



League of Discord

By Ghosted Note

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Chapter 1

The League

“Summoning is complicated. Not the type of complicated that entails studiously memorizing a few magic words, painting some strange looking symbols on the ground, and recitation reminiscent of bad poetry. Summoning is complicated in a manner that entails devoting the majority of your life to a fundamental understanding of all facets of magic and their interactions, pouring the entirety of yourself into your craft, and still only being worthy of the title of Junior Summoner. Truth be told, these minor representatives of the summoning craft still hold enough power to subdue some of the most powerful entities of Runeterra. This brings home the reality of the power held in the hands of their seniors, the Summoners of Valoran’s League of Legends. “

“What is summoning, you ask? Well, actually, you probably don’t, seeing as you probably all have some twisted notion of it floating around in your head already. Contrary to popular opinion, summoning doesn’t refer to the act of bringing one of the League’s champions to the battlefield and guiding them. Summoning refers to the act of calling forth magic from all schools and binding them together in an act that not only can transport a champion, but also establish a link between the two that essentially combines a part of the Summoner’s consciousness with that of the champion. This is what enables the pair to work as a team. Of course, stabilizing this link takes a little time, which is why you tend to see escalating intensity in a match as time goes on as Summoners settle into their champion’s mind, so to speak, but we’ve been making huge strides in that field recently, with the recent test runs on the Crystal Scar demonstrating a newer summoning technique that drastically decreases the amount of time it takes to synch with a champion. “

The speaker, a blue-skinned, black-bearded human wearing a suit that obscured most of the tattoos that covered every inch of his body, turned from the chalkboard to regard the class, a mixture of enraptured children who hadn’t quite gotten over who their guest speaker was. Despite his sometimes impatient and harsh demeanor, Ryze had a bit of a soft spot for children, and the students of the Institute of War’s outreach program for

the magically gifted had been an excellent audience, giving the League champion undivided attention. “But to answer your question,” Ryze nodded to one of the students in the front row before continuing, “No, summoning isn’t easy, but yes, there’s a chance, if you’re truly serious about it, that you can join the ranks of the Summoners one day. After all, this outreach program isn’t just to educate the next generation of magic users on how to practice magic responsibly, but to also scout out the best of the best, the most determined, the most studious students here so that they might one day get an official League stipend to learn at the Institute of War. So work hard, learn everything you can, and you just might find yourself face to face with champions like me, only this time, we’ll be working together.”

Ryze was one of the more qualified of the League of Legend’s magical champions. He had studied his craft and nearly perfected it, despite shunning formal education in favor of searching the world of Runeterra for those who taught magic beyond the boundaries of those who practiced magic on his native continent of Runeterra. The magicians of the various city-states of Valoran were impressive in their own right, but far too limited and restrained for someone who felt as innate a connection to magic as Ryze did. Thus, after years and years of travelling, and learning among shamans, cultists, and anyone else who might shed a new drop of wisdom in his quest for magic, Ryze had finally returned to Valoran for one final study. Aided by the forgotten art of thorn magic, Ryze had quite literally tattooed magic into the essence of his being, his blue coloration and decorated body a testament to his dedication. Now, his new teacher was combat. The League of Legends would accept, after some testing, most beings of immense power to fight in the pitched battles that now decided the fate of Valoran. Ryze was determined to study under his new teachers in an entirely different way, examining firsthand the methods and power of Valoran’s most deadly beings.

The League, of course, was delighted to have Ryze join their ranks, yet another tool in the League’s quest to ensure war would never break out on Valoran. After the devastating Rune Wars, which had laid waste to Valoran in times past, the League of Legends had been established to help encourage conflict resolution in a manner that didn’t cause permanent damage to the world. Though convincing Valoran that their plan could work was tricky, the Summoners, powerful mages who in times past had lead the factions in the Rune Wars, had determined that the only way for Valoran to

survive was for large scale conflict to be eliminated. Fortunately, Ryze was not lying when saying that Summoners were the most powerful mages of Runeterra, and soon the primary city-states of Demacia and Noxus had ceased their endless struggling and submitted to the will of the League. The various city-states of Bandle City, Piltover, and Zaun were slightly less troublesome to convert, and even the ever-alooof Ionia had eventually, for the sake of its own survival against the opportunistic Noxians, joined the League. Valoran had been saved, though scars of the Rune War still existed, if the magically unstable lands below the Great Barrier were any testament.

Now, however, Ryze was serving less as the student of combat and more as a teacher of what he considered to be the most irritating student possible. “Blasted boy, can’t you do anything right without your precious glove?! Focus! Draw the magic up, and control how fast you release it. Treat it like drawing water from a well. Use only as much as you need, and don’t let a drop spill. Don’t just sling it out all over the place!”

The young man in front of him sighed in frustration, his mind wandering off to the caves and ruins he’d much rather be exploring and mapping. Ezreal was naturally gifted at both magic and cartography. His passion for the former, though, was completely dwarfed by his desire to find every detail about unexplored lands and ancient ruins, and his maps were considered the most accurate on Valoran. His love of exploration had driven him to abandon the magical studies that had never really interested him. It had been quite a windfall when he had, while delving into the pyramids that littered the abandoned Shurima Desert, found an amulet that allowed for the easy manipulation of magic provided a magical source was nearby. Since the amulet was made for a being far larger than the standard human, Ezreal had it embedded into a specialized glove, and used it as a method of controlling his magic without any serious effort or study. However, Ezreal soon found out the caveat of wielding such power, when the amulet’s natural attunement to summoning magic had landed him in the League by accident. Though initially annoyed to be pried away from his explorations, and somewhat skeptical of the League’s efforts at controlling war, he had eventually decided that occasionally being summoned wasn’t a huge price to pay for using the amulet, and that making a difference in the world could be worth it anyway.

What brought the normally unconcerned man before Ryze today was a different story. Though Ezreal didn’t have as much zeal as many of the

League's champions, he still had a bit of personal pride, and lately his performances in the League matches had been somewhat...lackluster, to say the least. So, to rectify this, Ezreal swallowed his reservation and suppressed his boredom(at least for the most part), and pleaded with the most well-traveled mage in the League to help him refine his magical technique, in hopes that the wisdom Ryze might impart would help Ezreal to recover from his recent slump. Even mentally prepared though, the tattooed mage proved a challenging taskmaster for the 'Prodigal Explorer' (Ezreal wasn't sure why, but the League had a habit of appending titles to the champions' names). Ryze, expecting the worst when it came to someone as unfocused as Ezreal, was, at least from his perspective, going extremely easy on the younger magic user, only having been convinced to help because it seemed like a hanging offense to him that magical talent such as Ezreal's should go to waste.

Gathering up his willpower once more, Ezreal searched his mind for the familiar blob of power that always seemed to dance around the corners of his consciousness. Mentally wrestling with this presence in his mind, he struggled to keep himself focused enough to will the power into the form he desired. After a few agonizing minutes of doing his best to ignore the wanderlust that told him this was a waste of time, Ezreal's efforts yielded success, the bolt of lightning flickering violently between his outstretched hands. He gave a cocky smile to his teacher, and laughed. "See, no problem this time, and not even any electrical burns!"

Ryze wasn't impressed. "Shut up and keep concentrating. You're wasting power every time the electricity branches or flickers. I want a solid, unwavering beam of electrical energy, not some weak little shock bolt you can barely keep control of. Focus, and contain the power, and will it into the form you want. It isn't enough to simply will lightning into existence if you don't control its movement."

Ezreal had been having almost no progress mastering lightning in a precise and controlled manner, which was the precise reason that his tattooed elder had chosen it as a starting point. Not only did it need to be made apparent both to the teacher and the student the extent to which Ezreal's precision and control were lacking, but lightning by its very nature strained against being controlled. The mental exercise was, despite a lack of visible results, paying off, if slowly. Ryze grimaced as he recalled the last attempt that the kid had made, which had resulted in a small crater in the floor of the practice room that he had requisitioned from the Institute of

War, not to mention a slew of electrical burns and some minor heart damage. Luckily, the healers at the League's home were held with conviction by the belief that all League champions were either criminally insane or unbelievably stupid, so they were more than prepared for the relatively minor injuries that came when one of the venerated warriors was practicing some new move, or attempting to assassinate one of their fellow champions with a convoluted scheme that involved bribing about half of the Institute of War at one point or another. Ryze scowled, more from his disgust at the petty political games played here than at Ezreal's laughable attempts at real magic. There were more important things to dwell on than stupid political games, though. Ryze mentally prepared himself for another attempt at drilling discipline into his student, and returned to his harrowing task.

Jericho Swain's face remained the placid mask that it usually was as he made his way to the main building of the Institute of War. Even when the so-called 'Master Tactician' allowed himself the momentary flicker of annoyance from this failed scheme or that, nobody ever saw him flinch, even as his latest attempt to take the leadership of Noxus had fallen through. Though his frail body and crippled right leg might have suggested otherwise, Swain was a strong man. The Noxian ideal was a true meritocracy; let strength and the will to use it be rewarded accordingly. Swain, in his own way, exemplified this. Despite his disability, he had risen through the ranks of the much-feared Noxian Military with astounding speed, and within what had seemed to many like the blink of an eye, secured his position as a General, one of the primary ruling council of the city-state of Noxus. There was only one position higher in the militaristic society, and it was something Swain had been working toward since he had first made his presence known in Noxus. It was his intent to prove his strength to Noxus, to show that he was strong enough to lead the city-state and make it stronger than any other. He was the epitome of mental fortitude and ability, and he would be rewarded accordingly.

As if sensing the agitation that no other being could, the proud-looking raven that Swain was never seen without muttered its dark reassurance to the Noxian, looking at him with six luminous eyes of pure red. Swain nodded and murmured his own soft acknowledgement back to his longest and fondest companion, the ever present reminder to all of what Swain was truly capable of. Nobody had any memory of Swain without the

raven, and nobody had the nerve to ask. Of course, rumors ran rampant about the nature of Swain's connection to the bird, but there was nothing more solid than the sour grapes that fell rotten from the vineyards of speculation. Some thought that Swain controlled the bird, or that the bird controlled Swain and was some sort of otherworldly demon, but all agreed that the creature was not a normal raven, evidenced just as much by reports of the creature assisting Swain in combat as much as the bird's frightening visage.

Nonetheless, the familiar presence was a slight comfort to the otherwise solitary man. The Master Tactician found the presence of almost all people less than enchanting, instead preferring the more detached activities of plotting and planning over pursuing companionship. There had only been two other people in Runeterra who had been truly capable of understanding and maybe even relating to him, and now there was only one. Boram Darkwill, Grand General of Noxus and Swain's only worthy opponent, was dead, another gear in the machine that trembled and groaned under the weight of Swain's ambition as it lifted him from obscurity to the rank of general, a member of the war council that decided affairs in Noxus' militaristic society. There was only one more step for him now, and that was to fill the seat of the only one who had ever truly challenged him.

Everything for Swain had been leading up to the moment which he rapidly was approaching. Even his acceptance into the League of Legends had both been working toward fulfilling his ambitions, though lately his League duties had been proving slightly annoying, but Swain weathered the pathetic power mongering of the various rival Summoners, garnering favors and influence where he could and slowly adding more of the people who could be accurately described as Valoran's most potent resource to the list of those who, sometimes unwittingly, served his cause. Of course, this kind of reward didn't have a cost, and Swain knew the time had come to put aside his machinations to attend to the more visceral of his duties. It was time to prepare for his next match.

Six Summoners, six champions; two teams of three champions augmented and directed by their Summoners. It was an arrangement less common than the traditional configuration of two teams of five, but for minor political disputes such as the one currently being settled, some trivial Summoner infighting, the quicker pace and shorter resolution times made

combat on the lesser of the Fields of Justice, dubbed 'The Twisted Treeline', a little more appealing.

Swain waited silently for the magic of the Summoners to call him forth in the pre-summoning chamber that was designated for his team. Beside him were two figures. The first was a familiar giant of a man, somewhat lanky, almost completely covered in bandages, bearing a large spiked shield on one arm, and an even larger luminescent bottle of a toxic-looking green liquid on his back, the trademark poison of Singed, dubbed the Mad Chemist. Truth be told, what he lacked was not sanity, but restraint. Like most citizens of the city-state of Zaun, he held himself unfettered by petty morality and regard for life in pursuit of progress, a testament to this being his scarred visage and his faintly glowing eyes, which had a sickly lime green in place of irises or retinas. The master chemist often lacked human test subjects for his terrifying concoctions, and as a result he had often settled for the only human he could obtain for his tests...himself.

The second of the two was a young woman who was doing a poor job of containing her hostility toward the others behind a mask of professionalism. Adorned with various pieces of armor and equipment that seemed like an incomplete ensemble, she looked a perfect match for her weapon of choice; the sword that was held in her firm grip was large, wicked-looking, and emblazoned with magical runes. The lethality of her weapon didn't at all seem diminished by the fact that it had also rather unceremoniously been shattered about halfway up the blade, leaving a jagged reminder that neither the sword nor its bearer were whole. Riven, willingly called the Exile, used her appearance as a symbol and a reminder that her home had once had honor, despite its violent and dark nature. When the revelation that Noxus had fallen away from its tradition of honoring strength, ability, and the will to use it came to the decorated soldier, she had forsaken her status as an honored individual and went into a self-imposed exile until she had recently reemerged to join the League of Legends, intent on purging Noxus of those who had twisted the Noxian ideal.

The silence was broken only when a regal-sounding female voice sounded out. "Champions, prepare for summoning. Good hunting."

Far, far away, a being of pure energy and unparalleled amounts of pink ceased its spasms and looked toward the others surrounding it. "It's a DOOZY."

Chapter 2

New Arrivals

Ezreal groaned, his mind surfacing from the incoherence that gripped it. The blinding headache that pulsed steadily wasn't helping at all as he tried to figure out where he was and what had just happened. He had been waiting with Ryze and Nasus for the match to begin, and had just established the link to his Summoner when something happened. The Summoner's all-business tones which had been floating gently around his head suddenly switched to panic, and after that, a screeching noise had erupted which incited such an agony that even the ever-stoic Nasus had been brought to his knees after just a few seconds. Ezreal remembered the sensation of hitting the ground, but nothing after that. With a grunt, he tried to move, only to be met with a multitude of sensory signals he didn't recognize or know how to deal with. His beleaguered mind decided another impromptu nap was in order, and once more Ezreal was sucked into the oblivion of unconsciousness.

A few feet away, a stallion sat on his haunches, examining himself. His fur was a vivid bluish purple, and adorned with arcane symbols of a lighter, more reddish purple from muzzle to fetlock. The only exception was a clearing at his flank, where a circular clearing in the symbols revealed a startlingly detailed depiction of the giant, rune-covered scroll secured by leather straps to his back. Ryze snorted in annoyance as he moved a lock of his jet-black mane out of his face. Although he had never missed having hair as a human, he found the absence of his unkept beard to be a little disconcerting, though not nearly as disconcerting as his new form. Even if he had been expecting to become a horse, horses on Runeterra were not so oddly colored, and did not have horns protruding from their foreheads. Ryze huffed to himself, and stood uncertainly on his new legs. Unlike a certain other familiar-looking unicorn lying on the ground nearby, Ryze was not going to let a little headache stop him from finding out what had happened. Those idiot Summoners had some explaining to do once he figured out where the Institute of War was.

Taking a few shaky steps, Ryze approached Nasus, who was standing guard silently over the group. Unlike the others, when he had

awoken, the otherworldly being hadn't been phased at all by the pain in his head. For a being as ancient and experienced as Nasus, this pain was nothing, though he honestly couldn't say that he'd seen anything like their transformation coming. Towering over his fellow champion-turned-equine at nearly twice Ryze's size, Nasus had been changed as well. Retaining his natural dark chocolate-brown coloring and glowing red eyes, he also had a dull emerald green mane, but lacked the pointed protrusion that was present on the foreheads of Ryze and Ezreal. Out of curiosity, Ryze glanced at Nasus' flank, and saw a simple-looking depiction of an open book with a sun peeking out from between the pages. Ryze regretted never taking the time to learn anything about Nasus or how this symbol could relate to him.

"As soon as the explorer wakes, we should start searching for signs to tell us what happened. "

Nasus' calm tones, deep and smooth as ever, startled Ryze out of his thoughts. Ryze's reply sounded off, not quite as calm or as smooth. "Looks like those idiots screwed up the summoning again, in an even more creative way than usual. I don't even know where to begin to try to figure out how they managed this one. I'm not even sure if we're still in Valoran, or even Runeterra."

Nasus nodded, his emotions indiscernible past his blank face and luminescent eyes. "I have not seen any signs of dangerous wildlife in this forest thus far, but even so, we should tread carefully. I do not know the constraints of our new forms, or how it might affect magic use, so if anything here proves threatening, we should try to avoid conflict until we know how our new bodies operate."

"If you'll keep watch, I'll try to do some experimenting with my magic to see if it still operates normally until the kid wakes. Then we should try to find some civilization, so we can determine if we're still in Valoran." Nasus nodded again, and Ryze set about his task, feeling a strange tingling at his forehead as he began to channel his power. "Interesting..."

