how are you better now?"

"The necklace has something in it," Tailspin said, still not looking up from her work on Pith's leg. "I think it's... a reservoir, or something, of all the things Spike felt for his wife. It's enough to keep me on my feet, at least. I'm not entirely comfortable with using it without asking him, but you all needed help."

There didn't really seem to be anything that could be said to that. Compass just shook her head, trying to get the room to stop spinning, and took a few shaky steps around the fire.

Tailspin was still focused on getting the splint set around Pith's leg. She had taken a pair of short, metal poles - presumably used to support the tapestry that was now blazing merrily behind her - and a series of thick strips of fabric that she had saved from the fire, and was busy attempting to try and tie the poles into place as best she could.

Pith was unconscious, and already had several large, pronounced bruises forming around his head and chest, but he was breathing. His leg, though, was obviously in bad shape. It was the same one that had been splinted for a hairline fracture back in the fortress. The crash had obviously turned that into a full break; even with the splint in place, it was bent in places that weren't meant to bend. Tailspin was doing her best, but she was no doctor.

Compass limped her way over to the two of them, then dropped onto the floor again, panting heavily. Tailspin glanced up from her work and frowned.

"Just stay still," she said. "Honestly, I'm amazed any of us are even alive. Rest."

"You're the one who had to be carried here," Compass murmured in response. She lowered herself to the ground anyway. She was too exhausted to really argue.

"Yes, and now I'm probably going to have to carry the rest of you out," answered the pegasus in a matter-of-fact tone. She gave one last grunt as she finished adjusting her amateur splint, then sighed. "It's not a very good set," she muttered, "but it's the best I can do. At least it isn't pointing the wrong way any more."

She stood up and trotted over to Compass. "What about you? Anything broken?"

Compass shook her head. "Don't think so," she said. "But my horn is killing me. This place is full of magic." She frowned, shuddered, and added, "Bad magic. Like Chrysalis', but... worse, somehow." She glanced towards the shadows at the edge of her vision again. "I don't like it here."

"Neither do I," said Tailspin, following her gaze. "But we can't leave. I don't know why those things haven't followed us inside, but I checked the hole in the door, and they're all out there, circling the castle. We're trapped."

"So what do we do?" Compass looked back to Spike. The dragon's chest still rose and fell steadily, but there were no other signs of movement.

There was a sigh from the pegasus. "You're not going to like my answer."

"I still need to hear it," said Compass, turning back to her and frowning. "We're the only two awake. We've got to do something."

Tailspin nodded and, apparently without thinking about it, lifted one of her hooves to rest against the ruby necklace. "Exactly," she said. "We're the only two awake, and we've got to do something. Spike isn't in any condition to go anywhere, and Pith's leg is... bad. Neither of them is going to be walking any time soon, and you're not in particularly great condition yourself. We can't stay here, and we can't go back outside. So." She took a deep breath, then continued, "I'm going further into the castle."

Compass blinked. "You're leaving us?"

"No." Tailspin shook her head rapidly. "Not for long, anyway. I'll check back in as often as I can. But we can't go outside, so we can't call for help, and we don't have the means to take care of Spike or Pith long enough for them to heal. We also don't have any guarantee that the ice-things outside aren't going to come after us. If we stay here, we're going to die, one way or another."

"So what does you going further into the castle change about that?" asked Compass. She couldn't keep the slight edge of panic out of her voice. The thought of being left in the hall with their two unconscious companions filled her with dread. The shadows were too close.

"I don't know," the pegasus admitted, frowning. "But Spike said that there might be something helpful here, even if we can't find the Elements of Harmony. Maybe I can find something that can help us. It's a long shot, but it's still a better shot than we have right now."

Slowly, Compass forced herself to nod. As much as she hated the idea of Tailspin leaving them, she couldn't think of anything better, and she really wasn't in any condition to go exploring herself. "Just promise you'll check back in as often as you can," she said.

Tailspin nodded. "Of course. Just watch Pith and Spike for me. If they wake up, they'll probably need food and water."

The image of Spike's broken wing forced itself into Compass' mind, and she grimaced. They'll need more than that.

There was a soft rustling sound, and she snapped back to reality. Tailspin was putting on a set of saddlebags, her expression determined, and staring towards the far end of the hall. "If the fire starts to get low, there's a tapestry by the door that fell off. You can use that for more fuel."

"You're leaving already?"

"No point in wasting time," said Tailspin. She flipped one of the helmets onto her head. Miraculously, its light was still functioning. "We still don't know how long we have until those things find a way in."

Again, Compass nodded. "All right," she said, still frowning. "Just... be careful, okay?"

"I will." The pegasus smiled at her. Compass was slightly surprised to realize that it was a natural smile, without any sign of being forced. "Don't worry," she continued. She reached out and placed one hoof on Compass' shoulder for a moment. "I won't leave you guys. Just take care of Pith and Spike for me. I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Okay." Compass shuddered, and Tailspin patted her shoulder comfortingly.

"It's gonna be all right," she said brightly. "We've survived a lot together. We'll get through this as well."

And she turned to trot away into the darkness.

At first, the grand architecture and faded glory of Castle Canterlot had put Tailspin in mind of the ruins they had found in the Tangle. These halls also featured ornate tapestries and exquisite statues depicting various famous figures from antiquity. Beyond that, the designs themselves were quite similar. More than once, Tailspin spotted a tapestry depicting the two alicorn sisters that Spike kept calling Celestia and Luna, along with a few showing Twilight Sparkle.

But that was where the similarities ended. That castle had been old and decaying, but normal. The stones had just been stones. If the changelings hadn't managed to follow them inside, they would have been perfectly safe there.

This castle felt different. Odd shapes twisted at the edges of her vision. More than once, she was certain that she could hear something whispering to her in some language she couldn't understand. The light from her helmet lamp didn't dispel the darkness so much as force it to retreat for a moment.

Castle Twilight had been ancient, but nothing more. This place was wrong.

She pressed on regardless, despite her lack of a set destination. She didn't know what might be in the castle. Even if she had, she wouldn't have known which direction to go first. Spike was the only member of the group who might have been able to point them towards significant locations, and he was unconscious.

She would have preferred to wait until he had woken up so that she could learn more about the castle before setting out, but the ice creatures were still outside. There wasn't any time to wait. So she kept walking, trying to ignore the rising dread in her gut.

Twice, she thought she heard something scrabbling along the stone behind her. Twice, she spun around to look, and saw nothing but the darkness and the ominous shapes dancing at the edge of sight.

She passed dozens of rooms as she wandered, and even more doors that she couldn't open. Most of the rooms that she could see, she couldn't easily identify. Some had obviously been sitting rooms. Others were guest bedrooms. One or two might have been something approaching a guard post. None of them contained anything that looked useful.

Finally, she rounded a corner and found herself standing in front of a set of doors that looked very different from the rest.

They were large, ornate double doors, easily large enough for Spike to fit through, even in his larger states. Tailspin couldn't be sure what sort of material they were made from. It appeared to be some sort of alabaster stone, engraved and inset with precious stones to form a picture so large that it covered every inch of the titanic surface.

It was a picture of six ponies, all mares, each on their hind legs and with an intricately-cut crystal in the shape of their cutie mark set over their heads. Five of them - two earth ponies, two pegasi, and a white-coated unicorn that she immediately recognized as Rarity - were arrayed around the edges of the doors, forming a sort of pentagon around the one in the center. That one could only have been Twilight Sparkle.

The gems sparkled brilliantly in the light from her helmet lamp, and for a moment, Tailspin almost forgot about the shadows that seemed to be closing in around her. Then she shook her head and stepped forward. She couldn't afford to waste time, even to admire such an amazing

work. Especially when she had just stumbled across the first real sign that there might be something important here.

She stepped forward, and immediately stopped again.

Two of the gems set into the doors had begun to shine. It was a dim light, just barely bright enough to be seen, but it was there nonetheless. One of them was a ruby cut into the shape of an apple, set just above an orange-coated earth pony. The other was a set of pink balloons above a pink mare on the other side of the door.

She hesitated, unsure of whether or not to continue forward, but there didn't seem to be any immediate danger. She took another step. The gems shone a bit brighter.

She swallowed, set her jaw, and began to walk forward again.

There was a quiet rumbling and, ahead of her, the double doors began to swing inward. The room beyond was massive, even larger than the entrance hall, and her helmet lamp only illuminated the very closest section of it. She could just make out two rows of statues, one to each side, depicting the same mares on the door. And, at the very furthest end of the room, there were a pair of thrones.

Tailspin froze.

There was somepony sitting on one of them.

The figure was tall and sinuous, but it lacked any sort of grace. Its proportions were off, its limbs malformed and asymmetric. One of its arms was long, thin, and had fingers tipped with sharp talons, while the other was short and thickly muscled. Its legs were uneven, one scaled and one hooved. Even its horns were mismatched.

But the worst thing about it was its face. It was a twisted, garish caricature of a pony's, with a horribly twisted muzzle and misshapen head. Its teeth were sharp, jagged, and jutted from its mouth at freakish angles. One of them was especially long and wicked-looking, curving down over the monster's lower jaw and gleaming in the dim light.

And its eyes, its horrible, yellow eyes with their crazed, blood-red irises, were fixed firmly on Tailspin, whose legs had lost their ability to function. All she could do was stare, motionless, and hope that it would turn away so that she could bolt.

It didn't. As she watched, its lips curled into a tiny, predatory smile, exposing still more of those hideous teeth.

"Ah," it said. Its voice dripped self-satisfaction. "I was wondering when one of you would finally find me." It pushed itself off of the throne and, to Tailspin's amazement, sank into a low, theatrical bow. "I am Discord, Lord of Chaos. And the pleasure, I'm sure, is all mine."

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// 20: Roll The Dice// Story: What Bound Them// by Headless//-----//

Every fiber of Tailspin's being thrummed with the desperate desire to turn tail, leap into the air, and fly as far and fast as her wings could take her. The thing, the twisted chimera with the malicious smile, was looking at her. It was coming closer.

But her legs didn't seem to want to move.

Those eyes were drilling into hers. They looked sickly and feverish, and one was far larger than the other. They seemed to shine in the darkness.

She couldn't look away.

"Oh, come now," the thing said. Its voice was still full of that oily smugness, and it was walking towards her with a lurching, uneven gait, its body coiling and uncoiling unnaturally with each step. "I am fully aware that my looks can be rather startling-" it bared its teeth at her in a motion that just barely met the requirements for being called a grin "-but, believe me, if I were going to do anything really nasty to you, it would have started already."

Finally, Tailspin managed to force her legs into motion. She still couldn't tear her gaze away from the thing's eyes, but she did succeed in taking a few shaky steps backward, into the hall from which she had come.

"W-" Her voice came out as a squeak. It was hard to even think of any appropriate words through the terror clouding her mind, and it was even harder to try and get her throat to respond. She tried again. "Who-"

The thing rolled its eyes. It wasn't a normal motion. Rather than simply moving in a circle in their sockets, both eyes flipped around entirely until they were pointed back into its head, then kept going until they had come full circle. "I did just say that, didn't I?" It sounded a bit exasperated now, but still cruelly, sarcastically amused. "I'm afraid you might have some sort of problem up here."

There was the sensation of the world twisting, and Tailspin felt her stomach heave as something that she couldn't put words to happened. There was the sensation that her eyes were seeing something that her brain couldn't process. The result was that she felt as though someone had just unstopped a drain in her head and all rational thought was pouring out of it.

The thing was gone, leaving only empty space behind. But there was something else, now - a new feeling entirely. She felt a sort of pressure inside her left ear, and there was the distinct, impossible sensation that something far too large for her ear canal had somehow managed to get inside it without in any way actually stretching it. She froze.

"Well, I must admit, I'm at a loss." Its voice was too close now, far too close, and seemed to echo around the inside of her skull. "Everything in here appears to be in working order. There really is no rational explanation for you not having heard me."

When the thing somehow pulled itself free of her ear, still at its full size but still somehow, impossibly, managing to pull itself out without ripping a hole in her head, she felt simultaneously as though she wanted to scream and vomit. She couldn't manage either. Her body wasn't capable of that much movement. Absolute, abject fear had frozen her muscles more completely than any ice. All she could do was whimper.

"Nothing for it, I suppose," the creature said in an airy, conversational tone. It was walking in circles around her now, twirling its clawed hand lazily through the air. "I'll just have to try again. I am Discord. I am Lord of Chaos, King of Madness, and Chiefest and Greatest of Calamities." It paused. "Or was it the other way around? Ah, no matter." It gave a dry chuckle. "If you prefer, you can call me Dizzy. Because we're friends."

It elbowed Tailspin in the side with its furred arm, and she staggered. The shock of its touch seemed to jar her frozen brain into action again, and she shook her head quickly, trying to clear it. The terror was still there, and still overriding most logical thought processes, but she could fight it now.

...Sort of. A bit.

"F-friends?" She could still barely force the words out. Her jaw didn't want to move. "I don't-"

"You d-d-don't...?" Discord was facing away from her as he spoke, but again, his body contorted freakishly until he was bent over backwards so far that he could grin at the pegasus, upside-down. "Don't what? Understand? You mean Spike never told you about me? Oh, I'm hurt. I truly am. Of all the things that could happen, this is the worst-"

Again, there was that horrible sensation of the word twisting, and suddenly the chimera was lying, in a pose of overdramatized woe, on an ornate fainting couch.

"-possible thing!"

It cracked open one eye, then scowled. "Well," it grumbled, sounding suddenly peeved, "on second thought, that would probably have gone over better if he was actually here. Mocking the

dearly departed is so much more entertaining when somepony in the audience is personally offended by it."

Another twist. The fainting couch vanished. Discord was simply standing there once again, watching her with a thoughtful expression on his misshapen face.

Enough of Tailspin's mind was functioning again that she was actually able to form a coherent question. It took her a few seconds to get her vocal cords to cooperate, but eventually, she croaked, "You know Spike?"

"Oh, of course." Without any transition whatsoever, Discord was suddenly beside her. No, worse. He had one of his arms around her. The shock and revulsion of that touch almost made her miss the photo album that was suddenly being shoved in her face.

It looked like a scrapbook put together by someone's old grandmother when she had far too much time on her hooves. There were at least half a dozen photographs visible on the two open pages alone. The chimera's free hand came around to point at one of them in particular, which showed the six mares from the doorway standing in front of Discord, scowling. Each of them was wearing a gem in the same shape as their cutie mark.

"Spike and I go way back," the thing purred in her ear. Its breath was rank and hot, stinking of rotten meat. Again, she felt her stomach lurch, but she hadn't eaten much for several days. There was nothing to come up, even as more of the stench rolled over her from Discord's continued speech. "We first met when his friends all joined together and used the Elements of Harmony to blast me back into a statue for a few months."

He gave a slight sniff, and shut the scrapbook with a snap. It disappeared immediately, with yet another brief flash of... something that made Tailspin's eyeballs ache.

"Good times," Discord was saying. He had straightened up and was wiping a few tears away from his larger eye. "But that wasn't the extent of our relationship, of course. After a while, Princess Celestia got it into her adorable little head that I could be reformed. That I could learn to understand the magic of friendship, and use my powers for the benefit of others rather than my own amusement. Just another sickeningly-sweet plan in a long line of sickeningly-sweet plans."

He took a few steps away, and Tailspin took a few rapid gulps of relatively fresher air. Discord wasn't paying attention. He had wandered away, towards one of the statues on the right-hand side of the hall. It depicted an elegant-looking pegasus mare with a gentle smile and a cutie mark shaped like a trio of butterflies.

"She conscripted Fluttershy here-" Discord waved his clawed arm at the statue "-to be my therapist, so to speak. I never really did understand why she didn't choose Pinkie Pie instead.

More common ground, you know. And then she left me in Ponyville, expecting me, the immortal embodiment of chaos and disharmony, to make friends."

Tailspin took another few steps backward. So long as the thing kept talking, she was still alive. Maybe it would get so wrapped up in its monologue that she could make a break for it. She gulped, then squeaked, "I take it that didn't work."

"Hah!" Discord laughed for a moment, then turned to grin at her again. "Well, that would have been the logical conclusion to the matter," he said. "But I decided a long time ago that there is no fun to be had in being logical about things like this. No, no, it worked. If it hadn't..."

He paused for a moment, lifting his gaze to the ceiling and muttering to himself. "Let's see," he said. One arm came up as he began to count off on his fingers. "Your scout would never have seen the castle in the Tangle, Spike would still be asleep, your coltfriend would never have found that handy little magic branch, you and your two pony friends would have been devoured by changelings, the windigos would be inside this castle right now, you would all have died instantaneously from hitting the gates, Spike's little trinket would still be around his neck instead of yours, and you'd have starved to death back in the entrance hall."

Tailspin shut her eyes to block out the nauseating sight of Discord's hand sprouting extra fingers to count on. "So we'd have died three times over, despite the fact that we wouldn't even have survived the first one?" It wasn't a particularly insightful thing to say, but something about being close to Discord seemed to be sapping her of her ability to form coherent thoughts.

"What did I say about logic?" Discord laughed. "Really. It's so much more fun if you just let it go. But..." He gave a theatrical sigh. "I know it's hard for you ponies to really get to grips with insanity. Poor souls." There was a pause. "Except Pinkie Pie, of course. Though you are disappointingly unlike her. Not a single party cannon to be found."

The pegasus opened her eyes again, cautiously, unsure of what she might see. To her relief, Discord still remained in a somewhat comprehensible position. He was perched on the head of one of the other statues, the one showing a frizzy-maned earth pony with the balloon cutie mark. Where he had conjured the glass of iced tea from, she had no idea, but so long as he wasn't rummaging around inside her head again, or altering his body in impossible ways, she could... well, "handle it" was the wrong phrase. "Stomach it" was better.

"All right," she said, trying to force her heart to stop beating so fast. "So you're... reformed."

"Indubitably." The chimeric monstrosity drained the glass in one titanic slurp, then tossed the glass away over a shoulder. There was no sound of impact. It then gave her what was apparently meant to be a cherubic smile, but only succeeded in exposing its teeth once more.

She shuddered. "And you've been helping us."

"Incontrovertibly."

Tailspin narrowed her eyes. "Why? What are you? Why should I trust you?"

Discord sat up straight and gave an awkward salute. "In reverse order, ma'am," he barked, in a sudden parody of a military tone, "you shouldn't, I refer you to my previous answers on the subject, and because, aside from being a reformed villain, things were getting unbearably boring around here."

"Boring?" Tailspin gave him a sidelong look. She couldn't stop herself from edging away a bit further.

Suddenly, Discord's mismatched hands had gripped her around her barrel, and she was being lifted into the air. How the thing had gotten behind her so quickly, she didn't know. She just knew that it was touching her again, and the sensation made her skin crawl. She fought to suppress a scream.

"Yes, yes, yes," babbled Discord. He tugged her further up, into the air above the statues, and then squeezed her hard, as if she were a stuffed doll. "Boring beyond belief, and not just because I've been stuck in this dank throne room for more centuries than I care to remember. I swear, it's almost as bad as being a statue. I mean..."

Without warning, he released her, and this time Tailspin couldn't suppress the shriek as she began to plummet back towards the ground. She tried to spread her wings, but she was in the wrong position entirely for arresting a fall, and even if she weren't, her body was still weak. She wasn't certain that she would be able to fly under ideal conditions, let alone this.

Then she felt her hooves impact something familiar. She blinked, looked down, and blinked again, certain that she must be seeing things.

There was a cloud hovering beneath her, just a few yards above the floor. It wasn't a normal cloud, either. It appeared to be made out of cotton candy. But it supported her weight, at least.

Discord, once again, didn't seem to be paying her any attention. He was doing the backstroke through the air, eyes closed, and rambling to the world in general. Watching him made Tailspin's eyes water again. She had the very distinct feeling that the world was not meant to do the things that Discord made it do.

"...can say what you like about Celestia, but at least things were interesting when she was in charge," he said casually, not even looking towards her. "Oh, she was far too stuffy for my own good, but there is something to be said for a functional monarchy. Having a country that ran smoothly always made the little muck-ups that much sweeter. Absence, as they say." He

opened his eyes, frowning, and finished, in a rather more serious tone, "But then she had to go and die."

"I thought alicorns were immortal," Tailspin said. She shifted her hooves slightly on the surface of the cloud, trying to find a stable surface. The candyfloss was starting to melt and stick to her coat.

Another twist, another moment's feeling that reality was being put through the wringer, and Discord was back on the ground. This time, he was wearing... something. It was an odd ensemble in dark purple, nothing really coherent. He was also holding an equine skull in one hand, and appeared to be speaking to it rather than to Tailspin.

"Oh, they are," he said, his voice regaining its usual tone of smug self-satisfaction. "When it comes to time, at least. They can still be killed. They're like dragons. That's why the world isn't overrun with scaly fire-breathers, you know. They tend to slaughter one another over their hoards. Only a few of them live to be as old as little Spikey-Wikey out there. But I digress."

He crushed the skull between his talons with a wet snapping sound that made Tailspin feel like she was coming close to vomiting again, then sighed. "She was killed by her own little sister," he said. "Sibling squabbles always were such a painful thing to witness. And then poor Twilight had to step in and finish the job on Luna. Of course..."

The purple clothing vanished, and Discord was hovering in the air beside her cotton candy perch, grinning like a lunatic again. "For all her knowledge and talent, Twilight never was the most well-balanced of ponies," he said, in a conspiratorial whisper. "She never did fully recover from that. I tried to comfort her, of course, especially after what happened to Cadence. I was the only friend she had in the world, with Spike asleep."

Tailspin felt a sudden surge of pity towards Twilight Sparkle, which she fought desperately to keep from showing in her expression. Whether or not Discord noticed anything, he kept talking regardless. "Eventually, she got fed up with me and locked me away in here. Can you imagine? Just for trying to educate her on some of the finer points of friendship." He gave an offended huff. "And after that, things went downhill fast, just like I told her they would. And it's all come down to this mess you call a life."

He spun one claw through the air, and Tailspin's eyes widened as a map of the world, constructed, so far as she could tell, entirely from various pieces of pastry, manifested itself in front of him. It was barely a foot across, but exquisitely detailed all the same.

"You ponies are all just living out your miserable, regimented little lives behind the wall," Discord said, sounding completely exasperated now. "And Chrysalis was content to keep her subjects fed with the occasional raid rather than risk a full-on assault. Oh, there's been the occasional stray monster wandering into the settlements, and, of course, there's the annual visit from our

friend in space, but nothing really interesting has happened in centuries, especially with Cadence just cooped up and waiting to die. So I decided to roll the dice and see if I couldn't shake things up a bit."

He reached out and delicately plucked away a few strands of licorice that denoted the location of the Tangle. Underneath was a large purple gumbdrop.

"Dear old Spike," he said affectionately, giving the gumbdrop a small pat. The licorice disappeared into his toothy maw with a snap of colliding teeth. "We never saw eye-to-eye, the two of us, but he did always have a habit of surprising people. And, right now, I think this world is due for a surprise. It took a while to worm a hole into the spell Princess Priss put on my little jail cell, and even longer to gather enough strength to reach out and try to do something with it, but eventually, I managed it."

He spread his arms wide and beamed at her. "And so here we are!"

Tailspin gave him a blank stare for a few seconds. Then she sighed. "All right," she said. "Fine. Let's say that I believe you. You're the one who's been helping us out this whole time. You still haven't told me why. What's your plan?"

"Why, to help, of course!" Discord snapped his fingers, and the candy replica of the world vanished. "Whether or not you believe it, I did actually learn something about friendship from my time in Ponyville, and even someone like myself can have an altruistic urge every once in a while."

Tailspin's expression didn't change.

He rolled his eyes again. "Oh, fine," he said. "I admit that a teeny-tiny part of it might also be that I'm a bit miffed at Miss Sparkle for locking me up in here."

"Then how," the pegasus said slowly, "does helping us get back at her for that?"

Discord's face broke into another impossibly wide, predatory grin. "Oh, my dear, sweet filly," he purred, "haven't you figured it out yet? Twilight Sparkle is the Mare in the Moon."

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// 21: The Lesson// Story: What Bound Them// by Headless//-----//

Spike felt as though someone had beaten his entire body with a sledgehammer.

He had experienced bits and pieces of this sensation before. Dragons were tough things, but accidents happened. Injuries tended to pile up even when he wasn't helping his friends save the world. Once, Scootaloo had landed directly on him, scooter and all, while attempting a new

stunt. The result had been several shattered scales and a broken ridge. Another time, he had been assisting the Apples in refurbishing their barn, and one of the supports had given way at the wrong moment. He had lost a few teeth from that, and his right hand had been broken.

This felt like someone had taken all of his past experiences with pain, rolled them up into one white-hot iron bar, and then gone to town on him with it. Even the festering, acidic bubbling sensation of his wounds from Chrysalis was back.

His left wing was trapped underneath him, which was uncomfortable, and he could tell that the skin on it was ripped, which was painful. He considered rolling over and freeing it, but that would involve moving his other wing. He decided against it. Even with his eyes shut, he could tell that it was pointing in entirely the wrong direction, and even the thought of attempting to move it made him shudder.

He settled for opening his eyes.

Only one of them really responded. His left eye felt as though it was swollen shut. He squinted in the sudden flare of light and let out a rumbling groan.

The light was too bright, and he was still too disoriented, for him to really take in his surroundings. He could smell smoke, and the light stabbing into his pupil had a flickering, orange quality, which meant somepony had lit a fire. There were also a couple voices whispering back and forth, though he couldn't quite place where he knew them from just yet.

When he groaned, the voices suddenly became quiet, and he heard hoofsteps approaching. After a moment, Compass Rose's face swam into view. The unicorn, thankfully, looked as though she hadn't been badly injured by the crash. She was limping, and obviously bruised, but nothing worse.

"Spike?" she asked, radiating concern. "Are you all right?"

The dragon gave this due consideration. Then he coughed, dislodging a few fractured teeth, and said, "No." His voice was a low, powerful, almost tectonic sound. He was obviously still in his larger state.

Compass' eyes widened. "Your mouth-"

Spike managed to shake his head, and immediately regretted it. His neck creaked audibly with the motion. "Not a big deal," he croaked. "Dragons... lose teeth all the time. They'll grow back."

He caught sight of Pith Helmet. The earth pony was seated on the far side of the fire with one leg stretched out at an awkward angle. He gave Spike a concerned look, but didn't say anything. Compass obviously had the situation in hand.

"What about your - your wings?" the unicorn was saying. She was looking away, towards the rest of his body, and Spike knew that the flinch on her features was on his behalf.

He almost turned to try and look at them, but caught himself at the last moment. Movement was a bad idea at the current time. Besides, he could feel the damage. He settled for snorting and saying, "Those don't."

"Well, that is wonderful," said a new voice. This one dripped with malicious amusement. "That leaves Team Friendship as, let's see, a unicorn who can't use magic, an earth pony who can't walk, a pegasus on magical life support, a dragon who can't fly, and one of the top four most despised entities in Equestrian history." There was a cackle. "Truly, a force to make the assembled armies of evil and generalized nastiness quake in their boots."

Spike shut his eyes and let out another groan. Of course it would be him, he thought. As if things couldn't get any worse. He heard Compass Rose gasp and take a few steps away from the source of the sound.

"Oh, come now, Spike," said Discord brightly. "Is that any way to greet an old friend? After so long, too. I would have thought Rarity would rub off on you after a while. She was always an excellent hostess."

It took the dragon a moment to gather the willpower to open his eyes again. When he did, he wished he hadn't. Discord always hurt to look at when he was doing... whatever he was doing that made reality bend like that.

The chimera was standing in what appeared to be a gondola surrounded by a tiny lake of milk chocolate. Both the boat and the lake were suspended several yards above the ground, laughing in the face of gravity, and Discord was perched in the back, poling his way along with a length of wood that reached all the way down to the stone floor.

Tailspin was standing in the front of the boat, wearing a very familiar expression. It was the same expression everyone wore once they had been around Discord for any length of time, a sort of mix of absolute terror and near-terminal annoyance. She was staring fixedly ahead, as if attempting to ignore the maniac. Spike noticed that she was standing in an odd position, but he couldn't make out her hooves from this angle. What he could see was that she was wearing Rarity's necklace.

"Spike?" Compass hissed. She was attempting to hide behind one of his outstretched arms. "What is that?"

Before Spike could answer, Discord gave a theatrical sigh. "You see," he said, apparently addressing Tailspin, "this is the point where I should be making my fainting couch joke. He would get it. But nooooo, I had to go and spoil my own fun."

"That's Discord," Spike grumbled. "I was hoping we wouldn't find him."

