

## **Chapter 4 – The Royal Meeting**

Twilight surveyed the room anxiously. She'd been to Princess Summits before, in Canterlot and the Crystal Empire, but this was her first as hostess. She wanted everything to be perfect, even under the circumstances.

Each of her friends—even Rarity, who'd taken her time getting her high-collared purple dress *just so*—was seated in her proper throne. The Royal Sisters stood slightly outside the circle, across from Twilight and Spike. Princess Luna looked grave, but Princess Celestia flashed Twilight an encouraging smile.

Twilight had invited Discord, but she hadn't really expected the free spirit to come. She would track him down later. Two other absences bothered her much more.

"Are you sure your message reached the Crystal Empire? It's not like Cadance and Shining Armor to ignore a letter."

Princess Luna shook her head. "I fear they may be facing their own crisis. Neither your brother nor your sister has slept."

Twilight bit her lip, but Princess Celestia held up a reassuring hoof. "I sent the Wonderbolts to check on them. They should be back soon."

Twilight wasn't happy with that, but she knew Princess Celestia was just as concerned as she was. "I guess we'll have to start without them. Can you tell us what's going on?"

The way the Royal Sisters looked at each other made her heart sink. "Perhaps," said Princess Celestia delicately, "it would be best if you shared what *you* know first, Twilight."

"Er, okay ... . Well, the sky's all messed up," she said lamely. Princess Luna gave a curt nod, and Twilight hurried on. "Rainbow Dash saw a hedge of black vines sealing off the Everfree Forest—"

"And don't forget those two creepy weirdoes I saw."

Twilight nodded. "I'm sure it's all connected somehow."

"I don't know 'bout you, but I think it's mighty suspicious of Discord, not showin' up," Applejack said. "Our last weed problem was his doin', remember?"

"I told you, he had nothing to do with this."

"Oh don't worry Fluttershy! I'm sure Dizzy'll barge in any second now, fresh and friendly as a fiddle!" prattled Pinkie Pie.

To everypony's surprise, she was half right.

The door swung open and in stepped the Spirit of Chaos. His scales were scratched, and his fur was matted and smoking in places. "You will not *believe* the night I've had!"

Two ponies leapt to his side immediately: Fluttershy with sympathetic coos and a healer's touch, Pinkie Pie with a Discord-shaped balloon animal to cheer him up.

"See? I told you!"

"Oh my goodness! Discord, what happened?" Fluttershy murmured. She turned to Twilight. "Do you have any cold water? Honey? Bandages?"

Spike hopped up to get Fluttershy her supplies, and Discord took the dragon's seat. Twilight only got a brief glimpse, but it looked like his whole back was burned.

"Why can't he just fix himself?" said Applejack, not looking at Discord.

He snapped his fingers. The balloon animal sagged a bit, but that was all. "I just can't."

"Discord," said Twilight gingerly, "Can you tell us what happened?"

"Oh, I *could*," he said, raising an eyebrow at Celestia, who gave him a small nod. "But I'd much rather *show* you!" He struck a pose, the Sun Princess lit her horn, and the meeting room disappeared.

In its place stretched a warm blue sky in which the assembled conclave floated, surrounded by stars. Twilight's friends marveled at the spectacle, wide-eyed and mouths agape. A surprised yelp and crashing sound told Twilight that Spike had come too. She found him some distance away, bandages and salves strewn about him. Twilight gathered the dragon and his things up in her magic and gave Celestia a puzzled look.

"Why here?"

"The astral realm can show us many things, Twilight," said the Princess. "Princess Luna comes here to enter the dreams of sleeping ponies. But, as you know, it can also let us relive our own memories." As if on cue, moving images began to float past. Some showed scenes Twilight recognized. Others were unfamiliar to her. Rainbow Dash flew up to one of these and pointed excitedly.

"See? These are the guys I was telling you about!"

Princess Luna flapped up to join her, but Celestia stayed behind. "Valuable as I'm sure that knowledge will be, the memory we want will be easier to find if we all focus on Discord." She smiled indulgently at him, and he shrugged.

Helping Fluttershy treat Discord's wounds distracted Twilight and the rest from their own thoughts, and soon only a few images were left. "That one," he said, finally, and Celestia blew it up so it dominated the sky. It showed Discord

laying on a fog bank in the middle of the Everfree Forest, taking in the rare and subtle chaos of untamed nature. Above him, the starlight tripped erratically down through the air; below him, a brook burred unquietly.

"I'm going to need to find a new thinking spot," he griped, watching himself shift this way and that on the cloud.

"What were you thinking about?" said Pinkie.

"She'll know if I lie, won't she," Discord said, gesturing at Applejack.

"Yup." The farm pony pulled a bandage tight.

"Fine." Discord winced as he tested her knotwork. He could barely move his right arm. "If you *must* know, I wanted a way to prove I deserved this second chance."

Twilight looked guiltily away, and Princess Celestia gave him a knowing smile. Fluttershy opened her mouth to talk, but Discord shushed her. "Just watch."

An enormous crack appeared in the night sky of Discord's memory. As if in answer, his body spasmed from horns to tail, and he sat bolt upright on his cloud. He looked up and his eyes widened in shock just before he was bowled over by a sudden peal of thunder.

"Hmph," image-Discord grunted, popping to his feet and dusting off his forelimbs. He raised an eyebrow at the scrambled stars.