The sun had almost set when Swain stepped foot into Ponyville...or rather, stepped hoof. The general had yet to figure out why exactly he and his teammates had been transformed, but his magic still seemed to work at

least, though he now naturally seemed to possess a focusing appendage in the form of a horn that had appeared on his forehead. When he had awoken in a meadow with hooves, a brown coat of fur, and a depiction of his raven clutching a planet in its claws on his flank, he had been surprised, but even so he had not hesitated in taking command. Even Riven, ever mistrustful of Swain's methods, had decided to play along, knowing Swain was the most qualified to figure out how to restore their original forms. More baffling, though not enough for him to lose his composure, was that his feathered companion had remained completely unchanged. *'Perhaps some beings are incapable of change.'*

Swain's thoughts were interrupted when the cry of the aforementioned raven brought his attention to an approaching unicorn. He limped forward toward this newcomer, his front right leg mirroring its crippled counterpart in his natural form. Fortunately, having three others instead of just one meant that the Master Tactician could move without his cane, which he was unable to locate after waking up.

Upon seeing that one of the three strangers was limping, the purple unicorn looked worried, and increased her pace. Trying politely to ignore the feeling of unease she was getting from the somewhat tall earth pony with a crimson coat, pale green mane, and glowing green orbs in place of eyes, she smiled brightly and spoke. "Hello and welcome to Ponyville! I'm Twilight Sparkle. I couldn't help but see you from the Library's balcony, and I decided to come welcome you, since I didn't recognize you, but that can wait, seeing as it looks like one of you is injured. Don't worry, Nurse Redheart can fix you up in a snap."

Swain gave his most disarming smile to the babbling newcomer. "Oh, don't worry about this leg, it's just an old injury from my wild younger days. I'd be more interested in learning more about where I am. You see, myself and my companions seem to have gotten ourselves lost. My name is Jericho Swain, but most just call me Swain. It is my pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss Twilight Sparkle. My companions are Singed and Riven."

Swain's friendly and calm demeanor dispelled Twilight's worry. He seemed to her like a trustworthy pony to her, even if the one he called Singed unnerved her with that huge bottle of who-knows-what on his back and that blank expression. "Well, as I mentioned, you're in Ponyville, just west of Canterlot and northeast of Hoofington and Fillydelphia. Um, it's

getting late though, and we don't have an inn here, so if you want, I have a spare bed at the library, and I can see if any of my friends have space."

Swain was surprised at how trusting and hospitable this Twilight was being, as if she had never met someone capable of breaking that trust. It was still a windfall though, as he still didn't know what dangers lurked in this place, which obviously wasn't Valoran or anywhere he'd ever heard of. Swain gave as gentlemanly a bow as his crippled leg would allow. "Thank you for your generosity, ma'am. My companions and I would be happy to accept your hospitality."

Twilight giggled, amused at the formality of Swain's words. "Just call me Twilight. I think my friend Rarity has a spare room. With the way you talk, she'd love you. I'll also ask Applejack. I'm pretty sure she has space in her barn or something. Singed can stay with me. If it turns out they don't have room, I'm sure somepony will." Twilight didn't quite understand why, but she didn't want this tall earth pony near any of her friends more than necessary. Something about him just seemed off.

Swain looked to the others, who each nodded silently in turn, before looking back to Twilight. "It's settled then. Lead the way, Miss Sparkle."

Twilight nodded and started at a steady trot toward her first destination. The others followed, observing the town and its pastel colored inhabitants as they passed it. Not that many other ponies were out, as most had started settling indoors to end the day, but the few still awake continued to illustrate the heterochromatic nature that seemed characteristic of the ponies. While Swain was wondering if the somewhat rustic décor was typical of this society, Riven was noting that there didn't seem to be a single guard or soldier in the entire town. Singed would have been making his own observations as well if he hadn't been too busy pondering if pony physiology reacted differently to his potions and poisons than humans.

Finally, they approached a round building decorated in a somewhat showy manner, which proudly proclaimed itself via a sign to be the Carousel Boutique. Twilight walked ahead and knocked on the door. A few moments later, another unicorn answered. Upon inspection, Swain could tell that this one seemed to put a lot of value on personal appearance, if the styled purple mane and immaculate white coat were any indicators. After a few moments, Twilight signaled for Swain to come forward.

“Lay low. We don’t know enough about this place yet. We’ll meet again tomorrow.” Swain’s murmured instructions went unheard by the two ponies waiting for him, but his companions both nodded. Approaching the door, he regarded his new host. “Greetings. You must be Miss Rarity. My name is Jericho Swain, or just Swain for short. Miss Sparkle mentioned you might have a vacancy available. I’m afraid I have no means to pay you though. My friends and I come from a distant land, and I fear our currency probably doesn’t have any value here.” Swain’s second attempt at a polite bow went slightly better than his first.

Rarity gave a genuine smile at the well-mannered stallion in front of her. “Oh, think nothing of it, Mr. Swain. What kind of Element of Generosity would I be if I demanded payment from a poor gentlecolt in a strange land? Although, you might want to be careful with your bird. My cat, Opalescence, doesn’t take kindly to visitors or birds.”

“Don’t worry about this old raven. He’s a clever thing, and I haven’t seen a cat yet who can outwit him. Once more, thank you for your hospitality. Farewell, Miss Sparkle. Perhaps in the morning me and my companions might peruse this library you mentioned, to get some idea of our bearings, for the lands you mentioned are completely unfamiliar to us.” Swain mentally filed away the emphasized manner that she had placed on the title ‘Element of Harmony’.

Twilight nodded. “Don’t worry, I will do my best to assist you in any manner I can. Goodbye, and pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“Likewise. Take care.”

Twilight signaled to the other two newcomers to follow, and began the journey to Applejack’s abode.

“Ah reckon’ I can do that, Twi’.” The drawling accent was attached to the second of Twilight’s friends, an orange pony with a blonde mane secured by a strip of fabric in a manner that Riven could only describe as ponytail, though in this place it felt awkward designating it as such. “Come right this way, sugarcube. We got a guest bed inside ya can use.”

Though a decorated soldier in her time, Riven had never been arrogant, and thus her response was slightly less calculated and

significantly more sincere than her conniving teammate. "You have my thanks, Applejack. I am in your debt." The warrior bowed her head slightly as a sign of respect.

Applejack laughed heartily. "Aww, think nothin' of it. If ya really feel like ya gotta pay me back though, Ah can't say Ah ever object to a little extra help on the farm. Mah brother went and got himself hurt again so we're slightly shorthanded."

Riven nodded. "I do not know how long my companions will wish to tarry in this town, but if we stay past tomorrow, it would be my honor to assist you."

"That's mighty decent of ya. Now come this way, Ah'll show ya your room."

"Err...sooo...um...Singed...I notice your cutie mark looks like chemistry equipment. Does that mean your special talent is some sort of science?" Twilight's attempts at small talk were slightly awkward, but she seemed to be pretty intelligent past it, so Singed decided to play along, filing away in his brain that the marking on his flank was called a cutie mark.

"You could say that. I'm a chemist. In my homeland of Zaun, I was a bit of a celebrity even. I must admit, even though it's rather dangerous, it's quite a satisfying profession. I can honestly say that it is my life's calling."

"Zaun? I've never heard of that place...So you are a chemist? Is that why your eyes glow? Not that there's anything wrong with that, I mean...err..." Twilight mentally facehoofed at her insensitivity. For all she knew, it was some sort of medical condition he had no control over.

Singed laughed quietly, his deep, gruff-sounding voice not quite as reassuring as he intended. "Don't trouble yourself my dear. In my younger days, I was quite reckless with the scientific process, I must admit, and there have been a few long term side effects. Entirely my own fault, I assure you, but it was worth it, I think, for all of the progress made. You wouldn't believe some of the things that I've learned about regeneration and durability enhancements."

“Regeneration? Really? That sounds pretty advanced. If you managed to make strides there I don’t doubt you were famous. I’ve got to admit, here in Equestria, the scientific aspects of healing have been largely ignored in favor of the magical. Of course, earth ponies have made several recent strides in the field, but sometimes I wonder if magic doesn’t stifle the more mundane facets of our ingenuity. It sounds like what you do is pretty amazing, though.”

Singed smiled and bowed his head humbly as he walked. “Oh, well, I’m only trying to do the best I can to improve upon that which I love.”

Despite her reservations about this strange pony, her love of knowledge had kicked in and now she was compelled to query the chemist about his profession as they walked. Singed, equally as passionate about chemistry and potion-making, replied to the best of his ability while skirting around topics he felt would make her uncomfortable, such as live test subjects and chemical warfare, for the sake of polite conversation. Eventually they had arrived at Ponyville’s library.

“...and that’s when I discovered that a mixture of cobra antivenom, cursed nightshade poison, and beeswax could be used to cure the common cold. Of course, it was a stupid, disgusting cure, considering we have doctors who do it much less painfully, but hey, the more you know, right?”

Twilight giggled at the end of the anecdote. “Anyway, we’re here, and I’m sure you’re tired. I know I am. As I’m sure you know, the recent Discord fiasco has left a LOT of cleaning up to do. The guest bed is in the basement. Don’t mind all the equipment down there...I kinda use it as a storeroom too. You should have plenty of space though, so don’t worry. I’ll notify my assistant that you’re here as well so he doesn’t get surprised, and so he knows to cook for one more when the morning comes.

“I’m sure it will be delicious, Twilight. Good night.” Singed descended down the stairs into the basement, marveling at various devices which looked slightly complicated even for him, although he had to admit his knowledge of magically-enhanced technology was somewhat limited. Eventually, he came upon a bed tucked away in a corner that looked barely big enough for him. After slinging aside the large bottle he carried on his

back, he descended onto the bed, and finding it surprisingly comfortable, fell asleep shortly thereafter, wondering who Discord was.

“I hear water nearby. If it is a river, we can follow it and eventually it should lead us out of the forest.” Ezreal had been pretty disturbed at the transformation, but after reassurances that they’d find the idiot Summoners responsible for their predicament as soon as possible, he had put his exploration skills to use to try and find a way out of this apparently huge forest they had landed in. Thus far, there had been no other signs of life, but night was falling, and the forest was starting to produce noises that didn’t sound entirely friendly. The trio had increased their pace accordingly, not wanting to find out if the wildlife here was more deadly than Valoran’s own fauna. Ezreal took a moment to adjust the familiar-looking bracer that he had found on his leg, and focused, his eyes and a gem on the bracer glowing in unison for a brief moment. A second later, his eyes adjusted to having night vision. “Let’s keep moving.”

Chapter 3

Chromatic Impact

Riven was fond of the taste of apples. That did not prepare her for what breakfast entailed for a guest at the Apple family residence. The Apples had a definition of a 'normal' sized breakfast that already would baffle most ponies who didn't spend their days performing physical labor, but compounded with their hospitality, Riven had to wonder how it was physically possible for any being to ingest that much food. Nonetheless, a soldier knew to never refuse a meal when in the field, and so Riven ate slightly more than her fill, to the delight of the old mare called Granny Smith, who couldn't stand all of those skinny ponies who were too concerned with things like weight and diets and looks to appreciate a good meal, unlike this nice mare who put away almost as much food as Applejack.

Of course, after eating so much, Riven felt compelled to stretch her muscles, as unfamiliar with them as she was. Being the most agile and physically coordinated of her group, she had taken to the new form relatively fast, being comfortable walking within seconds, and able to gallop steadily within minutes of standing for the first time in her new form. However, one facet of her new form evaded her, and as much as she hated to admit it, intimidated her, as evidenced by the wings plastered to her sides. She knew that eventually she'd have to master their use eventually, but for the sake of her sanity she'd allowed at least one thing about this place and form get past her self control. Holding too much back was mentally unhealthy, and could lower performance in the field, after all.

"Get 'nuff to eat, sugarcube?" Applejack queried. Riven didn't especially care for the term of reference, but wasn't about to complain to the one who had housed and fed her. Instead, Riven nodded her assent. Applejack gave a friendly smile, and turned to walk toward the door. "Ah imagine yer friends are gonna come by some time to collect ya, so you can stay here as long as ya need. Me and Big Mac, at least as much as he can in his state, will be out in the orchard workin' if ya need something."

Riven saw an opportunity for a little morning exercise, and seized upon it. "Actually, I would like to repay your kindness and hospitality. If there are any tasks that I could help with, I request that you allow me to show my gratitude." Riven gave Applejack a hopeful look.

"Ah don't mean to make ya feel obligated to help. Me and Big Mac have been running this place by ourselves for years. We get by even if the clumsier of the two of us decides to sprain his ankle," Applejack paused, considering Riven's expression, and her previous experiences with refusing help. "Although, if ya really want to help, we still got some applebucking to do. Don't ya feel obligated though. Ah ain't in the habit of chargin' for being decent toward anypony."

"It would be my honor to assist you. Besides, after such a large meal, I need to do some exercising anyway."

Applejack laughed. "Ah know what ya mean. Granny Smith loves to cook a little too much sometimes, Ah think. Come right this way and Ah'll show ya how to harvest the apples properly. Don't be too upset if ya can't get them all on the first buck. Me and my brother have been at this for years."

With that, the two set to work. Riven didn't need much instruction, and once she established the basic technique, the task went at a brisk pace. Applejack was grateful that the harvest was going faster than normal, and pleasantly surprised at Riven's endurance. Twilight had volunteered to help in the 'earth pony' way in the past, but the studious unicorn had always faltered quickly. *'Ah swear, she needs to get more exercise. Book learnin' is all fine and dandy, but sometimes your body needs to learn things just as much as your head,'* Applejack thought to herself. *'This pegasus is pretty hardy though. It's nice to have a little bit of...qualified help. Ah'd hire her in a heartbeat if she were stayin'. Love my friends, but if it weren't for Twi's magic, it would have taken significantly longer to finish last year's harvest. Dash's the only one who's got any real muscle, but Ah'll be darned if Ah can keep her attention on one thing for more than five minutes.'*

Applejack paused to look over at her assistant. *'Ah wonder what's with those funny clothes, and those broken things on her wings. Looks sharp enough to hurt somepony. Can't ask though. Don't want to seem like Ah'm pryin' into the life of somepony Ah just met. It'd be impolite.'*

She was cut out of her reverie by a familiar whistling noise. "Duck and cover!" Riven instinctually jumped forward under a tree, turning around with a baffled look on her face before the source of the disturbance made itself clear.

As if summoned by mere thought, a distinctly multihued blur appeared with a resounding crash. A few yards away, the meteoric newcomer unfurled from the ball that its landing had forced it into. Ruffled feathers, various cuts and bruises, and a nervous chuckling confirmed Applejack's suspicions. "Rainbow Dash, by Celestia's mane, what did Ah tell you about practicing over the farm?! Ya could get hurt! These trees have pointy branches, ya know! Ya should go to the lake if ya want to do anything risky... Ya know ya worry me with how much liberty ya treat your safety with."

Riven, upon hearing the name Celestia, was about to ask who the name's owner was, but decided it was better not to reveal the extent of her foreign origins. Instead, she sat and watched as Applejack continued to admonish this rainbow-maned newcomer who was doing a poor job of hiding her regret at worrying Applejack behind a carefree and brash demeanor.

"Okay, okay...I promise I'll stick to the lake from now on with the risky stuff, AJ..." Rainbow Dash paused as she noticed Riven for the first time. "Who's your friend, Applejack?"

"Rainbow Dash, this is Riven. She and her two friends came into town yesterday, and Twi' asked me and Rarity to help house them while they passed through. We was workin' on the apple harvest when ya crashed."

Rainbow examined Riven carefully, darting around in the air to get a better look at the disconcerted warrior. After a few moments, she landed in front of Riven. "I've never seen a pegasus who wears stuff like that on her wings. Pretty cool, even if it looks broken. How do you fly in that getup?"

Riven searched for words, taken aback by the abruptness of the question. After a few seconds, she lowered her head, feeling a strange sense of inadequacy at being someone who prided herself on agility and mobility but lacked this knowledge. "I...I am afraid I was never taught. The blades are for help harvesting my home's principle crop. Nobody there was

capable of teaching me.” She hoped that sounded like a convincing half-truth.

Rainbow Dash, who was slightly lacking in the art of subtlety and the interpretation thereof, bought it, while Applejack, who was suddenly overwhelmed with pity and awkwardness for the pegasus who couldn’t fly, didn’t give it a second thought either. For her part, Rainbow Dash seemed almost outraged that an oversight of this magnitude could occur. “What?! You’re missing out on what makes a pegasus a pegasus! That’s...I don’t even. Applejack, sorry, but this is...yeah, you know what I mean.” Dash struggled for words to describe a situation that seemed alien and wrong to her.

Applejack nodded and laughed at her friend’s inability to articulate. “Ah gotcha, Dash. If her friends come lookin’ for her, I’ll send them to the lake. Ain’t nobody should miss out on their heritage.” At this, she looked at Riven. “Sorry if this seems a might sudden to ya, but Ah’m thinkin’ that ya should probably go. Don’t know how long you’ll be stayin’, so it might be a good idea to let Dash show ya a few things. Dontcha worry, she might not be the most patient or well-mannered, but she’s a dang good flyer, probably one of the best in Equestria.”