"Why, Spike, you wound me!" Discord brought his little flying boat over to hover in the air above their fire, then reached down and removed something from its floor. There was a brief gurgling sound, and Spike realized that the noise was a plug being removed. The little chocolate lake disappeared upward, through the tiny hole and into the gondola, and the boat began to sink towards the ground.

It touched down with a clunk of wood against stone, and Discord stepped out, leaving Tailspin behind, trapped in what was effectively a tub full of chocolate, with her hooves affixed to something that appeared to be a mass of melted cotton candy. Tailspin just stared straight ahead, jaw set. There was a muscle jumping over one of her eyes.

"And here I thought you'd be happy to see me, after all I've done to help you," said Discord, strolling over towards the fire and waving one claw expansively. "I mean, if it weren't for me, you wouldn't be safe and sound here inside the castle."

Spike's wings twinged. "Yes," he growled. "We're so grateful. What do you want, Discord?"

"Didn't I just say?" There was another stab of uncomfortableness from Spike's eyes as Discord rearranged reality around him once more, leaving him sprawled on a lounge chair beside the fire, wrapped in a bath robe and holding a large glass of something that was, presumably, alcoholic. The effect was slightly spoiled by the crazy straw in it. "I'm here as part of Team Friendship."

"He's apparently been helping us this whole time," said Tailspin, her voice slightly strained. "Getting Pith the branch, getting me the necklace, making it so that we survived that crash."

"Thank you, Tailspin," said Discord magnanimously. He gave a hefty slurp on his crazy straw and turned a look of smug self-satisfaction on Spike. "You see? If the Element of Honesty says it, then you know it must be true."

"Are you ever," said Tailspin through gritted teeth, "going to get me off of this thing?" The cotton candy pile that she was stuck to gave a wet squelch and sank slightly into the lake of milk.

"Oh, fine." Discord gave a sigh and snapped his clawed fingers. There was another twist, and the gondola vanished, along with the cotton candy. This left an extremely damp, sticky-looking, and livid Tailspin standing in the middle of an expanding puddle of chocolate milk.

"I don't believe I heard a thank you," Discord called over his shoulder as he stirred his drink with the straw.

"That's because I didn't say it." Tailspin's voice was level and even. If it weren't for the expression on her face, she would have seemed perfectly calm.

Discord gave a huff. "Well, fine," he says. "Be that way. Pinkie Pie always found my chocolate gondola rides highly enjoyable, but I suppose even Laughter changes over the years."

"What are you talking about?" It was Pith's voice. The stallion was still sprawled awkwardly on the stone floor a few feet away from Discord, and was eyeing him warily.

"The Elements of Harmony, of course." Discord drained the rest of his glass, which immediately refilled itself from nowhere, and gave Pith what he obviously believed was a winning smile. It just turned his face into a forest of knife-like teeth. "Your marefriend over there is the bearer of Laughter and Honesty, in case you hadn't figured it out yet. Not the combination I would have chosen - Honesty always finds a way to turn even the most entertaining ponies stuffy - but there you are. The ability to face up to things as they really are, warts and all-" another smile "-and the ability to find joy in them anyway. A perfect combination, if you can call such a subdued version of Laughter 'perfect'. Like peanut butter and..." He stopped, looking thoughtful. "Bananas, I think it was. Yes. Peanut butter and bananas."

Spike sighed. Having Discord around for any length of time was like a cheese grater being scraped across his frontal lobe. He would almost have preferred the windigos. They would have been less painful.

"This is Discord," he said, glancing over to Pith. Compass was still hiding behind his arm, and he didn't have the energy to look at her. "He's... the spirit of disharmony."

"Ah-ah!" Discord raised a claw. "Reformed spirit of disharmony, thank you very much. Tia even gave me a sticker as a reward for good behavior, once. It was a little golden sun with a happy face. I seem to have misplaced it."

"Right." Spike sighed and shut his eyes again. Just watching Discord was tiring enough. "He's... well, he's aggravating, but he's sort of on our side, I'm guessing, because if he wasn't, reality would be coming apart at the seams right now."

"Yes," grunted Tailspin. She was attempting to scrape the cotton candy off of one of her legs, but was only succeeding in getting it stuck to the other legs involved in the process. "He seems like he really wants to help, and he says he knows where the Elements of Harmony are." She gave a slight cough. "Among other things."

"That's what I was afraid of," Spike muttered, still not opening his eyes. "Whenever Discord wants to help, things tend to get a lot worse very fast."

"I assure you, I have the best intentions." Discord reclined into his seat and took another long slurp from his drink. "Perhaps you can fault me on execution - you all did turn up on my doorstep a little less intact than I would like - but I am doing my best."

Spike forced himself to open his eyes again, ignoring the continued pains from the rest of his body. "Your 'help' hasn't gone so far as to actually stop any of these horrible things from happening. What about Pith's leg, or Compass' horn? Did your 'good intentions' not stretch that far?"

"Well," huffed Discord, sitting up a little straighter, "ex-cuse me for not being quite so omnipotent as I once was. It's hardly my fault that I don't have the magical reserves that I used to. Your precious Twilight Sparkle took care of that."

Spike's eyes narrowed. "So Twilight took your powers away from you," he growled. "Princess Celestia told her never to do that unless you stepped over the line. Why should I believe that you want to help us when you've just admitted that you went back to your old ways badly enough that Twilight had to stop you?"

"Oh, please." Discord scoffed and rolled his eyes. "Tia was a stuffy old pony, but I actually did think of her as a friend, you know. Just like I thought the same of Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie, even if the rest of you never trusted me." He folded his mismatched arms over his chest and scowled. "It is hardly my fault that Twilight never even attempted to bond with me the same way they did. Nor is it my fault that she took away my powers for no good reason."

"Friends?" Spike could feel the fire rising in his gut again, and the wounds from Queen Chrysalis' attack were stinging violently. "You didn't even come to their funerals, you lying-"

"Well, of course I didn't!" the creature interrupted. "Can you imagine the scene if I had tried? I can. And, while it would have been absolutely hilarious, I decided that I would rather pay my respects privately, after the ceremony, to avoid causing a scene and tarnishing the memories of the first two ponies who ever really treated me as a friend rather than something to be tolerated." He lifted his head up haughtily and snorted, looking scandalized. "Even I can learn a bit of restraint, you know."

Spike was about to open his mouth to roar at the misshapen thing when Tailspin stepped in. "Spike," she said flatly, "you're getting off-track. And..." She grimaced. "As much as it might hurt you to hear it, I think Discord is telling the truth. Twilight took away his powers for no good reason, because she was starting to... well, crack."

The dragon brought his one good eye around to stare at her. "What," he said slowly, "are you talking about?"

Tailspin was sitting back on her haunches with her forelegs held out in front of her. She had managed to get most of the cotton candy off now, but she was still damp. Even with her coat matted and sticky, however, she looked far better than she had the last time she had been tied to his back for transport.

"I mean," she said, obviously picking her words carefully, "that Twilight was alone for a long time after a series of events that really, really hurt her. Celestia and Luna died, Spike. You read about it in that journal. That left her alone with Discord when she needed a real friend to help her." She glanced at the chimera, grimaced, and forced herself to add, "No offense."

"None taken," said Discord airily. "As I said, it's hardly my fault if Princess Sparkle never had any interest in becoming friends with me. I tried regardless, because nopony else was going to, and I could see where all of this was going to end. Eventually, she got fed up with me, shoved me into the throne room and locked me up, just for trying to help."

"But-" Spike looked back and forth between the two of them. There seemed to be a great, yawning pit opening up in his stomach. "But then why didn't she wake me?" It was almost a wail.

"Well, I would have thought that was obvious." Discord shrugged. "I mean, really. Her baby brother, who is also, in a manner of speaking, her son, loses his wife and all his friends, and spends years wallowing in depression because everypony he knew and loved growing up is gone. He decides that he needs some time away from it all, and leaves her with the means to bring him out of his happy dream-time."

"So?" Spike stared at him.

"Do I really have to spell it out for you?" Discord heaved a great sigh, then snapped his fingers again.

Immediately, there was the sound of hoofsteps from the staircase. For a moment, Spike's heart leapt; a tall, elegant purple alicorn with a mane filled with starlight was walking down the steps. Then, as quickly as it had come, the brief glimmer of hope vanished. The image of Twilight was translucent, and there was another, equally-obvious fake Discord floating along behind it.

"I said no, Discord," snapped the simulacrum. Its voice was hollow, and seemed to echo around the entrance hall. "I will not bring him back to this. It was bad enough to lose the others. I won't pull him out of his dreams just to make him support me."

"But he did say..." began the not-Discord, raising one clawed hand. Part of Spike registered that the real Discord was mouthing along with the words, and had raised one hand to move his fingers in an imitation of talking.

"He said for me to call on him if I needed him," snapped Twilight. "But that would mean interrupting his rest and bringing back all those painful memories just to add even more weight to his shoulders. I will not put Spike through that. I will not."

"So what's your plan, then?" said Discord's double, in a purely conversational tone. "Just sit up there in that tower, all alone, and pretend that you can carry the whole world on your shoulders? You can't, you know. It's much too heavy. Weighs tons."

"Spike told me to wake him if I needed him," Twilight said. "But I will not do that to him. So I will become somepony who won't need him. Not even for this."

The images reached the base of the stairs, where Twilight's stopped, wings spread, breathing hard. Spike saw that she had obviously been crying; her eyes were puffy and red-rimmed, and she shook slightly as she stood.

The Discord copy lowered itself to the ground and folded its arms, frowning. For once in his life, Discord actually looked quite serious, and there was no hint of his usual unctuousness in his voice when he said, "I did try to tell Tia about this, you know."

Twilight glared at him. "About what?"

"About the lesson. My lesson. About friendship." Discord gave her a long, considering look. "I told her you would need to hear it before long, but she wouldn't let me. She said I was wrong." He gave a heavy, genuinely regretful sigh. "You know, I respected Tia. But she was wrong about a lot of things, and this is one of them. But it's probably too late for it to make any difference now."

The alicorn snorted and tossed her head, looking disdainful. "You have a lesson to teach me about friendship?"

Discord merely shrugged. "Well, yes. Tia couldn't tell you, because she never learned it herself. None of you ever could, because you wouldn't let yourselves think about it. But it's still true, and it's still important."

Twilight gave him a sarcastic smile. It was a sharp little smile, like the edge of a knife blade. "Very well, then, Discord," she said calmly. "Tell me. What is this lesson?"

Discord drew himself up. For a moment, he had the look of a pony who was about to do something that he knew would end badly.

He took a deep breath and said, "That it ends."

The forced smile on Twilight's face didn't drain. It crumbled, and it seemed to take the rest of her with it. Spike felt the yawning void in his stomach open up wider, threatening to swallow him whole, as he watched his oldest friend sink to her knees, sobbing brokenly.

For a few long seconds, there was nothing but the sound of Twilight's weeping and the crackling of the fire. Then the alicorn shut her eyes and took a few deep, steadying breaths, rising slowly to her hooves once again.

"You-" she panted, eyes still closed. "You would dare say that to me, now?"

Discord grimaced, but remained unmoving, still as a statue. He didn't even answer. He just watched Twilight as she turned towards him again.

When she opened her eyes, there was a steely glint in them that there hadn't been before. "How dare you," she spat. "How dare you! I am done putting up with your insults and tricks, Discord! I let you stay in this castle because Princess Celestia asked me to tolerate you, and all you have ever done to repay her hospitality is cause havoc and insult everything that she ever stood for. And now that she's dead, now that she died defending me, you insult everything she ever taught me, and act as though you're doing me a favor."

She stamped one hoof, and her horn began to shine with violet light. "No," she hissed. "No more. Goodbye, Discord. I am done with you."

There was a flare of brilliant luminescence that filled the entire hall. When it faded, the images were gone, leaving Spike staring at an empty expanse of stone and feeling as though none of the physical pain he was experiencing could possibly be worse than the stabbing agony in his mind.

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// 22: What Broke Them// Story: What Bound Them// by Headless//-----//

No one spoke for what felt like an eternity after that. No one even moved.

Then, slowly, Compass became aware of a low grating sound, like two pieces of jagged metal being scraped together. The mass of scales that she had been half-hiding behind began to move. Spike was attempting to haul himself to his feet.

It wasn't a simple thing. One of his wings was still pinned beneath his torso, and the other shifted in a way that had to be excruciating. She couldn't tell the extent of his injuries - his scales

were too thick for that - but she knew that there had to be at least a few broken bones. He tried to stand anyway.

"Spike, no," she said, reaching out to set one hoof against his arm. "Don't. You'll just hurt yourself."

The dragon ignored her. Its one good eye was fixed on Discord, and there was a smoldering, volcanic light in it that told her he wasn't listening.

"Why?" His voice was a molten rumble of rising anger. "Why would you say that to her?"

Discord watched as Spike struggled to right himself and frowned. "Really?" It wasn't really a question. "You don't understand? I said it because it's true. You know that better than anypony, Spikey-Wikey." There was a slight barb to the last two words, but it was followed by a heavy sigh and a snap of mismatched fingers. "Allow me."

Compass felt the space in front of her fold in upon itself for a moment, and then Spike was standing upright. It wasn't a particularly stable upright - his right foreleg was held off the stone gingerly, and the rest shook visibly with every second - but it was upright nonetheless. His wings hung useless on either side of his body. She could see that the broken one was twisted into what had to be an even more painful position now, but Spike ignored them.

He heaved himself forward awkwardly, trying to leap at Discord. He didn't even make it halfway before gravity caught him and pulled him back down to the floor, but the roar he let out while making the attempt was still enough to shake the rafters.

Discord merely sighed and snapped his fingers again, leaving Spike suspended in mid-fall. "Really?" he said again. "Is that what this has come to? Talk about shooting the messenger. Or baking them alive, as the case might be."

He slid out of his chair, which vanished behind him with a quiet pop, taking his bathrobe and glass with it. Then he folded his arms over his chest again and gave Spike an exasperated look, apparently unperturbed by the dragon's writhing and continued death glares.

"Come now, Spike," he said, sounding mildly annoyed. "If our relationship was going to come to blows, it would have done so a long time ago. And besides, it's not as though you can actually hurt me. This is why it was so important to tell her that. You ponies are all so predictable, even when you're dragons. You see something that hurts you and your first response is to try and hurt it back, no matter how valid its point. Even Fluttershy had her moments."

He turned his back and flicked his serpentine tail, and the space around Spike twisted again. When it cleared, the dragon was back to his normal size, with both of his wings tightly bandaged and bound to his back. The set looked surprisingly professional. "But I have never been one to

hold a grudge," Discord continued lightly. "Except for all those times that I did. But that's beside the point."

The field of magic around Spike dissipated, and the dragon dropped heavily to the stone floor with a grunt of pain. He lay there for a moment, panting and glaring at the back of Discord's head, then said, "Then what is your point? Why would you hurt her like that?"

"Aside from the fact that it's true, you mean?" Discord gave Spike a disapproving look over his shoulder. "Because your precious princesses never learning that lesson for themselves is the reason things are the way they are. I had hoped that Miss Faithful Student might be intelligent enough to figure out the consequences of not accepting that. If she had, this whole mess could have been avoided."

Compass saw Spike trying to force himself upright again and moved forward to set her hoof on his shoulder. "Don't," she said quietly. "Lie still. You're hurt."

The dragon twisted his head around sharply to look at her, and she flinched involuntarily. He was still glaring, and the raw anger in his eye was enough to make her blood run cold. But she didn't look away, and, slowly, Spike's expression began to soften.

He took a few deep breaths, then looked back to Discord. "Fine," he said. "Fine. You say that your lesson was important. Why? How was hurting her like that supposed to help her? What happened while you were locked up in there? Where is Twilight?"

"Oh, so you're willing to listen now." Discord spun on one leg and spread his arms wide, grinning again. "Wonderful. I had so hoped that you would see unreason eventually. But the easiest way to get you to understand is to show you."

There was another flare of pain from Compass' horn as Discord warped causality around himself once again. When it faded, he was standing in front of a large white canvas that was suspended in midair. A few feet away was a small double-reel film projector.

Discord flicked it on with one claw. "Now, I wasn't there for quite a bit of this," he said, waving his stubby arm, "but what sort of lord of chaos would I be if I let something like the space-time continuum get in my way?"

"Just get on with it, Discord," growled Spike.

"Now, now, hold your small horses," said the chimera, waving a finger. "It has to warm up first. It's an antique, you know. Peeping through time doesn't come quickly."

As he said it, a flickering, unsteady beam of light began to shine from the projector and onto the makeshift screen. Discord gave a satisfied "ah" and, quite suddenly, was sitting in a lounge chair

with a bucket of popcorn in his claws. "Here we are," he said brightly. "This is one of my favorites."

And the film began to play.

A unicorn with a coat so deeply blue that it was almost purple sat atop a grassy hill. Overhead, the stars shone brightly, reflected in her eyes.

For a long time, she simply watched them, looking up at the moon. Then there was the soft sound of approaching hoofsteps on the grass, and she looked around.

"Luna." The white alicorn approaching her gave a soft, somewhat hesitant smile. "I was hoping I would find you here."

Luna said nothing. She simply watched in silence. After a while, the alicorn sighed and lowered herself onto the ground beside her.

"I wanted to talk to you," she said. Neither of them made eye contact. Instead, they both turned their gazes upward, to the stars. "About my decision."

The unicorn frowned. "I do not want any more apologies, Celestia. You have said enough of them already. None of them change the fact that you did this to yourself without even speaking to me beforehand."

Celestia's wings spread. They didn't go far; the motion seemed to be automatic rather than a conscious effort on her part. She still didn't lower her eyes from the sky. "I know," she said. "I'm not here to apologize again. I already told you why I chose this. Why it's necessary. I came to ask you something."

Luna sighed quietly, then, finally, turned to look at her sister. Celestia was taller now, more graceful, and her mane flowed with a magic all its own. She hardly resembled the unicorn that Luna had grown up loving.

"What?"

Celestia frowned, and, with a soft rustle of feathers, settled her wings in against her sides once again. "I wanted to ask if you would join me."

Luna stared.

The alicorn plunged on quickly, as if she were afraid that her younger sister would cut her off and storm away if she didn't get it all out at once. "I found a way to cast the transformation spell on you," she said. "You know how important this is. If nopony stops him, things will only get worse. And all the damage he's done already... we can fix it, Luna. We can do something that really matters. Together."

She looked away again and shook her head. "I don't want to do it alone," she finished quietly. "Not without my sister."

A moment later, Luna's forelegs were around her neck, and the unicorn was sobbing against her coat. Celestia blinked, looking astonished, then lifted her free leg to return the hug.

"I-I thought you want to leave me," Luna whispered through her tears. "When you d-didn't tell me what you were planning..."

"I never wanted to leave you," Celestia answered softly. "Never." She spread her wings and folded them around her sister, pulling her in close. "I didn't know if I would ever be able to find a way to cast the spell on somepony else. If I had told you that, you would have asked me to stop." She shut her eyes. "And I would have said yes. I love you, little sister."

"Then why?" Luna pulled her head back and frowned up at her sister, eyes still swimming with tears. "Why did you do it if you thought you would have to leave me?"

Celestia shut her eyes again. "Because the world needs somepony to protect it," she said. "And even if it hurts me to do it, even if it means leaving you behind, I cannot ignore that."

For a while, the two of them sat in silence. Then Luna nodded, slowly.

"I understand," she said. "I was just frightened that my sister had forgotten that I need her as much as everypony else does."

Celestia smiled. "Never. You are my sister, Luna. I will never stop loving you."

At that, the unicorn broke into an uncontrollable, childlike grin. "And I love you, sister," she said. "So long as you need me, I will be there."

The two of them looked back up to the night sky. "Together," Luna murmured, "we will do something that really matters."

Now it was day, and a light-blue unicorn with a white mane was seated on a small bench. Around her, exquisitely-kept topiary bushes in the shapes of various animals mingled with

ornate birdhouses and marble fountains. In the distance, she could make out the glittering spires of Castle Canterlot.

The grandeur made her nervous. She felt out of place here. Her mane was frizzy and uncooperative nowadays, and her once-beautiful velvet cape was tattered and threadbare. She hadn't even considered wearing the hat.

"Trixie Lulamoon?" said a voice behind her.

Trixie jumped off the bench. When she turned and saw who it was that had spoken to her, she sank into a deep bow. "Y-your Highness," she stammered. "It's an honor."

Princess Luna sighed, but she was smiling, at least. She waved a hoof. "Please, stand," she said. "There is no need for such formalities. I did not call you here to speak as a princess."

Trixie picked herself up off the grass and dusted a few stray bits of dirt off of her hooves, then raised her head. She still looked nervous, but now there was curiosity in her gaze, as well. "Then why did you call me here, Your Highness?" she asked. "I'll be honest. I was expecting an extremely overdue lecture on that whole amulet thing."

Luna laughed quietly. "Well, that is, in a way, what I called you here for," she admitted. "But I have no intention of lecturing you." She stepped over to the bench that Trixie had so recently vacated, sat, and continued, "I simply want to talk, as one pony to another. And please, call me Luna."

The unicorn blinked, now looking entirely lost. "Er. If you say so, Your- Luna." She shifted uncomfortably on the spot, obviously unsure of what to say next. Eventually, she asked, "So what is it that you wanted to talk about?"

"Your dreams." Luna wasn't looking at her. The alicorn was staring off towards a particularly ornate topiary bush. It depicted a swarm of parasprites following a frizzy-maned earth pony. How the gardener had sculpted each of the dozen individual instruments into the bush, no one would ever know.

"My dreams?" Trixie blinked again. "What about them?"

Luna smiled gently again. "As Princess of the Night, it is my duty to watch over the dreams of all my subjects," she said, turning to face her visitor. "And yours have... interested me."

The magician swallowed hard, trying to keep the slight panic out of her voice as she asked, "Why?"

"Because," Luna said slowly, "they are very similar to my own."

Trixie gaped at her.

Luna just smiled again. "I know what it is like to spend every night alone," she said, her voice surprisingly gentle. "I know what it is like to be treated as somepony to be feared, tolerated due to another's mandate rather than actual friendship. And I know what it is like to live a life constantly overshadowed by another."

She stepped off the bench and took a few steps towards the unicorn. Trixie noted with some surprise that the princess seemed almost as nervous as she was.

"So I called you here to see if..." Luna frowned, took a deep breath, then finished, "If you were interested in being friends."

For a few seconds, Trixie just stared at her. Then she grinned.

"Friends? With a princess?" She nodded. "I think I'd be okay with that."

As if on cue, they both started to laugh. It was as much out of sheer embarrassment as it was of anything else, but they laughed nonetheless.

"So... 'constantly overshadowed', huh?" Trixie said, after a while. "I didn't know you felt that way about your sister."

Luna shrugged. "I love her dearly," she said, a note of sadness entering her voice. "But yes. It is true. But she is not the only pony whose life constantly overshadows my own."

The two of them set off into the gardens, walking side-by-side among the topiary bushes. Almost all of the prior awkwardness had vanished as Trixie said, "Really? Huh. I kind of thought being Princess of the Night would be a pretty nice thing."

"It is not all perfect," Luna admitted. She gave Trixie a crooked smile. "You are not the only one who sometimes feels jealous of Twilight Sparkle."

"Ha! Yeah." Trixie huffed slightly, blowing an errant strand of mane out of her eyes. "I mean, I don't plan on repeating the amulet thing any time soon, but it does suck reading all the news about her. Did you hear about last month, when she..."

Castle Canterlot was dark now. Luna stood on the balcony of her tower, looking up at the stars.

Normally, the sight of her handiwork filled her with pride. Tonight, though, the ponies in the streets below were still clearing away the remains of the funereal procession, and the memory of Spike's expression as he left for Ponyville was still fresh in her mind. She had arranged a handful of stars into a new constellation, shaped like a trio of diamonds, in memory of the mare they had buried scant hours before.

All she felt as she looked up at them was emptiness.

There was the sound of soft wing beats, and Celestia rose into view. The elder alicorn looked exhausted, both physically and emotionally. Luna knew that her sister had been fighting back tears just as hard as anyone else all throughout the ceremony.

"I can't sleep."

"I know." Luna looked back up to the stars, expression blank. "I expect that Cadence has also elected to refrain from rest for the night. She and her husband looked quite downcast when I last saw them. I expect that they will be spending the night in one another's embrace."

"Yes." Celestia lowered herself to the stone floor of the balcony, crossed her forelegs, and let out a long breath. "I don't think that anypony is going to sleep well tonight. Perhaps not for a long time."

Luna still didn't look down. Below, there were the soft sounds of Canterlot at night. A few late taxis made their way through the streets. Doors opened and shut. Occasionally there was something louder, but nothing that she hadn't heard before. Luna had stood guard over the night for centuries, and the sound of her city asleep was almost soothing to her during her vigil.

Tonight, though, it seemed wrong. The sheer normalcy of it was an affront to the enormity of what had happened. The world itself should have been in mourning.

"I do not look forward to visiting Spike's dreams," she murmured, almost to herself. "He was not ready for this."

Beside her, Celestia sighed and put her head down. "He would have lost her eventually," she said quietly. "We all knew it would happen. She was a unicorn, and he is a dragon. He'll lose all of them, eventually."

"Except Twilight," said Luna. Her voice came out a bit sharper than she had wanted it to. Celestia didn't seem to notice.

"Yes. Except Twilight."

The calmness of that voice, the pure gentleness of it, stirred something in Luna. It wasn't a pleasant something. She flinched at the familiar sensation and attempted to force the memories back down. Anger, fear, sorrow, jealousy; these were the enemy.

Worse, they were part of her.

She forced her tone to remain quiet and level as she asked, "Is that why you cast the spell on her? To spare him?"

Celestia gave her a confused look. "No. I made Twilight the way she is because we need her."

Despite herself, all Luna could think was that we should have been I.

Once again, silence reigned. Overhead, a few of the Lunar Guard flitted across the moon.

"What if we needed somepony else?" she asked, after a while.

Celestia shut her eyes. "Luna..."

"No, sister. Listen to me." The princess of the night finally tore her gaze away from the sky overhead and looked down at her elder, frowning heavily. Her eyes were brimming with tears, but her voice was steady, and she stood straight and tall. "You know of whom I speak. You know what I would ask for them. And you know why I ask it. But twice now, you have denied me."

She lifted a hoof and pointed to the diamonds in the sky. "If you do not do this," she said, "then one night, I will be forced to stand here and place her symbol in the stars. Perhaps that does not mean much to you, but I do not know if I can stomach that, sister. I have precious few friends among the ponies of Equestria, and I do not care to bury another of them as we have Rarity."

Celestia sighed again. Her eyes were still shut, her face tight and strained. Then, slowly, she stood.

"The answer is no, Luna," she said flatly. "It has been every other time you've asked, and it always will be."

"Why?" Luna hated to hear herself begging, but she couldn't stop it.

"Because," said Celestia, her voice becoming sharper as her eyes opened, "Trixie Lulamoon, for all that I believe she is a good friend to you, is not like Twilight Sparkle. She is self-centered, arrogant, manipulative, and dangerous. She has proven to be a danger to the citizens of Equestria in the past, and I do not trust her not to repeat such actions if given access to power like that."

Luna felt her muscles tense involuntarily, felt her body trying to curl in on itself like a filly attempting to escape the stern gaze of the schoolmaster. She lowered her gaze to the floor of the balcony and felt the tears slip down her cheeks.

Celestia sighed. "I'm sorry," she said. Her voice was gentler now. It cut all the deeper for it. "But we both knew the price when we set out on this path. That's why I asked you to come with me, Luna. I need someone that can stand by my side. I wanted it to be you."

There was a rustle of air as the elder alicorn stepped forward to embrace her. Luna shrank back, biting her lower lip and keeping her eyes downcast.

Celestia stood there for a moment, wings outstretched in the act of folding around her younger sister, then sighed and stepped back. "I'm sorry," she said again. "It isn't easy, I know. But... try to understand. Twilight was a special case."

There was no answer.

"I love you, Luna."

Her tears were dripping off her muzzle now, falling to the stone below. She couldn't bring herself to answer. A few seconds later, she heard the sound of wings fading into the distance, and knew she was alone once more.

In the darkness, illuminated only by the wan half-light of the stars overhead, Princess Luna raised her eyes to the diamonds she had placed in the sky and wept.

Celestia gradually became aware that there was somepony else in her bed.

Since assuming the mantle of Sun Princess, she had never found herself in need of a clock. Her innate magic told her that it was still well within Luna's time to be in charge of Equestria. That meant no pony could enter her bedroom while she rested.

She groaned. Without even rolling over or opening her eyes, she snapped, "What do you want, Discord?"

There was the sound of a page turning. Discord obviously had a book with him. That would also explain the fact that somepony had turned on her bedside table lamp. Even through her closed eyelids, she could see the yellow light that flickered from it.