"Right about here, I realized something was wrong with the Tree of Harmony." Discord looked pointedly at Applejack. "And as you can see, I had nothing to do with it."

"I'm sorry, okay?" She glued her eyes to the image, where a crooked grin was spreading across Discord's face. He clicked his talons, and the image shifted as he teleported.

Now it showed the entrance to the Tree's grotto, where something was clearly wrong. It had always been shady, but the darkness that shrouded it now was thick and cloying.

"Okay, how do I fix this?" he mused.

"You could have kept us informed," scolded Rarity. "We're your friends, we would have helped."

Discord shook his head. "Didn't you hear me?" Rarity furrowed her brow for a moment, but nodded in understanding. Twilight, too, knew the temptation to *fix* something all by herself, the flush of pride that went with it, and the shame of those times it had gone wrong. She laid a hoof on a bandage-free patch of scales. Above them, Princess Luna faltered slightly in her flight, but turned it into a gainly landing to one side of the group. Rainbow Dash followed close behind.

"Oh, I can't watch," said Discord. The image showed him about to head down into the cave, only to suddenly turn and come face to face with a pulsating clot of darkness.

"I can't let you interfere, Spirit of Chaos." The mass spoke with a calm, male voice. A vague silhouette swam in the darkness, barely visible, but for two turquoise eyes shining through the inky blackness.

"Who do you think you are, telling me what I can't do?" Discord's sarcasm was obvious even through the filter of memory. "Don't get me wrong, I'd have joined the fun if you'd asked, but you crossed a line there."

"This is none of your business. Leave, or I shall make you."

"Oh, at least let me help clean up!" Discord summoned a mop, twirled it like a baton, and thrust it deep into the darkness. The mop lapped it up thirstily, and Discord wrung it into a bucket, where it bubbled like hot tar.

Without its shroud, the silhouette was revealed to be a blue pony, somewhere between Celestia and Luna in height. His eyes glimmered the light blue of moonlight, and his curved horn tapered to a cruel point.

Discord pointed the mop at the strange stallion. "Be a good little pony, and I won't mop the floor with you next."

He was interrupted by his own bucket plopping down on his head and dumping its contents over his face. Discord clawed at the clinging darkness, only to be pinned onto the floor by the unicorn's hooves.

He teleported away just in time to escape a magic blast scorching the spot where his head had been.

"Well, well, well!" Discord appeared behind his enemy, accompanied by a small, fluffy cloud. He snapped his fingers and a clear rain washed away the darkness.. "Now I've got to teach you some manners!"

But before he could do anything, a searing blast of green magic hit him between his wings and threw him to the ground.

"What are you doing?" a female voice hissed. "We were told to lay low for now! You know what's at stake here. Get lost!"

"I apologize, my Queen."

A dark haze filled the memory for a moment. When it cleared, Discord was alone on the ground.

"Oh, you are not getting away," he grumbled, but was interrupted by a loud cracking from between the trees.

Discord jumped in surprise as thorny black vines sprouted everywhere around him. He dodged, but one of the thorns grazed his belly. He snapped his fingers to teleport, but nothing happened.

With a desperate look on his face, he launched himself into the sky, just in time to see that the black vines began to swallow the forest. Holding it in an iron grip, locking it tightly.

The memory faded, leaving them with a beautiful sky around them.

"Ever since then, I haven't been able to work any magic. I had to fly all the way here. *Fly!* Do you know for how long I haven't done that?"

"A thousand years, and more." Princess Celestia lit her horn again, and the group reappeared in Twilight's castle. Twilight, invigorated by the transition, clapped her hooves together.

"Spike, take a note." The little dragon pulled a paper and quill from under his seat. "Here's what we know. We have four enemies, and we know what three of them look like. They did something to the Tree of Harmony that caused this whole mess. And they don't want us to interrupt them, so this is only the first part of their plan."

Celestia nodded. "We should prepare for anything. My sister and I will return to Canterlot and await the news from the Crystal Empire. The Royal Guard can patrol the borders of the forest."

"While we go in and beat up the bad guys!"

"Not yet, Rainbow Dash. Wait until Discord recovers. I believe he also has a part to play."

"And don't forget, we've still got a party to go to!" Pinkie gravitated to the door, desperate to be going.

"We can tell everypony Discord's going to help."

"Not just that, Fluttershy. I've got this feeling we're gonna make some great new friends there."

"It sounds like we've got a plan." Twilight said.

Celestia gave her a satisfied smile. Twilight's chest swelled with pride as her friends filed out, led by Pinkie Pie. Princess Luna, however, remained behind.

"Might I have a word with you, Twilight Sparkle?" she asked.

"Sure! What's the matter Princess?"

Luna walked slowly up to Twilight, her steps echoing in the high-ceilinged crystal chamber. "I was unable to enter your dream tonight, so I... "

If Twilight had been worried about that dream before she was definitely alarmed now. She described it to Princess Luna, noting for the first time the parallels between her dream and the waking world. "Do you think something is wrong with me?"

"I do not believe you are aiding our enemies. Perhaps you had a vision. Whatever the solution, it is hidden deep inside you. So deep in fact, that only you can uncover it. I hope it does not put you in danger."

Luna led Twilight to a window. The shimmer of moonlight shone through and reflected off the crystal walls of the castle, bathing them in its light.

"I should go now. Be on your guard, Twilight Sparkle." Luna teleported away.