As Rainbow Dash puffed up at the praise, Riven decided not to miss out on this opportunity to make use of her new form’s abilities. “I would be honored to be taught by someone so highly esteemed. Once more, thank you for your hospitality, Applejack.”

“...and then Rarity’s wings burned up, and she dropped like a sack of potatoes. Of course, she was so busy kicking and screaming that when the Wonderbolts went to rescue her, she managed to knock them out in midair!”

Curiosity got the better of Riven. She had already learned much, like how the land of Equestria was ruled by some sort of divine princess duo. Despite the boastful and boisterous nature of the pegasus, Rainbow Dash wasn’t stupid, even if she lacked any sort of refinement. “She’s obviously still alive now, so what happened?”

“Well, I was already airborne, so I got up as much speed as I could, and...well, you remember how I was talking about how I was having trouble

replicating my Sonic Rainboom? Well turns out your friend and childhood heroes falling to their doom is a good motivator, haha. So yeah, I did a Sonic Rainboom to catch up to them and save them! Right in front of everyone in Cloudsdale, and even Princess Celestia. One of the best days of my life...Oh, we're here." In front of the pair was a large lake. Even the hardened soldier had to admit that the view was breathtaking, and she couldn't help but think back to Noxus' attempt to conquer the city-state of Ionia. It was during that conflict, in that land of similarly breathtaking beauty that Riven had been broken in more than one way...

Riven shook herself out of the reverie. "So where do we begin? I have to admit, the thought of flying somewhat intimidates me. I don't have any experiences that I think I can compare it to."

Rainbow Dash showed Riven a few warm up stretches to begin with. Even as a pony, Riven was physically fit, and though they had never been used, her wings were no exception. Sensing Riven's personal attachment to the blades affixed to her wings, Rainbow Dash had the tact not to ask the warrior to remove them, since the joints expertly crafted to fit her wings meant they didn't obstruct her movement at all. Eventually, the time had come for Riven to take her first glide.

Rainbow Dash had carried Riven higher and higher into the air, Riven's nerves growing increasingly tormented as she looked down, noting nothing but clouds below them. She was even less prepared when Rainbow Dash set her on top of a cloud, letting out a strange squeak rather unbecoming of a decorated soldier of Noxus before realizing that she wasn't falling through the cloud. Embarrassment flushing her face slightly, she remembered her teacher's previous mentions of a city in the clouds, realizing now that it was less a city in clouds and more a city comprised of clouds. Rainbow Dash stifled a laugh. "Okay, you ready now? All we're doing is gliding. I'll be right beside you the entire time, so if you lose control or anything, I'll get you. We're over a lake anyway, so there's nothing to worry about. Just take a deep breath, and whenever you're ready jump."

Riven nodded, and gathered her resolve. She had slain men, conquered cities, and proven her mettle. Nothing as petty as flying in her new form would overcome her... But perhaps she might have to warm up some more. Fortunately, Rainbow saw Riven about to balk, and decided to give a subtle 'nudge' in the right direction. Riven stumbled, off-balance, toward the edge of the cloud, and seeing no other option, jumped.

It was like falling and floating at the same time. Riven's mind scrambled for a moment before once more she had regained her composure, and was able to fully grasp and appreciate what was happening. This realization threw off her mental balance again, in the other direction this time. She couldn't help but to laugh at the wonder of it, for in the human soul there's something innately fixated on the concept of flying, and the fascination is perpetually strengthened by the artificial chains of society that keep the average human shackled to the ground. As much as a Noxian could, she found it poetic as she drifted lazily downward, having just overcome the biggest restraint ever to hold back a dreamer, as if proving that in this strange place, anything was possible. This place was beginning to grow on her. If she didn't have a duty to restore her beloved homeland, and perhaps if circumstances were different...

She didn't get a chance to finish that train of thought though, as the inevitable counterattack from the force of nature she had temporarily bested came and she found herself sputtering and flailing in the lake, much to the amusement of Rainbow Dash, who had decided not to intervene unless there was real danger. Eventually dragging herself to shore, she tried her best to shake her body dry, still in a slight cloud of muddled ecstasy. Rainbow Dash was pleasantly reminded of the time she had taken one of the local fillies who seemed to look up to her on an extremely assisted glide. The excitement and wonderment of the experience almost universally left new fliers speechless, and it seemed that even for adults, that statement held true.

Riven sat there, gathering her breath and thoughts alike. After several minutes, she looked up to her teacher with a determined smile. "Again?"

Rainbow Dash laughed, and the two resumed. The practice continued through most of the afternoon, neither of the pair noticing that they had observers. The crippled unicorn turned to his earth pony companion, and smirked, his raven passenger cawing in assent. The two sat and watched, talking about what they had discovered about their new locale, until eventually the two pegasi landed, and showed no signs of lifting off again. Riven was pleased. Since her muscles were already fully developed, a lot of the work that went into learning how to fly was gone, and most of the teaching centered around technique, which Rainbow Dash was both proficient in as a teacher and as an example.

“Having fun?” Swain let out a quiet chuckle before continuing, his gruff but calm voice resuming its emotionless, all-business tone. “If you’re done, we have things to discuss. Twilight and her companions have agreed to let us stay another night, but we need to discuss some things with her at the library. It turns out we’re farther from home than we thought.”

The manticore roared in a mixture of rage, indignation, and pain. It wasn’t used to its food fighting back this hard. It took another look at the ponies in front of it, and decided they weren’t worth the effort or the numerous injuries. With a heave, the beast flapped its wings and flew away, leaving the three to resume their efforts at escaping the forest, which at night seemed to lose any semblance of hospitality. Luckily, they weren’t lacking in food or water, since grass and water seemed enough to sustain them.

The youngest of the three, a white unicorn with a blonde mane and a marking resembling a map on his flank, turned toward the oldest. “Wow. Remind me not to piss you off, Nasus. Wouldn’t it have been easier to just kill it?”

Glowing red eyes flickered slightly brighter in response. “It isn’t a matter of anger. It is a matter of proving that we are not prey while preserving the balance of nature here. I do not know how rare creatures such as those are, so killing them might upset the cycle of life here. Thus, the only solution was to cause enough superficial damage to convince the creature to retreat. Even in its damaged state, the likelihood of it being killed by anything other than its natural predators is slim, as most creatures it consumes will probably be conditioned to avoid it, and it will probably be driven by instinct to avoid stronger competitors, at least until it is capable of managing them.”

“At least we know our combat abilities are intact. We should be able to fend off anything interested in us, or at the very least escape if something appears that is beyond our capabilities,” Ryze commented dryly.”

The trio continued on in relative silence, something that two out of three could appreciate, but neither of them put much stock in Ezreal’s opinion outside of navigation, and Ryze was too busy continuing to silently

fume over how incompetent Summoners could be to talk. Nasus, on the other hand, was occupied with appreciating the wildlife around him. During his time in Runeterra, he had spent most of his time in the deserts of Shurima, comforted slightly by the familiarity being surrounded by an environment reminiscent of his homeland. He was a little homesick, but he knew better than to hold a grudge against the Summoners who had ripped him from his world in the early stages of the League, when the city-states were loathe to surrender their best champions to the cause. Nasus had decided that ending war was a noble cause, and volunteered his services. Of course, with the recent appearance of his brother and his induction into the League while the Institute searched for a way to 'cure' Renekton, he had even more reason to stay attached to Valoran's peacekeeping organization. Still, the change of scenery was nice, and even an immortal knew that life could be far too fleeting to ignore beauty. Nasus allowed himself an appreciative smile, and continued onward.

Chapter 4

Canterlot Calling

Swain was all-business now, and Twilight Sparkle thought she saw something odd past his curt tones and succinct speech, but she couldn't place it. The thought occurred to her that she might be worrying about it too much. After all, Singed, despite his unnerving demeanor and frightening visage had proven himself to be a friendly conversationalist and a source of ever-precious knowledge. He had even shown her how to craft what he called Health and Mana Potions, a recipe that was apparently elementary in his homeland, but their effects of physical and mental rejuvenation astounded her. No, it'd be the better thing to do if she didn't pass judgment on those she didn't know well.

“Our best guess is that a spike of magical energy coinciding with some unknown event here caused some sort of cross-dimensional rift that the summoning ritual snagged on. Not surprising, given that our Summoners were only recently promoted from Juniors, and summoning magic is closely related to the magics that originally brought the likes of Kayle and Nasus from their worlds to ours.” Swain paused, allowing his two companions to process the information, before continuing. “Twilight Sparkle has informed me that the two ruling entities of this world, the Princesses Celestia and Luna, would probably possess adequate power and resources, as well as a willingness to help, to assist in our goal of returning to our world.”

Everypony in the room listened in rapt attention. Besides the champions and Twilight Sparkle, there were five others in the room. The dragon named Spike was absent, but Rarity, Applejack, and Rainbow Dash had gotten themselves involved the session of theory-crafting regarding the trio's predicament. They had also been joined by another pony who, alone among those he had already met, unnerved Swain. The one called Pinkie Pie seemed to be completely insane, but still functional, at least to a degree. This alone wasn't enough to unsettle Swain, as he had seen his fair share of functioning psychotics in his time. What disturbed him was that after what seemed like hours of hearing her random, annoying, and inane suggestions, she had suddenly spouted a perfectly logical guess regarding

the possibility of a trans-dimensional rift, from which the rest of their explanation had followed. From what he understood, she was of a variety called Earth Ponies, who didn't have any overt magical ability. How had she so easily grasped a concept that she shouldn't even know about? It was disconcerting, to say the least.

“This brings me to my next point. There might be another team of three in this world who came with us, due to the nature of our occupation. We need to be on the lookout for that possibility as well.” Swain had done his best to give the native ponies a half-knowledge of summoning without revealing its true nature. From what he had learned, this place was practically a utopia, and the thought of even small groups fighting and killing each other several times daily would probably be unexplainable to the primitive white and slightly-darker-white morality that seemed to have fostered in the absence of real conflict. “In the mean time, we will gather what supplies can be spared for us, and make the trip to Equestria's capitol city of Canterlot. We leave the day after tomorrow. We will reconvene in the morning to begin preparations.”

“WAIT! Aren't we...forgetting something?” Swain almost let a frown escape. The pink one looked to be on the verge of a minor mental meltdown as she spoke. “What...is the one thing...that must be done...for EVERY new pony, especially ones who aren't going to be staying long? Heheha...hah...” Singed switched into a slightly more defensive stance. He was far too familiar with insanity to be caught off-guard by a sudden projectile meat cleaver or anything else of that nature.

Swain watched as some sort of psychological bomb dropped in Pinkie's psyche, the explosion lighting up her face as the nature of the beast made itself known. “A super-special Pinkie Pie Premiere Party! Going Away Edition! Tomorrow!” Singed sighed in relief, chuckling slightly as Swain wore an almost unnoticeably dumbfounded look, invisible to all but those who knew anything about him. For his part, the Master Tactician was being slapped in the face by the stark differences between this world and Runeterra, or any other world that Runeterrans had knowledge of. Everything seemed...friendly. Even insanity had lost its edge here. It was almost a pity that he already had plans to attend to back in Noxus, but a man had to have priorities, even if that man had already been deprived of most of his humanity. A split focus is a crushed dream.

Riven mentally flinched at the mention of a party, not enjoying resurfacing memories of drinking with her comrades to a victory well earned. Fortunately for her, the offending flashbacks were interrupted by Rainbow Dash. "So, uh, you're from another world? That kinda explains why you don't know how to fly. Don't worry about the whole thing about your stuff. I know it would have been awkward to explain that it didn't used to be for your wings. Twilight said some sort of long winded and boring explanation about why she thought your stuff changed too, but I wasn't listening. What's your home like?"

It was a surprise left hook to the jaw, or it felt like it as Riven struggled to will her mouth into following orders. "It is...different from here. People work just as hard though, maybe even harder, to achieve their dreams and make something of themselves. Noxus prides itself as a true meritocracy, a place where your works and your place in society are directly related...It even was, at one point, what it thinks it is...I was trying to...fix it...when I joined the League. The contests the League runs have a lot of clout in what goes on in Valoran. I was hoping that by joining I could get enough influence and respect to convince my people to turn back to their older, stronger ways."

Rainbow Dash looked thoughtful for a moment, and perhaps a bit sad. "Sounds like it was pretty cool. I know what it's like to work for a dream nonstop, and never get anywhere for it. I've been trying to catch the Wonderbolts' attention for years, and I've done some pretty awesome stuff, but nothing seems to work. It must have been great living in a place where everyone was treated according to what they did."

Riven laughed, one part sincerity and two parts bitterness. "It had its up and downs. Believe me that my world is a lot less...pleasant than yours. You would not enjoy it...but still...It is my home, and I long for the days when Noxus will cast off the chains it has forged for itself, and remember who it truly is, and what honor truly means. I hope you never have to see something you love make itself into less than it was meant to be."

Rainbow Dash was certainly not tearing up this. She was far too awesome to do something like that, but even still, she wasn't used to thoughts this heavy being laid upon her, in her world of stunt flying and carefree days. "I'm sure one day your home will be everything it was meant to be, Riven... They'll come around with your help, I'm sure of it. Everypony

is basically good, after all.” Words fell from Riven's tongue silently, tasting of ashes, at Rainbow Dash's last sentence. The warrior cast a bitter look to a gaunt earth pony a few feet away who was busy readjusting the bottle on his back while talking to Twilight and Applejack about magical fertilizing chemicals.

Of course, the distribution of ponies in the library left Swain, Rarity, and Pinkie Pie to converse among themselves, and Swain found himself grateful for Rarity's presence, even if she reeked of pretension with the obviously affected accent and the shallow focus on fashion. Pretension was a solid quality he could lock onto, something that existed in spades back home, and even if it normally would have disgusted him, he found the flaw oddly comforting. In any case, anything was better than being alone with the ramblings of Pinkie Pie, whose very presence seemed to grade on Swain's sanity. At least Rarity seemed well-cultured, probably as a side effect of wanting to be an elite in what seemed to be a backwater town only notable for a convenient position near many major cities, although that seemed to beg the question, why was a town in such a favorable trading position so small? Swain stopped the train of thought before it ran its course. It was folly to assume economics in this world functioned similarly to Valoran. Reluctantly, he turned his attention back to the others, dropping his previous all-business tones for a gentlecolt's manner of speech. “So, Miss Rarity, you mentioned something about being an Element of Generosity earlier. I was afraid to ask at the time, but now that you know of our origins, I was wondering if I might find out more about your world.”

Rarity nodded sagely. “I would be glad to help you learn about Equestria, and perhaps it is not a coincidence that your question is one so deeply tied to our history, both for our nation, and for our group of six friends.” The unicorn cleared her throat in as daintily a manner as she could muster. “Well, long ago, Equestria was ruled by the Royal Sisters, Princess Celestia and Princess Luna...However, at one point Princess Luna was corrupted by dark magic which fed on her resentment and feelings of under appreciation because of ponies sleeping through the night that she created and ruled over, while Princess Celestia's day was the domain of work, play, joy, and all kinds of activity for ponykind. The dark magic transformed the Princess of the Night into Nightmare Moon, an entity who took Princess Luna's wish for appreciation and turned it into hatred and a wish for eternal night. Princess Celestia was forced to use magic called the Elements of Harmony to combat her sister, but because the

magic of the Elements is meant for six, and not one, not even one as powerful as she could use them to cure her sister.”

Rarity paused for dramatic effect, deflating slightly when Swain remained expressionless. “Anyway, a thousand years later, Nightmare Moon freed herself from her prison in the moon that Princess Celestia banished her to. During the attempted coup, our group of friends, led by Twilight, tracked down the Elements of Harmony in the Everfree Forest, at the ruins of the old Castle of the Royal Pony Sisters. At least that's what we originally thought. During the final confrontation with Nightmare Moon at the castle, the Elements were seemingly destroyed, but Twilight figured out that apparently the magic of the Elements were innate in those who embodied the traits described by each of the six Elements. With that knowledge, she led us in harnessing the Elements and purifying Nightmare Moon in the Rainbow of Light, reverting her to Princess Luna. Anyway, as its bearer, I am sometimes referred to as the Element of Generosity. Twilight is Magic, Applejack is Honesty, Rainbow Dash is Loyalty, Pinkie Pie is Laughter, and our friend Fluttershy, who couldn't be here due to other obligations, is Kindness.”

Swain was mildly disappointed upon learning the Elements were innate, and not something he could bring back and harness for his own uses, but his attention didn't waver. “So your princesses are directly responsible for the maintenance of day and night? They must be very powerful.”

“Oh, yeah! They raise the sun and moon! Doesn't it work the same way on Runeterra?” Pinkie Pie suddenly made a lot more sense to Swain when identified as the Element of Laughter, though he still found her grating.

“No, actually. On Runeterra, the celestial bodies maintain themselves, and the environment and weather operates naturally.” The general was slightly amused by the look of astonishment on the baffled ponies.

“Ugh..just like the Everfree Forest...If your world is anything like that dreadful place, I pity you, Mister Swain.” Rarity looked discomforted by the concept of a world where the weather ran itself and nature ran wild.

Swain raised an eyebrow. "Really? What's so bad about this Everfree Forest?"