"Hm?"

Oh, yes. Discord's voice. No pony else could make a single syllable so infuriating. Celestia ground her teeth together, then said, rather more loudly, "What do you want?"

"Oh, of course. My apologies. I really should have explained myself before imposing." The draconequus shifted on the mattress, and Celestia felt the blankets being tugged away slightly. He was under the covers, less than two feet away, if she wasn't mistaken. The fact that his voice came from a slightly greater elevation than her own meant that he was sitting up, too.

She waited for him to continue, but he didn't. Eventually, she sighed, opened her eyes, and glared up at him. "I thought I told you to stay out of my bedroom unless invited," she grated.

Discord was, indeed, sitting next to her. He was wearing a pink nightcap with an equally-pink fluffy pom-pom in addition to his usual expression of self-satisfaction, and was holding a book entitled *Murder On The Friendship Express*.

"What?" he said, putting on a look of mock surprise. "You mean 'come see me any time' doesn't count as an open invitation? Well." He snorted, snapped his book shut, and frowned. "You do have my deepest apologies."

Celestia groaned again and draped one foreleg over her eyes. "I am trying to sleep," she muttered. "I know you want something. What is it?"

"Other than to spend time with you? Not much." Discord reached out and patted her shoulder with his lion paw. "I thought a bit of bonding time might do us both some good. Besides, I'd rather not have your sister rooting around in my dreams just about now."

The paw was still on her shoulder. She debated telling him to remove it, but decided that she would rather not deal with the half-hour sidetrack to the conversation that was sure to result in. Instead, she asked, "Bad dreams?"

"No, not at all," Discord said brightly. "In fact, they've been quite pleasant lately. Pinkie Pie features prominently, and upon having said that, I wish that I hadn't. Rather embarrassing."

Another groan. "Please don't tell me you're saying what I think you are."

"Oh, I know, it's awful." Discord sighed. "Sometimes, though, the alliteration just doesn't come."

There it was - the familiar sensation that her brain was dribbling out of her ears. And this was supposed to be her resting period.

"Just tell me why you're here, Discord," she grumbled. "I'm not in the mood for this."

"Well, honestly, I'm surprised you haven't taken to napping at other times as well," the chimera said. "I mean, letting her watch your dreams? It doesn't feel entirely safe at the moment."

Celestia lowered her foreleg and set her glare back into place. "What are you saying?"

Discord raised both of his mismatched arms, looking far too innocent. "Oh, well, you must admit that your sister has not been particularly sociable lately. How long has it been since she did anything other than sit up in her tower and stare at the sky? I'm just not comfortable having such a socially isolated pony potentially attempting to psychoanalyze my dreams."

"Luna is under a lot of stress," said Celestia flatly. "We all are. Running Equestria is not easy, Discord."

"I never said it was," answered the monster, lowering his arms again. "But then, you have somepony to confide in. Other than myself, I mean. Who does she have?"

Celestia narrowed her eyes. "My sister has me," she snapped. "She always has me. She knows that."

"Of course. Of course." Discord nodded. "Silly of me, really, to think otherwise. After all-" he broke into a wide, wicked grin "-we all know that you two have never so much as squabbled in the past. The perfect sibling relationship."

Slowly, Celestia lifted herself up on her forelegs, her glare growing even more intense as she brought her eyes up level with his. When she spoke, all the icy, detached disdain that she had learned from centuries of politics was brought to bear in two simple syllables.

"Get out."

"As you wish, m'lady." And, with a twist of space that made her eyes water, he was gone.

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// 23: Ragnarøkk// Story: What Bound Them// by Headless//-----//

The sky above Equestria was filled with starlight. Countless pinpricks shone in the blackness like brilliant opals. They hung over Canterlot like a shroud of jewels, stitched with countless designs: here a star-tipped wand, there a spool of thread, a musical clef over the rightmost tower of the castle, a trio of diamonds just above.

Despite the implications, Discord couldn't help but pause to admire the artistry involved. Thousands upon thousands of constellations spun and danced through the night overhead. As

he watched, a new group of stars, these ones depicting a shield with wings like a bat's, winked into existence below the trio of diamonds.

And, in the center of it all, bathing all of Equestria in a milky-white glow, was the shining crescent of the moon.

He shook himself and hurried on.

The castle had been sealed, of course, but simple things like the laws of reality had never gotten in his way before. Most magic just rolled off of his hide like water off... well, water off of anything he wanted water to roll off of. The protection spell on the castle was strong, but not unbreakable, and it wasn't targeted at him anyway. He moved past it without even really thinking about it.

There were a few bodies in the entrance hall. Fewer than he had expected, all things considered. Most of them were guards. Perhaps they had managed to evacuate the non-military personnel before it was too late. Not that it really mattered; there was another spell around the city itself. No one got in or out until somepony managed to get through that - and, during a Canterlot night, the thing they were running from was as close to omnipresent as it was possible to be.

He stepped neatly over a bat-winged Lunar Guard stallion who had fallen in such a way as to block the staircase, noting with mild interest the shield-shaped cutie mark on the corpse's flank. The victim had been just another rank-and-file guardspony, if his armor was anything to go by. Not that it had made any difference in the end. The Captain of the Guard lay just as still a few yards away.

The mare he was looking for was waiting in the throne room. He knew that she was waiting because she lifted her head the moment he entered, despite the fact that he had not used the door. Or any other mundane entrance, for that matter.

Nightmare Moon's lips curled into a smile. "Discord," she said jovially. "We were wondering when you would arrive."

The chimera peeled himself off of one of the tapestries, where he had been masquerading as Fluttershy in the act of feeding a particularly insufferable-looking white rabbit. A moment later, he looked more like his usual self, but in a rather flatter state.

"Luna." He returned the grin and the pleasant tone, apparently without any sign of sarcasm. "Back to whole Royal Voice routine, I notice. Does this mean you'll need two chairs at the table now?"

The night-black alicorn just shook her head. She didn't make any movement towards stepping out of the throne she currently occupied. It had been Celestia's throne. Her own, rather smaller, dedicated seat was nothing but a heap of rubble and ashes now.

"We have re-adopted our speech patterns in recognition of the weight of today's events, Discord," she said. She was still smiling. "Tonight is a night of mourning for all of Equestria, after all. We must set an example to our subjects. Formality must be observed."

He recognized that expression. The smile was still present, yes, but there was nothing behind it.

He still managed to hold her gaze without any slip in his own expression, of course, and he kept his bright tone as he asked, "So how far are you planning on taking this, then?"

She spread her wings. The darkness seemed to deepen around her.

"All the way, Discord. We are finishing this tonight. We have been delayed for over a millenium. We will wait no longer."

He pursed his lips and tapped on his chin with one finger, looking thoughtful. "I did notice that the moon looked a bit larger than it usually does," he said, with the air of one trying to remember a trivial detail from a conversation by the water cooler that morning. He cocked an eyebrow towards her. "Been putting on a bit of weight lately?"

She snorted and folded her wings again. Around them, at the edges of vision, the shadows seemed to come alive. Strange, unnatural shapes danced in the dark.

"We do not care to be mocked during the moment of our triumph," she said, her voice losing its friendliness. In its place came the same icy, dangerous hollowness of her smile. "You would do well to realize our power."

"Mock? Me? Never." Discord huffed and turned away, his face a perfect mask of injured innocence. "I was asking entirely out of concern for your health. I have noticed some changes in you lately, you know. You don't eat with the rest of the nobility, you don't speak to anyone, you've turned ominously black and gained unfathomable power... It's enough to make me wonder if you might be catching something."

Now she sneered at him, openly disdainful. "More jokes, worm? Is this what you look like when accepting your fate, or is this just your addled mind producing meaningless babble out of sheer terror?" Her eyes flashed. "Or perhaps you still think that you can face me."

Discord laughed. "Fate? Now you're the one trying to provoke me, Princess." He wagged one stubby finger at her. "I am chaos incarnate. Fate looks at me and gets all cross-eyed." A pause. "Just like everypony else, really."

Luna's eyes narrowed. "Then you do think that you can face us. We had not taken you for a fool."

Another laugh, and this one was genuine. It went on for a long time, and had him doubled over and clutching at his knees for support by the time it was through. Eventually, he straightened up and wiped a few tears out of his eyes before breaking into a wide grin.

"Oh, please," he said. "Luna. I am nothing if not a fool."

Nightmare Moon drew herself up and glared at him down the length of her muzzle. Her horn began to swirl with arcane power. It was like watching the opposite of a light switching on. She seemed to draw in light rather than emit it - and any that touched her was utterly consumed.

"Then try," she snarled. "We have tolerated your existence this long because you have not taken action against us, but make no mistake - you are strong, but we are your equal. And here-" she spread her wings still further, and the throne room sank into near-complete blackness "-we are in our element."

Discord sighed. "I would," he said, a wistful note entering his voice. "I really, really would. But, you see, I've never been much of a fan of violence. Chaos, yes. Killing, no. Even I have standards, you see. Besides, this seems like more of a family matter."

He snapped his fingers, and the stone of the castle groaned as it opened up above him, exposing a tunnel to the night sky. "And anyway, you've made a complete mess of things up there," he added. "Moons flying every which way. Somepony could get hurt."

She stared. Slowly, the magic swirling around her horn began to fade.

Another snap, and suddenly he was wearing the black apron of a housemaid, complete with a feather duster clutched in his lion's paw. "Tia will throw a fit if this mess is still around when she gets back," he said brightly. "I suppose I shall have to take it upon myself to clean up after you. Do try not to make any more messes about the castle whilst I am away!" He gave her a cheery wave. "Ta-ta!"

There was the sensation of space folding in on itself, and he vanished. The hole that he had left in the ceiling began to close as Nightmare Moon stared up at it.

After a while, she snorted and lowered her gaze.

The night blanketed Equestria, and she was the night. With her expanded senses, she reached out and into the city. There were ponies at every gate out of Canterlot, trying to fight their way past her spell. She could see the panicked flares of their minds as clearly as any light. Casually,

as if the action was no more important to her than swatting an insect, she began to snuff them out.

In the skies above Equestria, Discord soared upward, as fast as thought. Ahead of him, the shining crescent of the moon grew larger by the moment.

"Dizzy, you can't just leave them."

He grit his teeth. No matter how often he told himself that it was just his own fractured mind producing it, Fluttershy's voice always cut through him like a knife. He kept his eyes focused directly ahead, on the approaching moon. He didn't dare look to the side. He knew that he would see her there if he did, and he couldn't afford the distraction.

For once in his eternal existence, every drop of Discord's limited reserves of concentration was focused on the task at hand.

"Ponies are dying. You can save them. Didn't you learn anything from me?"

Despite himself, fighting the words every step of the way, he hissed, "Of course I did."

"Then why are you leaving them? Why are you leaving her? She needs you as much as they do. You can still help her."

"No pony can help her." The moon filled almost a full quarter of his vision now. He could make out its impossible bulk against the blackness of the space beyond. The atmosphere around him was growing thinner with each passing moment. "And she doesn't want to be helped."

"That doesn't mean you shouldn't try."

"I can't be there and stop this at the same time."

"If you just reached out to her-"

"No," he said sharply. "Some things can't be healed. And even if they could, I'm not the one to do it."

She was saying something else, now. He ignored her. Below, Nightmare Moon was toying with the handful of ponies who were still trapped within Canterlot, but she was only awaiting the final act. The real threat was there, above, hanging over the landscape like the blade of a celestial guillotine.

He stopped. Behind him, he knew, the planet was hanging in space, a jewel even more beautiful than the stars on all sides. He didn't bother to look. He had seen it before. What was important was the moon.

It was still growing visibly larger, though he had stopped moving towards it. Part of him marveled at the sheer amount of raw magical power that would have been required to pull it so far out of its natural place, and at such speed. In her desperation, Luna had found reserves of strength that he wasn't certain even he could match.

He tried anyway.

If this had been any other task, he would have tried for something flashy. Carving the moon into a likeness of his own grinning mug was a good start. Perhaps he would have added a hat of some sort, to complete the effect. But this wasn't an easy thing to do, even for one as powerful as the Lord of Chaos. He didn't dare to expend any of his reserves on comedy.

The only outward sign of the titanic forces being mustered was the fact that any light passing between Discord and the moon was twisted and warped. The twinkling stars became dizzying blazes of every color in the rainbow, refracting upon themselves over and over until they were finally expelled from the vortex of warped space. A thousand, nearly invisible threads of light spread out over the skies of Equestria, the only sign of the battle taking place.

Discord felt no physical strain. Unicorns focused their magic through their horns, and thus, their power was limited by how much raw energy their horn could channel. He, on the other hand, had no physical form in any real sense. Oh, he had a body, but Discord himself was as close to being raw magic as anything could ever be. His chimeric form was just the way that magic made itself known in the crude three dimensions that most ponies spent their lives in. The only limit to his power was how much of himself he was willing to expend.

Ahead of him, the moon was slowing, but it was still moving forward. It was still going to strike Equestria. Meanwhile, he was at his absolute limit. Any more, and he would never fully recover. It might even destroy him.

In his mind's eye, he saw Pinkie Pie and Fluttershy watching him across the gulf of years.

He kept pushing.

The sensation of her protection spells breaking was only a minor twinge in the back of Nightmare Moon's mind. It hardly registered now. They were paltry things compared to the magic that she was capable of now. Even as she turned her attention towards the approaching

magical signatures of her fellow princesses, she reached out and ripped a handful of other minds out of existence. Above, another set of constellations winked into being.

She opened her eyes and smiled once again.

Celestia was standing on the other end of the throne room, breathing hard. The white alicorn had tears in her eyes, and her body shook from mingled sorrow, fear, and anger, but when she spoke, it was with the same calm determination that Luna had come to despise.

"Sister, you must stop this."

Nightmare Moon heaved a theatrical sigh. "Really?" she said, her voice dripping spite from each syllable. "We have already come this far, and you believe that we can be talked down?"

"You are still my sister," Celestia said, taking a step forward. "You are still Luna. We can still-"

"Fix this?" Nightmare Moon smiled a bit wider and stepped off of the throne. "Fix us, you mean? No. You cannot wield the Elements of Harmony any longer, sister dear. Even your precious Twilight Sparkle, the student you groomed for decades, cannot do that. The Elements have moved on. They have selected other bearers, and they are not here. Even if they were, they could not stop me now. Some things never heal."

She spread her wings, and again the darkness flared around them, leaving Celestia as a beacon amidst impenetrable night on all sides. For a moment, her own eyes were visible, but then they sank into the gloom, leaving the elder sister to stare wildly about, searching for any sign of her opponent.

Nightmare Moon's voice didn't fade. It seemed to whisper in from all sides, as if the dark itself were speaking. "Besides," she purred, "even if you could 'save' me, even if you could force all of this down once more, it wouldn't change things. Before, they feared me for a thousand years for a few moment's battle with you. Now, I have slaughtered them by the dozen. By the score, sister. The streets of Canterlot run red beneath my stars. They are still dying, and you cannot bring them back. Even your precious student, for all her magic, cannot protect them all. No matter how hard she tries."

Celestia spun on the spot. Her horn was shining now, as bright as the sun, but the beam of light she conjured still barely made it a yard into the shadows before being swallowed up. "Why, Luna?" She was sobbing openly now, but her voice was still steady. "Why would you do this to them? They did nothing to you! If I hurt you, then take me! They are innocent!"

"Some of them are," came the answer. "Others... no. I know the dreams of every pony in Equestria, sister. I know them all. Every one of them, I know as well as I know myself. I see the

innocent and the monsters alike, and I do not discriminate. In less than an hour, they will all be dead."

There was a surge of light as Celestia fired a beam of concentrated magic into the smog. There was no real target. It was a desperate act, taken because she saw no other real option. All it accomplished was that the night opened up for just a moment, let her attack pass through, and closed in once more.

There was a laugh. It was high and cruel, and echoed around the throne room for several seconds. "You could not stop it now even if you could strike me, sister," said the voice from the darkness. "I have called the moon. All of Equestria ends tonight."

Celestia's blood ran cold. This time, she couldn't keep her voice from breaking. "So that's it?" she screamed. "You would kill all of them, just because of some perceived injury from me?"

"Idiot." The word whistled out of the darkness like a javelin, and a thick tendril of the inky blackness whipped out at the same moment, striking Celestia's right wing. It burned like ice. "The great Princess Celestia, wisest and most beloved pony in Equestria," the voice continued. Now it was mocking her, every word dripping with bitter anger that had long since turned to poison. "You always knew how best to handle everything. You always ruled with such kindness. Where was your renowned empathy, sister, when it could have helped me?"

Another lash, and Celestia's right hind leg buckled as everything below her first joint went numb. She collapsed to the stone and cried out, but Nightmare Moon's voice continued.

"For all your pretty words, for all your grace and poise, you never understood me," she hissed. "Never. You wanted somepony to stand at your side and bear the weight of years with you. You wanted it to be me."

The night swirled around her, and for a moment, Celestia was certain that she was about to die, but the attack never came. Instead, the darkness split and pulled apart, revealing Nightmare Moon seated upon the throne once again, glaring icily at her.

"You wanted it to be me," she said again. "I needed it to be you."

Celestia tried to raise herself to her hooves again, but her leg was still uncontrollable, and her wing hung limply at her side. She was forced to lie there and stare, panting.

"You told me that you would always be there for me," the black alicorn said coldly. "But that was a lie. You never saw my pain until it was too late to heal. You told me that nopony would ever replace me, but that was a lie. You found Twilight Sparkle, and she became closer to you than I could ever hope to be. You told me that we would rule Equestria side-by-side, but that was a lie. You were loved and showered in adoration, while I was cast aside and unwanted."

Her wings flared out, and again the darkness crept in, but this time it left enough light that Celestia could just make out her sister's silhouette.

"I hated you for it," she whispered. "Oh, how I hated you. I hated you, my sister, and because of it, I grew to hate myself even more. But even that does not begin to encompass all of this. Because, you see, I did hate you."

She stepped off the throne once again, wings still outspread, and began to walk towards Celestia. "But that was not the worst of the lies," she said, apparently addressing the air in general now. She wasn't looking at her sister. "The worst of them was telling me that we could do something that mattered. Do you know what I have discovered, in all the years that have passed?"

Celestia raised her head. "Luna, please..."

"None of it mattered!" The shout echoed around the cavernous hall. Nightmare Moon stamped hard on the stone with one hoof, splintering it beneath her metal armor. "All those ponies that we built Equestria for, all of those that I took on this burden to save, are dead and buried. So are their grandchildren, and their grandchildren's grandchildren, and on and on for more than a thousand years. They. Did not. Matter."

She tossed her head, raving now, not screaming at Celestia but at the universe in general. "They lived out their lives, and I lived alongside them. I knew them, each and every one, better than they knew themselves. I was as close to them as I could possibly have been, and I loved them, Celestia. But each of them was only a handful of years, and I am eternal. I watched them all die. Now, no pony even remembers that they existed. The ponies living outside this castle? In a hundred years, they will all be forgotten. None of them matters."

"So your solution," Celestia whispered quietly, "is to kill them all?"

"What difference does it make?" snapped Nightmare Moon. Her head swung around to glare down at Celestia once more. "They will all die eventually. Every one of them will be forgotten. This way, I at least end them on my terms."

She turned away and began to walk towards the throne again. "As I said, Celestia," she continued, her voice becoming calmer and more even, "I hated you. I do not hate you any longer. Now, I simply do not care."

Once again, Nightmare Moon settled onto the throne and smiled.

Celestia lay on the floor, fighting to control any part of her body. She could feel the emotions rising up within her, flooding her mind with anger, sorrow, fear, and a dozen other sensations in

great waves. Her mind was trying to wrestle away from her, to succumb to despair. She would not let it.

After a few seconds, she managed to get herself upright using only her three good legs, but she kept her eyes downcast as she said, "You'll die, too."

"And?"

Celestia shut her eyes. There was too much behind that one syllable for her to be able to come up with a proper response. No, not too much. Too little. She could hear the emptiness behind the veneer of anger.

Slowly, she raised her head and set her jaw. "Then there really is only one end to this," she said quietly.

"At last," said Nightmare Moon, as the dark closed in once more, "we understand one another."

The streets of Canterlot were dark, too dark to be natural, and odd shapes danced at the edge of Twilight Sparkle's vision. Combined with the fog of mingled panic and exhaustion that filled her mind, she could barely make out anything of the city around her.

She was vaguely conscious that there were bodies everywhere, but she blocked them from her consciousness. Ignore them. They could not be helped. Focus on the living. Throw your senses out like a net, trawl the city streets for signs of magical flare-ups. Find the ones who could still be saved.

Her horn flashed again, and she found herself by one of the city's outer walls. All of the ponies she had helped were beginning to run together. It was getting difficult to tell any of them apart. Was this family the same one that she had pulled out of the restaurant on Mane Street a few minutes before? It was hard to tell. The young colt looked similar, at least. The moment's reflection almost caused her to delay too long, and the shadows around the family reared up and lunged forward like claws.

She blasted them apart, ignoring the alternating shouts of appreciation and pleas for instructions, and teleported away again.

The spell that had been keeping anypony from evacuating the city had been broken. The ones she saved had a chance, at least, but she had no time to stay and shepherd them individually. For every potentially victim that she saved from an attack, four more were dragged down. She couldn't stop for a moment. Every second she wasted was another grave filled.

But even she couldn't look away when the walls of Castle Canterlot exploded outward in a flare of light. The princess of magic gaped openly at the sky as two figures spiraled through it, climbing rapidly. Even at this distance, they were unmistakable as Princesses Celestia and Luna - or, at least, Princess Celestia and what had been her sister.

Celestia was visible as an angelic figure, as bright as the sun, surrounded by a halo of light that unleashed volley after volley of piercing sunbeams at her opponent. By contrast, Nightmare Moon was only visible as a spot that no light could illuminate. She blotted out the stars as she moved, and those of Celestia's attacks that came close to her vanished into the cloud of thick smog that she seemed to trail behind her.

The two of them were circling one another, constantly ducking and weaving around the barrage of magical attacks, searching for an opening and fighting for altitude. As Twilight watched, a ray of light finally managed to pierce the veil around Nightmare Moon, and she heard a scream of rage and pain echo over the city. It was followed by a sudden, sharp dimming of the light surrounding Celestia, and the white alicorn dipped sharply for a moment, as if she were going to crash.

As her mentor steadied herself above, Twilight spread her wings and took flight after them. All thought of the shadows in the streets left her mind. Celestia needed her. Nightmare Moon had to be stopped.

The light around Celestia flared again, and the elder sister powered upward, rising like a rocket towards the stars overhead. Nightmare Moon's magic swiped at her, missing by a hair's breadth each time. Twilight found herself letting out a breath that she didn't know she had been holding as her teacher emerged from the cloud of darkness unscathed.

She reached down, searching for the well of magic within her, and found it waiting. She had exerted herself powerfully on the city streets, but in her desperation, she found reserves of energy she didn't know she had. The first blast of magic that she threw at the black alicorn was powerful enough to have torn masonry apart.

At the last moment, Nightmare Moon twisted aside. How she still had enough concentration left to detect and avoid an attack from an entirely new front while simultaneously fighting against Celestia, Twilight never knew.

The counterattack came whistling around before she could be ready for it. She had been so desperate to come to Celestia's aid that she had neglected to watch for assaults on her own person, and the series of blows caught her on the right side. It felt as though she had been doused in acid. The dark was so cold that it burned.

She felt herself lurch to the side, thrown off course by the strike, and begin falling. She flapped harder, focusing on arresting her plummet, and hoped that Nightmare Moon was too focused on

Celestia to attack again. Even Twilight couldn't defend herself in free fall. Not when it felt as though her entire body was made of ice.

Until then, the battle had been entirely silent apart from the crackling of magic as it seared the air. There were no words exchanged between the combatants. There was no time. Talking took away concentration that could be focused on attack or defense.

As she finally managed to steady her fall, though, Twilight heard Celestia scream "No!"

There was a flare of light close by. When the purple spots cleared from her vision, Twilight spun in the air to see Celestia hovering between herself and Nightmare Moon. The light around her was weaker now, dangerously so, and her wingbeats came in labored, heaving spurts rather than automatically. She had protected Twilight from the second attack, and she had paid the price for it.

The white alicorn only spared a glance to her student before flying off again. There was no time for anything else, but that look said everything that needed to be said anyway.

This ends here, or not at all.

Twilight had fought before, when Queen Chrysalis had attempted to invade Canterlot all those years ago. She had stood together with her friends and battled against a horde of changelings.

The terror that she had felt then was nothing compared to what she felt during the battle against Nightmare Moon. Down in the streets, with her friends at her side, she had been frightened, but she had also been confident in their ability to overcome any odds so long as they stood together. She had also suspected that the changelings would want them alive if possible.

The enemy that she was facing now did not want her alive. There could be no truce here, and there would be no rescue. There would not be a spell to save her if she failed.

If she failed, there would not be anything that could save Equestria.

Time seemed to slow to a crawl, stretching the scant seconds of the battle out to an eternity. She knew that she had only been airborne for a few moments, that every movement she or her fellow fliers made was happening in the blink of an eye, but it felt as if she had been fighting forever. As she spun away from one of the scything tendrils and returned fire with her own magic, it seemed as though she were moving through treacle.

At the same time, things were happening far too fast. Nightmare Moon was quick, impossibly so, and her attacks seemed to emerge from nowhere, as if the darkness itself were her weapon.

Twilight pushed her body to its limit, twisting away at the last possible moment and still, somehow, finding time to return fire.

Magic crackled and lashed through the air around the three alicorns, warped by their wills. They were the epicenter of a thunderous storm of magic now, surrounded by a cloud of violet lightning, blinding light, and ice-cold blackness. Nightmare Moon hung in the center of it, immovable and unbreakable, her attacks crashing through the air like tidal waves as she tried to find her targets. Celestia hardly seemed to exist in comparison, a tiny firefly weaving desperately to avoid being swatted from the sky. Her spells seemed feeble, and though they often connected, they were simply absorbed by the night. She seemed so frail beside the hurricane of power that was Nightmare Moon.

Twilight circled the dark alicorn in tandem with Celestia. Concepts like gravity and direction became almost meaningless in the dance. She wasn't sure whether she was flying up or down at any given moment, but she knew it didn't matter. All that mattered was the battle.

She swung around, fired another blast of purple lightning into the darkness. When she heard Nightmare Moon scream in response, she stopped for just a moment.

It was a moment too long. The blow caught her on the underbelly this time, sent her spinning away and made her scream as her bones turned to ice. When she managed to stop herself and look back to the battle, what she saw made her feel that the attack had reached her heart as well.

Her spell had punched a hole in whatever defensive spells Luna was weaving around herself. A spider-web of cracks hung in the air around the point of impact, pulsing with arcane energies. And, speeding towards that opening like an arrow, was Celestia.

The flare of light from the impact blinded Twilight completely, and the force of the blast threw her from the sky.

Nightmare Moon awoke in the streets of Canterlot. She was sprawled awkwardly over one of the stone curbs on a main street. Which it was, she couldn't tell and didn't particularly care. Pain clouded what parts of her mind could still conjure up the energy to wonder about such things.

With some effort, she managed to lift her head and look around. She was surrounded by the results of her work. Even from her low vantage point, she could see the bodies around her. Part of her, the tiny, insignificant piece that still felt anything other than emptiness, wanted to laugh and revel in her triumph.

She didn't. Instead, she stared around, expression blank, and waited until she heard hoofsteps approaching.

Her neck protested as she turned to look at the source of the sound. She couldn't have moved the rest of her body if she wanted to. Her forelegs felt too weak to lift, and there was no sensation from her hind legs at all. Even moving her head, she knew, was more than she could really manage, but she did it anyway. It wasn't as if it mattered.

The one approaching her was Twilight Sparkle. The lavender alicorn was walking slowly, in uneven steps that kept her on the verge of collapse, but she was upright. Behind her, there was an unmoving white shape.

Finally, Twilight drew up to her. Neither of them said anything. Neither of their expressions betrayed any sort of emotion. They simply stared.

Behind Twilight's eyes, Nightmare Moon could see an emptiness as vast as the one in her own.

After a while, she lifted her gaze to the sky overhead. The constellations she had placed there were still present, but the moon was unmistakably receding.

She couldn't quite bring herself to care.

When the violet flash came, bringing with it a night more complete than any she could have created, she welcomed it with open arms.

Now the sun and the moon hung over Equestria. Beneath them, Twilight Sparkle stood on the balcony of Celestia's tower, staring up at the sky.

There were hoofsteps behind her. She didn't bother to turn and look. She knew that there was only one other pony who would enter Castle Canterlot.

"I know what you've been doing," came the quiet, tired voice.

"I knew you'd find it eventually," she answered, still not turning to face the speaker.

"Is this what you think Celestia would have wanted for you?" The hoofsteps came closer, left the staircase and entered the room leading onto the balcony. "Letting Equestria fall into ruin? Abusing your power to - to -" there was a moment where the speaker clearly couldn't bring themselves to say something "-try and recreate something you lost?"

"What Celestia would have wanted doesn't matter," Twilight said, shutting her eyes. "Celestia isn't here. None of them are. Even you aren't here, really."

"Yes, I am, Twilight," said the voice. It sounded faintly musical, even through the exhaustion. It was just that its music was a funeral dirge. "I'm here. And I still love you."

"No." Twilight shook her head. "I failed you. You needed me, and I failed. I saw what Sombra did to you. And I can't use the Elements of Harmony. I tried, but they've left me." She let out a long, slow breath. "I'm so tired, Cadence."

Slowly, the princess of love lowered herself onto the stone beside Twilight and draped a wing over her barrel. She looked almost skeletal, and her horn looked off, pitted and twisted. Even her eyes were the wrong color, an unnatural mix of greens and reds and purples. But she pulled her friend close all the same.

"You didn't fail me," she whispered. "You saved me. Even if you couldn't undo all the damage, you saved me. And I'm here for you. But you have to stop this. Equestria needs its princess back, not a madmare who cares for nothing but recreating the past."

Twilight couldn't stop the brief hitching of her breath, or the sudden swell of tears that leaked out from beneath her closed eyelids. After a moment, she whispered, "I need the princess back, too."

"No, you don't," said Cadence, her voice growing sharper now. "You're strong, Twilight. You've always been strong. And now, you need to show it. You have to be the ruler Equestria needs. No pony else can do it."

"I can't." It came out as a choked sob, and Twilight twisted away from Cadence, looking pained. She stood and moved to the far side of the balcony, swaying slightly with each step. "I can't, Cadence. I'm not strong. Not strong enough for that. This... I'm doing all I can do. It's not pretty. I don't like it. But I have to."

Cadence sighed and shut her eyes. "You're sure about this?"

Twilight nodded.

"You won't stop?"

A shake of her head, this time, and a murmured, "I can't."

Cadence took a deep breath. When her eyes opened again, they flickered with a sickly inner light, and her horn shone with a yellow aura the same hue as a fresh bruise.

"Then I'm sorry about this, Twilight," she said.

Before the lavender alicorn could react, there was a flare of light from Cadence's horn. When it faded, she was alone on the balcony, staring up at the moon.

And, in the darkened entrance hall of Castle Canterlot, Discord's film flickered to a stop.

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// 24: The Heart Whose Woes Are Legion// Story: What Bound Them// by
Headless//-----//

Spike was vaguely aware of the fact that a whole crowd of Discords had appeared around them, all cheering wildly and shouting for an encore. He ignored them and continued to stare at the blank canvas, willing the images to continue.

They didn't.

He felt the anger welling up inside him again and spun on the spot. When he spotted Discord standing in the middle of a crowd made entirely of himself, taking bows and signing photographs from the cheering clones, he forced his way forward, elbowing them aside until he reached the center.

"That's it?" he bellowed. He reared up on his hind legs and swung one taloned hand around, clutching the chimera around its neck. "That can't be it! There's got to be more!"

Someone coughed meaningfully behind him, and he turned his head to see another Discord, indistinguishable from the now-silent crowd around them, frowning at him. "Hands off the stunt double, please," it said. "I understand the impulse to harass celebrities, particularly after a successful film debut, but still, this is going a bit far."

Spike snarled at him and, ignoring the protestations from his body, swung the Discord copy in his hand around like a club, trying to smack the real one away with it. He never connected. Instead, there was the feeling of reality screaming, and Spike stumbled, landing badly on his injured leg, as Discord danced away. He sprawled full-length onto the stone and attempted to force himself upright again.

"Spike, no!"

He felt hooves pressing down on his shoulders. Both Compass Rose and Tailspin had rushed to his side and were doing their best to hold him down. Ordinarily, he would have had no issue with shrugging them off and continuing his charge, but the surge of anger that had carried him thus far was fading, and taking his strength with it. As it went, it left behind the feeling of absolute exhaustion.

He stopped trying to pick himself up. Just now, it wasn't such a bad thing to have somepony close.

"Very good," said Discord. The thing was sprawled lazily in midair as if it were seated on a particularly comfortable couch and watching Spike with an expression of vague disinterest. "Is everypony finished with their hysterics now? Can we get on with things?"

The dragon shut his eyes. While the story had played out in front of him, he had been able to focus on that rather than his injuries. Now that it was over, all the aches and pains were coming back. The bandages that Discord had magicked into existence around his wings were all done correctly, so far as he could tell, but he was still pretty certain that he had other bones that had broken and which remained unset. Even breathing hurt.

He forced himself to lie still and take steady, even breaths. Compass was still standing next to him, one hoof on his shoulder. She was stroking his scales gently, which made them ache even more. He considered telling her to stop, but decided against it. At that moment, the contact was worth the pain that came with it.

Tailspin, on the other hand, had pulled away. He could hear her walking slowly across the floor towards Discord.

"No," she said flatly. "We're not done. That... show was supposed to give us answers, but all it did was show us things we already knew. Celestia and Luna died, and Twilight is missing."

"Oh, no," said Discord. "Not missing. We know precisely where she is, remember?"

Spike's good eye snapped open again. "Where?"

Discord rolled his eyes again. "Well, if you haven't figured it out at this point, I'm not feeling particularly inclined to tell you," he said with a huff. "Aside from the fact that it really should be obvious where she was sent, if you actually make me say it, you're just going to try and attack me again. Not that it would work, mind you-" he waved his clawed arm dismissively "-but I worked hard on those bandages, and you need strict rest. Doctor Dizzy's orders."

Spike ground his shattered fangs together, growling, but the pressure of Compass' hoof on his shoulder kept him still. He looked instead to Tailspin, who was giving him an odd look. Before he could ask her what she was thinking of, though, Discord spoke again.

"Besides, like I said, this was about the lesson." He twisted in midair until he was hanging upside-down, grinning at the rest of them. "'Why' isn't a particularly meaningful question when applied to yours truly, I'll admit, but for everypony else, it's important. Tia was pretty smart, but she tended to overlook the why when it came to her little sister."

"Discord," Spike rumbled, "I already sat through your show. I've been through changelings, spells, mountains, storms, and windigos to get here. If you really are here to help, then get to the point."

The chimera glowered at him for a moment, then rolled his eyes and said, "Fine. Just for you, Spike, because we're friends." And then he was upright again, standing by the fire with both of his arms folded behind his back. Pith Helmet tried to scoot away without moving his splinted leg. Discord ignored him.

"Tia," he began, "couldn't let go of her relationship with her darling little sister. Even after things went bad the first time, when your precious Elements of Harmony were able to take all of Luna's anger and block it off for a while, when she had proof that her sister wasn't cut out for life as a pretty pony princess, she persisted." He paused, blinked, then quirked a slight smile. "And it's a mark of how serious I am attempting to be right now that I didn't even plan that alliteration beforehand."

He brought his hands out from behind his back, revealing a pair of crude sock puppets in the likenesses of Celestia and Luna. "So, naturally, this resulted in... well. You saw." The Luna hand puppet bit down on the Celestia one and shook it back and forth violently as he continued. "And all because Luna couldn't let go, either. Both of them did truly love their subjects, you know, but Tia was always better at remaining detached. So, eventually, Luna lost her mind when she couldn't let go of all the poor ponies she watched die, and decided to engage in what was essentially an overly-dramatized murder-suicide."

A third puppet came into view. This one was on the tip of his tail, and was unmistakably meant to be Twilight Sparkle, despite the shoddy craftsmanship. "And then we have your poor purple princess," he continued. The Luna puppet had ripped its Celestia counterpart off of his other hand and was chewing on it lazily. As the final puppet approached, though, it burst into violet flames and withered away. "Who lost her parents, older sibling, best friends, younger sibling slash son, and finally her beloved mentor. And, of course, when I offered her my own advice, she reacted poorly."

He plucked the last puppet off the tip of his tail and tossed it carelessly into the fire. "All because they were all attempting to hold onto things that couldn't last," he said. "Tragic. Truly tragic. And, of course, that resulted in your dear Twilight being banished to the moon."

Spike blinked.

He was vaguely aware that Tailspin was scowling and had raised one hoof to cover her face. Compass Rose and Pith Helmet just gaped.

A little voice in the back of his head told him that he should be feeling something. At the very least, he should be attempting to throttle an actual explanation out of Discord instead of listening to him ramble on for hours and trying to coax him into giving a straight answer.

He didn't. His brain had just... stopped.

"Princess Cadence," he said slowly, in an absolute, even monotone, "banished Twilight Sparkle to the moon."

"Well, yes," said Discord, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "Because she was apparently trying to, and I quote, 'recreate the past'-" he waggled two claws and two stubby, furred digits expressively "-and 'abusing her power'. And before you ask, no, I don't know exactly what she was doing, because I was barely capable of looking out of that throne room for more than a few seconds at a time at the, hah, time." He lowered his arms and shrugged. "But I can make a pretty good guess, and I'm sure you can, too. Even you were never that thick."

Spike felt his jaw muscles clenching involuntarily. "Then tell us your guess."

Discord sighed. "You really do want everything spoon-fed to you, don't you? Well, no point in delaying it, I suppose. Even annoying you begins to wear thin after a while." He clasped both hands in front of him. "Twilight Sparkle goes rushing off to the Crystal Kingdom, Elements of Harmony in tow. When she returns, she has Cadence in tow, sporting a spiffy new horn and eye color, and she won't shut up about how the Elements of Harmony have left her. Then she and Cadence have a little chat where Cadence berates her for something, she cries about not being able to do this alone, and then... voom."

His hands parted, and a tiny purple orb of light floated between them for a moment before rocketing up and disappearing into the rafters. "Cadence leaves to the Crystal Empire, the nightmare mist springs up, and on the anniversary night of dear Twilight's banishment every year thereafter, a mysterious alicorn appears in what used to be Equestria, rampages about for a few hours, snatches up a few ponies, and then vanishes in a flash of black, red, and green. Rather cut-and-dry, wouldn't you say?"

Spike stared at him, waiting.

After a few seconds, Discord sighed. "Fine." He snorted and tossed his head. "I'll put it in terms that even a foal could understand, since you don't seem to be catching on. Your precious Twilight has gone battier than Luna, become the Mare in the Moon, and started kidnapping ponies to experiment on, probably to try and do something with the Elements of Harmony. Meanwhile, Princess Cadence is using dark magic to try and keep her out of Equestria. Happy?"

Spike blinked, once. Then, very slowly, he turned his gaze to each of his traveling companions in turn. There was Pith Helmet, still sprawled on the other side of the fire and watching him with

the same stony expression that he always wore when he didn't have anything to say. Tailspin was sitting back on her haunches, wings drooping listlessly to either side of her body, and looking as though she wanted to try and offer him some form of comfort, but couldn't think of any way to do so. Rarity's necklace glinted in the firelight as she shifted nervously. And, finally, there was Compass Rose, still standing next to him with one hoof on his shoulder and looking thunderstruck.

He took a deep breath, released it, and took another. He shut his eyes, took another breath, opened them, released it. Again.

Nothing came. There was no sadness, no anger, not even the barest hint of confusion. His mind was simply empty of any thoughts, completely unable to respond.

Finally, he looked back to Discord, who was still standing across the fire with an expression of impatience, and opened his mouth to speak.

The only word he could find was "No."

A few hours later, Tailspin set off into the castle hallways again.

Compass and Pith remained behind in the entrance hall with Discord. The monster had, eventually, been persuaded to summon a hospital bed for Pith to lie on, so at least his leg wasn't being disturbed, and Compass had assured her that the two of them would be all right.

For all that Discord was a nuisance, Tailspin believed her. If the chimera had wanted to cause them harm, it would have done so long ago. None of them could use magic, and as far as she could imagine, there was no other way to defend themselves from such an entity. But it did seem set on helping them instead, even if it was extremely odd in doing so, and even if its help only came after a dozen attempts to get it to speak plainly.

She wasn't surprised to find Spike in the throne room. The dragon had limped off into the shadows, alone, not long after Discord's story had finished. Now he was curled up next to a small fire created from another of the tapestries that decorated the walls.

He didn't look around as she entered. He was just staring up at the statues that lined the hall, his expression completely blank.

"Hey, big guy," she said gently as she trotted up to him. "Figured you would need some food and water. We've still got most of that, thankfully." She pulled a few cans and a large canteen out of one saddlebag, then pushed them towards the dragon with one hoof.

"I'm not hungry." Spike just kept staring upward. His eyes were fixed on a statue that, even in the dim, flickering firelight, Tailspin knew depicted Rarity.

She sighed, dropped onto her haunches, and pushed the small pile towards him again. "I didn't ask if you were hungry," she said. "I said you need food. Eat."

"No."

Tailspin sighed, set her jaw, and pushed her helmet back slightly. "Right," she said. "I know where this is going, and I've had enough of beating around the various bushes for today. So listen up."

She jabbed him in the side with one hoof, which provoked a snarl and turned the dragon's gaze towards her for the first time. She recognized the anger there, and part of her realized that she had just put her hoof dangerously close to one of the gaping rents in his scales from Queen Chrysalis' attack, but she didn't flinch.

"Got your attention? Good." She straightened up and spread her wings slightly, frowning. "You're hurting right now, and I know that. But wallowing in it isn't going to get anything done. Remember, we're on a mission here. Queen Chrysalis is still a threat. There's whoever this Cadence is to deal with as well. Even Twilight Sparkle still needs your help. It just isn't the type of help you expected it to be."

His glare didn't waver. She returned it stolidly. "Right now, there's a unicorn a few rooms away who lost her horn just a few days ago and still volunteered to come with you. In fact, she still managed to find the way through all that magic to get you here. And there's an earth pony who might never walk again because he stuck by you and found you a safe path through uncharted mountains. They aren't the only ones who've made sacrifices for you, either. Even Colonel Reveille did everything he could to help. You don't get to just turn away from that, no matter how hopeless you might feel."

There was the metallic sound of Spike's scales moving against the stone floor. He was drawing himself up into a sitting position, facing her. The firelight lit him from below, made it impossible to read his expression. All she could see was his one open eye reflecting the blaze.

Slowly, he lifted one claw and set it against the ruby necklace she wore.

"You've made sacrifices, too," he rumbled.

She snorted. "No," she said. "I just got put in the wrong place at the wrong time and lost something as a result. I won't pretend I've done as much as they have. But I will say this." She lifted her right foreleg and draped it over his claw. "You don't just get to stop now because you're feeling hopeless."

She was acutely aware of the fact that a single twitch of his hand would kill her before she could react. His talons were inches away.

Above her, that single eye still blazed.

He lowered his head. When he spoke, his voice was shaky. "I don't know what to do next."

"We go back to the fort," Tailspin said simply. "We deal with Queen Chrysalis and her army. Then we figure out a way to help Twilight or talk to this Cadence pony, or anything else. It isn't hopeless, even if we didn't find the Elements here. We did find someth- someone useful, and at least we know that we can use the Elements now. We have a chance."

Spike let out a long breath, then lifted his head again. He didn't look at her, though. Instead, he turned to look up at two of the statues. One of them was the frizzy-maned earth pony that she assumed was Pinkie Pie. The other, standing to the left of the first, was another earth pony mare. This one was wearing a hat.

"Right," he said. She noted with some relief that there was a bit of energy entering his voice now. "Right. We do have a chance. It's not much of one, but we do."

She nodded. "Glad to see you're still alive in there," she said. A small smile played around her lips as she stood. "I'm going back to the entrance hall. Discord doesn't seem dangerous, but he's also not particularly helpful, and the other two need some watching. We'll be waiting for you there."

With that, she turned away and began to trot off towards the doorway again.

Spike's voice stopped her after a few steps. "You have, you know," he called.

She glanced at him over one shoulder and raised an eyebrow, confused. "I've what?"

Spike gave her a sheepish smile. "Done as much as they have." He paused, sighed, and finished, "I'm just glad you're here, is all I'm saying. Thank you."

She grinned at him. "If you say so, big guy. Just eat, and come back to us when you're ready. I'm going to go see what sort of candy apocalypse that maniac has whipped up."

And she strode away, smiling to herself.

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// 25: Pressing Concerns// Story: What Bound Them// by Headless//-----//

Compass was trying her best to ignore the constant, throbbing pain in her horn. It wasn't really working. Discord's presence cut through whatever tolerance she had built up like a hot knife through butter. He was almost literally a walking migraine.

That made trying to talk to him even worse than it would have been otherwise. Even if he seemed to be a bit more subdued following the revelations he had imparted to Spike, Discord was still almost impossible to weasel any straight answers out of, and combining that with her headaches put things on the level of getting her teeth pulled out one by one.

Still, it was important. If it weren't, she would have given in to her exhaustion and fallen asleep long ago. Pith was asleep on the bed that Discord had conjured up for him, though she wasn't really certain whether he had actively chosen to rest or had simply passed out. Either way, she was glad he was resting.

A large part of Compass wished that she could go to sleep as well. As far as she could tell, she hadn't actually broken anything in the crash, which left her second only to Tailspin as the most physically capable member of their little troupe, but she was still exhausted and sore. For some reason, though, no matter how tired she felt, she couldn't actually feel any desire to actually sleep. The exhaustion was just there, hanging over her like a shroud.

No, she didn't want to sleep. She felt almost the same way she had back at the fortress, when she had been pushed far beyond her normal limits and had somehow found it easier to keep going than to stop. So, rather than curling up by the fire and trying to get some rest, she was sitting in a chair behind a claw-footed desk that Discord had conjured up, poring over a set of papers that she had retrieved from her saddlebags, and trying to ignore the occasional growl or purring noise from the table as it shifted on its mismatched legs.

Most of the maps she had brought with her had been severely damaged by water at some point. Whether that was a product of the storm or the windigos, she wasn't entirely sure. It didn't really matter anyway. The maps weren't the most important thing. The most important thing was the copy of Twilight Sparkle's spellbook that she had brought with her.

It had been damaged by water as well, of course, which meant that almost all of the pages towards the front had been reduced to an amorphous mass of pulp and ink, and the rest had deep smudges scattered throughout. Almost all of the actual dissertation on magical theory had been obliterated. The pages that had survived intact were the spells, which had been compiled in several sections towards the back of the book.

The section on unicorn spells was mostly legible, but that wasn't what she was looking at now. She had opened the copy to the section listing various forms of alicorn magic, and was doing her best to make sense of it.

It was slow going for more reasons than simple smudging. Even where the spells were technically readable, they didn't make much sense. As Compass Rose was quickly learning, alicorn magic shared little with unicorn magic beyond the most absolutely basic principles, and even those seemed fluid and unreliable.

A few days ago, she would have cast the book aside as useless to her. There was no way that any unicorn, let alone one as unskilled with magic as herself, could possibly have worked their way through that, especially if they no longer had the ability to cast any kind of spell themselves. Now, though, she just continued to stare at the page. In her head, a few more scraps of comprehension slotted themselves into place. It was like watching a puzzle being put together. Slowly, a concrete image was forming.

It just wasn't one that she particularly liked.

"How did this Cadence pony manage it, then?" she asked Discord, trying to ignore the fact that looking at him made her head feel as though it were about to explode. "If even Celestia couldn't do it without the Elements-"

"I haven't the foggiest idea," answered the monster blithely. "As I said, I was locked up in the throne room at the time. I had a hard enough time seeing as much as I did, without trying to find anything more. But no, she was quite normal for an alicorn, assuming my memory is still working."

He raised one claw and pushed it impossibly far into his ear, then withdrew it a moment later with a slight popping sound. There was something small and shiny in his grasp, which he inspected carefully before nodding and re-inserting it. "Yes," he said, more confidently. "Quite normal. Certainly not as strong as Tia, at least. Or Twilight, for that matter. And far below yours truly, of course."

Compass' lips moved soundlessly as she sorted through some of the information she had been absorbing. Then she shook her head. "Then we're missing something."

"Missing what?" It was Tailspin's voice. When Compass looked up, the pegasus was reentering the entrance hall from the doors at the far end. She looked surprisingly cheerful as she approached the fire, even though there was no dragon with her.

The unicorn pursed her lips and tapped on the desk with one hoof. It shifted slightly and opened one drawer with an agitated sort of creak. She ignored it. "How Cadence managed to send Twilight to the moon," she said. "Alicorns are strong, but they still have limits. I'm not an expert on magic by any means-" she ignored the slight laugh from Discord and plunged on "-but the sort of magical power necessary to send somepony to the moon in the first place would be immense. Keeping them there requires even more. Even alicorns wouldn't be able to manage

that, unless they're a lot - and I mean a lot - stronger than we thought. It would be something on the level of... of..." She trailed off, unsure of how to finish the sentence.

"Of altering reality at a whim, perhaps?" Discord said from behind her. He was draped over the back of her chair and grinning widely at her. She didn't bother to ask how he had gotten there. She just grimaced and raised one hoof to cover her broken horn.

"Right," she said. "Like that. Maybe you're strong enough to do something like that-"

"Was," Discord interjected. "Was strong enough to do things like that." He kicked his legs lazily. "Aside from that stunt with the moon, Miss Sparklebutt's spell did a number on me as well. And I haven't exactly had the opportunity to recover yet, seeing as I've been locked up the whole time since. Now I'm as weak as a kitten." He turned what he probably thought was an adorable, helpless expression towards her. All it did was emphasize the jaundiced, sickly nature of his eyes.

"-but," Compass continued sharply, "I don't think anypony else is."

"Well, of course not," said Discord. He let himself slither off one side of the chair, then made his way across the floor towards the fire like a snake. "Tia had to use the Elements of Harmony to manage it on dear Luna the first time, and even then, it didn't last forever. I'd imagine Cadey not being strong enough to manage it normally is why she went all-" His eyes bugged out for a moment and spun with different hues of black, red, and green in rapid succession. "And even then, of course, it's not perfect. If it was, we wouldn't have our yearly homecoming parties."

Compass shook her head and looked back to the papers. Every pony in the settlements knew about the Nightmare Night. It never fell on the same night on any given year, but it was always close to twelve months after the last event. She had never had the misfortune to be in one of the settlements affected by it, but she had seen the aftermath of the military's containment efforts, and seen the expressions on the faces of the families who lost members to her.

It was the same every time. An alicorn cloaked in blackness appeared in a city, captured a handful of seemingly random ponies with her magic, repulsed every attack made against her by the military, and then vanished again. She had never imagined that the alicorn in question could be Twilight Sparkle, though, or that the only reason that she kept vanishing was because another alicorn might be working against her. But then, precious few ponies outside of the military had actually witnessed a Nightmare event and survived. Those that did usually didn't care to talk about it much. And she had never imagined that it might concern her.

Until a few days ago, she wouldn't have imagined that anything like that would ever concern her. Now she was sitting in the middle of the ruined capitol of a fallen empire, surrounded by the remnants of past battles, speaking with a lunatic god, accompanied by a dragon older than her civilization, and, though she hadn't actually asked Discord to confirm it yet, was fairly certain that

she was one of three ponies chosen by some unknown method to wield a weapon powerful enough to defy the laws of magic.

She had a vague feeling that she should feel overwhelmed by this. She didn't. In fact, she felt oddly exhilarated, even through the exhaustion.

"Right," she said. "So that's another question. How did Cadence get strong enough to cast that spell?"

Tailspin sighed and made her way over to the other side of the desk. "No offense, Compass, but I think we have more pressing issues to focus on."

"I know." Compass nodded twice, then turned a page in the sodden mass and looked down to it again. "We need to find a way to get to the moon ourselves, which could be just as hard. Failing that, we need to find a way to get through the nightmare mist and speak to this Cadence pony. She and Twilight are the only ones who might be able to tell us where to find the Elements."

"No," said Tailspin. She set one hoof on top of the book, keeping Compass from turning any more pages, and frowned. "I mean we have time constraints here, remember? We came here looking for the Elements because Queen Chrysalis is coming. They aren't here, which means that we have to find some other way to fight her."

Compass blinked. "Oh. Is that all?"

"Is that all?" Tailspin gave her an odd look. "What do you mean, 'is that all?' That's the whole reason we're here."

"No no no," said Compass quickly, waving a hoof. "I just mean that we don't really need to worry about that any more. We didn't find the Elements, but we did find something else."

She turned to look at Discord, who was lounging in a sun chair beside the fire with some sort of fizzy drink in his claws. He gave her a blank look.

"Who, me?"

"Yes, you," she said. "You said it yourself. You used to be one of the strongest beings in existence. Even if you're weaker now, you can still do something about the changelings."

Discord sat up quickly and waved his paw, frowning. "Oh, no. I thought I told you already that I don't do fighting. Besides-" the air twisted around him again, and Compass winced as the sun chair vanished, replaced by a second hospital bed and a thermometer, which he placed between his jagged teeth "-I truly am as weak as a kitten just now. Facing off against an

enraged alicorn might be enough to overpower my frail constitution completely. Why, I feel faint just thinking of it."

"You're keeping the things outside from getting in," Compass said. She raised an eyebrow. "I'm not sure you're as weak as you say you are."

"Posh." Discord pulled the blankets on his bed up under his chin, snapped his fingers, and placed the resultant hot water bottle on top of his head. "That hardly takes any effort at all. The space out there is so twisted up from all the lingering magic that it was harder to get all of you inside than it will be to get you out again."

"And how were you planning to get us out?" said another voice. Compass looked around to see Spike limping his way back into the hall. He was frowning heavily, but he looked intact, at least. That was a relief. His expression after speaking with Discord had made her think that he might never smile again. Now he merely looked concerned.

"Ah, Spike," said Discord, his voice now breathy and weak. "Come to visit me on my deathbed? Will you offer words of comfort, or more cruel accusations of not offering everything that I-"

"Answer the question," said the dragon sharply. His talons clicked on the stone stairs as he made his way down towards the fire.

Discord sighed. When he spoke again, his voice was back to its usual strength. "Oh, you're no fun. Fine. A teleportation spell. Not far. Just enough to get us out of the windigos' territory. That's about all I can manage right now, aside from some minor amusements. Fortunately, they only hang around the top of the mountain. They've been scavenging off of the remnants of Luna's hate since dear Cadence cast her little spell."

"And then what?" Spike dropped onto his haunches just beside Pith's sickbed, still staring at Discord with his one good eye. "What was your plan after that?"

Discord sighed. "How many times do I have to say 'chaos' for you to understand? I don't have a plan. The closest thing to an end goal I have here is 'set the dragon loose and see what happens, because it's got to be better than sitting around in this dingy throne room forever'. The last time I actually tried to come up with a real plan, every tailor in Canterlot wanted me re-statuefied and Tia wouldn't speak to me for a week. I am a facilitator. You and your friends are always the ones who come up with the plan."

Spike snorted, and his tail started to swing out to the side before he winced and stopped himself. "Well," he said grimly, "that's great, then. The Elements of Harmony are probably on the moon for all we know, Cadence is behind a wall of nightmare fog, Twilight isn't just missing but is actively insane, and we're all in worse condition now than when we actually came out here." He shook his head. "Not exactly the best way to prepare for a major battle."

Compass looked back down to the papers on the desk, then up to Discord again. The chimera was babbling something to Spike, probably making another tasteless joke, but she wasn't listening. Her mind was buzzing too loudly for her to hear anything but her own thoughts.

Problem. Queen Chrysalis was preparing for an attack, and the Elements of Harmony were inaccessible at the current time. She lacked any real ability to cast spells, and even if she had that power, one unicorn would hardly be enough to resolve the issue. That left a heavily wounded dragon and a chaos spirit with only a small amount of power remaining as their only tools.

Possible solutions. Depend on the military's established strength to turn the tide of the attack; unlikely to succeed, with Chrysalis leading the charge. Attempt to establish a defensive line of changeling-repelling spells along the fortresses; equally unlikely, with the added chance that it was entirely impossible - she hadn't verified that the spell was even in the spellbook yet, and even if it was, the military developing a usable, stable version that could be maintained indefinitely in a permanent cordon around the Tangle was an idea so far-fetched as to be ludicrous.

More unorthodox solutions. Find a way to return Spike to fighting condition and rely on him to defeat the bulk of the changeling forces; possible, but unlikely, with too many variables to be depended upon. Spike might not be strong enough to defeat the changelings, Chrysalis could intervene, they lacked a way to corral the enemy forces and keep them occupied with fighting a dragon, et cetera, et cetera. Find a way to return Discord to fighting condition; still far too many variables to be considered truly reliable, including Discord's own reluctance to actually engage in open combat with anything, but if it could be done, it was by far the most certain way of winning.