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Ezreal ducked as another one of the huge, wolf-like creatures jumped at him. "Still think we shouldn't kill 'em, Nasus?" Ezreal's tone was slightly deadpanned.

A sickening crunch served as a complement to the massive stallion's response as one of the creatures went unmoving beneath his hoof. "This is the third pack that has attacked us since we crossed the river. I believe their numbers are large enough to risk thinning them some."

A bolt of white-hot arcane energy sparked from Ezreal's horn as the gem embedded in a bracer on his right foreleg flared. Ezreal smirked in satisfaction as a yelp signaled his hit. "You're not very good at sarcasm, are you, big guy?"

"Shut up and concentrate on driving these pests away," Ryze growled, magic crackling around him as he summoned a disc of magical energy that bounced between their assailants, leaving electrical burns where it made contact. "If these things are anything like wolves back on Runeterra, killing the biggest one might scare the rest off, after the casualties we've already inflicted."

Nasus nodded, and searched the battlefield for his target. After a few seconds, his quarry made itself known, diving at Nasus with tooth and claw bared. Nasus rolled with the assault, doing his best to keep his vital areas intact. He grunted in annoyance as he felt a familiar warmth dripping from a new wound running across his side. With a savage growl, he searched within himself for the familiar energy, a ghastly shimmer surrounding his hooves. The creature died the moment Nasus made contact, who withdrew his hoof as a faint, ghostly visage of the pack's leader was torn from the now lifeless husk. As the misty apparition dispersed itself, it was absorbed into Nasus. The long gash previously on his side was nowhere to be found.

The ploy had worked. The pack, deprived of its leadership and already heavily wounded, retreated. Ezreal shuddered, and looked at

Nasus. "Was now really the time for a snack? Besides, it's creepy when you do that."

Red orbs shifted their gaze to the young mage. "Am I to apologize for what I am? It has been some time since I have had any real nourishment, and it takes more than just two nearby sentients to sustain myself without directly feeding. In your new forms, you can at least feed on the plant life here, but your core nature is unchanged, magically and spiritually. The changes are merely superficial. The same applies to me, and I am unable to sustain myself in the same manner you are."

Ryze scowled at Ezreal's show of ignorance. "I still wish you'd tell me more about your species. Research into your kind and the magic involved in your existence would be a huge breakthrough in almost every field."

"From what I've heard of your race, and the so-called Rune Wars, you'd all be dead the moment the secrets of my kind were made known. Even we have to work hard not to abuse the nature of what we are. Consuming the life essence of another being is not something to be taken lightly. If we could nourish ourselves in the manner of humanity, we would."

The magical scholar nodded. "I suppose you're right. I imagine a war involving soul eaters would be worse than the Rune Wars themselves."

The Curator of the Sands looked away from Ryze, eyes dimming slightly. "You have no idea."

The silence continued for several moments before Ezreal thought to speak. "We should keep moving. I'm seeing a little more light than before, so I think the forest is getting less dense. Maybe there's something more to this place than endless forest and hostile creatures."

- - - -

Dear Princess Celestia,

It turns out those strange ponies I met yesterday are actually from a different world. Our best theory is that a type of magic they use on their world that was previously used to transport entities across dimensions might have somehow snagged due to a surge in magic here. My personal

theory is that it's related to the second use of the Rainbow of Light during the Discord incident. I would like to send these ponies to Canterlot. I believe that with their assistance in understanding more about their 'summoning' magic, the minds at the University of Canterlot can help speed these ponies on their way home. It pains me to think of ever being separated from Equestria for any extended length of time with no way home, so I can only imagine how these ponies feel.

Their leader, a pony who calls himself Jericho Swain, has stated that there might be three others from his world as well that we should be on the lookout for.

On a more positive note, I'm sending with this letter the recipe for two concoctions the one called Singed has shown me that can restore mental and physical condition. He brings back fond memories of Zecora and our first meetings with that kind zebra. Due to his admittedly intimidating appearance, I was wont to pass judgment on him, but he has proven to be a font of knowledge both chemical and alchemical. I've already learned much from him. He's truly a genius, I think. It's a shame we won't have time to learn more from him. Either way, my dealings with him seem like another triumph of the magic of friendship.

I worry for the one called Riven, though. I suspect that she has recently been through an ordeal more traumatic than the one she currently finds herself experiencing. She seems uncomfortable around her fellows and I've heard her speak in melancholy tones to my friend Rainbow Dash regarding her homeland, a place which Swain originates as well, called Noxus. From what I've found out, it is some sort of meritocracy where ability is prized above all else. It seems a bit cold and impersonal to me, but both Swain and Riven seem fiercely loyal in their own ways to it, and they seem like nice enough ponies, and it's not my place to judge. I think I'm rambling a bit though.

These past few days have been pretty exciting, though I miss Spike already. I hope he returns swiftly from helping Fluttershy with her trip to the Hoofington Veterinary Clinic. He has been gone but a day, and I already find myself missing his assistance and company. Anyway, I look forward to your correspondence as always.

Your Faithful Student,

Twilight Sparkle

Chapter 5

A Thirst Unquenched

“Captain, prepare the Royal Guard. I want a transport arranged to Ponyville. Your men are to escort three ponies who identify themselves as Swain, Singed, and Riven; the group is composed of a unicorn, an earth pony, and a pegasus, respectively. Do not let your guard down, though. These are not Equestrians, and we cannot be certain of their motivations yet. That being said, show them the utmost courtesy and respect. I will arrange for their housing in one of the guest suites in the castle before I leave for Manehattan to sort out yet another parasprite infestation. Allow them the same amenities and access that would be extended to a foreign ambassador.” The captain of the Canterlot Royal Guard nodded wordlessly, and set about his tasks, leaving Princess Celestia to her thoughts. The ruler, famous within and without her domain of Equestria for maintaining a state of peace that had lasted so long that even the memory of war had faded into obscure legend, was the epitome of regal mannerisms tempered with a practical mindset. Even with the return of Luna and her reintegration with the administration of the kingdom, Celestia still was responsible for most of the day-to-day running of the Canterlot Court, though with liberal use of delegation she still managed to find time to retain her sanity.

In addition to being the driving force of Equestrian policy, she and her sister had one other, much more important duty. Long ago, in times when even Celestia and Luna were naught but fillies, the mighty race of alicorns that the sisters were the only remnant of had seen signs of doom on the horizon. Wielding magic that would make even the vaunted Summoners of Runeterra nervous, they had made preparation for the worst. Thus, what should have been the twilight of a planet was merely the eleventh hour of a race, and the land survived the death of its sun long enough for a smaller, more sustainable replacement to be crafted. The catch was that this new sun was too large to be held easily in the orbit of the planet, so it fell to the last children of the alicorns to maintain the paths of the celestial bodies. To do this, though, the pair would have to be unbound by constraints such as age, and would have to possess untold reserves of power. Once the sisters had come of age, after decades of preparation, for the good of all living

things, the alicorns transferred the greater portion of their power to Celestia and Luna. There was another price, though, for when the time came for the surviving alicorns to give birth, they found that their foals possessed either wing or horn, but not both. More surprising was that some of these foals had neither of the two marking characteristics of the alicorns. Thus, as the final midnight fell for the alicorn race, the dawn of ponies had arrived, an age that had lasted in a peace enforced by the sisters for time immemorial.

Celestia broke out of her reverie, and resumed preparations for her journey. Parasprite infestations hadn't been a problem in ages until recently, when the pests had begun flooding out of Everfree and Whitetail Woods. She would have to see if there was an imbalance in their natural predators after she was done making trips around the kingdom to educate major settlements on parasprite control, as well as subtly gauging the state of her kingdom as she was wont to do on occasion.

She was not aware, however, of the presence of another entity listening to her conversation with the guard captain, an entity that had been sealed away, but had secretly retained its perception, among other things. Sensing its opportunity, it started forming a plan.

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Riven braced herself for the trial she was about to face. She was about as mentally prepared as she believed she could be for the upcoming test, and drifting through the air with Rainbow Dash, both still slightly damp from finishing the day's flying practice with a bath in the lake, she might almost have been relaxed for the first time in many months. However, the warrior still felt a slight amount of trepidation at the thought of what waited for her at Applejack's barn, which had been decided on as the best location for the evening's festivities. Riven hadn't participated in any revelry since her tour of duty in Ionia. *'I wonder if I'll even be able to truly celebrate anything tonight,'* Riven mused to herself.

Rainbow Dash noticed her pupil's melancholy mood, and thinking back to what Riven had previously mentioned about Noxus, decided to intervene. "Is something wrong? You seem kinda down for someone about to go to a party."

Riven sighed. She'd actually become quite fond of the rainbow-maned showoff, respecting her drive to continuously improve and her determination to achieve her goals. Riven steeled herself, and decided to take a risk. "I'm just...a bit nervous, to be honest." A hollow laugh rattled out. "I'm not sure I'm ready for this."

Rainbow Dash smiled genuinely, hoping to reassure her newest friend. "Don't worry about it. I know Pinkie comes off a little strong sometimes, and to be honest even I get a little annoyed by her antics sometimes, but she means well. That, and there's nobody in the world who throws a party like Pinkie."

"It isn't that..." Riven's gaze was downcast. "This is the first time I have celebrated anything in about half of a decade. I don't know if I can handle it."

"What's to handle? If it's been that long since you've had any reason to celebrate, sounds like you need it that much more! Relax! It'll be cool. Trust me, I know cool." Rainbow Dash let a smug smile sneak onto her face, but her eyes still reflected concern. "Why haven't you celebrated anything in that long, though?"

"Everyone...I...If I tell you something, you have to promise never to tell anyone, especially my comrades. I don't know how they'd react to others knowing about where we come from." Riven's expression was grave.

Rainbow Dash's response was equally solemn, and she began reciting with equal solemnity. "Cross my heart, hope to fly, stick a cupcake in my eye."

Riven thought the wording was strange, but the tone of voice told her that Rainbow Dash was serious about not telling. "Well...The most important thing is, the world we come from...It's different from here. Things are harder, and the inhabitants are harder too.

"Our world has conflict, plagues, disaster...everything your world seems to lack, to be honest. This place we live in...it's a daily struggle to survive for many, and we all have different ideas on the best way to make things safe for ourselves and those we love. In Noxus, our idea was to make everyone as strong as possible, so that we'd all be safe from the

terrors of the world. We refine ourselves in whatever ways we can find, trying to become stronger, smarter, faster...better...In our culture, there is honor in contest, and position is afforded to those who are able to shine above others. As such, it's in our very heritage that we tend to be perpetually in conflict with those who do not share our ideals." Riven gathered her mental strength as what she deemed to be the hardest part approached.

"Please try to understand, this world is so different from ours. We don't have Princesses watching over us, making sure we're all safe and that we all play nice. Our way of life is just the best we could think of to make sure that nobody could ever make things worse for us. Anyway...One such place who did not hold our ideals is Ionia. The Ionians believe that peace, war, good, evil, and everything must be balanced. To a degree, they do strengthen themselves, but not to the end of strength. Rather, they wish to know themselves more thoroughly, and pursue this objective through any means. I can understand the mindset, to a degree, as knowing yourself enables you to find your weaknesses, but as a concept, I don't think that's enough to keep your loved ones safe and your belly filled. The time came when we went to war against the Ionians, hoping to show them that their ways could not keep the world at bay, while simultaneously strengthening Noxus. It was to be a contest of ideals, pitting the strength of mind against the strength of will. Victory would have proven the superiority of the winner's mindset."

Riven's breath caught. "But...something went wrong. Someone high on the chain of command forgot what strength meant, and what honor was worth. Then they went and hired that *bastard*. His knowledge of chemical warfare is matched only by his mentor, who was so sick and twisted a goddess sacrificed her divinity to curse him into having an exterior as monstrous as his interior. A lot of good that did. Somehow, I think his student was worse, though. Before there was a sadistic pleasure in the pain of others, and at least then the lives taken meant something, even if it was demented. But after his mentor's transformation, the new Head Chemist of Noxus only looked at things in a cold, methodical way. Lives were the currency in a sickening sacrifice to his god of Progress. He was the one who showed me what my home had become. My unit had walked into a particularly clever Ionian trap, and we had taken heavy losses from them, for they were excellent fighters. To be honest, we didn't deserve to win that fight. In a way, I don't think we did. The Head Chemist's

abominable creations were flung at the battlefield when hope seemed lost, killing Ionian and Noxian indiscriminately. We only prevailed through numbers.”

Rainbow Dash looked horrified. Riven was shaking with rage, barely able to keep a steady flight pattern. “I was the only survivor from my unit. Do you know why?” Riven almost lost her balance in the air as her muscles involuntarily tightened from the anger pouring through her. “LUCK! It was damn luck! Not strength, not because our ideals deserved to outlast theirs, not because our victory was well-earned. We won, I lived, but so many died, just because of LUCK. So much potential was wasted that day. Tactical geniuses might have arisen on either side, new and great heroes who would refine the world itself so that one day everyone might be strong enough to survive and thrive in it. All of that was wasted. That wasn't war, it wasn't even a battle. It was wholesale slaughter, and after I heard the Head Chemist talking about how much he'd learned about his latest creations, I left Noxus, determined to become so strong I'd defeat everything, even luck. Then I would be able to show Noxus, and everyone and everything I cared about, that this...murder wasn't the Noxian way. That we were better than that, and that our very heritage demanded that we conduct ourselves with honor, and that every life lost is a tragedy brought on by a world stronger than us, and that for the good of all we must find the strength to protect everything dear to us.” Riven paused to catch her breath, ignoring the burning in her eyes. “The last time I celebrated anything was the day before my unit fought its last battle.”

For several seconds, Rainbow Dash said nothing, trying her best to comprehend fully everything that had been said. War didn't exist in Equestria, and the worst of the danger was confined to the Everfree Forest. How could anypony relate to a world like Riven described? How could anypony stay sane in a world like she described? A small voice in her head was sounding off another question in sad tones. *'Why should anypony have to live in a world like that?'* She cradled that voice in her thoughts for a few more seconds before knowing how to answer. Rainbow Dash flew over to Riven to put a hoof on her back, careful not to disrupt the already unstable pegasus' flight. “I can't say I can understand wanting to kill anypony. I don't think I want to. That said, without understanding that, I can't understand if the way you think is truly the best for your world. In the time you've been here though, you've shown that you have a lot of light in you, even if the dark world you come from tries to smother it, and I wish to Celestia herself

that your world could be like mine, this place where people are free to seek happiness as they wish. Maybe for tonight though, at least, you can leave your world behind and stay in ours for a bit, in more than just body? Even the strongest souls get tired eventually, and I know from experience a smile can do so much for renewing that strength, and trust me, if anyone can make you smile, it's Pinkie. So what do you say to stepping away from Noxus for a while and giving Equestria a chance? I'm sure your homeland will still be there for you when you get back, and I'm sure that you'll do your best to do right, as much as right means in your world." Rainbow Dash gave Riven a hopeful smile.

Riven couldn't help but return the smile as she looked up at the first person she had considered a friend in years.

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"Signs of life at last. This isn't a game trail, it's an actual path. Maybe we can finally go home soon." Ezreal sighed in relief. "Just when I was really starting to like this forest, too. I mean, if it weren't for the ravenous creatures attacking us every time we took a second step, and the distance from any sort of civilization, I'd sa-

"Shut up, boy. We get it. Talk about it less and correct it more." Ryze could tolerate the kid in short doses, but after having to listen to hours of his complaints filtered through wisecracks both decidedly lacking in wisdom and decidedly effective in producing cracks in Ryze's temper, the mage-turned-stallion was in a foul mood. He'd definitely need a break from their 'lessons' after this incident was over.

Ezreal scoffed. "Don't get all high-and-mighty on me. Just because you prefer to be angry all the time doesn't mean I can't joke around. Maybe I'm not made of the same stuff as you, but I can't tolerate being down all the time."

Ryze's vitriolic comeback was interrupted by Nasus. "Someone would have to travel this path at least somewhat frequently for it to be this well-defined among the foliage. Either this is a trade route, or someone lives near enough to make frequent use of this path. Either way, if we follow it long enough, we shall probably encounter someone. It's probable that the

friendliness and camaraderie abounding here will inspire them to be just as friendly and helpful to us as we are to each other.”

The message was received clearly, and the greater portion of the bickering stopped as they journeyed along the dirt trail. Fortunately for the group, most of the animal attacks had abated, and the wildlife appeared more and more innocuous the further along the path they progressed.

After another hour or two of walking, they found themselves at a crude but sturdy looking hut, and all were relieved by the sight of smoke coming out of a chimney. Nasus led the way to the door, and knocked firmly. The door creaked open, and a striped face greeted them. “Greetings, travelers, and welcome here. Might I ask what brings you near?”

Ryze and Ezreal shared confused looks, but Nasus didn't miss a beat as he responded to the zebra. “Long by us this forest has been crossed. I am afraid we are somewhat lost.” The Curator of the Sands silently thanked growing up around a nearly limitless supply of poetry, hoping he could avoid offending any locals by imitating their customs.

The zebra for her part was delighted to meet someone who could return her effortless rhymes. “Come in, sit down, stay if you might. Over some tea we shall discuss your plight.”