No reliable solutions presented themselves. For a moment, she stood ready to pronounce the situation hopeless. Then she shook herself.

Think of it like a map. You have a starting point and an ending point. Now find the path between them.

She snatched up a pen that had rolled to one corner of the desk, flipped the copied spellbook over, and began to scribble furiously on its back cover.

Tailspin gave her a sidelong look. "What is it?" she muttered.

"I might have an idea," Compass answered quietly. "But there's no guarantee it will work. Give me a minute to think."

No single solution was enough. If she combined them, however, the beginnings of a solution took form. That solution, though, brought up a new problem, and that one intimidated her more than the rest combined.

She clenched her teeth and continued on.

Tailspin shoveled another mouthful of canned stew into her mouth. It wasn't particularly fancy food, but it was solid stuff that didn't require any real preparation and could be eaten on the go. For somepony that spent weeks at a time out in the wilderness, it was perfect. The fact that it tasted like used sweat socks was the only real downside.

The only sounds in the hall were those from her eating, the crackling of the fire, and the sound of Compass Rose's pen scratching across paper. She had been writing non-stop for nearly twenty minutes, her face twisted in a look of absolute concentration. Spike and Tailspin were both watching her silently. Pith was still asleep, and even Discord seemed to have settled into a sort of doze. She was glad about that. Every time he opened his mouth, she felt an exceedingly powerful urge to throttle something.

There was a snort from beside her, and she turned to see Pith crack open one eye and peer blearily around. When he spotted her, he blinked slowly.

"So I wasn't imagining that," he grunted. "You are actually up. Good. Am I done hallucinating now?"

She shrugged and gave him a faint smile. "Don't think you ever were," she said. "Though I don't blame you for thinking that. Discord's still around. I'm just glad he finally shut up."

Pith turned his head so that he was fully facing the two of them and grimaced. "So the chocolate boat and the picture show about the crazy alicorns was real, then," he said, sounding vaguely disappointed. "Great. What's happening now?"

"You're resting," said Tailspin firmly. She reached out and put a hoof on his shoulder; he had been trying to push himself upright. "That's what we're all doing, really. Your leg's busted up good, and your ribs are probably almost as bad, so don't put any strain on yourself."

Pith frowned, sighed, and let his head fall back onto the pillow. "Fine," he said. "Don't think I could move much if I wanted to. What's Compass doing?"

"Making plans," said Compass.

All of them looked around. Compass had finally lifted her head and set her pen aside. She was looking tired and nervous, but determined. "I think I've come up with a possible solution," she continued slowly, "but I can't make any guarantees yet. There are still some things I've got to know." She looked over to Discord. "Starting with you."

"Moi?" Discord put his clawed hand over his chest, looking mildly surprised. "And here I thought you had forgotten-"

Compass raised both hooves, pursed her lips, and stared at him for a moment. Slowly, Discord let his arm fall back to the bed and sighed. "Fine," he said, sounding extremely put-upon. "What is it you want to know?"

The unicorn nodded once, looking satisfied, and lowered her hooves to the desk again. "You're weak right now because you expended so much magic trying to stop the moon," she said. "Is it possible that you can take in magic in the same way? That you might be able to heal yourself by, and I know this is the wrong word but it's the best I can come up with, eating magic?"

Discord glanced towards the shadows at the edge of the firelight. Even now, they still seemed to twist and shift unnaturally. He huffed and turned away. "Absolutely not," he said firmly. "I wouldn't touch such swill even if it were served in a-"

"I'm not talking about this magic," Compass said sharply. "I don't want to know what happens if somepony takes in too much of this kind. But you said it yourself; the mountains out there have so much magic in them that it's almost impossible to move. If you could expose yourself to that kind of magic, would that make you stronger?"

"Possibly," said Discord slowly. He had a thoughtful look on his face now. "I've never really had reason to try until now. But, ha, I suppose that's why I woke our dragon friend up in the first place. First time for everything." He stroked his chin. "But I'd need time, and I won't get it with our icy companions out there. Even I don't particularly like the idea of becoming a popsicle. Pinkie Pie might have, but I-"

"Right." Compass sighed and settled back into her chair, rubbing at her face with her hooves. "That's the important part. You're our ace in the hole, and we need you as strong as possible. So we need to get you out there and gathering up as much magic as you can as soon as possible. Which means the rest of us-" she lifted her head again and looked over to Spike and the others "-are going to have to find a way to get rid of those windigos."

Tailspin felt a sudden rush of hot air over her wings as Spike snorted. "We can't," he said. "Windigos feed on negative emotions like fear and hate. If Princess Luna was strong enough to keep feeding them for this long, then there's no way we'll be able to beat them here. Not without magic."

Compass frowned heavily. "I know," she said. "Which is why I've been working on this." She tapped on the back of the spellbook with one hoof. "I can't guarantee that it'll get rid of them, or that I'll even be able to cast it, but it's the best I can come up with."

They all watched her for a moment, unsure of what to say.

It was Pith who broke the silence. He let out a grunt and attempted to push himself upright again using his one good leg, ignoring Tailspin's scowls and efforts to hold him still. "No," he said. "It's too much of a risk. I don't want you to have to try and fight off a horde of evil ice monsters with a broken horn. Not when the rest of us can't help you."

"Well, do you have a better idea?" Compass asked sharply. She drew herself up and gave him an imperious glare. "My horn is broken, but I can still manage some basic spells if I try, and I don't see any other options."

"No," said Tailspin, as she finally managed to push the struggling stallion back onto the sheets, "Pith's right. We're all glad you're here, Compass, but putting that much strain on yourself for a long shot isn't the way to do this. You're right. We need Discord-"

"Please, call me Dizzy," said Discord sweetly.

"-as strong as we can get him," she plowed on. "But there might be other ways to do it. Throwing yourself into a pack of windigos when there might be other options available isn't what we need. We still have some time before Chrysalis attacks. We can find another way to do this."

Gradually, she became aware that both Discord and Compass had sudden awkward looks on their faces.

"We do still have time," she said, a certain accusatory tone becoming evident in her voice. "Don't we?"

Discord hopped off his bed and, through some trick of space, managed to end up standing on Compass' right side and holding a microphone. He cleared his throat. "I'll field this one, Miss Rose," he muttered in her ear. Then he straightened up and waved his lion paw.

A small rectangle of light appeared floating in the air behind him, depicting what Tailspin immediately recognized as a map of the Tangle and the surrounding fortresses. "Now, for those who missed our last broadcast," he said, "perhaps because they were off speaking to dragons in other rooms, here's what you missed."

Icons began to pop into existence over the map. A handful of them looked like little suns with happy faces, and were positioned over the forts and the area behind them. The rest were black

clouds covered in wicked-looking blue thorns that erupted out of them from the inside. Occasionally, little stylized lightning bolts arced between them.

"It's been a lovely week for our little ponies in the Fort Maneholdt district," Discord said brightly. "Clear skies and smoochy days as far as the eye can see. But that's going to change come tomorrow."

Brightly colored arrows began to emanate from the dark clouds. All of them pointed towards the fortresses.

"Yes, it's a doozy of a storm that our friends from the Tangle have whipped up for us, folks!" Discord was grinning like a loon now, and waving his clawed hand over the map in quick, frantic motions. "Starting tomorrow night, if you can call it that, ha, we'll be seeing flash floods, sleet, lightning, and possibly even some plunder hail, mixed with twelve to twenty-four inches of changelings."

"That's enough, Discord," said Compass quietly.

To Tailspin's mild surprise, the image disappeared immediately, and Discord danced away, humming a little jingle to himself. Compass just sighed.

"So no," she said, "we don't have time. Queen Chrysalis is going to attack soon, and we don't have the Elements of Harmony to try and stop her. It's my plan or nothing." She shook her head. "I don't like it. I'm probably going to fail, and you're going to have to try and find another way to stop them. But it's the only thing I can think of."

Again, there was silence. Again, it was Pith who broke it.

"All right then," he said. "So when are we doing this?"

Compass looked confused. "We? I'm the only one-

"If you think we're sending you out there alone, you're crazy," Pith said flatly. "We can't use magic, but we still might be able to do something. 'F nothing else, I can hold a light for you or something."

Tailspin nodded, and, behind her, Spike's face split into a wide grin, exposing his rows of broken teeth.

"Right," he said, nodding. "We're not going to make anypony stand on their own here. Friends, right?" He laughed. "Besides. Did I ever tell you what they called the magic they used to beat the windigos before?"

Compass shook her head. She was vaguely aware of Discord making some exaggerated gagging noises in the background, but she ignored him.

Spike laughed. "'The Fire of Friendship'. We're sticking with you, Compass. Besides, it's not like I haven't been present for my share of stupid, desperate gambles before. What's one more now?"

"I'd rather we didn't all end up as icicles," said Tailspin, "but I'm not sending you out there alone, either."

As one, they turned to Discord. He paused in his fake-vomiting and eyed them all warily.

"What?"

"Well?" said Spike. "Are you in or not?"

Discord sighed, straightened up, and ran one hand through his mane. "I don't suppose I have much choice in the matter," he said. "I already rolled the dice. Now it's about time to see whether or not I've bet on the right racer." He blinked. "I believe I got a bit lost with that metaphor, but you get the point."

Compass, despite obvious fear and exhaustion, smiled. "Thank you," she said quietly. "Really."

"Don't thank us until we're out and alive," said Tailspin, standing up. "Come on, Spike. You and I are the only ones who can really carry anything right now, so let's get this stuff packed up. We're heading out."

And they turned to gather up their equipment.

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// 26: No Hard Feelings// Story: What Bound Them// by Headless//-----//

"Okay, no," said Spike in a pained voice. "This isn't going to work."

He shook himself, sending the saddlebags that Tailspin had been attempting to attach to him to the floor. It wasn't that he didn't have the physical strength necessary to carry them, even though they were by far the most heavily burdened of any of the saddlebags they had brought. Pith had been carrying them before, and even while injured, Spike was pretty certain that he was stronger than the stallion.

No, the problem was that, even though he had only been carrying them for a brief moment, they had made him feel as though his wings were being destroyed all over again. The bandages Discord had conjured up and, even though he wasn't an expert on such things by any stretch of

the word, the set felt professional enough. He still had hopes that they would heal, but putting added strain on them wasn't the way to let them do that.

Tailspin sighed and scooped up the saddlebags. "Fine," she said. "We'll have to put these on the bed as well. I'd rather have them with somebody, just so we're sure we won't lose them, but I guess it can't really be helped."

"Don't worry. I'll hold onto 'em," said Pith, raising his good leg. Discord had, after some coaxing, been convinced to change his bed into a sort of wheeled stretcher with an elevated head. The stallion was reclining in it as best he could, looking uncomfortable. Tailspin had insisted on lashing him to it the same way she had been tied to Spike's back. He didn't look particularly happy about that, but he didn't complain. He just accepted the saddlebags and did his best to hook them around the ropes.

Discord was leaning against the gurney, looking bored. Occasionally, he suppressed a yawn. None of them had even bothered asking him if he would help with carrying the saddlebags. It had been hard enough to get him to agree to wheel Pith around, away from any of the more severe dangers that cropped up. Again, Pith wasn't happy about that, but after a short, whispered discussion between himself and Tailspin, he'd agreed that he should try to stay out of the way as much as possible.

Compass had gathered up her maps and pens again and was pacing the floor, talking incessantly. Her words came out in a rush, high and slightly frantic, and Spike could see that she was shaking slightly. "So," she babbled, "assuming that I can actually cast this spell and we don't all die, Discord will absorb the magic from the mountains, teleport us back to Fort Maneholdt, and when the changelings arrive, he can... stop them, however he plans on doing that, I guess."

"Assuming that I actually can do that," Discord said lazily. He huffed on his claws and spent a moment rubbing them against his mangy coat. "I've never even attempted something like this before."

"Yes, yes, I know." Compass was obviously fighting, and failing, to keep her expression neutral. Her voice was growing more and more panicked by the moment. "All of this is based on a series of huge ifs. If I can cast the spell, if you can absorb the ambient magic, if the spell even works--"

Spike reached out and set one clawed hand between her shoulders as she walked by. She jumped slightly, but stopped and looked up at him.

He smiled crookedly. "I spent enough time with Twilight to know when somepony's in panic mode," he said, somehow managing to sound gentle despite the echoing nature of his voice. "Try to relax."

She gave him a disbelieving look. "Relax? Relax? Now? Really?"

Through some effort, the dragon managed to keep his smile from fading as he nodded. "Yes, really. We'll be all right. Even if the spell doesn't work, Discord can just teleport us all out."

"You're rather quick to volunteer my services," Discord cut in.

"Says the one who's supposedly here to join Team Friendship," countered Spike, without missing a beat. He gave Discord a disapproving look. "Or were you planning on backing out now?"

"Oh, no, not at all," said Discord. He smiled. "Just making an observation. Of course I'll help. We're all friends here, after all." He leaned over and ruffled Pith's mane with one hand. The stallion just scowled.

Spike eyed him for a moment before looking back to Compass. "See? Even if you can't cast it, we'll be fine. We'll just find another way to handle Chrysalis. Just breathe, okay?"

The unicorn nodded. She still didn't look entirely convinced, but the shaking had died down somewhat, at least. He gave her a gentle pat, then turned to the others.

Spike watched her walk off to put on her cloak, then settled down onto the floor to wait while they sorted out the rest. The stone scraped against his scales uncomfortably. It felt as though every one of them had been splintered, loosened, or was just outright missing - the bandages covering the deep rents in his hide that Queen Chrysalis had left were gone, destroyed when he had lost control of his size during the fall. The wounds shifted as he breathed, joining the rest of his injuries in torturing him.

His one-eyed gaze drifted towards Discord. The chimera was leaning against Pith's stretcher and occupying himself with swapping out the various items from Tailspin's saddlebags when her back was turned, making it impossible for her to take inventory.

"My eyes are down here, big boy," said a voice in his ear.

Spike blinked and turned his head slightly. There was a second, smaller Discord, this one hardly the size of a kitten, sitting on one of his hands and grinning maliciously up at him. No one else seemed to have noticed, and the original was still snickering to himself at the pegasus' expression. Spike looked back down and let out a low rumble from the back of his throat.

"What do you want?" His voice was as quiet as he could make it.

The tiny Discord patted the back of his hand with its stubby paw. "Just checking up on an old friend," it said, its voice dripping sincerity. "After all, you and I are the last of the old guard now."

The foulest of foul weathers, the endless eons, the thickest of thieves - and it comes down to us. You and me, Spikey-Wikey. Pals."

The thing dropped onto its belly and slithered up his arm, then dropped into a sitting position on the back of his neck. Spike could feel it sitting there, behind his head, and whispering. "So I thought I'd come over here for a little heart-to-heart, while Miss Not-A-Cripple-Anymore is finishing up the sorting. You ran off in rather a huff after our last discussion, after all. I just wanted to be sure there are no... shall we say, hard feelings between us? After all, I am trying ever so hard to be helpful."

Spike looked back to Tailspin and Compass. The two of them were putting on their cloaks and fashioning crude torches from the remnants of the fire. Around them, the once-grand entrance hall was dark, ruined, flooded with unnatural shadows fed by the hatred of a pony he had once known and loved. The throne room was full of statues of his friends and his wife, but they were all worn with age. And, in the end, they were nothing but stone.

That's the closest you'll ever get to seeing any of them again.

He grit his teeth. "No," he rumbled. "No hard feelings."

The front gates of Castle Canterlot opened slowly. Even with all of Spike's bulk thrown against them, they were massive, heavy things. If the force of impact from his crash hadn't reduced almost the entire top half of them to rubble, he doubted that he would have been able to move them at all.

As it was, he still barely managed it. He couldn't make use of one of his arms, and the rest of his body wasn't in much better shape. It took him almost a full minute to force the gates open, but eventually they swung wide, accompanied by the sound of grinding stone. In their wake, he stepped out onto the front steps, the others following at his heels.

Laid out before them was the gutted carcass of what had once been the most beautiful city in Equestria.

The raw magic that permeated the mountains was just as strong here. A few yards away from the open gates, the city seemed to be fighting with itself. A three-story stone ruin that had probably been some sort of store was clashing with one of the city plazas. One street seemed to have seven endpoints when Spike tried to trace its length from afar. A tall, spired building became the memorial cemetery when looked at from another angle.

And, overhead, the windigos raged.

Canterlot had not escaped their touch. The city was a study in shadows and ice. Most buildings were nothing but outlines, their remains too caked with rime to be made out. The frost had taken on odd, misshapen contours under the pressure of the howling winds. Their shadows filled the streets and seemed to writhe at the edge of vision.

Spike shuddered and looked away. Just here, in front of the castle gates, they seemed to be in the eye of the magical storm. There was wind here, but it was just a breeze. It was cold, but not unnaturally so, and far from being as powerful as the gale that whipped the snow off of the buildings ahead and churned it into a thick, icy mist. The windigos circled the castle above, neighing and thundering through the sky as they searched for a way in, but they couldn't seem to get past the edge of the intangible barrier around the castle. Their cries sounded distant.

"Adorable, aren't they?" said Discord mildly from somewhere behind him. "They remind me so much of myself when I was younger. So brash, so eager to see ponies suffering in entertaining ways." He let out a sigh. "It's a shame that they turned out to be so unimaginative, really. All I did was twist the background magic a little bit, make the path here a bit more confusing, and suddenly they're completely at a loss. Amateurs, the lot of them."

"And yet they're the ones who haven't been locked up in a throne room for several hundred years," said Tailspin, sounding faintly amused. Discord made a scandalized noise, but she ignored him. "Compass? You're sure you want to do this?"

Spike turned. All three of the ponies were wearing heavy cloaks and holding torches. Tailspin and Pith had pulled theirs up over their faces, but Compass Rose had left hers back, presumably to leave her horn free. She was squinting upward, towards the circling windigos. She was also shaking.

"Yes," she said. Her voice was surprisingly firm. "I'm sure. It's our best shot."

It was impossible to make out Tailspin's expression under her hood, but Spike could see enough to tell she was frowning. "I just don't want you to end up h-"

"If she thinks she can do it, let her do it," Pith said in his usual, even tones. "She's done the impossible twice already."

"A mare after my own heart," Discord said, grinning widely. He raised his clawed hand, fingers poised to snap, and raised an eyebrow towards Compass. "Say the word, madam."

"Not yet," said Compass quietly. "Let me... get ready."

She closed her eyes.

Compass Rose was rapidly becoming familiar with the twin sensations of panic and exhaustion. She was also beginning to realize that she worked at her best under pressure.

Over the course of her travels with the others, when lives were on the line, she had found strength and skill that she hadn't known she possessed. When the changelings attacked them in the Tangle, she had beaten them back with nothing but a spellbook as a weapon. When Tailspin had been at death's door, she had somehow, impossibly, managed to create a healing spell that even she didn't fully understand and successfully translate it for use by others. When the windigos had attacked, she had managed to find the path to Canterlot through impossible geometries and blinding, hostile snow.

Even asking Pith to break the resin around her horn had been a result of her newfound strength, in a way. She wouldn't have been able to stomach making that request before, she knew. Even now, she wasn't entirely sure how she had made herself go through with it, let alone how she had still managed to provide emergency care for Tailspin immediately afterward.

It wasn't a nice thought. Knowing that she was at her best when things were at their bleakest wasn't pleasant. But it was... bracing.

She just had to hope that her horn was still intact enough to allow her to cast the spell she had devised.

To her mild surprise, she wasn't too worried that her spell wouldn't work. She had felt firsthand the type of magic that the windigos used - the type of magic that they were made of. It was a cold, hungry, spiteful thing, strong as the blizzard they summoned. But it was also precarious, in a way. Fighting them wasn't a matter of power. It was a matter of finesse.

The problem wasn't in the spell, or in the power required. It was with her.

She pushed those thoughts out of her mind for the moment. One step at a time. Take it piece by piece.

Her senses had been dulled by the breaking of her horn. She could sense the magic within herself only dully, and she groped for it like a blind mare, trying to gather up as much of it as she could. Before, this would have been trivial. Now it was almost impossible, but she managed. Then it was just a matter of preparing the spell, crafting the raw magic into a coherent form.

You're one of us. You earned us.

It was ready.

Compass Rose opened her eyes, grimaced, and readied the spell. A weak, wispy green aura flickered into being around the remains of her horn.

"All right," she said. "Now."

Discord snapped his fingers.

There was the sense of the world twisting in on itself. Suddenly, the howling of the windigos seemed much closer.

Wind, sharp and biting, whistled across Spike's scales. Sleet hissed across his vision and stung his eye, forcing him to blink rapidly in an effort to clear his vision. When he managed it, he looked up.

The windigos were bearing down on the five of them, riding a cloud of swirling ice. They tossed their heads wildly, and the high, piercing shrieks they let out echoed throughout the city.

The temperature was already dropping. Hoarfrost was forming on his tail, and he could hear the groan and crack of shifting stone as the castle froze. But there was something else, now, something that he hadn't felt the last time that the windigos had attacked.

It was as if the cold that the windigos conjured were inside him. He could feel it creeping inward. Worse, he could feel it spreading out. The sensation reminded him of the slow burning that he had felt when he thought the changelings had captured Twilight, the feeling of something powerful and inevitable swelling up from inside his own blood, but this was somehow worse.

The open wounds from Queen Chrysalis' attack felt as though someone had stabbed him with knives of ice.

"Compass?" It was Tailspin shouting, her voice barely audible over the screaming of the incoming blizzard.

"I'm-" The unicorn gave a slight gasp, and Spike saw that she was shaking with effort. "I'm trying." Her horn was glowing steadily now, but there was a network of cracks visible on it. They spidered across the remaining surface, pulsing with the same green as her aura. It looked as if it were about to explode.

"We're running out of time," Tailspin shouted again. She moved up to stand beside the unicorn, leaning against her as if to offer support. "Are you sure you can-"

"No!" Compass' eyes were shut again, and the cracks on her horn seemed to be widening. "But I'm going to try!"

For almost three full seconds she stood, trying to force out the spell in silence. The windigos were nearly on them now. Spike could see their manes flying in the wind. Every shriek left his ears ringing.

"I can do this!" Compass' eyes snapped open, and she squinted at her targets. "I just - have to push - a little harder-"

Despite her look of exertion, the green aura around her horn began to fade.

"Okay, time's up!" screamed Tailspin. "Discord, get us out of h-"

The world condensed itself into a single point, twisted around, turned inside-out, and went black. Spike screamed. No sound came out.

A moment later, the universe sprang back into existence. The next thing he felt was a sudden, sharp impact as he collapsed against one of the ruined, frozen hulks of Canterlot's former residences. He didn't hit particularly hard - he had apparently sprung into existence just a foot or so above the ground - but he felt disoriented nonetheless. Discord's method of teleportation was much less enjoyable than Twilight's, and Spike had never particularly cared even for that.

He heaved himself to his feet, stared around at the streets of Canterlot, and grated, "Discord, why are we still here?"

Discord was standing in the middle of the street, still holding Pith's stretcher in one hand. They, at least, seemed to have arrived upright. Tailspin and Compass, however, were still trying to pick themselves up.

The chimera was staring at his fingers as if he'd never seen them before. "I appear," he said slowly, "to be having some technical difficulties. Perhaps I am a bit more under the weather than even I realized. Or perhaps all of this background magic-"

"Just get us out of here!" shouted Tailspin. The pegasus had managed to regain her footing, and was pointing down the street with one hoof. "They're coming!"

It was almost impossible to tell what part of the city she was indicating. Here, things were so mixed up that Spike wasn't even certain of the distance between himself and the others. But even through the eye-twisting haze of magic, they could all see the windigos bearing down on them once more.

Before anyone could say anything more, the world folded in on itself again. This time he managed to keep from screaming, and he kept his feet when they reappeared in another street that looked almost identical to the one that they had just left.

"Discord!"

The draconequus just lowered his clawed hand, gulped, and murmured, "Oh, dear."

The screams of the windigos echoed around them. Spike wheeled on the spot and saw the herd of them barreling down the twisted city streets towards them like an oncoming freight train.

Without really thinking about it, he stepped to the side, placing his scaled bulk between the windigos and the others. "Compass!" His voice came out as a bark. "Stay behind me! And get that spell working!"

"Spike, you can't fight them," Tailspin shouted. "You have to use magic! You said so yourself!"

The dragon bared his fangs. The ice in his veins was screaming at him. He couldn't have backed down if he wanted to. There was finally something in front of him that he could fight. One of his problems finally had an answer that he understood. Despite the cold, despite the pain in his body, despite the feeling of being frozen from the inside out, Spike grinned.

"I'm going to try."

He dug his talons into the ice beneath his feet, braced himself against the building wind, and roared.

And the world went white.

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// 27: What Bound Them// Story: What Bound Them// by Headless//-----//

Dragon.

Spike had always known, intellectually, what the word meant. Dragons were dangerous creatures, all scales and teeth and fire. They were beings of anger, greed, jealousy, and hate. Their lives were literally paced by how much of those traits they exhibited. The angrier they became, the more precious the things they hoarded, the larger and stronger they could grow.

Now, for the first time in his life, he embraced it.

In the Everfree forest, he had been unable to stop himself from changing. It had been an automatic reaction. Twilight Sparkle was in danger. Twilight Sparkle was precious to him. His

body had answered without any actual conscious decision taking place, the same way that it had on the day that Rarity died.

This time, he was calling it up deliberately. That terrified him, but he did it anyway. He couldn't deny the feeling bubbling up inside his chest.

His wings were broken. His scales, shattered. His bones, fractured. His eye, so swollen that he thought it might never open again. His wounds, open once more. His body, full of the sensation of dark, dark ice spreading through his veins, radiating outward from the rents in his scales where Queen Chrysalis' magic had struck.

Rarity, taken from him in the most brutal way possible.

Rainbow Dash, Pinkie Pie, Fluttershy, Applejack, Shining Armor, Scootaloo, Apple Bloom, Sweetie Belle, all dead and buried, alongside countless others.

Ponyville, lost to the mists of time.

Canterlot, reduced to rubble and ice.

Celestia, murdered by her own sister.

Luna, consumed by insanity.

Twilight Sparkle, gone.

For the first time in his life, Spike the dragon wanted to hurt something.

Before, it had been a reflex. He couldn't have stopped himself from burning the changelings in the Everfree Forest if he had tried. It was simply what dragons did when something precious to them was threatened. Even then, he had made the conscious decision to not kill Queen Chrysalis when he had the opportunity.

Now, he chose it. He could feel the raw, seething anger welling up within him, and he couldn't fight it. He didn't want to fight it. He wanted to get it out, to purge it from his mind in any way he could. He wanted to take that rage and channel it into his claws and teeth and flame and simply hurt something until he had taken all of the pain inside himself and forced it out onto his target.

He wasn't proud of it. He didn't want to feel that way. But now the windigos were here. They were offering themselves to him as receptacles for his anger.

Spike, said a very, very small voice in the back of his mind, I'm so sorry.

He still didn't know whether or not the windigos could be physically killed, but he remembered the feeling of impact the first time that he had swung at them. Even if they couldn't be beaten, they could be slowed.

As the stampeding forms of the windigos bore down on him, unsure of whether he was doing it out of anger or fear or sorrow or some other emotion entirely, Spike reared up onto his back legs, spread his claws, and screamed at them.

Compass felt the world spin around her as the blast of icy wind plucked her from her hooves and hurled her, end-over-end, into the sleet. She hit hard, bounced, hit again, skidded to a halt as ice and stone alike battered at her already-sore body. The threads of the spell spun away into the corners of her mind once more.

She was wearing a thick cloak and thicker boots, but already she felt frozen to the core. Every pained breath caused the air in front of her face to fog heavily for a moment, just before the steam was subsumed into the rest of the storm. The blizzard the windigos had brought with them reduced visibility around her to the point that she could barely make out her own hooves if she squinted. No sound but the rushing of the storm reached her ears, save for the occasional shriek from the windigos.

No, that wasn't entirely true. There was another sound, but Compass Rose did her best to shut it out. It was an oily little whisper, right next to her ear, that she could somehow make out over the wind. It said things to her that she didn't even want to contemplate in the safety of her own mind, let alone hear spoken aloud.

The same voice had spoken to her the first voice the windigos had attacked, before they reached the safety of the castle. It wormed its way into her mind, found all the things that she didn't want to think about, and brought them up. It felt the same way that the magic in the castle had: hungry, corrosive, wrong.

She attempted to push it aside and get herself upright. There were others who needed her help. They were counting on her to cast the spell.

you could have done it already if he hadn't crippled you

Even though she had only been on the ground for a few seconds, the ice had begun to set in. She heard a crackling noise as she wrenched her right fore hoof free of it and stood up. And the ice was inside her now, too, the same way it had been the first time. The windigos were reaching into her. They were feeding.

She swung her head back and forth, looking for any sign of the others. There was nothing but blinding snow and the shadows of the windigos circling her.

Once again, she felt herself slipping past simple panic and moving into the oddly calm waters beyond, where each of her thoughts rang with impossible clarity.

Find the path.

The Elements of Harmony. Even though she had never seen them, they were the answer. They were separate, but one. There was something that connected them, a thread of magic that kept them united.

Eyes shut, Compass Rose reached out with her dulled, clumsy magic and found the thread that bound them. And, at the other end, there was a pull.

She staggered off.

The windigos didn't come to him. The ice came first, forming around Spike's legs in thick layers, trying to pin him to the spot. He heaved with all of the strength that his anger brought and snapped through it without even trying.

The voice in his head was screaming now. Every painful memory, every repressed hurt he had ever felt, was being dredged up and recited to him in a litany of pain. He didn't know if it was his own mind doing it, or if the windigos were summoning it up, or if it even mattered. He just knew that his rage was still rising.

He lunged forward, turning his scream into a roar. The blizzard drank and deadened the sound as he brought his talons around, swiping at the closest shape, anticipating the shock of impact that he had felt before.

It never came. His claws passed through the spirit as if it didn't exist, and it galloped away unharmed. The shriek it emitted seemed to mock him as it went.

He spun, lashed out again as another of the herd came too close. Again, his claws passed through it as if it weren't there.

You can free her from all this. Chrysalis' voice. Images of the castle, of Twilight cocooned and helpless, danced in front of his eyes. His claws smashed into stone, tore it apart effortlessly.

The last of the old guard. Discord's misshapen face, grinning at him, mocking his loss, piling more and more injuries onto him even as he claimed to be helping. Spike's tail lashed out,

ignoring the scream of injured bones and bruised muscle. A building, only partially visible in the storm, collapsed on itself from the impact. You ponies are so predictable.

He'll lose them all eventually. Princess Celestia, calm and collected as always, with that same damn soft smile that she meant to be comforting but which only emphasized the fact that she didn't care the same way he did, that she didn't feel the pain he had when Rarity was laid to rest.

He roared to the sky, spitting green flame, still thrashing at the windigos. His movements were wild, uncontrolled, desperate; he needed a target, and he was being denied. The pain in him was boiling up and he couldn't keep it in any more, oh please just give me some way to make it stop-

I promise. I promise, I promise, I promise.

The rising cacophony in his head was gone, replaced only by those words. They rang around his head like a condemnation. They hurt more than he could possibly describe.

She promised.

She lied.

Now the sensation of something rising within him wasn't metaphorical. He could feel it in his throat, an obstruction forcing its way upward, like the force of his fire but oh so much more painful. He tasted bile, felt his throat burn and ache, felt something thick and tar-like leaking from between his shattered teeth.

The wounds Queen Chrysalis had left felt like they had been reopened, as if someone had stabbed him right through those rents in his scales with blades of ice.

He had to get it out.

This time, when he opened his mouth to spit flame at his attackers, no green fire came. Instead, something else poured out of him, something black and smoky, something that looked like flame but flowed like tar and clung to what it struck and sizzled and melted and corroded. He hated it, hated the bitter taste, hated the unnatural feel, hated the way it burned him from the inside. He wanted it to stop, but every time he tried, he felt as though it were pooling inside him, and that was worse.

So he forced it out in great, heavy goutts, turning the white snow black and scouring away the stone. Around him, the windigos shrieked louder.

Ahead of her, Compass could hear screaming.

It wasn't the howling of the winds or the unnatural keening of the windigos. It was a pony's voice, caught somewhere between terror and anger. There weren't any words to it. It was the scream of someone who couldn't find any words that could express what they were feeling. She pushed towards it.

It was Tailspin. The pegasus was standing, crouched low, beside a figure half-buried in the snow. It took her a moment to realize that it was Pith Helmet, and for a moment, she thought that he might be dead, but then he lifted his head and she let out a sigh of relief. The stretcher was gone, as was his torch. He just couldn't stand up.

Compass forced her way through the blizzard towards them, blinking rapidly to keep her vision clear in the blinding sleet. As she approached, she saw one of the windigos swoop down towards them, causing the ice beneath it to grow even thicker. Tailspin screamed again and reared up on her hind legs to kick at it.

It didn't look like she had landed a very solid blow, but the thing shrieked and wheeled away.

"Tailspin!"

She didn't think that her voice would be strong enough to reach, but the pegasus turned to face her anyway. Compass couldn't make out her expression through the snow, but a moment later, she found herself being pulled into a one-legged embrace as Tailspin pulled her close.

"Where's Spike?" She was shouting into Compass' ear, trying to make herself audible through the storm.

"I don't know! I haven't seen him!"

"Can you cast the spell?"

Compass flinched, but forced out a reply anyway. "No! I tried! Felt like my horn was going to break again!"

"Then what do we do?"

Tailspin released her grip on Compass, turned away, and heaved Pith to his feet. The stallion's coat was covered in frost, but he managed to keep from shaking, and even stood on his own despite his broken leg. He moved in to join the other two.

"We find Spike," he shouted. "And then we run for it."

"What about Discord?" Compass cast her gaze about at the circling windigos and pressed a bit closer to the other two.

"Can't find him," answered Tailspin.

Compass blinked. "We can't just leave him!"

"He's probably run off already!" came Pith's reply. "Focus on us!"

Compass opened her mouth to reply, to try and argue, but she was interrupted by another shout from Tailspin. The pegasus' sudden movement as she kicked out at another windigo almost sent Pith sprawling to the ground again, but he somehow managed to stay on his hooves despite having to keep his broken leg off the ground.

"No time!" Tailspin shouted. "Let's move! Find Spike!"

Compass clenched her teeth. There was no time. They had to keep moving, or they would be frozen solid. Even as she thought it, she had to wrench one of her hooves away from the street as the encroaching ice worked its way up past her boots.

"Fine!" she screamed. "Follow me!"

She reached out, searching for the thread again. When she found it, she gripped it with all her might and set off into the storm once again.

Spike wasn't sure what he was trying to do any more. He wanted so desperately to strike the windigos circling him, but his claws had no effect and the black sludge that came up instead of his flame only clung to them for an instant before disappearing into their spectral forms. He wasn't sure whether it hurt them or made them stronger.

But he kept struggling. Even as the temperature plummeted still further, he struggled. Even as the ice piled up on his scales and the weight became too much to bear, he struggled. When it forced him to the ground under its crushing pressure, when he felt it forming a solid shell around his body that he just couldn't seem to break, he kept thrashing, trying to snap through it with every ounce of strength left in him.

There wasn't much of that. He felt drained, like every mote of energy in him was being smothered in snow. The whiteness of the blizzard was being replaced by blackness at the edges of his vision, and he knew he was close to passing out. His thoughts were no longer coherent. They were being smashed to pieces by the clamoring voice in the back of his mind.

-she lied she lied she lied she lied-

Even calling up the black flame was too much effort now. He opened his mouth, tried to force it up, but was only answered by a thin trickle of bile that hissed past his teeth and scalded the stone beneath him as it pooled. He could feel it there inside, replacing the familiar, comforting warmth of his natural flame with acid, but he could no longer fight to force it out.

He felt his good eye begin to drift closed. The last thing he saw before it shut was the windigos moving in.

And then there were hooves on the scales of his chest, trying weakly to shake him awake.

"Spike!" It was Compass Rose's voice. His eyelid twitched, but he couldn't summon the energy to lift it.

There was a series of impacts around his back. He felt them only dimly, and even less dimly registered that somepony was attempting to carve him out of the ice. He felt too drained to care.

He didn't even feel cold any more.

"Spike, please!" Compass sounded as though she were sobbing. "We need you!"

Princess Celestia's face swam into his mind's eye, flanked by the staring ponies who had attended Rarity's funereal procession. We need you to be strong now, Spike.

Everypony needed something from him. They always had.

Number One Assistant.

There was a brief flare of anger again as he thought about all the ponies that had demands for him. They all wanted him to give something, and he always had. A shoulder to cry on, a helping hand, a few moments of his time. Years of his life. His heart. His trust. And the world had done nothing but rob him in return.

But even that anger faded in the face of the cold.

"It's no use!" Tailspin's voice. "The ice is too thick! I can't get him out!"

Spike felt a sudden sensation of cold along the underside of his neck and his jaw. He hadn't realized that he was lowering himself to the ground, but he was there now, all the same. His body stretched out along the street and waited for the ice to creep over it.

There was more than one set of hooves against him now, and he realized that all three of them - Pith was there, too, apparently - had gathered around his head and were attempting to shake him awake.

Tailspin was screaming at him. "Damn it, Spike, we're not leaving you here! Get up!"

He debated trying to find the energy to reply, then decided that it wasn't worth it.

The coating of ice had nearly reached his head now. He could feel it pressing down on the scales of his neck. There was another series of dull impacts.

One of them was trying to dig him out. He wondered why.

Partners.

The word seemed important, for some reason. Even through the screaming in the back of his brain, it echoed. And, accompanying it, there was a dim spark of color: a brilliant sky blue.

His eye flickered open.

Tailspin was there, standing directly in front of his snout and shouting at him. He could no longer hear her words over the howling of the blizzard. The wind was too strong.

But he could see the golden necklace under her cloak, and the sparkling, heart-shaped ruby set into it.

He lifted his gaze to her face, and saw that she was crying while she shouted to him. There were tracks of ice across her muzzle where the tears had frozen.

Slowly, he gathered his legs beneath him, summoned up what strength he could, and heaved himself upward.

Tailspin danced back a few steps as Spike began to move. The dragon looked horrible, even through the ice; there was something black and tarry seeping from the gaps in his scales, and from between his teeth. There was enough ice around his back legs that they weren't visible at all, and the rest was growing thicker by the moment. Even with his size and strength, it looked like an impossible burden.

But somehow, slowly, he managed to force himself upward. His body shook with the effort of it. She could see his scales shifting as muscles rippled beneath them, shaking with the titanic effort involved. Every crack of the ice was like a gunshot, deafening even above the storm.

Stone cracked under his talons. Around them, the windigos screamed, and Tailspin could see the ice piling higher and higher as they tried to keep him pinned. But he kept rising.

She wasn't sure how long it took, but eventually Spike was standing upright. He tore his back legs free of the ice with a sound like an explosion and staggered towards her.

Compass Rose slipped and slid across the stone to stand with her. A moment later, Pith Helmet limped over to stand on her other side.

Spike raised one claw and, with great care, moved it forward to rest the tip against the ruby necklace.

There was a flash of blinding red. When Tailspin managed to clear her vision, she saw Spike raise his head, open his mouth, and breathe forth a lance of scarlet flame at the circling windigos. The heat from it was enough to instantly turn the ice around them to steam, but she felt no pain. It was like a gentle, warm breath against her coat.

The windigos screeched again and again as the dragon turned his fire on each of them in turn. She watched in silence as they disintegrated beneath the ruby-red torrent, taking the blizzard with them.

When it finally ended, when Spike finally shut his jaws and let the flame die away, the four of them were left standing in the middle of the ruins of Canterlot, with no windigos in sight. The ice had gone, leaving nothing but ruined stone around them. There were still storm clouds overhead, but they were just that and no more. There was no sign of the sleet that had blinded them just moments ago.

Spike turned back to them and stared for a moment. Tailspin saw that he was swaying, and the black tar was still oozing from his reopened wounds.

There was a series of creaking, popping sounds as he began to shrink back down to his normal size. When he was back to being on eye level with Pith, he stopped, swallowed hard, and said, "I'm sorry."

And then he toppled. He was unconscious before he hit the ground.

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// 28: Disharmony// Story: What Bound Them// by Headless//-----//

It wasn't often that Discord wanted to sit still. He usually hated it. The lack of activity just grated on his nerves, even if, technically speaking, he could be sitting absolutely motionless in a physical sense and still bouncing off the walls in a magical one. Sitting still just felt wrong.

But now he was perched on the ruined widow's walk of what had been one of Canterlot's finest manors, and could have easily been mistaken for a statue. Or a gargoyle, at least, given his twisted features.

He wasn't entirely sure how long he'd been there before he heard the distant clop-clop of approaching hooves. There was only one set of them. He wasn't in the least bit surprised.

"Discord?"

It was the green unicorn, the one with the pinched features and far-too-early crow's feet. Oh, and the broken horn, of course. Of course it would be her. No, not in the least bit surprised.

Just... disappointed.

"Discord? Where are you?"

She was staring around at broken windows, as if expecting him to be on one of the ground levels. He sighed inwardly. Nopony ever thought to look up. They were all so dreadfully simple.

Still, he had already cast in his lot. May as well get it over with.

He fixed an utterly perfect, utterly fake smile onto his features, stepped forward off the balcony, and found himself behind the searching unicorn. When he spoke, his voice was its usual airy, carefree self.

"You rang?"

Compass Rose jumped at the sound of his voice. She had been expecting it, in a way, but that didn't keep it from startling her. She spun around to face Discord and fought to get her heartbeat under control.

The draconequus was still wearing that same smug, self-satisfied expression that he always did. He didn't show any signs of injury, or even of worry. He just looked like he always did.

Granted, that was still horrible to look at - even without the fact that his existence made her head swim, Discord was still a twisted mockery of a pony - but she found herself breathing a sigh of relief anyway.

"There you are," she said. "I was beginning to think you'd run off. Or that the windigos had..."

"Of course not," said Discord jovially. He took a few steps along the street, almost skipping as he went. "Didn't I say that they remind me of myself when I was younger? They wanted to take the time to catch up, as it were. Honestly, it was rather dull, as they aren't exactly the greatest conversationalists, but I have never been one to judge."

Compass blinked, then raised an eyebrow. "You spoke to them?"

"Well, yes." Discord stopped and gave her a quizzical look over his shoulder. "Didn't you? They do tend to repeat themselves a bit, but they do so love to talk. Surely you heard them as well?"

Compass shuddered at the memory of the oily whispers that had snaked their way into her brain during the blizzard. "Yes," she said. "But I tried to ignore it."

"Oh, it's never good to ignore them." Discord wagged a finger at her. "After all, they only tell you what you're already thinking. What have I been saying about living in denial?"

The unicorn tilted her head to one side. "Then what did they say to you?"

There was the most infinitesimal of pauses before Discord shrugged. "Not much," he said. His voice still retained its usual sound of amusement. "After all, what could I possibly be angry about? Now, you - I imagine somepony like you has quite a few things to be upset and afraid over."

Compass eyed him for a moment. He was avoiding anything approaching a direct answer again, but he always did that. He seemed as smug as ever, and there was no sign of injury. And yet...

She shook her head and said, "No. Almost nothing to be angry about. Worried and afraid, yes. But not angry."

"Oh, really?" Discord leaned forward, grinning like a lunatic, until his picket fence of yellowed teeth was mere inches from her muzzle. One of his claws came up and traced a line along the top of her head, stopping just above her horn. She managed to keep herself from pulling away, even as he spoke again and the stink of his rotten breath rolled over her. "Not even about losing this?"

She swallowed hard, fighting the sudden dryness in her mouth. "No. I told him to do it. I wish it hadn't happened, but I don't blame him." Finally, the ache grew too much for her to bear, and she raised a hoof to push his claw away. "I'm just worried that it'll end up with somepony getting hurt because I can't use magic any more. Like it almost did here." She paused, an image of Spike's oozing wounds drifting through her mind, and added, "Did."

"The purple one?" Discord straightened up and waved one hand dismissively. "He'll be fine. Dragon and all that. And he's a tough one, even for a dragon. Saved the Crystal Kingdom when

he was just a baby, you know. Got a stained-glass window dedicated to him and everything." He laughed. "Of course, it's nothing on the ones I had in that one back there-" he jerked a thumb towards the distant castle "-but still, an impressive achievement."

Compass blinked. "Spike has a memorial dedicated to him?"

"Of course," said Discord, with a disinterested yawn. He let himself fall backward and lounged there, suspended in midair as if it were the most normal thing in the world. "Several, in fact. And a statue, assuming dear Cadence hasn't torn it down in a fit of pique by now. He was quite the celebrity back then, actually. Younger brother and chief confidant of the Princess of Magic, Ponyville's resident dragon, savior of the Crystal Kingdom, and any number of other titles. I believe he was formally knighted at some point, though I never paid much attention to that sort of thing."

"And what about you?" Compass sat back on her haunches and looked up at him curiously.

"Hm?" Discord blinked. "What about me?"

"You said you had some dedicated to you as well," she said, waving a hoof. "Were you ever knighted?"

The chimera let out a harsh laugh, almost a bark. "Of course not," he said, grinning still more widely. "Why would anypony knight me? I am, after all, Discord. Spirit of disharmony, Lord of Chaos, Prince of Madness, et cetera."

"But you saved Equestria," Compass pointed out. "You stopped the moon."

Discord raised an eyebrow. "And?"

"And," she continued firmly, "you're reformed, aren't you? You lived in the castle with the princesses. You're helping us now, even though you're weak. You tried to stop Nightmare Moon. You tried to stop all of this."

He laughed again. There was a twist of space, and then his paw was draped around her shoulders as he pulled her against his side. "Oh, my dear Compass Rose," he said, pinching her cheek with his other hand, "you have a lot to learn about public relations. Just because I did the occasional good deed doesn't mean I was liked. My memorials commemorate the centuries I spent spreading chaos across Equestria, lording it over all you little ponies like - well, like a god, in fact. As it turns out, some ponies tend to hold a grudge about that kind of thing."

She shook herself out of his grasp and looked up at him, frowning. "So that's what they said to you, then," she said. "The windigos."

Again, the most infinitesimal of pauses. Then Discord laughed and skipped away, shaking his head. "Ah, now, Miss Kindness," he said, in entirely bright and cheerful tones, "just because you're a bit more tolerable than the others doesn't mean I want you prying into my private business. We don't know one another that well just yet. Besides, don't we have places to be, magic to eat, lives to save, that sort of thing?"

And he danced off, humming to himself. Compass stared at his retreating back for a moment, then shook her head and set off after him.

For what felt like the hundredth time, Spike woke to discover new and interesting varieties of pain.

There was his sore throat, for starters. It felt as though it had been scraped raw. So did the inside of his mouth, but the pain there seemed less pronounced because he was too distracted by the horrible, bitter taste on his tongue.

All of that paled in comparison to the feel of the wounds Queen Chrysalis had inflicted on him. Even immediately after she had struck him, they hadn't felt like this. Now they subjected him to a horrible combination of sensations, like they were simultaneously being torn open, growing so cold that they were numb, and rotting away.

He took a moment to try and force the pain down, trying to push it out of his mind. They weren't small injuries, but he was a dragon, and they weren't large enough to kill him. It only partially worked.

There were voices nearby. Pith Helmet and Tailspin were talking to one another in low voices. He couldn't make out the words, but after a while, Tailspin laughed, and Pith gave what sounded like an embarrassed snort.

Spike opened his good eye.

The two ponies were sitting a few feet away. Tailspin was jabbing Pith in the side with one hoof and grinning slyly at him, while the stallion was obviously trying not to laugh, despite his look of embarrassment.

Spike gave a grunt and lifted his head. Immediately, the two of them turned to look at him, and Tailspin leapt to her hooves, her grin vanishing. Now she looked concerned.

"Heya, Spike," she said as she trotted up to him. Her voice had a note of forced cheer in it. "How you feeling?"

He blinked slowly at her, and she gave him a slightly sheepish smile. "Well, I've got to ask, right? It's not every day you start leaking oil." She lifted a hoof and pointed towards his chest.

The dragon turned his head to look at his scales. There was indeed something black and viscous oozing from his wounds. He had been half expecting it, but it still worried him. He let out a low sound in the back of his throat and looked back to her.

"Awful."

She let her false smile fade and moved a bit closer. "Are you going to be all right?"

"I don't know." Spike shrugged, then winced as his scales moved painfully. "I think the windigos did something to me. Or their magic reacted with Queen Chrysalis'. Or something." He hissed softly as one of his wounds twinged. "It... hurts. And it feels wrong. But I don't think I'm going to die just yet."

The pegasus gave a heavy sigh and dropped into a sitting position. "We need to get you to a doctor," she said. Then she paused, glanced over her shoulder at Pith, and continued, "We all need to see a doctor. As soon as possible, preferably. I've done my best with the big guy's leg, but it's not set properly and I know it. Compass can't keep pushing herself like she has been, you're, well-" she waved a hoof at his wounds "-bleeding tar, and I've got no idea what kind of magic I'm even living off of here."

Spike looked down at the ruby and shook his head. "Neither do I," he said, "but I don't think it's harmful. When I touched it, and all that red fire came up, I felt..." He searched for the right word for a few seconds, then gave up and said, "Better. I think it's become magical because of what I felt about Rarity and all the rest of my friends. It's not bad magic."

Tailspin nodded. "I guessed. But I'd still rather have myself checked over, along with the rest of you. We just have to hope we can get out of these mountains before the changelings take out all the fortresses. At least two of us are in need of expert care, which means military."

"Speaking of which," Pith said suddenly, "I think Compass just found our ride."

"That's me," said Discord brightly. He and Compass Rose were approaching from one of the side streets. "Chaos Taxi Services, Incorporated. The highest position in life any spirit of disharmony could ever aspire for."

Spike glanced down at Compass Rose. The unicorn was, for some reason, frowning heavily at Pith. He didn't seem to notice. He just kept eyeing Discord with the same suspicious look.

"I'd thought you'd be long gone by now," he said flatly. "Left me tied to that stretcher in the middle of a blizzard."

"Left? Never." Discord placed one paw over his chest, looking hurt. "I thought we had all agreed we're on the same side here. In case you hadn't noticed, the windigos were, to my shame, a bit more dangerous than I had anticipated. They separated us deliberately, after they kept me from getting us all off the mountaintop. They whisked me away for a little heart-to-heart."

Spike's one open eye narrowed. "Why would they do that?"

Discord grinned maliciously at him. "For the same reason they did it to you, Spikey boy. Better pickings. Aged like fine wine to boot." He wiggled a claw towards the wounds in the dragon's hide. "And it looks like they did a number on you indeed."

Spike suppressed the growl that rose up in his throat and settled for shaking his head. "Fine," he said. "Fine. They stopped you from taking us out of here. Can you do it now?"

"Not until we know whether or not he can heal himself," said Compass sharply. "That was the whole point of this, remember? And it's still our best shot."

"Quite," said Discord, nodding. "So. Assuming that you're all as sick of wasting time as I am-" Spike rolled his eye "-let's get on with this."

Tailspin stood up and trotted over to Pith. "Ready when you are," she said, as she helped the stallion to his hooves.

Discord grinned. "Then let's get started."

And he snapped his fingers.

When the world came back into focus, Spike found himself standing on top of a bluff overlooking a magically-distorted valley. Or, from another angle, he was standing in a valley and staring upward at a towering cliff. He tried to fight down the feeling of nausea that accompanied the dual vision, shook himself, and looked over towards Discord.

Everyone else did the same. The draconequus was standing at the very edge of the bluff, taking deep breaths and grinning. After a moment, he thumped his paw against his chest and said, "Ah, yes! Smell that mountain air. That's the stuff. Just the ticket for a recovering constitution such as mine."

"Well?" said Compass, taking a few steps forward to stand beside him. "Can you do it?"

The chimera smiled at her and patted the top of her head. "Already started, my dear. It's not exactly haute cuisine, but it is working." He flared his nostrils and sucked in another deep breath, then smacked his lips. "Ah... not a patch on what I used to have at my disposal, but it's far better than nothing. Like farm food. It's bland, but there's a lot of it. No offense to old Applejack's cooking, of course."

Compass broke into a wide, uncontrollable grin. "So it's going to work?" she said. Spike recognized the inflection in her voice. She sounded like Twilight always had after a breakthrough in her research. "You'll be able to stop the changelings?"

Discord stroked his goatee, looking thoughtful. "Hm. Possibly." One of his claws tapped against the longest of his fangs, making a soft clinking sound. "It's really an issue of time. If I had a week, perhaps, or a month, I might be able to gather up enough of this to do... almost anything. Given old Chryssi's timetable, though, I'm not sure."

Compass only looked slightly worried by this. "But it's a possibility."

"Everything's possible when I'm involved," said Discord airily. "That's the whole point of it, in fact. But I'll need time. As much time as you can give me."

"I thought we might have to do that," said Compass. She turned to face the rest of them, still smiling. "You see? We've got a chance. We can still do this, even without the Elements of Harmony. We just have to get back to the fortresses and tell them what's going on. If they know that Discord will be coming to help, they can plan around it. We can buy him the time he needs."

Spike snorted and eyed the chimera uneasily. He opened his mouth to say something, reconsidered, and shut it again.

"That's fine," said Pith, sounding skeptical, "but we've still got to get to the fortresses, and we're apparently on a range limit here."

"Not any more," said Discord brightly. "I'll need time to gather up enough to be comfortable confronting dear old Chryssi, but teleporting? Teleporting is easy. I've already got enough to send all of you halfway across the globe if I wanted to. Just say the word."

Pith frowned for a moment, then nodded. "Then Fort Maneholdt would be the best bet," he said. "Center of the cordon. Best place to go to get a message out."

"Your wish," said Discord, raising his claws, "is my command."

And he snapped his fingers, sending the four of them back into the void.

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// 29: Battle Plans// Story: What Bound Them// by Headless//-----//

When the universe sprang back into existence, Spike only had a moment to gather his bearings before there was the sound of splintering wood and he found himself falling again.

This time, though, it was only a drop of a few feet, and he was able to stay upright when he hit the floor. Discord had somehow managed to materialize the four of them directly on top of a large, circular table which was, in turn, located in the center of a large, circular room. It had then promptly given way under their combined weight, leaving the four of them in a heap of wood, scales, papers, and hooves at the center of the wreckage. They were surrounded by silent, gaping ponies. Every one of them was wearing a military uniform.

Spike wondered whether or not Discord had planned this. It fit his idea of humor.

The ponies around them were shouting now, and a good number of them were getting to their hooves. A few had sprinted for the exits, where even more were attempting to force their way in. Those ones were wielding spears, so he assumed that they were guards of some sort.

He groaned and attempted to get to his feet again, only to be stopped by a pained groan from behind him. Pith Helmet had landed badly, and was now curled up in a sort of defensive position around his broken leg. Spike's movements had jostled it sharply. The stallion had his teeth clenched hard and was taking light, rapid breaths, almost gasps.

Tailspin was the first to get herself upright, and she turned immediately towards the onrushing guards. "Wait, wait, wait!" She raised one hoof. "Scout First Class Tailspin!"

The guards arranged themselves in a semicircle around the four new arrivals and leveled their spears at them. One of them, an earth pony mare who was rather larger than the rest, said, "Passcode?"

Tailspin blinked. "What day is it?"

"Thirteenth."

"Diamonds, then." Tailspin shook her head as the guard grunted and looked over her shoulder, towards the crowd of watchers.

"Captain? One of yours?"

A familiar-looking stallion with an orange coat stepped out of the group. Spike recognized him almost immediately as Long Road, but he looked rather more formal than he had before. He gave the three of them a critical look, frowned, then nodded to the guardsmare.

As one, all of the guards brought their spears back to a more neutral position. Spike gave a sigh of relief.

"What is the meaning of this, Captain?" An older-looking stallion with a set of stars across his lapels had stepped forward as well, and was eyeing the four of them critically. "I wasn't aware that the Reconnaissance Corps had any dragons among its ranks."

Long Road saluted smartly. "No, sir, General," he said. "This is the dragon that I reported having arrived at Fort McHoofry, sir, along with the scouting party I dispatched from same."

"Captain," Tailspin interrupted, as she helped Pith to his feet, "I apologize for interrupting, and I'll be available for debriefing in just a few minutes, but we're all in need of medical attention here."

"Understood, Scout." Long Road nodded curtly to her. "We'll get you all to the infirmary as soon as possible. Debriefing will be in half an hour."

"Might want it to be sooner than that, sir," grunted Pith. He was standing awkwardly, trying to keep any weight off of his broken leg. Spike saw that the splint had come loose, leaving it bent in several places that it shouldn't have been. The stallion had a glassy look in his eyes as he attempted to remain upright. "We have critical information regarding the changelings."

The general narrowed his eyes and gave Pith a suspicious look, then turned to face the rest of the assembled ponies. "I think we'll need a moment to get this room back in order anyway," he said sharply. "All of you, dismissed for now. Reconvene here in one hour. Communications has orders to remain open for you around the clock, so take this time to send whatever orders you need to."