Ezreal, with more stammering and less smoothness than his larger companion, voiced his concern. “Thank you, stranger, for your generous, um, backing, but I fear my rhyming is somewhat lacking.”

The zebra laughed. “You need not fear, for most are the same. I did not catch yours, but Zecora's my name.”

The white unicorn smiled. “Thank you. We're kinda in an unfamiliar land, and to be honest, that's not all that is unfamiliar.”

Ryze spoke in his most diplomatic tone. Zecora decided not to take offense to the harshness of his speech. “We were wondering if you might direct us to civilization. We've been lost in this forest for almost two days”

Zecora nodded. "Glad I am, to be of help to you. Following the path is what you should do. Supplies I can spare, take them if you will. By tomorrow you'll be in Ponyville. You should not tarry here, I do advise, if you wish to leave the forest before sunrise."

The four of them, led by Zecora, began packing some supplies into saddlebags provided by the zebra. Being an experienced woodspony, the supplies taken didn't phase Zecora, as they were all easy for her to find and replace. Thus equipped, the trio heaped thanks onto the zebra and departed in high spirits, looking forward to the prospect of long-absent civilization.

Chapter 6

Ambition Renewed

He felt refreshed. Better than he had in so long. He wasn't ready yet, though. The new arrivals had brought something so new, so strong that even in his Canterlot prison, he was able to feel their arrival, and to feed off of their natures. No pony of Equestria had possessed this much delicious chaos in its nature for ages untold, not since those wonderful years when the leadership of Equestria was less...balanced. Yes, every second that these newcomers were here was a delightful convalescence for this seemingly innocuous statue.

It was so easy, so natural to savor this bouquet, with its pungent flavors permeating his essence. All of the familiar components were there. Fear, anxiety, ambition, hate, confusion; all of these were comforting companions that he had learned to draw power from so long ago, and at one point had even seized the throne with. There was something new here, though, something that he had experienced so little he could barely recognize it. He contemplated it, trying to remember what could cause this particular sensation within his soul.

Discord, Spirit of Chaos and former ruler of Equestria, allowed himself a moment of sadistic glee as he remembered what could be in an entity's heart to cause him such acute delight. Images of red, demonic eyes gazing at a field of broken bodies of some species he didn't recognize flashed through his mind, the last of the survivors of some battle writhing in agony as a purple mist flowed over them before the stillness of death overtook them. Discord had all the information he needed from the distant peek he got into the hearts of the newcomers. Scattered thoughts coalesced into a rare, solid form in his consciousness. He would not miss this opportunity.

After all, it had been so long since anypony in Equestria had violence in their hearts.

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Rainbow Dash gazed thoughtfully at the party going on around her. Normally she'd be in the middle of it, enjoying herself and playing around with everyone else, but Riven's words troubled her. Rainbow Dash was still a bit shaken from Riven's admission that she had taken life before, but her heart seemed good. Maybe if she'd been born in Equestria instead, things would be different. Rainbow Dash didn't know how anyone could survive in the environment Riven had described, but if it was really as bad as she described, maybe being able to take life was necessary. At the very least, she still regarded every life lost as a regrettable result of a cruel world. Rainbow Dash wondered if her two companions were also hiding similar trauma.

The party was in full swing now, and like many of Pinkie Pie's larger parties, a good portion of the town had shown up. The mayor of the town had authorized the use of the town square for the party. Pinkie truly did have a talent for parties, and having something to bring the community together helped keep things cohesive, so once in a while, Pinkie would 'convince' the mayor to allow the use of public property for large events such as this. Throughout the square, ponies of all shapes and color configurations enjoyed the opportunity to revel, only vaguely aware of the reason that Pinkie was throwing a party this time. Even the three champions had, relatively speaking, relaxed and were enjoying the festivities. Riven was locked in a wrestling match with Applejack, surrounded by a crowd of cheering onlookers as the soldier and the farmer tested the other's strength. Swain was likewise surrounded, playing down his crippled leg just enough to make everypony even more sympathetic while he subtly fished for information about Equestrian politics and government.

Elsewhere, Singed was at a table with a purple coated mare with a mane of a darker purple, each of them taking turns slugging a distinctively apple-flavored alcohol favored by the few ponies of Ponyville who did drink. Unfortunately for Berry Punch, the aforementioned purple mare who emphatically denied she had an alcohol addiction, Singed was a master at the art of drinking, his body being practically immune to inebriation from all but the strongest brews of Runeterra. One defeated sigh later, a bag of the currency referred to as bits was slammed onto the table right before Singed's opponent toppled over. Singed chuckled as he secured the bag to the strap that held his bottle in place. The poor mare never knew she was against the second-hardest drinker in Runeterra. The money would come

in handy, though. He would have need of certain ingredients, just in case. Singed got on his hooves, and began to search for the bookish mare, the one called Twilight, who had housed him previously. He hoped that she would know where he could purchase his desired herbs and chemicals.

Twilight Sparkle saw the chemist approaching, and waved a hoof at him. "Hi Singed! I hope you're enjoying the party." She gestured to a cream-colored, pink-maned pegasus mare and a small, purple-scaled creature beside her. "This is my friend Fluttershy, and my assistant Spike. They were away helping another town's veterinary clinic when you first arrived. Luckily, they were kind enough to get her a sky-carriage back after she was done. Fluttershy, Spike, this is Singed. He's one of the ponies I was telling you about earlier."

Spike's greeting was short and distant, and Singed noted that he seemed unduly distracted by Rarity. After a few moments, he decided to not follow that train of thought to its logical conclusion. Fluttershy, however, seemed to have vanished, at least until he heard a squeak vaguely resembling a greeting escape from behind Twilight. Singed frowned. His appearance had caused the all-too-common response of fear from those who met him in person, even in his normal form. It had made socializing difficult at times. People and ponies alike seemed to equate glowing eyes with danger. Of course, Singed knew he was plenty dangerous, but his appearance had nothing to do with that. They never seemed to realize that it was his mind that was such a potent weapon, and without his genius, he wouldn't be the juggernaut he was known for being on the Fields of Justice. Brushing off Twilight's profuse apologies at Fluttershy's timidity, he turned to the topic he had approached her for. "So, Twilight, I was wondering if you could assist me. I've recently acquired some bits from a friendly wager with a pony called Berry Punch. I was wondering if you could help me acquire some supplies before I leave."

"I'd be glad to help. What do you need?" Twilight sent Spike to fetch a quill and parchment.

Shortly afterward, the dragon returned and Singed began to rattle off a list of various chemicals and herbal ingredients. Most of the chemicals went over Fluttershy's head, but her already considerable fear of this intimidating earth pony was augmented as she recognized many of the plants she had treated animals for ingesting. Judging by the way this pony

was speaking, he was familiar with them too. Thinking back to Rainbow Dash's often-given advice to her about being assertive, she gathered her courage, and spoke. "Um...Mr. Singed, um, you know that most of the herbs you ask for are toxic, right?" She flinched, as if expecting reprisal for her statement.

Singed laughed heartily. "Of course, my dear. I'm a chemist by profession, after all. Part of my job is to take things that would normally be dangerous and find a way to make them useful, and these ingredients are all vital parts of my greatest creation. Once I go to work on them, they won't be poisonous to me anymore, but instead, will combine to form a concoction that will be capable of boosting nearly every aspect of my body's functions. The effects are so profound that most thought that I was crazy when I first described it to them, which is why I've affectionately named it the Insanity Potion. Unfortunately, I haven't quite refined it to the point at which others can use it, but I possess a resistance to certain chemicals brought on by years of experience, so it's perfectly safe, although there can be some minor side effects, but that's neither here nor there. Anyway, worry not your pink-crowned head. I've been a chemist since I was quite young, and I've learned under some of the finest minds Runeterra has to offer."

'Not exactly what I was worried about...I probably shouldn't judge someone based on looks though. Zecora turned out okay, after all.' Fluttershy barely managed a somewhat artificial smile. "That's...very reassuring. I was just a little concerned after seeing the effects of such plants on so many unfortunate animals."

"I take it you're quite the animal lover, then? I've not had the best experiences with animals, but my friend Swain has a bird that he's unusually fond of, and I've not known the man-err, stallion to be very sentimental. Personally, I find the creature to be rather unsettling, but each to his own."

Fluttershy glanced over to the bird perched atop Swain's back. It looked back at her, its six eyes as luminescent and cold as ever, and gave a disapproving caw. Fluttershy decided she could live with herself if this particular animal decided not to love her. Her next conclusion was that a conversation with Singed was more preferable than a staring contest with the creature. "Well, I've always had a special connection with animals. I'm

the closest thing that Ponyville has to a veterinarian, though I'm not officially qualified yet. I'm taking these neat courses in Manehattan next summer though, when I have enough bits saved up from my work here, so I'll at least have that much formal education. I'm hoping to open my own clinic for sick and injured animals one day." Fluttershy couldn't help but smile at the thought of being able to do more to help her precious animal friends.

The party continued for a few more hours, and as the crowd began to slowly disperse, Riven found herself smiling contentedly as she sat and watched the remaining ponies around her. Her companions had excused themselves a little earlier, saying that Singed had to concoct a remedy to help relieve pain in Swain's crippled foreleg. Riven didn't really believe them, but she didn't press the issue. Rainbow Dash had been right. Taking some time to cut loose had been a refreshing experience, and although she still felt the weight of both her past and her convictions, she felt a little stronger to bear them. Riven stifled a laugh as Rainbow Dash managed to get tangled in a party banner as she tried to catch Pinkie Pie, who had somehow managed to find her way onto a nearby roof. Fortunately, the banner Rainbow Dash had plowed into served as an effective method of controlling Pinkie's descent, and she bounced gleefully into a nearby pile of banner, feathers, and rainbow. Riven decided that she'd have to find some time for revelry when she returned to Noxus. Riven gave up on stifling her laughter at the chaos that seemed to follow the pink pony as she attempted to unravel her friend's bindings, and moved to help free the pair.

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The first thing Nasus noticed was the sunrise. The Equestrian sun was making it's way back onto it's azure throne, regal purples and reds filling the sky to announce its presence. Nasus was more interested in what he saw after that though. As Nasus looked at the distant town, he could already perceive what seemed like a rainbow-hued tapestry of colors to his mind's eye. It was like the distinctive flavor of each settlement he had been to, for his glowing red spheres could detect far more than visual signals; magic-users who had perfected the same ability called it aura viewing, the ability to see the nature of one's soul via a colored haze that emanated from them. For the beings known as soul eaters, though, it was innate, and from a distance, the colors dispersed and blended into a beautiful, swirling vortex. *'And yet it is only to mark food sources. Ironic, that such a lovely*

display is wasted on those whose very nature demands they destroy it. Even more ironic that those who produce such beauty are usually doomed to be ignorant of it.' Nasus smiled to himself and waited for his two companions to catch up, admiring the complexities of this particular town's aura. Unlike the two former humans behind him, Nasus did not have to deal with sleep, or food aside from his ethereal nourishment, though he was able to partake in food and gain an infinitesimal amount of sustenance through it.

After a few moments, Ezreal staggered into view, bleary-eyed and blank faced, followed by Ryze, equally bleary-eyed but slightly more coordinated. Ezreal muttered something about civilization, and slumped against a nearby tree. Ryze looked to Nasus tiredly. "Hate to say it, but I'm in the same boat as the idiot. I need sleep. I'll set up a few magical traps, so you can be free to scout the town ahead of us."

"Very well. Rest well. Come to the town when you awaken. I shall know when you are near and meet you on the outskirts." Nasus nodded at Ezreal, who was already far along in his journey to a restful oblivion, and began walking.

It was about an hour later that he came across a cottage standing alone outside of town. It was a somewhat whimsical looking structure surrounded by a variety of birdhouses, with a smaller dog-house like structure labeled 'Angel Bunny', and Nasus was inclined to wonder how the roof, made entirely of some sort of foliage, appeared to still be alive and green. After crossing a bridge over a creek that bisected the path to the building, Nasus walked to the door and knocked firmly with his hoof.

Nasus could vaguely hear the sounds of various animals from inside the cottage, and he thought he could make out a faint voice trying desperately to calm the racket that his loud knocking had caused. When the door opened, and Nasus found himself face to face with a certain pink-maned pegasus, he tried to assume an even mixture of formality and friendliness. "Greetings. My name is Nasus, and I was wondering if you could help me, for I am part of a small group that seems to have found its way into a land we do not know. If you are unable to help, I apologize for wasting your time and disturbing your animals."

Upon seeing Nasus, Fluttershy's first reaction was to slam the door and cower in fear, but she managed to overcome her paranoia long enough to hear the stranger ask for help. *'Gee, I wonder why there are so many huge, scary-looking earth ponies with glowing eyes around. Maybe he's from the same place those others are.'* After debating with herself a few moments, kindness won over fear and she invited Nasus in for tea while they discussed his group's situation. It didn't take long for the subject of Swain, Singed, and Riven to come up, and Fluttershy agreed to lead him to Twilight Sparkle so that he could reunite with his fellow champions.

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"You just missed them. The Royal Guard showed up about an hour ago and picked them up in a sky-carriage. Don't worry, I'll have my assistant send for another. You'll be reunited with your friends in no time." Twilight Sparkle's reassurances elicited a raised eyebrow from Nasus, who was slightly amused at her assumption that the two groups were on friendly terms.

"Thank you, Twilight Sparkle." Nasus paused, examining his surroundings. "This is more books than the average inhabitant of Runeterra possesses. Are books more valued here, or are you a librarian?"

The purple mare giggled. "Oh, neither. Well, I suppose technically I am Ponyville's librarian, since I run the place, but I'm actually a full-time student of Canterlot University. Graduated top of my class from Princess Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns just recently. Princess Celestia sent me here on a special assignment, and I took a liking to Ponyville, so she let me stay. She's the best mentor anypony could ask for!" The admiration flowed from Twilight's voice like a waterfall the moment the name Celestia was spoken. "What about you? I mean, Swain and the others mentioned that you all are part of some organization that runs things by settling disputes via some sort of contest, but I get the feeling he was intentionally vague when describing it. I won't pry though. Anyway, besides that, do you have any hobbies or occupations?"

"That sounds like Swain." Nasus paused thoughtfully. "Since I came to Runeterra, I spend most of my free time exploring a place known as the Shurima Desert. I am more comfortable among the sands than anywhere else, and it is a good place to learn about Runeterran history. Before I

came to Runeterra though, I worked with my brother, Renekton. I was the overseer of our kind's greatest achievement: the Great Library, and he was the head gatekeeper, responsible for keeping those not ready for the Library's secrets out. I have never seen anything that can compare to it in my time away from my home. The structure itself is the size of this town, and every room is filled with books dedicated to a subject. At least, I hope it still is. Things were not going so well when I was summoned to Runeterra."

Twilight looked as if she might explode when Nasus spoke of the Great Library's size. "That sounds like possibly the most wonderful building I have ever heard of. If such a thing existed here, nobody would ever see me again. But how would I choose what to read? No pony can read that many books even in their entire life...or can they? How much of the knowledge would be retained though?"

Nasus laughed, finding the bookworm's quandary to be somewhat endearing to the scholarly being. "My species is naturally long-lived. I was actually present at the opening of the Library, and before I became overseer I managed to read a relatively large portion of the Library's contents. Those were the most enjoyable centuries of my life."

"...centuries? That's...wow...I thought only the Princesses could live that long. If I could live that long, I'd have time to read all of the books in Equestria!" Twilight looked extremely pleased at this notion."

Fluttershy had been standing silently off to the side since she had brought the large earth pony to the Ponyville Library. With a barely audible farewell, she started moving toward the door. Twilight, engrossed in her fantasies of eternal learning, didn't notice until Nasus spoke his farewell in return. "Oh, uh, sorry. Bye Fluttershy! Take care!" Twilight paused, looking awkward for a moment after her friend had departed. "Um, sorry, I can get a bit enthusiastic when it comes to knowledge. Anyway, I should probably offer to show you around town, shouldn't I?"

"Few things are better than a love of learning, and fewer things are as rare. I would be honored to learn more of your home. It will be several hours until my companions make their way here. Our journey through the nearby forest was somewhat tiring."

“You had to go through the Everfree? Eek, that must have been scary. All sorts of dangerous creatures inhabit it.” Nasus smiled at Twilight's concern, and the two continued to speak as Twilight began leading him around town.

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If he hadn't been encased in stone, Discord would have been jumping for joy. Every second brought the newcomers closer to him, and every second he felt stronger for it. This was going to be fun.

Chapter 7

Greed is Colder than Stone

Swain's sleep, for as long as he could remember, had been as cold and empty as many misguided souls claimed he was. The truth was, Swain's heart constantly ached with a pressing need, an unfulfilled wish, an unyielding ambition to claim what was his. Beneath this, fear burned at the inevitability of the consequences of his actions. He did not believe he was wrong, but he knew that everything had a price paid, and his debts were still unattended. The ride to Canterlot was several hours, though, and Swain had thought to recover a few hours lost from the night before. This time, his dreams were as full as his ambitions.

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The adolescent limped silently into the Noxian infirmary. The doctor gaped as the boy flatly requested treatment for a leg that had been snapped in half, bone protruding from the skin. The youth named himself as Jericho Swain, and calmly answered all of the doctor's questions regarding his health and medical background. The boy's face didn't flinch once as the doctor reset his leg with a sickening pop and crackle. The doctor was nearly beside himself with bewilderment as he recommended magical treatment for the leg. Swain seemed almost annoyed at this as he responded. "No magic shall touch me but my own. Do you have a crutch I may use?" The doctor nodded, dumbstruck. As Swain hobbled out of the door, the bird on his shoulder let out a disdainful cry.

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"You, join the glorious Noxian army? A cripple?!" The recruiter couldn't help but laugh at the young man before him. The bird affixed to Swain's shoulder seemed equally amused, but perhaps not for the same reason, and it cackled evilly. Swain did seem amused, however. The recruiter's secretary watched in terror as Swain gave his response. After a few seconds, the screaming subsided, and a broken body lay on the floor where the recruiter used to stand, eyes locked on the horror that his last sight had been.

Swain hobbled around the corpse, avoiding the crimson puddle forming near his feet, and looked the secretary in the eye. "You have been given a field promotion. I would like to join the Noxian Officer Corps. Are you going to tell me no?" The raven eyed the corpse hungrily.

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Swain calmly limped across the battlefield, as soldiers both Noxian and Demacian fell around him. A Demacian soldier had the ignorance to try to engage him. Swain raised his hand. As the bolt of magical energy hit the unlucky infantryman, he hit the ground, writhing in agony. Swain continued hobbling to his target, stopping only to deliver a coup de grâce to the soldier with the sturdy cane supported his stride with. Before him, just a few yards away, Jarvan Lightshield IV, crown prince of Demacia, and one of the last of two witnesses to Swain's crime, stood, fighting in the tradition of Demacians, bravely and showily. Swain felt the familiar changes race through his body as he prepared to strike.

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"It's done. Slaughter whoever you wish, but Noxus is mine. You can have him as a token of good faith." Swain's face was as emotionless as always as the hooded figure floated toward a younger version of Jarvan, bound and gagged.

The figure appraised Jarvan for a few seconds. "One soul means nothing to us. We expect you to perform your role without faltering. Remember the gifts we have already given, and remember what you have given to us. What you lack will not be returned until we have what we wish. We must depart. You have visitors." Swain's face flickered in frustration as he heard the sounds of battle nearby.

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Blankness. Swain looked around at the nothing that he now found himself in, gratefully noting that he still remained in his original human form. "It took me a while to figure out what exactly you gave up. You sure love your risktaking, Jericho Swain." Swain wheeled about, coming face to face with what seemed to be some sort of hideous chimera, a pony's face

speaking from a body made of parts from too many creatures. "My name is Discord. You, my good pony, or whatever it is that you are, seem like someone I could get along with, or at least long enough for us both to gain something. You see, I have been waiting for someone like you. I even had a long speech prepared and everything about Celestia's tyranny, but I don't think that I'll need it here. I'll cut to the meat of why I'm here instead. You have something I need, and I have something I think you will like."

Swain remained expressionless, feeling strangely naked without the presence of his bird. As if Discord could look past the blank facade, he patted Swain on the shoulder. "Don't you worry about your...friend. It would be unproductive for both of us if he were able to perceive this particular exchange. I'll be quick. I can give you a way out of your deal. You see, back in the day, I was pretty powerful. More powerful than Celestia and Luna combined. Even when they found the Elements of Harmony and imprisoned me, it was only a temporary setback. Unfortunately, I underestimated how much being a statue for several thousand years can damage your combat capabilities, and to be honest, your capacity to think clearly. I got a little bit overconfident on my second chance very recently, and I made a bit of a misstep. Bam, back to the statue garden for me, or rather, until Celestia decided that she wasn't going to risk me being released so easily again."

"You want me to free you." Swain's voice was as flat as his expression. "What do I get out of it?"

"As I said, I can give you a way out of your little deal. You help restore me, and I'll restore you. If you can help me, I'll heal that withered lump that they reduced your soul to, and the bird will be a luxury instead of a necessity. Of course, he won't know that. What you do then is up to you. Do we have a deal?" Discord extended a lion's paw toward Swain.

Swain remained motionless. "How do I know I can trust you?"

"You honestly think I believe you'll trust me no matter what I do? I'm not offering trustworthiness. I'm the living embodiment of chaos and disharmony. I'm offering you the assurance that I have absolutely nothing to gain from making an enemy out of you, and everything to gain by sticking to my end of the bargain. If you accept, I'll even give you a little advance on your payment, so that Celestia doesn't see right through you

the moment you step before her. Believe me, I'm mostly responsible for her being the great judge of character she is today, for better or worse. So, what do you say? Deal?"

Swain stood silently for several moments. After what seemed like an eternity to Discord, he extended a hand. The spirit giggled delightedly, practically shaking with excitement before speaking. "Okay. Listen carefully. I am sealed in a vault hidden in the rarely-used Canterlot dungeons. It's at the bottom floor of the castle. Don't look for me yet though; I trust you to use the utmost discretion. You are a politician, after all. I need you to retrieve a set of powerful artifacts known as the Nightmare's Regalia, created by Luna during a fit of, pardon my pun, lunacy. Unfortunately, she's cured now, thanks once more to those blasted Elements of Harmony. Anyway, Bring them to my statue. I'll draw from the magic still remaining in them, and use it to free myself. The Nightmare's Regalia resides in the abandoned Castle of the Royal Pony Sisters in the Everfree Forest. It will be a set of armor fitted for an alicorn such as Luna or Celestia. All you have to do is bring it to me, and I'll do the rest. Maybe after that we can do some more business to facilitate getting you back to where you came from as well. Okay, time for you to wake up now. Up and at 'em, whatever-you-are."

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Swain awoke with a rasping cough, an unfamiliar pain surging through his body. As the pain subsided, he felt a long-forgotten warmth coursing through his mind. Swain couldn't stop a small smile from escaping his lips. Singed looked over with concern at the coughing fit. "You okay? Wouldn't want you keeling over this close to Canterlot."

Singed had to admit that Swain's cold, but strangely sincere laughter disquieted his mind. "Oh, just a particularly strange dream. I shall tell you about it when we have some privacy."

"Must have been some dream."

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Ezreal stared down his opponent. Applejack leered back as Fluttershy set up the targets in the background. It had been less than an hour since Nasus had escorted his companions into town and introduced

them to Twilight and her friends, and by a chance twist of conversation, the subject of skill and hoof-eye coordination had come up, inevitably leading to Ezreal proclaiming his superiority at being a marksman, and that he'd probably make just as good a markspoon. Ryze wasn't the only one slightly grated at what seemed to be a familiar showy nature, and Applejack had decided to put the young stallion in his place. "And Ah can do it without nothin' but mah hooves!" Her proclamation had sealed the challenge.

Ryze had swiftly grown irritated at the waste of time he considered the competition to be, and had busied himself in the library that Twilight called home. Twilight, Rainbow Dash, Rarity, and Pinkie Pie were all gathered about Nasus, eagerly questioning him about various things. Rarity was especially fascinated by Nasus' descriptions of everyday life on Runeterra. "You're saying that every day, almost all the time, Runeterrans wear clothes?! I'd be wealthier than Prince Blueblood if ponies cared that much about clothing here."

In the background, various splatting noises could be heard as Applejack tossed apples she had gathered to use as projectiles into the air, and kicked them with uncanny precision at the targets. Nasus found himself slightly amused at Ezreal's expression as he tried to figure out how a being without hands could toss anything, obviously not knowing enough about magic to recognize the innate kinds the various pony subspecies seemed to possess. He turned back to Rarity. "Yes. Even on my homeworld, clothes were considered mandatory, and it was considered indecent to be without at least a small amount covering the waist and chest."

Rarity was imagining a society where everypony was her customer, and it was a fantasy she was very eager to hear more about. "What do inhabitants of your world call fashionable, anyway?"

"Well, the various species of Runeterra have completely varied tastes. The yordles of Bandle City seem to take a minimalist, practical approach. If they wear heavy clothing, it's usually protective or good for storing tools or something like that. Understandable, considering that an adult yordle only comes up to your knees. Humans, the dominant species, are extremely varied. Fashion depends on where you are from, how much money you have, your skin tone, many different factors. As for my species, there are only two on the entirety of Runeterra, and I cannot imagine my brother is in a state to care about his appearance at the moment. I will

admit though that when I am not in my ceremonial armor, I tend to dress very plainly. The desert is not kind to high fashion, and my lifestyle demands very durable materials if I wish for my clothing to remain intact.”

Twilight saw a glint in Rarity's eyes and moved to intercept the conversation before it spiraled out of control into the inevitable destination of Rarity's boutique. “So, Nasus, Swain talked a little bit about the League of Legends, but he didn't say much. If you don't mind me asking, what exactly do you do in the League?”

Nasus' heart sank. The truth, however, was a gift worthy of the hospitality he had received. “The continent of Valoran is a politically unstable mire of greed, corruption, and conflicting ideologies, but it used to be much worse, from what I know. Before I was torn from my homeworld by the call of a Summoner's spell, Valoran had been ripped apart by conflict. The magics used were potent and the restraint of their casters were equally as lacking. The carelessness of Valoran's inhabitants threatened to make the land unlivable. Thus, the three most powerful magicians, now known as the High Council of Equity, orchestrated the formation of the League to act as a restraint and a safer method of arbitration for the warring city-states and tribes. Summoners would back a political entity, and champion the causes of nations on the Fields of Justice. The Summoners would mentally link with beings such as myself and my companions to be the strategic portion of a contest of magical and martial might and skill.”

The four ponies looked aghast, though Rainbow Dash had already slightly steeled herself against the realities that Riven had shown to her about Runeterra. Twilight looked especially disturbed. “They ripped you and your brother away from your home...to fight? That's...That's terrible. Why do you help them?”

Nasus looked remorseful for a moment. “It is best that my brother is where he is at the moment. As for myself...I arrived at an early portion of the League's inception, where it was still a fragile thing. Political entities did not trust it enough to dedicate their finest warriors to the cause of stopping war. War is a horrible thing, more horrible than anything you will ever experience here, I suspect. I was ripped by a summoning spell from my homeworld under dark circumstances, and I knew just how damaging war could be to a world. I realized that my presence in the League could help provide a measure of peace and stability to a people who had lived under

the shadow of conflict for as long as they could remember. It is not ideal, and it is nothing like the land that you have shown me today, but for the peoples of Valoran, it's a vast improvement. Perhaps, given long enough, they may find something even better. That is my hope."

Pinkie Pie tilted her head, looking puzzled. "Why do you look all sad when you talk about your brother? Valoran sounds bad enough, and siblings are supposed to make you happy."

The others visibly flinched at Pinkie's lack of tact. Nasus did not seem offended, but the eery red glow that sat in the place of his eyes dimmed slightly. "I thank you for your concern. However, sometimes the past is best left to itself. Trouble not your hearts with the mistakes of a civilization or the regrets of an old fool." Nasus looked in the distance, where Ezreal was wearing an increasingly hopeless expression. Magic was a lot easier to aim than an apple was. "It appears my young companion has met his match. Perhaps he might even realize there is a lesson to be learned here about not overestimating one's abilities."

The group dispersed and gravitated toward the two competitors, three of the mares extremely grateful for a chance to dodge what seemed like a very touchy subject from a very dark world, while the fourth remained unextinguishably chipper. Twilight reflected on what she had learned, and found that her view of Nasus and his fellow champions was of respect mixed with pity. She could only imagine if she had to leave her home to fight as an occupation, and she didn't think it would be a fulfilling existence. Yet these ponies, or whatever they normally were, were willing to give up their own chance at living a peaceful existence for the sake of others. It was no wonder that a few of them seemed so strange and unsettling. Fighting constantly could only be a scarring experience.

The mood lightened somewhat as Applejack lightly teased Ezreal, who was experimenting with the natural magic that allowed the ponies to manipulate things with hooves. Pinkie Pie had to be restrained from throwing a post-competition celebration, and was only abated when the group promised that before the other transport Celestia had sent upon hearing of the second group arrived, they would be able to have a group meal and some time to casually interact, which the pink mare reasoned was like a miniature party, without the games or music. Nasus suggested that he be the one to break the news to the rather misanthropic Ryze, who as expected, took the gathering as an interruption in his research on

Equestrian magic. Before long, the three stallions and the six mares were gathered at a table in one of Ponyville's few restaurants.

"I do not wish to waste your funds. I assure you, eating for me is entirely optional." Nasus did not wish to offend his hosts, but he did not wish to be a burden either.

Rarity giggled in her overly-ladylike manner. "Do not trouble yourself, my dear. The fashion industry, despite our society being clothing-optional, has been kind to me, and I personally will see to it that while you are in Equestria, you see proper Equestrian hospitality. Since you're not normally ponies, I'd recommend the carrot soup or the daisy salad. This restaurant does a fine job at preparing both dishes."

Nasus conceded. "If you insist. I suppose I shall try the soup then." It wasn't long afterward that the waiter arrived and took orders, with various soups, sandwiches, salads, and a cupcake arriving an impressively short time afterward.

Rainbow Dash took a bite of her sandwich, unaware at Rarity glaring at her for her messy eating style. "So Ezreal," the mare said in between bites, "Other than Applejack showing you up earlier, we don't know much about you. Nasus has told us plenty about him, and Ryze practically screams egghead-I mean scholar." She paused to rub a hoof against the leg that Twilight had kicked. "So what do you do? I mean, besides the League stuff."

"I'm an explorer and a mapmaker! Best in Piltover. My parents were pretty bummed out when I dropped out of school to be a cartographer, but they got over it when I started raking in cash for having the highest quality maps around. Not to brag, okay, maybe a little bit of bragging, but I wasn't even an adult when the government of Piltover started commissioning my maps. The League isn't my main thing. I mean, it was kinda accidental that I got involved in it, but it seems like a good way to contribute to the community and all, plus free publicity." Ezreal grinned.

"An accident? Geez, does anyone join the League by choice?" Twilight's voice took on an undertone of light sarcasm.

“Oh, plenty, but those are mostly affiliated with the military forces of various city-states, or have some great crusade or point to prove or something. I just happened to find this amulet thing in a tomb in the Shurima Desert that allows the user to manipulate magic so long as there is a source nearby. Luckily, I qualify as a source. Less luckily, I occasionally catch interference from Summoners' magic. So, one day I found myself accidentally sucked onto Summoner's Rift. The match was delayed, they explained everything to me, and I rolled with it.”

Ryze glowered. “You can tell he takes the effects of his actions on the world seriously, that one.”

Fluttershy managed to overcome the nervousness-induced seal on her speech, and spoke in a kind tone that made Ryze feel like he was being force-fed candy. “Well, um, why did you join then?”

“Well, Rainbow Dash had it pretty much nailed. I'm an 'egghead'. Aside from the whole keeping the world politically stable bit, the League represented an unparalleled opportunity to study the most powerful magic techniques in Valoran. I've spent years compiling the knowledge I've gained about magic into written form, and I intend to learn as much as I can about it, considering I have a rather...primal connection to it. And yes, before you start gawking, the tattoos are a part of that. I also teach in my spare time. It's a blasted shame that kids these days don't learn a thing about proper magic and its history.”

Ezreal rolled his eyes. “Yes, and he's also the friendliest member of the League, did I mention?” This elicited laughter from everyone but Ryze, who huffed indignantly. As the group left the restaurant and arrived at Twilight's library, in the distance they could see a distant blotch. Ezreal examined the blotch for a few moments. “Looks like our ride is here.”

Chapter 8

Clothed in Nightmares

Celestia waited patiently for the foreigners to arrive. She had decided to wait for the second group to come before summoning them before her, after divine monarch had returned from dealing with the latest parasprite infestation. The letters she had received from Twilight Sparkle had contained in-depth descriptions of the travelers, including diagrams. Celestia suspected her pupil was far, far too fond of diagrams at times. She would have to speak with her later about being concise later.

Celestia snapped to attention as the escort guard she had sent walked into the door, followed by six ponies that did not belong in Equestria. To the average citizen of Equestria, the differences might have just been one of the myriad quirks of the colorful ponies resident in her kingdom, but to Celestia, the alien nature of the six in front of her was as plain as the marks on their flanks. The white unicorn with the bracer seemed innocent enough, or at least oblivious enough. However, the other two unicorns reeked of combat magic, and the pegasus had the nerve to wear weaponry, however broken, in her presence, lying rather obviously to the guards about its true nature. Celestia did not fear anything as mundane as physical harm, though, so she had allowed it. Truth be told, it was the last two, the earth ponies, that worried her. The crimson one with the bottle of who-knows-what on his back was already unnaturally large, but massive could only describe the other, and both of them seemed like they were hiding something. The dark brown earth pony only stood about a head shorter than Celestia herself, and alicorns by nature were giants compared to normal ponies. Nasus' gaze met the Princess' own, and she found herself somewhat unnerved, though her own eyes did not falter in return. The six travelers bowed as they reached the throne.

Celestia did not show any of her concern though. She was, after all, the primary ruler of Equestria, and the custodian of the sun, and she conducted herself with the propriety thereof. "Rise, and welcome travelers, to Canterlot and to the Royal Court. I hope you have found your accommodations to your liking thus far?"