They all saluted, though Spike noticed that quite a few were looking uneasy and confused as they turned to leave. After a few moments, they were left alone with the general, Captain Road, and a few guards who had remained by the doors.

"Right," said the general, turning back to them. "Medical it is. We'll debrief you there, assuming you don't have to be put under for treatment. We're a bit short on time here. Can he walk?" The last was accompanied by him pointing to Pith, who nodded.

"Yes, sir," he said. "Slowly, but I can, sir."

"Good." The old stallion nodded, turned, and headed for the door. "This way, then. I want to know what's going on here."

Fort Maneholdt was a much more impressive construction than Fort McHoofry. Even in the scant few minutes that Spike had spent outside, he had seen a marked difference between the two. Fort Maneholdt, for one, was more crowded, both in terms of ponies and in terms of buildings, and the buildings in question were much larger than the ones he had seen before. Several of them were even made out of stone rather than wood.

They had been led immediately to an operating theater, accompanied by the sound of a unicorn's magically-amplified voice letting the rest of the encampment know that the dragon was not a threat. Now, Spike was lying on his side on a table while ponies in white uniforms busied themselves around him.

He had seen more operating rooms through other doors when they had entered; Fort Maneholdt's medical division seemed to have more resources than Fort McHoofry's as well. There were more doctors on hand as well. Three of them were around him alone, with at least one more checking up on each of his companions. Pith had two of them busy with his leg.

One of the healers assigned to Spike was a unicorn. He could feel their magic probing his wounds, studying him for any injuries hidden beneath the scales. It wasn't an unpleasant feeling, exactly. Just unusual.

He kept his good eye focused on Captain Road and the older stallion. He was called General Tempo, and Spike noted with some interest that the stallion's cutie mark, rather than being anything military in nature, was a conductor's baton.

The general was scowling at Captain Road now. The captain, for his part, was trying to remain upright and composed when he very obviously just wanted to bolt for the nearest door.

Tempo gave a snort. "So you sent these three off on a 'routine' scouting mission," he said. "I suppose you didn't think it necessary to report that they were explicitly accompanying the dragon, and this entirely routine scouting mission was taking place to investigate intel received from said dragon?"

"Sir." Road saluted, keeping his gaze determinedly fixed on a point some distance above the general's head. "No, sir. The dragon left on his own account. I merely authorized a scouting expedition on my own initiative, sir. We have very little intel on the mountains, and-"

"Stow it, Captain," snapped Tempo. "I'm not here for the runaround. You gave an incomplete report because you'd have been tied up in red tape for six months before this ever got authorized above-board. I know it, you know it, so stop trying to hide it and just give me the facts. What were they actually looking for?"

Captain Road opened his mouth, obviously searching for words, but didn't say anything for several seconds. Spike, more to spare the stallion any further vitriol from his superior than anything else, said, "Canterlot."

Tempo rounded on him. "And what," he said, "is Canterlot?" His voice was less angry now, but he still sounded as though he wasn't about to react kindly to any further stalling attempts.

"A city," Spike answered flatly. "From when I was young. It used to be the capitol of Equestria." He paused. "That's what we used to call this place. Canterlot was the center of magical learning back then. We thought we might find something useful there, to stop the changelings."

"Did this 'something useful' turn up to actually be there, then?" asked Tempo, raising an eyebrow. "You did say you had critical information."

Spike paused, then said slowly, "Not... exactly." He was about to continue when he heard the doctors moving around him begin to whisper among themselves. A moment later, there was a sudden, intensely relaxing sensation enveloping his body. It reminded him of the times that Rarity had dragged him to the spa. All the aches and pains that had been building up for the past few days seemed to melt away in an instant. He couldn't stop his gaze from drifting out of focus, or the contented sigh that followed.

The general stamped a hoof. "Get on with it, colt," he said sharply. "We're on a strict time limit here. You and your associates turned up in the middle of a war council, in case you hadn't noticed. We've got a defense to plan. Talk fast."

Spike blinked rapidly for a moment, then shook his head. He could feel the swelling around his left eye receding. For the first time in what felt like forever, he had his depth perception back. It was so tempting to just lie down and go to sleep while the wonderful, warm sensation coiled around him, but he forced himself to focus.

"It wasn't," he said. "We were there looking for the Elements of Harmony. Long story short, a powerful weapon from my time. There are six pieces, each of which can only be used by a single pony. They're selected by magic. Don't ask me how. If you have all six of them, though, and each is held by their chosen bearer, there's almost nothing they can't do. Queen Chrysalis wouldn't even have been a threat."

Tempo frowned. "But they weren't there," he said. "So what's this critical information?"

Spike let out a low rumble as something in his right arm, something that he hadn't even realized was dislocated, popped back into place. "Two things," he said, as he flexed his fingers experimentally. "One, we found out who can use the Elements." He tilted his head briefly towards the beds that the other three were lying on. "Compass, Pith, and Tailspin are each bearers for two of the six, so if we can find them, we'll be able to put them to use."

The stallion made a thoughtful sound. "Noted. What's the other thing?"

"Getting to that." Spike arched his back slightly as he felt some of his broken scales begin to knit themselves back together. Then he winced as there was a brief, sharp pain in his broken wing. One of the doctors mumbled "sorry", and it was immediately replaced with more of the relaxing sensation.

"We didn't find the Elements," he continued, "but we did find something else. Er. Somepony, I guess I should say. An... ally."

Captain Road blinked. For a moment, it looked as though he was about to say something, but he stopped and looked to Tempo instead. The older stallion just stood there, obviously waiting for an explanation.

Spike sighed. "His name," he said, unable to keep the note of reluctance out of his voice, "is Discord. And he's from... my time. Before my time, even. He's one of the few things in the world I think is actually... well, eternal, I guess, or close to it."

More patient silence from the general.

"He's the spirit of disharmony," Spike went on, after a moment. "And he's... strong. Very strong. 'He can bend the world to his whims' strong. Or he was, anyway. He's a bit weaker now."

The stallion's eyebrow raised itself a little higher.

"But he's on our side," the dragon went on, a bit hurriedly. "And he can stop Queen Chrysalis if we buy enough time for him."

Now the general's eyes narrowed. "If he's so powerful, why do we need to buy time?"

Spike sighed. The warm feeling was running itself over his wings now. He didn't dare turn his head to actually look - some part of him felt that this would somehow jinx it - but he thought he could feel his ruined wingflaps being stitched back together by the doctor's magic.

"Because he's weaker than he used to be, like I said," he explained. "He's up in the mountains right now, healing himself. He's... eating the raw magic that's all trapped up there, or something. I don't know exactly how to explain it."

"Sir, if I can speak freely," said Tailspin, raising herself up onto her forelegs, "I think that I can explain this. I know what sort of questions you're going to want to ask."

Tempo nodded to her. "Go ahead, Scout."

Tailspin saluted. The doctors around her had moved away to join those at the other tables, apparently satisfied that she was in no real physical distress. "Spike is over eight hundred years old at the minimum, sir. Probably much more than that. As strange as some of this might sound, I've seen the evidence of it personally. Everything he's said, I'll back him up on."

She took a deep breath. "Regarding the Elements: they exist, they are strong, and I've seen some things that confirm that we have some ties to them. Some old enchantments reacting consistently to my presence, for example. And Discord himself confirms that we are the bearers. Regarding Discord: he's real, he's essentially a god, and yes, from what I can tell, he's on our side, even if he's a bit... crazed." She shook her head. "We don't know how long it'll take for him to gather up all the power he needs, but once he does, I don't think there's a single thing in the world that could possibly stop him, General. The changelings won't stand a chance. As for how he got weakened, and how I can convince you that he's on our side, well, the one who took away his powers was the Mare in the Moon."

Tempo blinked at that, but Tailspin didn't pause. "Spike knew her personally, sir. The Mare, I mean. Before she became what she is. She used to be one of the rulers of Equestria, but there was an... incident with dark magic. If it weren't for Discord, the entire world would have been destroyed. But Tw- the Mare in the Moon went insane as a result, and cast a spell that locked him up and stripped him of his powers. She's his enemy as much as she is ours, sir. He wants revenge on her, and he's willing to help us because he thinks we can help him get that."

Spike lifted his head and glared at her. "Twilight is not our enemy," he said. It came out more harshly than he had intended.

Tailspin shot him a look of warning, but Tempo had already raised a hoof. "'Twilight'?"

"That's her name," Spike said, swinging his gaze around to face the old stallion again. He didn't feel relaxed any more. Tension was building up in his muscles, despite his best efforts to force it down. "She isn't your enemy. She isn't anyone's enemy. She's one of the greatest ponies I've ever known. She needs our help." He looked back to Tailspin. "If Discord thinks I'm helping him do anything to harm her, then he's going to be very disappointed." He clenched his teeth, too distracted to notice the fact that they were whole once again. "I'm here to help Twilight, not to hurt her."

Slowly, he became aware that every pony in the room was staring at him. Tailspin was wearing a pained expression. Compass looked concerned, Long Road looked almost frightened, and Pith just looked blank. Tempo was just giving him a long, appraising stare, as if sizing him up.

Spike opened his mouth to say something, found that he didn't have any more words, and shut it again.

After a few seconds, Tempo just grunted, then turned away and trotted off towards the other three. "Right," he said flatly, as if Spike's outburst hadn't happened. "Let's assume that this Discord is trustworthy, and as soon as he's got whatever he needs, we're home free. How long does he need?"

"You'd have to ask Compass Rose about that, sir," said Tailspin, saluting. "She was the one who came up with this plan."

The general turned to face Compass. "Well?"

The unicorn pushed herself upright and brought up a leg for her own, rather clumsier, salute. "I don't know exactly, sir," she said, frowning. "I don't think even he knows. He said 'as long as you can give me'. My plans were more along the lines of... theoretical battle plans, I suppose. Trying to maximize how long we can hold out, rather than attempting any sort of direct confrontation in an attempt to repulse the attack on their terms."

Tempo raised his eyebrow once again. "And you came up with...?"

"That depends entirely on how many unicorns we have capable of casting the changeling-shield spell that we believed would be found in that spellbook," said Compass. "You got a copy?"

"Yes, yes, I got a copy," said Tempo flatly. "Every outpost from here to the badlands did. And we found the spell. The problem is that we've only got six unicorns who are capable of casting it, and they can only maintain it for a few hours at a time."

Compass blinked, then bit her lower lip, looking worried. "Oh. I thought there would be more than that."

"Of course not." The general stamped a hoof. "That would imply that we might ever have something go in our favor here. I'll take it your 'plan' revolved around keeping the outer fortresses protected by those shields and funneling the battle inward, towards us?"

She nodded. "Where the fortifications are strongest," she said. Her eyes went slightly distant, and Spike had yet another flash of déjà vu for the times that Twilight would get completely absorbed in a logic puzzle or discussion of magical theory. "Using the foothills to the north as a natural shield, with more spellcasters down to the south so that they can't just march across the fields and-"

Tempo snorted. "Yes, we thought of that. Even if we're not trying just to delay them, forcing them into a fight on our terms is our best bet. That means getting them here. But we don't have the spellpower necessary, and if this 'Chrysalis' thing is as strong as your initial reports said it is, then if those insects have any brains, they'll go anywhere but here. We just don't have the raw numbers to hold the outlying forts. We've already called all personnel away from McHoofry and

all positions south of it. We're evacuating civilians from those areas as well. And we're still stretched too thin."

Spike cleared his throat, and the general swung around to glare at him again. "What?" he snapped.

The dragon raised a claw. "I think I might be able to help with a part of that, at least," he said slowly.

"How?" Tempo straightened up and gave him another appraising look. "You gonna go out there and take them all on?"

Spike laughed. "No," he said. "Not exactly. But the whole reason Chrysalis is doing this is because she's angry at us, right?" He pointed to the other three. "More specifically, because she's angry at me. She doesn't need to attack you, so far as I can tell. She's been living in the Tangle and just living off of raids. They aren't starving. They're not after food, and she doesn't want to just throw her 'children' to their deaths."

"So what are you proposing?" Tempo tilted his head to one side, frowning.

"Simple." Spike drummed his claws on the surface of the table and grinned. "She's after me. So, if you want to draw her here, to where you can fight on your own terms... let her know where I am."

The gaping rents in his scales throbbed as he said it. Even with the doctors still spreading their healing magic through his body, those remained unchanged, and as painful as ever. But he still couldn't stop the grin on his face from spreading wider, exposing more and more of his fangs. Nor could he stop the low growl that bubbled up from inside his chest at the thought of seeing her again.

"I've faced her before," he rumbled, "and I survived. I can get her to come here, to get another shot at me. I can buy you the time you need."

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// 30: Weak// Story: What Bound Them// by Headless//-----//

Both of the commanding officers had left the operating theater not long after that, leaving the four of them alone with their caretakers. Spike lowered his head and shut his eyes, letting the doctors do their work.

He could practically feel the others trying to restrain themselves from talking, and he knew that, as soon as they were alone, they were all going to start questioning him. He wasn't looking

forward to that, but for the moment he was content to simply lie still and bask in the feeling of his injuries being washed away.

It wasn't going to fully undo everything that had happened to him, he knew. He'd been to Ponyville General a few times, and had his wounds treated magically there. Unicorn magic simply wasn't strong enough to completely undo something like a broken bone without extreme exertion, careful preparation, and multiple practitioners working in concert - something along the lines of what Doctor Grey had done for Tailspin - but it was enough to set the bones and mend the tears and let the body do its own healing.

Before, his body had been overwhelmed by dozens of little agonies that had all blended together into a symphony of pain. Now he simply felt bruised. Sore, yes. Stiff, yes. But not broken beyond repair any more. He would heal.

All except for the three wounds left by Queen Chrysalis. Those remained as painful as they had been during the blizzard. The sensation of ice being stabbed into him was still there, accompanied by the dull, burning, acidic feeling.

Still. It was an improvement, and it was the best he had felt in a long time. If it weren't for the fact that his traveling companions were being quiet so loudly that he couldn't think straight, he would have allowed himself to fall asleep right there. As it was, he just sat and waited for somepony to break the silence.

It was one of the doctors that spoke first. Spike blinked slightly at the sound of her voice; in his half-doze, he had almost forgotten that she was there. She didn't look at any of them as she spoke. She was too preoccupied with levitating a pen and clipboard in front of her and scribbling notes onto the latter.

"That's all that we can do for now," she said. "None of you are in any immediate physical danger, though those of you with broken bones-" she jabbed her pen towards Spike and Pith in turn, without looking up from the clipboard "-will need to take things easy for a few days. Walking and other standard activities are acceptable, but nothing more strenuous. And I'm afraid that there isn't anything more that we can do about your wounds."

She looked up at him, frowning, and continued, "We'll continue to search for information on a possible treatment, but these are magical in nature. None of them are deep enough to be life-threatening, and the... discharge... does not appear to be blood. What it is, we cannot be sure just yet, and there may be some sort of magical damage that we lack the knowledge to even identify, let alone treat. I would advise strict rest, and report any change in your condition immediately. Now." She made a few final notes on the clipboard, then slipped the pen into the pocket of her coat and looked up at him. "If you will excuse us, we have other patients to see to. The general will send for you when you are needed again."

Spike stared at her for a moment. She wasn't waiting for any sort of response. She simply turned and motioned for the other doctors to follow her. It only occurred to him that he should have thanked her when the door was already shut behind them.

As soon as the doctors had left, there was the sound of a set of hooves hitting the floor. He turned. It was, unsurprisingly, Tailspin. The flame-colored pegasus was walking over to him, frowning heavily. At the other end of the room, Pith was standing up as well, though the stallion was taking rather longer to do so. His leg wasn't bent in all the wrong places any more, but he still obviously didn't want to put much weight on it. Compass seemed content to simply remain curled up, though she was watching him with narrowed eyes.

He looked back down to Tailspin, waiting for her to start shouting. Her expression was serious and unmoving as she looked him up and down.

When she spoke, though, her voice was surprisingly gentle. "Spike, are you okay?"

The dragon blinked. He had been expecting a rant. "What?" It was all he could manage, for the moment. His train of thought had been derailed.

"I said, are you okay?" she repeated. "You're kind of scaring me, for more than one reason."

Spike felt a few of the ridges on his back fold downward automatically, and couldn't stop his body from curling in on itself. It wasn't a particularly obvious motion - he doubted that he had moved more than half an inch - but he saw Tailspin's frown deepen as he did it.

"I'm fine," he said. Once again, he found his voice coming out harsher than he intended it to. He paused for a moment, mastering his vocal cords, and tried again. "I'm fine. Better than I have been in a long time. I don't feel like somepony's just finished beating me with a sledgehammer, at least."

"Not what she meant," said Pith, drawing up beside the pegasus, "and you know it."

Tailspin nodded her agreement, and Spike frowned. "I'm fine, I said."

Pith's broad, flat face was as expressionless as ever, but Spike was getting the hang of reading the stallion's emotions through the blankness. He saw the disbelief in the way the stallion's eyes flickered over towards Compass, and the slight downward twitch at the corners of the mouth.

"We're with you, Spike," said Pith. "We'll back your play on this."

Spike felt a twinge of annoyance. He could almost hear the unspoken "but". Having everypony tread lightly around him was beginning to wear thin. It wasn't as though he were a child.

"Good," he said flatly. "Then we're all on the same page here."

It was Compass Rose who spoke up next. The unicorn was giving him a stern look, but there was concern in her eyes. "We are with you, Spike." She turned and stepped down off of her table, then paused to shake out her tangled mane. "But..."

Ah, he thought. There it is.

He tilted his head to one side and gave her a quizzical look. "'But'...?"

"But we need to know that you're still with us," said Tailspin flatly. Spike grunted and turned his head to face her again, frowning now. "You've been off, lately. Ever since we talked to Discord."

Spike gave an exasperated snort, trying to ignore the renewed ache in his wounds as he did so. The motion of his chest caused the scales around them to shift uncomfortably. "Of course I'm still with you. We're partners, remember?"

"That's not what I meant." Tailspin prodded at the floor with the tip of one hoof, frowning heavily now. When she continued, her words came out slowly, each obviously selected with some care. "I saw your expression when we were trapped by the windigos and you said that you wanted to fight them. And I saw the way you looked when you were thinking about facing Chrysalis again."

Spike's eyes narrowed. "And?"

The pegasus drew herself up, glanced at Pith, and then turned back to Spike. "Are you trying to get yourself killed, or are you just losing it?"

The dragon stared at her. Before he could answer, she continued, "You knew you couldn't beat the windigos without magic, and you know Queen Chrysalis is stronger than you. You were even ready to attack Discord just for giving us some information you didn't like. What's going on with you?"

There was another pang from his wounds. Spike ignored it. "I'm doing what needs to be done," he said. "Somepony has to take on Chrysalis. I'm the one she wants, and I'm the one who might actually survive it. It's the best plan we have."

"No pony's arguing against that." Tailspin frowned and tapped her hoof against the flooring again. "I'm worried that you're so eager to do it because you know it's not going to go well for you."

A metallic scraping sound filled the air as Spike pushed himself into a sitting position. When he was upright, he stared down at the two ponies in front of him, still frowning. "If you think I'm

doing this because I want to die or something, you can stop worrying about that," he said flatly. "I said I would do it because it needs to be done."

"No, you didn't." Tailspin's gaze didn't even waver for an instant, and Spike suddenly found himself remembering her as the nervous mare that had practically hidden in the rafters of Carousel Boutique to keep him from even looking at her. It was an odd contrast. "It needs to be done, but that's not why you're so eager to do it. You want to fight her."

One of the purple dragon's claws twitched, scoring a shallow groove across the surface of the table. "Fine," he snapped. "Yes. I want to fight her. I want another shot at her. What's your point?"

Again, Compass spoke, and Spike had to turn his head to face her. She was still standing beside her own table, and gave no sign of wanting to come any closer. "That you didn't before," she said. "You let her live before, even after everything she did to you. To us. Now you look..." She lowered her eyes, and Spike thought that he saw a slight shudder pass through her body. "You look like you're ready to kill her."

"And?" Spike's voice rose slightly, and he turned his head, his gaze traveling across each of his companions in turn. "So what if I do? She's a monster. She's killed and tortured dozens of ponies. She tortured you." He pointed one claw, almost accusatorially, towards Tailspin. This time, the pegasus did flinch. "You're only alive because we got lucky, and we still don't know how long that'll last."

Tailspin's smaller form was suddenly pressed up against Pith's larger one. The stallion had placed one foreleg over her barrel and pulled her in protectively. There was a hint of defensiveness in his posture as he looked up at Spike, but his face was as blank as ever.

The dragon snorted. "I know you'd kill her if you got the chance," he said, addressing Pith now. "You wouldn't even think twice about it."

Pith didn't miss a beat. He simply opened his mouth and said, with all of his usual calmness and certainty, "You would."

"I would have." Spike raised his head until he was surveying the pair of ponies down the full length of his snout. "But I've had a long time to think about that since then. She's a monster, and somepony's got to put her down."

"You never talked like this before," Tailspin said quietly. Her expression had softened now. She didn't look upset. She just looked sad, and very, very tired. "You..." She trailed off and shook her head.

Without really thinking about it, Spike spread his wings. He felt them ache and throb as he did so, but they answered, and there was no pain that he couldn't take. They were bruised and sore, but they were whole again, and they blocked out the light from the lamps in the room as they opened. Tailspin and Pith were left standing in his shadow.

"Before?" His voice came out as a rasp now. "Before was more than eight hundred years ago. Before was back in Ponyville, when all the ponies I knew and loved growing up were alive. Before was when Equestria was happy and beautiful. Don't talk to me about before."

A deep, tectonic growl rose up from his throat, and he felt as though the acid were building up inside him again, flooding his insides and drowning out his natural flame. "I've seen a lot of monsters," he hissed. "Queen Chrysalis. Nightmare Moon. Discord. And they weren't the only ones. They weren't even the worst." He snarled the word. "I faced King Sombra twice before I went to sleep. The nightmare fog in the north that you're all so afraid of? That's only a fraction of what I saw him do. It's only a fraction of what we had to face. And back then, I was too afraid to really fight. And do you know what I got for that?"

His voice rose again, became a roar that left the others' ears ringing. "I got to find my wife's dead body lying there with a hole in her chest, because she did what none of the rest of us could! Because she was strong enough to fight, when I wasn't!"

He stopped, breathing hard, and forced his wings to fold in against his sides again. "She had to die to save us because I was weak," he said, more quietly. "Because I was weak, I told Twilight that I needed time away from the world when they all passed away. Because I was weak, I wasn't there when she needed me. Because I was weak, even more innocent ponies are dying. There are more monsters in the world now than there ever were before. Equestria is gone. Twilight is alone and in pain. Because I was weak."

He tossed his head, turned his gaze upwards, towards the ceiling. "I'm not going to let Chrysalis live this time," he finished. "Not if I get the chance. I'm done letting monsters like her live to hurt more innocent ponies just because I can't stomach the thought of finishing them off myself. I've seen the consequences now. I'm not letting it happen again."

There was a long silence. It took Spike several seconds to realize that somepony had set a hoof against his hand.

He looked down.

It was Compass Rose. The unicorn was looking up at him with an expression that he couldn't quite read. There was a myriad of emotions tangled up in that look: pain, fear, a touch of anger... and, behind all of it, a deep, deep sadness.

She didn't say anything. She just stood there, keeping her hoof pressed against his hand and keeping eye contact. She didn't move, didn't blink, even though her eyes were glistening. She was just... there, a tiny bit of physical contact.

It was an anchor. Spike knew the feeling, knew the simple power of a touch. Countless times, when he was younger, Twilight would simply place a hoof on his shoulder or pull him into a brief hug. No words needed to be exchanged. That simple contact said everything that needed to be said.

Slowly, very, very slowly, Spike felt his body begin to relax. The muscles of his back came first, leaving his wings to settle into a more natural position. Then came his breathing, easing into a slow, even pattern. Even his brow unknit itself.

It wasn't pleasant. He felt as though he were breaking apart with every motion. But it was better than what he had felt inside when he had shouted at Pith and Tailspin. The growing ache in his chest was nothing compared to the unnatural feeling of acid eating away at him from the inside.

Inch by inch, he sank back down onto the table. When he was lying fully upon it again, he blinked and looked away from Compass, back to the other two. Both of them were wearing the same expression that Compass was.

It hurt too much to look at them. He shut his eyes tight, feeling the tears leak from under his eyelids, and murmured, "I'm sorry."

"It's okay." It was Tailspin's voice. Even without opening his eyes, he could tell the pegasus was smiling at him. "We're your friends, Spike. We're saying these things because we care about you. We're worried about you."

He heard her move closer. "We know Chrysalis is a monster," she continued. "I'd kill her in a heartbeat if I had the chance. But I also know you, Spike, and I know you wouldn't. You're not a killer, Spike. That doesn't make you weak. You're... you're one of the gentlest ponies I've ever met, even though you're a dragon." She laughed, and he could hear genuine affection in it, even if it did sound hollow. "We know you're hurting. We're here for you. Just come to us, okay? When you need help, we're here. Don't just let it fester. That'll just end up with you ending up like..."

She paused, and he knew that she had been about to say "Twilight". He was glad that she didn't.

"...Like Luna. Don't let that happen, okay? We'll be here for you, but you've got to meet us halfway."

Spike nodded once, without opening his eyes. He felt very, very small.

Compass Rose pressed against his hand for a moment. "You've saved all our lives more times than I really want to count," she said quietly. "I never really had any friends before the three of you. I'm not the best at this, but I don't want to lose you. Any of you. And I'll do what I can."

"Same," grunted Pith.

Despite the empty feeling inside him, Spike smiled. "Thank you," he whispered. "I'll... I'll keep that in mind."

This time, when silence fell over them again, no one tried to break it.

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// 31: Cross My Heart// Story: What Bound Them// by Headless//-----//

Pith wasn't sure how long he stood there watching the other three. Tailspin and Compass were both standing beside Spike, one hoof pressed against his scales.

He didn't feel comfortable with that, which left him standing off to one side and just... looking. It was something that he had become very good at over his years as a scout. Any scout that failed to become good at it didn't survive very long. You had to be good at it, or something that was better would show you the consequences of your inadequacy.

A lot of things that he had seen over the past few hours were worrying him. Only a few of them had anything to do with Spike.

The dragon was the most immediate of his concerns, but far from the only one, and possibly not even the biggest. The black tar that Spike's wounds were oozing had flowed all the more freely during those moments when he had screamed at them, which was ominous, but he didn't seem to be in any immediate danger.

Even if he was, they were already doing everything that they could. The sludge had first appeared after the attack by the windigos. It was obviously tied to the dragon's emotions. Tailspin and Compass were both doing their best to offer silent comfort, and there wasn't much else that he could think of.

He'd heard the voices, of course. He'd known what they were and what they were trying to get from him. It was only now, though, that he considered that Discord had been exposed to the same thing - and they had left him in the mountains, alone.

Eventually, he was pulled out of his silent musings by the sound of the door opening again. All four of them looked up, and, almost immediately, both Pith and Tailspin gave automatic salutes.

"Colonel Reveille, sir," Pith barked. "We were not aware your company had arrived."

It was indeed the olive-coated pegasus from Fort McHoofry. He was looking disheveled, tired, and weatherbeaten, but he was whole. He was flanked by a pair of spear-wielding guards nearly twice his height.

"At ease," he said, waving a hoof at them. "We got in just a short while ago - right after you turned up, I'm told. I heard it all at the meeting, so don't bother tossing your reports at me. I'm here with new orders."

The colonel was quieter than usual, and his face seemed gaunter, more heavily lined. The stare he fixed on them was as powerful as ever, though, and he still seemed to command attention simply by standing there.

Pith lowered his leg and said, "Yes, sir."

"Sir, did the general take our report into account when speaking with the other commanding officers regarding strategy?"

Pith's eyes widened slightly, but he didn't turn his head. Even for Compass Rose, a pony who was not a soldier in any way, shape, or form, it had to be obvious that this was Reveille's time to speak.

But the colonel didn't so much as bat an eye. He just shook his head, frowning. "Partially."

Compass tilted her head to one side. "'Partially', sir?"

"He thinks you're all completely insane," Reveille went on. "And that's about the best case scenario, so far as he's concerned. Worst case is you're all changelings, and the real yous were all killed to set up a deliberate campaign of misinformation." He snorted. "Second-worst case. Releasing an omnipotent spirit of chaos and dooming us all is the worst."

"Discord can be t-" Compass began, but the colonel raised a hoof to cut her off.

"No, he can't," he said bluntly. "Even if he could, we can't plan around 'he'll be here eventually and he'll fix everything when he shows up'. We have no guarantee he's as strong as you say he is, that he'll be on our side, or that he won't just make things worse."

Spike nodded grimly. "Yeah. He tends to do that. Especially when he says he wants to help."

"You see my point, then." Reveille shook his head. "So no. We're not planning around Discord. What we are doing is hedging our bets." He pointed at Compass, Tailspin, and Pith in turn. "You three are coming with me."

Pith blinked. "Sir?"

Reveille gave him a blank look. "You say you're all the ones who can use this superweapon? Fine. You're mission-critical personnel now. That means we get you off the front lines and keep you somewhere safe until we have it. Meanwhile, the dragon-" he didn't even look at Spike as he said it "-stays here and fights. If we hold, great. If not, we at least haven't lost these Element things."

Pith felt his gaze slip sideways, away from his commanding officer and towards Spike. The dragon was still lying on the operating table, but he had lifted his head now, and was staring at Reveille as if he couldn't believe what he was hearing.

The stallion caught sight of Tailspin's expression, saw her look move towards him. They only made eye contact for an instant, but that was enough. He knew that she was thinking the same thing he was.

Don't leave him alone.

"With all due respect, sir," said Pith slowly, "I think we're needed here."

Reveille snorted, and Pith couldn't help but flinch inwardly at the derisive look that crossed his commanding officer's face. "Why?" he said. "To play nursemaid to a dragon? Yeah, the doctors heard his little tantrum. And you know what? I say good for him."

Pith kept his expression blank and his eyes forward. You did not argue with officers. You especially did not tell officers to take their attitude and shove it because the dragon they were talking about was right there, listening to every word. Even with his gaze locked straight ahead, Pith knew that Spike was tensing up. He could hear the labored sounds of the dragon's breathing. It was a ragged, angry hissing noise, accompanied by something like the crackle of dying embers.

"He's getting mad? Good. Get mad. You want to help? Great. I let you go off into those mountains because I thought you'd come back with a solution. You didn't, so now we need a different one."

Reveille stepped forward, his wings spreading as he did so. Pith could see that the left one had been maimed at some point; there was a long crease down the center of it, as if that part had been ripped out and never healed correctly. This time, when he spoke, he was addressing Spike directly. "So get mad," he snapped. He had to tilt his head back quite far just to maintain eye contact with Spike, but he still seemed somehow titanic compared even to the dragon's bulk. "Get angry. Get furious and go out there and rip those insects in half. We need a trump card here, and a dragon who won't fight is no damn good at all."

"Sir." Pith almost shouted the word, but his body leapt to attention as he said it. Without really thinking about it, he was back to standing up ramrod-straight, his gaze directed straight ahead, staring at a point on the opposite wall. "With all due respect, sir, I was trained not to leave my partners behind."

"I do not believe I was giving you an option, scout," snapped Reveille. Pith could just see him out of the corner of one eye. The pegasus hadn't even looked away from Spike. "This is a direct order issued by General Tempo. You do not get to choose."

The words rose up from within his chest without him really thinking about them. "Sir, if necessary, I will-"

"Go."

Pith blinked, shocked out of his immobility by the sound of Spike's voice. He turned his head. "What?"

"I said go," Spike repeated. He still had his head bowed, as it had been when he was watching Reveille, but his jade-green eyes were fixed on Pith. "You can't help here."

"Spike." It was Compass' voice now. Pith could barely see her, hidden as she was by the dragon's bulk. "You need-"

"You've already given me everything I need." Spike lifted his head and gave them a crooked smile. His voice was surprisingly calm and gentle. "Or everything you can, anyway. And the colonel is right. The three of you are too valuable to risk. And I'll be..." He stopped, then shrugged and finished, "I'll survive."

Reveille gave a satisfied nod, then turned away from Spike and towards Pith. "I'm going to assume that you were going to end that last sentence with 'obey the orders from my superiors to the letter', scout," he said sharply. "Do not attempt to disillusion me of this notion. I'll expect all three of you outside in five. Your escort will be waiting. As for you-" he glanced back over his shoulder at Spike "-there will be an escort sent in for you shortly. Wait here until then."

He gave Pith and Tailspin a brief, curt nod apiece, then turned to leave. The last thing he said before the doors shut behind his guards was "Carry on, scouts."

As soon as he was gone, both Tailspin and Compass were talking over one another.

"Spike, we can't-"

"You need-"

The dragon raised a claw to silence them. "Like I said, you've already given me everything you can," he began. "And what I need, right now, isn't that important. What you all need is, and you need a dragon. The colonel is right."

"But it's hurting you," said Pith flatly. He raised a hoof to point to the ooze blackening Spike's scales. When the dragon gave him a surprised look, he continued, "I saw it get thicker when you started to shout earlier. You said the windigos did something to you. They feed on negative emotions, right? Now you're bleeding black whenever you get mad."

Spike watched him for a moment, then nodded slowly. "Yes." He lowered his eyes. "And that's not all. When I was fighting them, back in the blizzard, I couldn't flame. This-" he drew a claw across his stained scales, covering the tip in the dark oil "-or something like this, anyway, came up instead. Black fire, but it burned like acid."

Pith heard the sharply indrawn breath from Compass, saw Tailspin frown. He ignored them both. "Then we've got no idea what doing this will do to you," he pressed on. "This could end bad, Spike. Real bad."

"I know." The dragon lifted his eyes again, and Pith saw the glint of determination there. "It probably will. But I have to try anyway, and there isn't anything you can do. You'd just be putting yourselves in harm's way for no reason when you three are our best shot at fixing all of this."

He rolled slightly and pushed himself off of the table to stand beside Compass. "I can help," he went on, frowning, "but I'm... ha. I'm just a dragon, if that makes any sense." An awkward grin crept onto his face. "I can't wield the Elements of Harmony, and that's what all of this rides on in the end. If we're going to fix any of this, if we're going to get rid of the changelings and the Tangle and fix the sky and get rid of the nightmare mist and make it so anypony can live a normal life again, instead of just living in fear of the next time things are going to go wrong, that's on the three of you."

He lifted his head and ran his gaze over each of them in turn. "You're too important to lose," he said firmly. "Any of you. And not just because you're my friends. Everypony needs you safe and ready to use the Elements when we find them. So go. Keep yourselves safe and out of Chrysalis' way. That way, even if this does go bad for me, you'll still be around to give people a chance. I don't like doing this. I don't think it's going to end well. But there aren't any other options, and it needs to be done, and I'm the only one who might be able to do it."

There was silence for a moment. Then Pith said, very simply, "We'll find you when it's over."

"And you'll try to find us," Tailspin added sharply. "Promise us that."

For some reason, that got an actual laugh out of Spike. He reared up onto his back legs, then drew one claw over his chest twice, making the shape of an X over his scales. "Cross my heart and hope to fly, stick a cupcake in my eye," he said. His grin only got wider as he finished the motion by covering one eye with his hand.

They all just stared. After a few seconds, he lowered his hand, sighed, and said, "That was called a Pinkie promise back home. No pony ever breaks a Pinkie promise. I'll find you. I swear."

Pith nodded. "Good. Make sure you're still in one piece, too."

Another laugh, this one a bit more forced. "I'll do my best," he said. "You should probably get going, though. They're waiting outside."

The stallion nodded solemnly. Before he turned to leave, though, he drew himself up to attention and saluted once again.

"We'll be waiting," he said. "I don't abandon my partners."

Spike nodded in return, and Pith saw something like gratitude in the dragon's eyes. He didn't wait for a response, though. He lowered his leg and turned towards the door, Tailspin and Compass falling in behind him.

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// 32: This Day Is Going To Be Perfect// Story: What Bound Them// by
Headless//-----//

Duplicity.

It was an easy thing, really. It was what he was best at. Everyone did it, in one way or another, but Discord had millennia to practice the art.

A lie was a powerful thing. A small lie could trick someone for a moment. A larger one, for a day. Larger still, for a lifetime. And the nice thing, the nice thing, was that if a lie was convincing enough, and if it lasted for long enough, there ceased to be any difference between the lie and reality.

Discord, in the countless aeons since his birth, had mastered the art of lying to the world. Lying to its inhabitants was simple. A true master of the lie could fool reality itself. It was surprisingly easy; the space-time continuum never seemed to learn any of the little giveaways that its children were so annoyingly perceptive about.

Being in two places at once was simple, compared to some of the other fast ones that he had pulled.

That was why it disgusted him that it took so much of his energy to do it. He felt like an athlete that had indulged in too much fast food over the past few years, and was now attempting to run a marathon. His heart was, both metaphorically and literally, screaming at him. He told it to shut up, then, as an afterthought, got rid of it entirely. It wasn't as though he had ever really needed one anyway.

Looked at from one angle, he was still standing on the mountaintop - or, more accurately, he was sitting at a small table with a checkered cloth, sipping freshly-brewed, piping-hot magic out of a small silver teacup and admiring the view as a few errant windigoes stampeded around the distant peaks. He had considered inviting them to join him, but eventually decided against it. They were not the best party guests, really. They tended to spill the drinks.

Looked at from another, rather more actual angle, he was hanging upside-down from an ornate crystalline chandelier, with his clawed foot hooked around one of its jeweled outcroppings like a bat's.

It wasn't entirely dark in the hall. There was the dull, burnished, coppery light that leaked in through a few ruined windows, but they were too streaked with soot to allow much in the way of illumination. That left few details of the surrounding area visible.

Or, rather, it would have left few things visible if he had been relying on ordinary sight. The Lord of Madness had no trouble at all in discerning the grand throne beneath him, or the figure that sat upon it. Both had changed substantially since he had last seen them, but there was still just enough of the old to be recognizable.

And, of course, there was the heart-shaped crystal, as large as a pony's barrel, that floated in the air just in front of the figure, radiating sickening, black power. That also left little doubt as to what he was looking at.

He was fully aware that the... thing... on the throne could see him just as well as he could see it, though its head was still turned away. He wasn't particularly worried.

Still, the silence was becoming a bit oppressive.

He raised his paw to his lips and coughed, once.

"What do you want, Discord?"

Even with the body so changed, the voice remained beautiful. Discord let his expression change into a wide, toothy grin.

"Oh, I just thought I'd pop in to say hello to an old friend. I've been away for some time, you know. I thought it was only proper."

The thing on the throne shifted. There was a scraping sound.

"An old friend?" There was a note of amusement in the voice. "A bit presumptuous of you, don't you think?"

Discord laughed and twirled a claw. "Come now. I know that the two of us were never quite bosom pals, but still."

"The two of us'?" The thing below him laughed as well. It was a familiar laugh, almost musical in its way. When it faded, a pair of eyes opened. They were brilliantly green, and the air near them seemed to fume and twist with uncontained power.

"I think," it said slowly, "you may be thinking of someone else."

Discord's grin only widened. "Oh, no," he said. "You are just the person I wanted to see." A simple lie, that. It was one of the truly easy ones, the ones that would be treated as though they were true even if the mark saw through them. Some people just couldn't resist the urge to talk. He should know. He was one of them.

Yes, two places was easy. Three, on the other hand, was going to be a bit harder.

Back on the mountaintop, Discord frowned and glanced down at the tiny cup that he held so delicately between two claws. He swirled its contents about thoughtfully for a moment, then sighed. He was rather proud of his little tea service, truth be told; the little pattern of butterflies on it was quite fetching.

But some lies... well, some lies just needed more behind them if they were going to last. And this one was going to be a doozy.

It really was a shame. The khaki one was a bit of a buzzkill, yes, but overall the other two had been... well, not nearly as much fun as Pinkie, or as sweet as Fluttershy, but... still. A shame. And there was Spike, of course, but then, there was always Spike. Things never seemed to go that dragon's way. Surely he would be used to it by now. It wasn't as though it were anything personal.

...No, that wasn't right. It was personal, wasn't it?

Yes. Personal.

With a flicker of thought, he dismissed the tea service. A moment later, it was replaced by a pint mug, which he filled from a tap that had spontaneously materialized in midair, drained in a single gulp, and immediately refilled.

Discord grinned to himself. There was no real mirth in it.

This... was not going to be fun.

But, perhaps more than anything else he had ever done, it was going to be oh so satisfying.

The guard flinched under Colonel Reveille's glare.

"Sir, I'm sorry, but I can't open the gate without authorization from-"

"I am giving the authorization!" Reveille's voice was at its full, ear-shattering volume. The guardsmare in front of him was leaning back as far as possible, obviously fighting the urge to turn and bolt.

Pith was intimately familiar with that urge. Every recruit had the fear of their drill sergeant drilled into them during basic training. He was impressed that Reveille had picked up The Voice without ever actually serving as a drill instructor.

He was more impressed that the guardsmare was actually rallying well enough to form a coherent sentence in the face of the hurricane of sound. She licked her lips once, then quavered, "Sir, if you're leaving the fortress, we need a record of where you're going-"

Pith shot a glance towards Tailspin and Compass, who were standing to his right. Tailspin had a look of faint amusement on her features as she watched the proceedings. Compass simply looked sour, and kept snatching glances at the five soldiers who stood around the three of them on all sides.

Armed escort wasn't something that Pith had ever been placed under before. He would have preferred that he and Tailspin had simply been allowed to take Compass and head out into the wilds alone; these were soldiers, not scouts, and a group this size would be a hell of a lot easier to spot than they would be on their own even if they were all trained in stealth. But Reveille had insisted, and on this, there was no budging him.

"-part of 'top secret' do you not understand, soldier?" he was shouting. "Our destination is confidential. You have a problem with that, you take it up with Tempo, understand? Now open these gates!"

The guard swallowed hard. It was, Pith had to admit, somewhat entertaining to watch a mare that size cowering in front of somepony as diminutive as Reveille. "S-sir," she croaked, "if that's the case, then the General would have given you the override code phrase--"

Reveille paused for a moment. Then he turned his head to look at one of the guards, his expression unreadable. Pith glanced over at the guard he was looking at just in time to see a barely-perceptible nod.

Reveille snorted. "Harvest!" His voice was a bark, but not as loud as it had been a moment prior. "Code!"

The guard he had looked at saluted. "Sir! Code is apple-diamond-pear..."

Pith tuned him out and looked back to Tailspin and Compass. Both of the mares were looking up at him, their expressions identical pictures of slight confusion. After a moment, Pith shrugged and looked back towards Reveille.

The pegasus was giving the guard an expectant look. After a second's time to compose herself, the guard straightened up and nodded once. "That all seems to be in order, sir." Somehow, she managed to keep her voice from cracking. "Just let me, uh, get this gate open for you."

A few seconds later, the troupe was on the road, headed along one of the paths leading northwest from the fortress. Colonel Reveille strode along in the center of the group, walking abreast with Compass Rose just behind Pith and Tailspin. The armed escort that he had insisted upon bringing along arranged themselves in a sort of rough circle around the four of them, and spent most of their time peering around suspiciously. They walked along without speaking. The only sound was that of their hooves thudding against the rocky ground as they walked.

The first time that anyone spoke was when they crested a rise in the road. It was Tailspin who broke the silence, first with a low whistle, then with a "Well. That looks worse than I expected it to."

Pith blinked slowly and turned to look at her. She had stopped walking and turned around to face back the way they had come. In the distance, the colossal bulk of Fort Maneholdt was visible as a dark line against the horizon. From this spot, though, there were other things visible as well. Here, at the center of the cordon, the emplacements were closer together than elsewhere. Pith could clearly see, off to the south, the smoking ruin where one fortress should have been, and the black, amorphous shape that had replaced another.

And, hovering in the sky over the Tangle like a dark crown, there was a mass of black thunderheads.

Pith set his jaw and let out a low snort at the sight. His eyes darted over the shattered wrecks on the horizon, then to the Tangle, and finally back to Fort Maneholdt. Then he shook his head.

"If you're all done staring," said Reveille's voice, as sharp and brazen as the crash of cymbals, "we have somewhere to be."

Pith shook himself. "Sir," he said. "Yes, sir. Apologies, sir. I was distracted for a moment."

"I can see that," answered Reveille, looking disinterested. He frowned and jerked his head towards the path they had been taking. "Keep moving. The entire reason we're getting you three out of there is to keep you away from the changelings, and they're getting closer by the minute."

"Yes, sir. We can see that," said Tailspin, as they started forward again. She shot a look at Pith, whose stony expression mirrored her own. "They seem to be getting closer very quickly, sir," she continued. "What are the odds that we'll be able to hold?"

Reveille snorted. "Not good, unless your dragon friend has a miracle ready for us. And 'saved by an evil god-monster' doesn't count. The changelings went straight for Greenfield, punched right through. Cut the entire south side of the cordon off from reinforcement and just swept down. We only made it out of McHoofry because I called for evacuation before they actually reached us, and we had to break into small groups and run for it through the hills. I'm not sure how many actually made it."

"And Doctor Grey?" It was Compass' voice, this time. Pith could see her expression out of the corner of his eye. She still looked sour - she had a face that naturally tended towards that - but there was a tinge of worry in it as well.

Reveille grunted, then said, very simply, "Didn't make it."

There was silence for a full thirty seconds after that. Then Compass said, "I'm sorry."

Reveille didn't look at any of them. He just kept facing forward, his expression hidden from view. "This is a war," he said flatly. "People die."

"Yes," said Compass. "But I understand the two of you were close."

Pith frowned and shot her a look. This was not the thing to say at the current time. There was no immediate reprimand from Reveille, however. There was nothing but silence, and a slight twitch of his wing.

When he spoke again, his voice was short, clipped, and, for the first time, had a faint note of uncertainty in it. "My relationship with the late doctor is no concern of yours, Miss Rose," he said. "Do not press further into this matter."

"Yes, Colonel." Compass pursed her lips and let her gaze fall to the path again. For a few seconds, Pith shot she was finished, but then:

"Where are we headed, sir?"

Another twitch from Reveille's wing. "A bunker," he said, his voice firm once again. "Just south of where the nearest settlement used to be. There are a few scattered around the settlements, in case we find something we want to keep safe and can't trust the usual methods."

"I've never heard of them," said Compass. "They weren't marked on any of the maps I-"

"That," Reveille cut in, his voice rising, "would be because their locations are top secret, Miss Rose. Now, if you are finished prattling, perhaps you can focus on maintaining the proper pace. We need to get away from the front lines as quickly as possible."

Pith set his jaw. Beside him, he heard the slight hiss from Tailspin and saw her move a bit closer to the flinching Compass. But that was all. No one said anything else.

Wrapped once again in silence, they continued along the path. Behind them, Fort Maneholdt faded into the distance.

The dragon was stirring in the back of Spike's brain.

It was something that he had learned to control when he was very young. He had spent some time among others of his species, and seen the way they conducted themselves. Young dragons were greedy, boastful, petty things. He had once hoped that he would meet older dragons and find that they learned to reign in those impulses.

He had been disappointed. Elder dragons never shed their greed, or their unthinking anger, or their spiteful nature. They honed them, practiced them. They took the unthinking, brutish nature of their childhood, reigned it in, and sharpened it to a razor's edge.

Some accounts that Spike had read described dragons as noble. That was true, to an extent. Dragons were noble in the same way that a scheming duke with his eye on the throne was noble. They were haughty, vain, cruel things, and they reveled in it.

And they were strong. They were very, very strong.

Right now, Spike needed strength.

The dragon was nothing so simple as a separate entity. It wasn't a voice that spoke to him in seductive whispers, or some dark side of himself that he kept locked away. It was simply the capacity to be like others of his kind. If he wanted to, he could kill.

I say good for him.

Chrysalis' face loomed up in his memories. His claws shifted reflexively, scraping across the tabletop with a faint, shrill sound.

The sound of the door opening pulled him out of his thoughts. He looked up to see Captain Road making his way into the room.

The captain had obviously been busy since he left. His uniform was askew and untidy-looking, his mane was disheveled, and he looked more than a bit nervous. He smiled faintly when he saw Spike.

"Right," he said. "Sorry for the wait. I've been running around all over the place trying to get things done. We're ready for you, though. Follow me."

Spike took a deep breath, nodded, and stepped down off of the table. His legs protested slightly, and his wings ached heavily with the motion, but it was a marked improvement over how he had felt before the medical staff had worked on him. He still felt bruised and tired, but he was, at least, whole.

"I'm ready," he said. "Just show me what you need."

Road nodded, then turned and motioned for Spike to follow. "This way, then. The general is waiting. And we may not have much time."

Outside, the world was still masked in its perpetual half-shadow. Spike cast his eyes upward for a moment, towards the moon, and frowned to himself. He didn't look long, though. There was too much going on for him to be able to get away with not paying attention to where he was going.

Fort Maneholdt was fully awake now. When Spike and the rest had first arrived, there had been activity, yes, but it was nothing compared to the rush going on now. Spike would have thought of it as chaos if it hadn't been so readily apparent that each and every pony present knew exactly what they were doing.

Pegasi soared overhead. Earth ponies and unicorns rushed back and forth on the ground, more often than not with heavy burdens on their backs or being towed via cart. Several injured ponies on stretchers were levitated past him as he made his way out of the medical building.

And it was all done in near complete silence. Everypony present had their orders. There was almost no talking going on at all.

Even with his size back to something approaching normal, Spike towered above the crowds, and it was difficult to move without running into anyone. Once or twice, he was forced to dance out of the way of an oncoming cart.

Captain Road was moving more quickly than he was. If it weren't for his height advantage, Spike might have lost sight of his guide in the crowds. As it was, he managed to tail him towards the eastern wall of the fortress, where the crowd was thickest.

Like the rest of Fort Maneholdt, the walls were much more impressive than those that had been in place at McHoofry. McHoofry's walls had been wooden. These were stone, cyclopean things, built to last. They reared upward over Spike's head, reaching towards the dim sky.

Soldiers and other military personnel were crowded around the base of the wall, as well as moving up and down the stone steps that led up towards the parapet. None of them gave Spike so much as a glance, and the dragon shivered as he watched them. There was something haunted in their expressions.

He ducked through a brief opening in the crowd and made his way up to Captain Road. "So," he said quietly, still watching the workers, "what am I here to see?"

Road's eyes were turned upward, towards the stairs. He ran one hoof through his mane, sighed, and answered, "General Tempo wanted to speak to you. If you're fighting with us, you need a sitrep, and we need to know exactly how much you think you can do. He's up on the wall, though, and it's going to be a pain getting up there."

Spike snorted. One of his wings twitched automatically. "I can get up on my own, I think" he said. "I could try to carry you, but I don't know exactly how much strain I want to put on my wings just yet."

Road blanched slightly. "Uh, no," he said, with a few rapid shakes of his head. "No. Thank you, but no. I like my hooves on the ground, thank you very much. I'll make my own way up. But you should go to see the general."

"Fair enough." Spike nodded once, then shifted his stance and, with great care, spread his wings. "I'll meet you up there, then."

And he flapped once, tentatively, testing his strength.

He did lift. It was a clumsy thing; he was no pegasus, and going from a standing start to full speed in an instant, as he had done in the Everfree, was more stress than he was willing to put

on his newly-healed limbs at the moment. Even with such a gentle takeoff as this, he felt the ache in his joints redouble. But he could fly.

A sudden, unexpected feeling of relief washed over him. He could fly. He hadn't quite registered until just now what it would mean to lose his wings. There had been too much more to consider. Now that he had a moment, though, the exhilaration of being airborne swept over him in a great wave, and he had to fight the urge to flap harder. There was no point in straining himself.

The sight that greeted him as he crested the top of the wall forced him to stop and stare for a moment.

The parapet was an impressive construction, easily wide enough for him to stand on despite his bulk and stretching off around the perimeter of the fortress in both directions. Despite this, it was full almost to its entirety. Earth ponies and unicorns of all descriptions lined the wall, almost all of them holding some sort of weapon. Overhead, heavily-armed pegasi flew in squads of four and five.

Those that weren't were either busy retrieving one or delivering one to somepony else. Javelins, spears, halberds, maces, morningstars, and a dozen other varieties were all visible. There were also a number of large, wooden mechanisms scattered along the length of the wall. Spike had no idea of the details of their design, but given that they each appeared to be loaded with a spear and pointed towards the Tangle, he could hazard a rough guess as to their function.

But that wasn't what drew his eye. No, what caught his attention was the Tangle itself.

The great mass of vines was, as best he could tell, less than a mile away - and, unlike the vines that they had forced their way through to reach Twilight's old palace, these vines were alive. They writhed visibly and sent feelers forward. Dark shapes moved between them, and their vicious thorns gouged up the ground in great furrows. It had the appearance of some great monster skulking low to the ground, waiting to pounce.

And, above it, there was the great mass of thunderheads. They were not natural clouds, but the same oily, black, thorn-covered things created by the plunder seeds, all gathered together and forced into one colossal mass. There was so much magic forced into that storm that it was no longer even truly black, but a mix of purples and blues and reds, as if the sky were bruised. Green lightning flashed within the mass of clouds, and the air was full of the distant rumble of thunder.

Spike shook himself, found a break in the crowd, and lowered himself onto the top of the wall, frowning. He was about to take a step forward to get a better look at the Tangle once again when a voice rang out.

"You."

Spike turned. General Tempo was striding towards him, tailed by a young unicorn that could only be an adjutant. The adjutant was constantly accepting files and memos from passing personnel, glancing over them, and occasionally passing one to the general. The general, for his part, dismissed most of them. His eyes were fixed on Spike, who drew himself up and cleared his throat.

"Uh... yes, sir," he said. "Me. I've decided to fight."

"Good." Tempo cast a critical eye over him. His gaze lingered for a moment on the oozing rents in his scales. "We'll need all the help we can get. The changelings have broken our southern defensive line. We've managed to get four out of the five settlements defended by those fortresses evacuated, but if we can't hold the line at Maneholdt, then it'll all have been for nothing. The changelings will crush though and take everyone. There won't be anywhere to hide."

Spike blinked. "Four out of the five, sir?"

"Yes." Tempo accepted another file from his adjutant, grunted, and handed it back. He said nothing else.

After a moment, Spike prompted, "What happened to the fifth?"

Tempo scowled. "Razed," he said flatly. "And its inhabitants taken prisoner. Along with the entire garrison at Greenfield."

"I'm sorry," said Spike. There didn't seem to be anything else to say.

Tempo merely grunted again. "Be sorry later," he said. "For now, we have to focus on keeping the rest of the settlements safe. The southern fields were already the source of most of our food stocks. We can't afford to lose any more territory. We live on a knife edge as it is."

Spike nodded and glanced back towards the Tangle. "Then how do we stop them, sir?"

"With every armed pony we can muster armed to the teeth and sitting inside the most heavily-fortified position in our territory," answered Tempo flatly. "Maneholdt is the single toughest nut to crack our military has ever established. It's turned the insects back before when it looked like it wouldn't be possible. Maneholdt will hold." He stepped forward and jabbed a hoof against Spike's chest. "You'll make sure of that."

Spike nodded again, his expression grim. "I'll do what I can."

"Good," said Tempo. "This... Chrysalis thing, assuming it is the leader, has never been able to take Maneholdt before. It's been over a decade since they made any serious attempt. We can and will stop them here, especially with a dragon as our trump card."

Something flicked on in Spike's memory. Something that Pith Helmet had said while they were resting in the Fort McHoofry infirmary.

"Ace," he muttered.

Suddenly, he felt very worried.

The great gates on Fort Maneholdt's southern wall creaked open, admitting a handful of beaten and bleeding soldiers. Two of them were pulling a cart, which was full of other ponies. All but one of the ones in the cart were unconscious.

The one who was still awake was a grey unicorn mare nursing an obviously broken hind leg. Beside her was sprawled a diminutive, olive-coated pegasus stallion wearing a colonel's uniform.

Doctor Grey raised her head and peered around at the crowd, then leaned over and draped one good leg protectively over the pegasus.

"What?" Tempo looked up from another memo, frowning.

"The ace," Spike repeated, his voice rising sharply. "What's her ace? Chrysalis might be angry, but she's not stupid. What's her plan? If she can't take Maneholdt through brute force, what's she going to do? She wouldn't throw her entire hive to their deaths without a backup."

"We're not expecting her to," said Tempo shortly. "But we've got no intelligence to work with here, no time to gather it, and no real way to do so even if we did have the time."

"But we can't just go into this blind," Spike said, unable to keep the edge of panic down. "Chrysalis has had years of experience fighting you. She's had decades to figure something out, to get things in place, but she didn't actually try to attack until now. She hasn't attacked when she was just up against normal ponies, and now I'm here. What's changed? What's her ace?"

Tempo raised his head from the latest memo and gave Spike a blank stare. "We don't know," he said, his voice slow and patient. "We can't know."

"Then what do we do?" asked Spike urgently.

Tempo took a deep breath, passed the memo back to his adjutant, and turned to look outward, towards the Tangle. "We hope," he said, "that ours is better."