Swain gave his best winning smile. "The rooms were luxurious, Your Majesty, and your guard as courteous and professional as I have ever seen. I am sure my companions feel the same."

Celestia felt a surge of distaste. Swain reminded her too well of the sycophantic nobles of the Royal Court, ever-vigilant for an opportunity to dip into the treasury. She returned Swain's smile with her own, equal parts regality and friendliness. "I am pleased to hear that. Forgive me for skipping further pleasantries, though. I'm sure you know why you're hear. I'm happy to say that I have already devoted the top minds at the University of Canterlot to finding a way to send you home. I'm sure they will have a solution in no time."

"If I may, Princess, I already have significant knowledge of the magic that backfired to bring us here. I believe I can be of some contribution to their efforts." Ryze adjusted the scroll on his back as he waited for a response.

Celestia nodded. "This makes sense. I will have an escort direct you to the university research laboratories after we conclude our meeting. Is there anything else?"

Singed raised his head. "Forgive me, Princess. I do not mean to impose, but I was wondering if perhaps I might receive transport to the forest known as Everfree. I am a chemist by trade, and I have heard of some interesting plants native to the area I would like to collect samples of while your researchers are doing their work. Perhaps I could share some of the fruits of my labors with researchers here? I understand your student, Twilight Sparkle has already sent you the recipes for some basic potions that my world has created, but I feel if I were given the opportunity to do some research with plants from Everfree Forest, both of our peoples might be able to benefit from combining my knowledge with the intrinsically magical nature of the flora and fauna here. I do not mean to sound arrogant, but I assure you, I am quite an accomplished chemist."

Silent alarms rang in Celestia's mind, but she could not pinpoint the source of her anxiety. "The Everfree Forest is beyond Equestrian control and maintenance, and the creatures within are characteristically hostile and formidable to the unprepared."

“Rest assured, Your Majesty, my companion is very capable of preserving himself without damaging the environment around him. I will also accompany him if it reassures you. I am a proficient magic-user in my homeland, and together I am sure we will be more than a match for anything that the Everfree sees fit to pit us against,” Swain quipped reassuringly. His raven cawed inquisitively at Swain, who petted it gently.

Celestia still felt an unidentifiable unease at conceding to the request, but she did not wish to dismiss the opportunity to get both of these ponies away from her court. She was sure that any influence they had over those around them couldn't be healthy for her subjects, so reluctantly, she gave way. “Very well. However, I insist that one of my Royal Guard accompanies you, for the purpose of facilitating necessary communication between your group and Canterlot, so that you might know when we have found a way to send you home.”

Swain nodded, annoyed at the hindrance, but still willing to take what he could get. The guard would be dealt with appropriately at a later point. Celestia signaled to a nearby unicorn dressed in the armor of the Royal Guard, and whispered a few words to him. The guard nodded, and trotted toward the ornate double doors that led away from the throne room. “This way, gentlecolts. It's a bit of a trip, so it's best we start packing straight away.” His two charges nodded, and followed him out of the room.

Celestia couldn't help but note Nasus' suspicious glance at the two retreating forms. It seemed she was not the only one who didn't trust those two, but perhaps he had tangible reasons...

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Nasus sat, taking in the peaceful scenery of the Canterlot Royal Gardens, extending his senses into the environment around him, feeling within and without the life that he was surrounded with. As immersed as he was, though, he wasn't surprised when the alicorn landed behind him. Celestia stared out at the gardens. “Beautiful, aren't they? I commissioned the gardens from some of the best artistic minds in Equestria at the time, and at times flew across the world itself to retrieve certain rare species. It was always my belief that those who choose to live on this cold mountain with me and my sister should not be separated from nature, for it is in that

innate connection that ponies thrive. You seem like the sort to appreciate the concept.”

Nasus nodded. “The world that I was living on before I was sent here would be better for such a connection, though it does exist in places. Though, I do not think that this discussion is why you are here. Beings such as you and I need not dance around the matter at hand. If there is a lesson immortality has taught me, surrounded by those constrained by time, is that every second is blessed. What troubles you, Princess?”

The Princess only let her shock cover her face for a few seconds before regaining her composure, letting out a dignified chuckle. “I cannot say I was expecting to find another immortal any time soon. It is a pity you are right about our seconds being blessed, though, else I would sit and discuss many things with you as days innumerable passed. Alas, it cannot be. I must say, your two companions, Swain and Singed, worry me. A lesson immortality has taught me is never to ignore your instincts, and my instincts cry against letting those two wander about my land. I am not a tyrant, though, and intruding too much into the affairs of others is a swift way down a dark path.”

The Curator of the Sands nodded. “Your mistrust is not misplaced, I fear, but I cannot fathom their intentions. Those two care more for their own goals than for the well-being of the world around them, though. Let us hope that we swiftly are returned to a world more capable of dealing with ones such as those.”

“Indeed.”

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The sky-carriage touched down at the edge of the Everfree Forest at midday. Singed and Swain thanked the two pegasi operating it before stepping off. The unicorn guard assigned to them silently followed as Singed purposefully meandered around, stopping to gather plants and stuff them into pouches he had attached along the strap that secured his bottle to his back. The guard didn't notice the subtle cues that Swain directed to Singed along the way though, nor did he realize the reasoning behind the chemist's corresponding navigational changes.

It was about two hours before Swain gave one last nod to Singed, who bent down to pick up another plant, secretly opening a smaller bottle that began to leak a colorless, odorless gas. He then casually redirected his path in front of their escort. It was right as a bleak-looking, abandoned castle came into view that the pair heard a telltale thump. Neither of them missed a beat.

While Singed stayed behind, keeping the unconscious guard, Swain ventured forth, hurriedly limping along toward his prize. The general's route was direct and efficient. The Castle of the Royal Pony Sisters was already somewhat simplistic in design, and Discord's instructions had been specific. It wasn't long before Swain stood in a decrepit tower, the hoofprints of those who had more recently been here still visible in the thick layer of dust that had settled over everything...or at least, almost everything. Gleaming in the darkness, a silvery shimmer caught Swain's eye. The armor looked like a compromise between the showy nature of royalty and the spartan nature of a combatant, and it permeated the room with silky strands of magical residue that drew Swain like a moth to a candle. He couldn't help himself; the thought of the reward promised to him elicited a dark chuckle as he gathered the armor into his saddlebags.

When the guard woke up, he was greeted by the concerned faces of Swain and Singed, the later of which looked somewhat sheepish. "Forgive me, good stallion. It appears that some of these plants, if contained for long periods of time, emit gasses that must have rendered you unconscious. A fascinating phenomenon, to be certain, but I believe we should return to Canterlot to be sure that you have no lasting damage to your lungs or nervous system." The guard nodded groggily, and quickly composed and sent a message to Canterlot, his horn glowing as the parchment ignited in a magical green blaze.

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Riven blazed through the air, her target almost within her grasp. Rainbow Dash had been impressed with the rapid improvement of her protege's technique, but even so, she was a master at her craft. Right as the white-maned pegasus reached out to grab her teacher in mid-air, the latter almost effortlessly doubled her speed, doing a few loops around the confounded Riven as if to drive the point home.

Below them, Ezreal and Nasus lounged with Fluttershy, Twilight Sparkle, and Pinkie, though for the latter, the term lounge is used loosely, as Ponyville's partying expert felt more inclined to do cartwheels around the group while they sat so boringly still. Riven had suggested that the remaining, unoccupied champions return to Ponyville until another summons was made, and Celestia had no qualms about accepting, having spoken with Nasus enough to know that Riven was not a threat. Her brief time talking with the giant earth pony had been enlightening, and Nasus had told her many things about Runeterra, and a few things about his distant homeworld. Celestia had reminisced about the history of her rule over Equestria. Immortal beings are relatively rare, and Celestia had been delighted to speak with someone else who was roughly the same age, although when the subject came up, Nasus had to admit that he was slightly younger than the ruler, which Celestia laughed off, citing his harsher experiences as a better teacher than Celestia had. The Princess had been very pleased to find that her misgivings about Nasus seemed unfounded.

“So Nasus, if you don't mind me asking, if you don't eat food like we do, or your companions in their native forms, how do you sustain yourself?” Twilight looked up from the notepad on which she had been keeping her various observations about the foreigners.

Nasus sat up, and took a breath. “My species was created by beings far more powerful than I, many aeons ago, to protect and guide the humans native to my world. The humans called us Soul Eaters, after our ability to feed off of the auras and energies that every living thing gives out, though in desperate times, we have the ability to live up to our names. However, consuming the soul of a living creature is mostly unnecessary, as we are able to sustain ourselves freely off of the naturally discharged magical energy from any significant group of sentient beings that are not Soul Eaters, so building our civilization around the local humans meant that we never wanted for sustenance. Consuming the soul of a sentient being is considered monstrous, however, and consuming a soul that belonged to someone close to your strength can drive you insane. In combat, though, it is customary to take part of the defeated combatant's energy to fuel you in battle. The process by which we 'digest' also heals our bodies physically. A perk of being a Soul Eater is that because of the natural fluctuations and spikes in one's aura that combat causes, the mere act of combat allows us

to replenish ourselves.” Nasus waited patiently while Twilight continued scribbling.

“I wonder what a soul tastes like...” Fluttershy looked mildly sickened by Pinkie's curious statement.

Nasus frowned at Fluttershy's nauseated manner. “The taking of a life is not something to be taken lightly, and that being said, the act of consuming more than a small portion of someone's magical energy or life force can be sickening. We are aware of the monstrous nature of our existence, and we are more than grateful to be able to live in peaceful symbiosis with humanity. However, our method of passively absorbing energy give an effect dependent on the overall mood of those emitting the energy. It can range from elation, serenity, or a feeling of overwhelming power.”

Nasus' treatment of the subject seemed to reassure the timid pegasus, and Twilight was more than delighted with the chance to research something probably nopony would ever be able to do again. Above them, Rainbow Dash got a little too careless, and with a splash into the nearby lake, Riven tackled her out of the sky, eliciting laughter from the bystanders. The sun began to set.

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Singed was ready. The sun had set by the time they had returned and finished preparations, and now Singed and Swain silently mulled over the directions given telepathically from a nearby Discord. Approaching an unmarked door, hidden out of the path of most ponies, the two began their plan. Singed lifted a small bottle to his lips, smiling in anticipation...

The reaction was instantaneous. Singed doubled over in pain, feeling as if his blood had been replaced with liquid fire, searing him from the inside. His glowing eyes flared like torches, attracting the attention of a nearby guard, who rushed over in concern. Singed staggered around as he tried to reestablish his sense of balance. Foam began dripping from his mouth, tiny flecks of it reaching Swain, who snorted in distaste. By now the unfortunate guard had reached the pair. “Sir, are you okay? What happened?” Singed finally stood still, and looked up at the guard, who

stood, terrified speechless at the emotionless green orbs staring at him like a feral animal. Green liquid dripped from Singed's mouth. Swain nodded.

The guard had no time to react before Singed plowed both through him and through the nearby door, the wooden frame splintering as if it had been paper. Swain followed along, sidestepping the crumpled figure of the guard and the shattered pieces of the door frame. On and on the pair rushed, navigating a twisted labyrinth until they came across a thick metal door. Singed immediately began pounding on it, each impact from his hooves leaving a small dent in the metal. After a few seconds of this, a larger group of guards heard the noise and tracked it to its source. "Alert the Princesses!" Swain cursed himself as one of the group retreated before he could stop him.

In front of him, a group of mixed unicorns and pegasi leered at him with hostile eyes. Swain laughed. These guards had obviously never seen combat, and Swain knew they didn't stand a chance. The guard's hostility quickly morphed into horror as they saw what came next. Swain's body had begun to twist itself, and his raven was cackling madly. Talons erupted from his hooves as he stalked forward. Pitch black feathers began to cover his entire body, and soon his mouth was replaced with a wicked looking beak. The squad found themselves overshadowed by hideous wings, and a demonic laugh rasped forth as Swain's six eyes focused on his targets. The guards were paralyzed with fear at the nightmarish raven-pony monstrosity before them. Finally, one of the more intrepid of the group came to his senses and conjured a ball of fire. Swain roared in fury as his shoulder was singed, and raised a claw at the group. Talons emerged from the ground and rooted the guards in place, and they struggled in vain as shadowy blobs fought their way free of Swain's disfigured body. The shadowy ravens cackled madly as they dived at the guards, tearing into them with wickedly sharp claws. As each raven made its rounds to and from Swain, the burn on his shoulder gradually faded, and the guards felt weaker and weaker with each passing moment. As one pegasus managed to break free of his bindings, crawling away feebly, Swain's pet casually flew above him and began tormenting him with a sizzling beam of arcane energy. Swain moved in, ready to begin striking his final blows to the guardsponies. In the background he heard the sound of a door collapsing. Swain raised a claw...

Swain gasped in pain as he slammed into the wall, his form quickly writhing back into its original state. Celestia looked down on him with undiluted hatred. A smaller blue alicorn stood at her flank, leering with disgust. "Jericho Swain, you have attacked my guards and broken into-Oh, no...this is the room where...Stop him!" In a flash, Celestia had teleported to Singed and pinned him, who was cackling madly as he tossed his saddlebags to a statue on a pedestal in the center of the room. The stone cracked as the bags glowed briefly.

Discord erupted from his prison, grinning like a maniac. "Helloooooo, Equestria. It's time for some CHAOS!" In a flash, he, Singed, and Swain had vanished, leaving two dismayed princesses and a heavily wounded squad of guards behind.

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Twilight groaned, and rubbed her sore head. With horror, she realized where she was, and a dark voice sounded out. "Hello, dear Twilight. I'm back, and guess what? I have plans for you."

Chapter 9

Sunset Over Everfree

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

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

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

Celestia nickered. "Did you not see how easily the two foreigners swept aside my elite guard? I did what I could, sister, but these aren't war ponies, they're glorified police officers! I made a mistake. I was foolish and short-sighted and now there's less than ten capable warriors in all of Equestria. Two of those are confirmed enemies, and I can't risk putting my ponies in the hooves of foreigners that might betray us just as easily. I've made as much preparation as I can, and even if our military is lacking, I'm still one of the most powerful beings on the planet...Hopefully at this point, I

am the most powerful. Discord shouldn't have had time to regain his strength yet. He'd have to stay in hiding. At least he never was very good at long-term planning. He always relied on brute force, and this time it should work to our victory. Have faith in me, Luna. I can fix this."

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

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

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

In the background, Singed grunted at the mention of his name, wrapping yet another bandage around himself as another tuft of his coat fell to the floor. The long-term side effects of his most ingenious creation had to be compensated for, and with his now-bare skin taking on a blackened, somewhat rotting appearance, the bandages would have to do in keeping himself from being exposed to the elements too much. Of course, if he was

going to return to his traditional look, perhaps a few other pieces could be added to this ensemble... Absentmindedly remembering the schematics for his patented Mana Barrier, he commented, "Ironic usually means impractical, in my experience."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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A tree crashed to the ground as Celestia exploded into existence. Before her stood her the home of her foal years, the Castle of the Royal Pony Sisters. Once a magnificent testament to the ingenuity of the lost alicorns of Equestria, now it stood as a grim reminder of the feud of two sisters. The crumbling walls and overgrown courtyard served only to

increase Celestia's discomfort as she ventured into this museum of her past. Around her, crumbling skeletons of the ancient dead kept their millennium-long vigil, and occasionally a collapsed passageway would hint at the city that the castle had once been a part of. Celestia steeled herself, and pressed onward. As she approached the ornate double doors and pressed a tendril of telekinetic energy against it, she felt a magical surge resonate through the castle, and heard an eery laugh echo throughout the stone tomb that she once called home.

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

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

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

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

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

your precious student, Twilight Sparkle. For someone studying friendship, she's been very fussy about socializing with me."

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

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

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

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

faced on me!” Discord fell to the ground, rolling in merriment as he decided where to put his new statue.

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

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

Chapter 10

Fury of the Sands

“Okay gentlecolts, everything is going swimmingly, but I have to take my leave of you for a short while.” Discord paced in front of Swain and Singed. “I have to gather some allies for us. I trust you can hold down the fort in my absence? My use for Twilight Sparkle is almost done, but until it is time to dispose of her she must be kept from the other Elements of Harmony, else everything we've worked for will be jeopardized.”

Swain nodded, and his raven cawed in accord. “I'll kill any intruders myself. I'm curious to see what sort of 'allies' a world like this can offer to ones such as us.”

“Remember that this is the same world that birthed the likes of Discord.” Singed slid a blue crystal into its slot on the barding he had been crafting. One audible click later, and Singed began adorning himself in his new armor, which included a sturdier harness for his bottle, and spiked plating on his forelegs and shoulders. The entire ensemble was colored in the same shade of crimson his coat had once been. “You shouldn't underestimate what this world can offer.”

Discord allowed himself a smirk at the indirect compliment. “Well, everypony, I must be off. Something tells me today is going to be a good day. I can just feel it.”

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Nasus stood alone, gazing at the setting sun. Luna was entirely occupied by the strain of moving two celestial bodies at once, and the other ponies were preparing themselves for the journey tomorrow, leaving the behemoth alone with his thoughts. At least, that's what he thought, until the presence of a cream-colored pegasus proved him wrong.

Fluttershy looked up at the earth pony. “Why aren't you with your friends? Don't you have anything to get ready?”

Nasus shook his head slowly. "I require no supplies. As for my companions...I am more...acquainted with solitude of late than of companionship. I was meditating. I must be sure that I have a clear mind, that I might do what must be done tomorrow."

"Your mind hasn't seemed clear the entire time you've been here." Fluttershy squeaked at her outburst, and looked at the ground. "Uh, I mean, maybe being alone isn't what you need to clear your mind? I'm not nearly as old or experienced as you, but when my heart is heavy, I always talk to Rarity and I usually feel better afterward. Don't you have anyone to talk to?"

"I had one, once. My brother and I used to spend many hours contemplating the meaning of existence together." Nasus' expression was unreadable, his gaze fixed upon the dying inferno that the setting sun had set the sky ablaze with.

"If you don't mind me asking, what happened to him? You talk about him with regret whenever you mention him." Fluttershy sat down, trying to fathom the other pony's emotions.

A pointed silence passed, and for a few seconds the timid pegasus was afraid that she had overstepped her bounds before an answer finally came. "A long time ago, my brother and I were the two chief figures in the operation of the pinnacle of our kind's achievements, the Great Library. I was the foremost scholar in charge of teaching those who came into the Library. However, not all who came had pure intentions, and my brother, who had a more sensitive perception of others than I, was designated the gatekeeper. It was his duty to read the intentions of those who would enter, and cast away those with evil in their hearts and minds."

Fluttershy nodded. "That sounds like a heavy responsibility."

Nasus continued, his deep voice taking on a distant and somewhat melancholy tone. "We were separated for long periods of time attending to our duties. I was so engrossed in the truths of the universe that I neglected the truth right in front of me. Sunset and sunrise, Renekton was exposed to the evil in the hearts of both my kind and the humans our kind lived to protect. He was a noble soul of noble intent. He only wished that he could find some way to rid the world of the evil he saw day after day, but we both knew that there was no way to do that, and thus we settled into our roles.

Each fool seeking arcane secrets for the harm of others, each corrupt soul trying to force its way into a place of purity...Renekton became tainted by the very monsters he guarded against. The sheer amount of darkness he saw warped his mind and polluted his thoughts, sending him into an uncontrollable rage. The 'Butcher's Rage' they called it later. The agony of being a lonely source of light against the encroaching evil drove him to cut the evil from those who possessed it. The more beings he cut down, though, the less each one alleviated the blinding fury that he was becoming enslaved by. He was aware that his unstable mind was making him into a mockery of all he once stood for, and that only served to intensify his pain. In the height of his madness, he caused a war. A purification, the madness in his head termed it. The duty of my kind is to protect though, and I had no choice but to stand against him."

His audience's response was barely above a strained whisper. "...Continue, please." Fluttershy looked as though she knew where this story was heading, and the knowledge was crushing her, making her smaller and smaller each second.

"I tried to reason with him. I tried to help him." Nasus' face had a trace of defeat on it now, and more than a trace of regret. "My help came too late for him though. I was not there when he needed me the most, and the opportunity had passed for me to do anything other than to end his torment, something both of us desired at that point. On one fateful day, I stood against him in battle. Blinded by his rage, he could not stand against me or the knowledge of combat I had obtained. As I moved to strike him down for the final time, though, the Summoners of Runeterra intervened. A summoning ritual aimed at my brother caught both of us, and I was transported to Valoran while my brother was caught in between dimensions. It was only recently that he finally emerged into Valoran, and the League was forced to contain him until they could find out what to do with him."

"I'm...so sorry." Fluttershy struggled to find something to say to dispel regret of this ancient being. "It...it wasn't your fault though. Your brother could have come to you, or stepped down from his position. It's always a shame when you don't spend enough time with your family, but if anyone is to blame here, it is those evil souls that drove your brother mad...and, and I'm sure if your brother was as noble as you say, there is still hope, as long as you don't give up on him. Your world may be dark and scary compared

to ours, but I'm sure the darkness will only serve to allow you to be a better light to guide your brother back to you."

Nasus broke his gaze away from the retiring sunlight to look the small being next to him in the eye. "...Thank you. I wished only for someone to remember my brother as he truly was...but perhaps I was the one who needed reminding."

Fluttershy got up and began to walk away. "I have to go help the others now...but please be careful tomorrow...The last time we fought Discord, we almost lost. I know your friends always say that you're very powerful, but just...remember that you can't help your brother if anything...really bad happens to you."

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Singed scribbled down some hasty notes on some parchment Discord had given him. "Okay now, Twilight, on a scale of one to ten, tell me how much discomfort and/or pain you feel when I administer this chem-" The chemist paused his experimentation as he heard a rumbling noise in the distance. "Don't you move, dear, I'll be back in a jiffy, and then we can continue the science."

He and Swain arrived at the castle's courtyard and waited for the dust to clear. Swain noted that for dust, the cloud had a very rough texture, almost like sand...

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Ezreal nodded to Luna, who pointed at a collapsed tunnel. "This should lead us inside. Let's hope Nasus can keep them busy long enough for us to get in and out cleanly. We shall stay and start clearing out the rubble here in case we need to support Ezreal in a hurry, who will be scouting ahead." Ezreal nodded, and in a flash of blinding light, vanished behind the obstruction.

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The cloud of sand began to abate. Swain instinctively took a defensive posture as he recognized a faint silhouette with blazing red eyes. "Coming here alone? I'd thought you smarter."

Nasus stepped forward slowly, each step deliberate and measured. "You have insulted and damaged everything I have worked for, and brought pain to those who are innocent bystanders to your cold ambition. I have already waited long enough to pass judgment upon you." Nasus' world was a maelstrom of color as he began picking out, twisting, and amplifying streams and currents of magic. Sensing each myriad life force as a pinprick against his soul's awareness, he silently begged forgiveness of each one as everything from microscopic organisms to plant life nearby began to wither and die as Nasus drew their energies into himself. "This castle will be your tomb, a weathered landmark among the sands of time to show the consequences of those like you. Your legacy will be that of a lesson the inhabitants of this world and your own will tell to their young about the price of ambition without compassion, and your death will serve as history's reparation for the suffering you have caused. Jericho Swain, prepare to die."

The sky seemed ready to collapse on itself as clouds formed and dissolved in moments. The wind picked up, and in the distance, Swain thought he could spot the beginnings of several tornadoes. A furious whirlwind of sand began to form around Nasus. Around the castle, the Everfree Forest began to wilt and collapse as the life of the land drained itself into Nasus. The sandstorm expanded, and the Castle of the Royal Pony Sisters already began to show signs of weathering against the assault. Nasus took a breath, and for a moment, the chaos seemed to abate, only to explode back to life at full force as Nasus let out an unearthly roar. For a moment, Nasus' form was completely obscured before the other two could see the Curator of the Sands grow to three times his normal size. The maelstrom expanded around them until it formed an eye with the courtyard of the castle as its center. Nasus' expression spoke of pure rage, and Swain began to see a silvery trail from himself and Singed join the multitude of sparks and shimmers that already surrounded Nasus.

Swain moved forward, already feeling his body morphing as he began to channel his own power. Singed had already uncorked an Insanity Potion and was in the process of drinking it, his magically imbued armor glowing briefly in response. Singed ran forward to strike at Nasus, the

bottle on his back spewing a sickly purple gas. Nasus slammed a hoof on the ground, and a circle of ghostly blue flames caused Singed to stumble for a moment, only barely able to dodge in time as Nasus leaped at him, the latter leaving a small crater at his impact.

Swain began sending his ethereal flock to tear at Nasus as his raven flew overhead, spewing gouts of white-hot magic at their assailant. As each of the demonic swarm tore at Nasus' flesh and returned to Swain, the weakness that Nasus' sandstorm had begun to wreak on him abated, and he began flinging bolts of his own magical energy at the colossal figure. Nasus and Singed continued their martial dance, Singed landing pinprick hits on Nasus, who struggled to hit the unnaturally speedy chemist with steel-shattering blows.

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Ezreal's pace increased as the castle shook with the force of the fight as he searched frantically for his objective. Avoiding as many falling rocks as crumbling pony skeletons, he desperately searched for any sign that would lead him to Twilight's prison.

After what seemed like an eternity, he came to a room with a sickly green glow coming from it. Entering the laboratory, he spotted his prize. "Oh, no...I knew Singed was twisted, but..." He paused, unable to voice his disgust. With a strained grunt, he managed to pull Twilight onto his back. "Come on girl, best we get you out of here quickly."

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Nasus roared in frustration, and Singed felt an oppressive magic begin to slow his movements and make him feel as sluggish and helpless as an elderly man on the edge of the grave. With a swift kick, Singed was sent flying through a wall, and stirred no more. The cuts and bruises that adorned Nasus faded instantly, and he turned to Swain. "You are outmatched. Face your death with dignity."

Swain laughed, a twisted, hollow sound as he began to shift back into his original form. "You're forgetting something."

Discord returned Swain's laugh. "I leave to go party with some friends for a little bit, and already you're letting in uninvited guests. How irresponsible! Although, Nasus, I must say, I'm quite impressed with the chaos you've caused here. All good things must come to an end that aren't me, however. Discord snapped his fingers, and Nasus turned to face the new opponent that the Spirit of Chaos had summoned.

It looked as if someone had adorned a bear with the visage of the night sky itself, and then expanded the bear into the size of a town. Discord looked like he was about to faint from sheer giddiness. "It's called an Ursa Major. Wonderful, isn't it? Well, you'll know soon enough anyway, as you're about to find out firsthand." Nasus closed his eyes for a moment, and took a deep breath before moving to strike.

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Ezreal burst through the recently cleared tunnel, only to find the others gazing at an enormous bear that seemed to blot out the sky with its own constellation-studded pelt. Luna looked conflicted for a few seconds, glancing up at the castle and then at Twilight. Riven placed a hoof on Luna's shoulder, and nodded sadly. "He's doing his job so we can do ours." Luna's head sank to near the ground, and the group vanished in a subdued pool of shadows.

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The group appeared at the lake, where the other Elements of Harmony were worriedly staring at the storms over the Everfree forest, only to be snapped out of their reverie by Ezreal's worried voice. "Quick! Twilight Sparkle needs medical attention. Who knows what Singed did to her..."

Luna and Fluttershy moved past the others to inspect Twilight. Her form had become unnaturally thin and emaciated, and various cuts lined her body, some of which looked to be turning a variety of unhealthy colors. With grim determination, Fluttershy began directing the others to retrieve various herbal ingredients while Luna began using her magic to help stabilize Twilight, who was staring blankly into space with a dull expression, her breathing shallow and rapid.

In the distance, the storms began to subside. Ezreal gave a respectful nod toward the forest, while Riven gave a traditional Noxian salute. The others, not knowing what to make of this, or perhaps not wanting to let themselves think about it, focused on caring for Twilight.

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Discord surveyed the carnage around him. The castle, already aged and weathered, was now crumbling. In a huge circle around the castle, the trees were entirely crushed or withered. Singed was imbibing a foul-smelling red liquid while holding his ribcage tenderly. The Spirit of Chaos turned to Swain, who was standing beside him, inspecting the latest addition to Discord's new statue garden. "Well, good news, two out of three of our opposing immortals have been dealt with. Bad news, we've been tricked. I felt Luna's magic right after I arrived. They must have been using Nasus as a cover to retrieve Twilight."

Swain nodded. "One threat falls, another rises. Still, from what you've explained, the Elements of Harmony require time to channel, so we at least know a reasonable counter to them."

"Yes, and this time I'm not going to be quite so reckless when dealing with them. Last time I tried to fight them by destroying the inner harmony that allows the six to make use of the Elements, but this time, I think I'll stick to a more...practical approach. Probably one that you're familiar with. I'm nearing my full abilities again, but before I make my move against Canterlot, I need to be sure the elements have been dealt with. Those two objectives might overlap if they seek sanctuary there though, and there's no telling what sort of countermeasure's they will have prepared. I will not be caught off guard again. Prepare yourselves. We have work to do."

Chapter 11

Raven and Snake

“She's awake! Quick, get some water.” Twilight coughed and sputtered as she stirred, wiping a viscous red liquid from her lips. Blinking rapidly, a familiar orange mare came into focus as she began to recognize her surroundings. The Ponyville Library was a comforting sight for Twilight as she sat up to listen to Applejack. “Ah reckon Singed didn't think his fancy healing potion recipe would come back to haunt him. Once we emptied that stuff down your throat, it was like some sort of crazy magic. Don't think Ah've ever seen someone heal that quickly. How d'ya feel, sugarcube?”

Twilight gratefully accepted the water that a returning Riven offered her, downing it in one swig before replying. “I have a little bit of a headache, but otherwise I'm fine. What happened? I remember bits and pieces, but it's mostly a blur.”

“We mounted a rescue mission. From what I've been told, we need the magic of your Elements of Harmony to beat Discord once and for all, and they are inoperable without the six of you present.” Riven shifted uncomfortably, her bladed wings rustling with a slight scrape of metal on metal. “With Celestia and Nasus missing in action, I'm guessing that if this doesn't work, we've lost.”

Twilight's face immediately fell into a mask of shock. “The Princess is missing? Nasus too? What happened? Do you think they're...” Twilight found herself unable to finish her sentence, finding the thought of being bereft of her lifetime mentor crippling.

Riven's face was unreadable. “We can't say for certain, though for Nasus the prospects look pretty grim. Celestia went missing after embarking on a rescue mission shortly after you were kidnapped. Nasus served as a distraction for our own rescue. We were lucky to catch Discord out of the way when we initiated our plan, but as we departed, he returned with a gargantuan bear-like creature, whose hide was akin to the night sky.

It is unlikely that he survived. Even less likely is his escape. We will pay him proper tribute on the field of battle.”

Twilight was torn asunder by her grief, and to a lesser degree, enraged that Riven could speak so calmly and casually about the potential death of the one who she had begun to look at as a friend. As she opened her mouth to voice her opinions of Riven's hardhearted demeanor, she was interrupted by the arrival of six others. As the four other Elements of Harmony unceremoniously piled onto Twilight in a sudden group hug, Princess Luna and Ezreal approached with more measured steps, the former of which was inclined to smile at the display of affection as she addressed the pony who was currently the center of attention. “It is good to see you well, Twilight. Very soon, we will have need of your Element of Magic. I have been discussing matters with your friends, and I feel that it is time we make a decisive move. As soon as you are feeling well, we will begin discussion of what we plan to do about Discord.”

Finding her emotions derailed and scattered by the mix of the grim situation combined with the warmth of being surrounded by her friends, Twilight decided to excuse Riven's behavior. After all, Riven didn't appear to have a group of friends to fall back on when times were dire, so maybe this was just her way of coping with the concepts of death and doom her world seemed to be full of. Worse still was the possibility that she had been desensitized to it through a lifetime of exposure. Being rendered numb to the basic emotions that normally would define a pony seemed a fate to be pitied if anything.

Truthfully, Riven was feeling closer to her emotions than she had been in years. The stark contrast of Equestria combined with the friendly and welcoming atmosphere was at odds with her worldview, and it was only the battle-hardened discipline of a career soldier that kept her from being overwhelmed by feelings that she had long since thought dead. Friendship, happiness, contentment, even camaraderie were sensations she had all but forgotten, and the knowledge that every step, for better or worse, took her away from this wonderful place of healing back to her dark but beloved homeland of Noxus brought to her attention an even sharper conflict within herself. Even worse was that Rainbow Dash seemed to her to be an unanswered 'what if' waiting at every turn to present a vision of a life that never had the conflict that had shaped the weapon that Riven had always prided herself on being.

Riven tore herself out of her reverie. This conflict would have a resolution, but there was a more pressing, immediate battle to fight, and Riven would see just payment to those had struck down the one who had only sought to create a world where soldiers like Riven would be unneeded. At the bottom floor of the library, the others had congregated and were preparing to begin discussion of the coming battles. With a graceful hop, she glided down from where she and the others had been taking turns holding vigil over the convalescing Twilight into the library's main room.

“Fillies and gentlecolts, here is our situation: Discord knows he has us on the ropes, but he knows too well what the Elements of Harmony can do, as he's been defeated twice by them.” Luna paced in front of the group as she spoke. “He has been gathering an army composed of various creatures from the Everfree that he has enchanted to do his bidding. As you know, Swain and Singed are also at his side for reasons that have yet to be revealed to us. With two of our most powerful allies out of the way, he will likely try to attack us directly so that he may deal with the Element's holders once and for all. I propose we retreat to Canterlot. Since my sister relocated the capital after the destruction of the City of Everfree formerly in existence around the Castle of the Royal Pony Sisters, she has made certain to put a lot of time and energy into various warding and defensive spells intended to keep the new capital safe in the event of another major conflict. With the addition of the unicorns that Ryze has been training for combat, it would take a considerable amount of time for Discord's forces to break through. The only downside is that Discord is likely to realize this as well, and Canterlot will be his first destination when he strikes.”

Twilight tilted her head. “There was a city in the Everfree Forest?”

Luna nodded. “Yes. It was based around our old castle before I was transformed into Nightmare Moon. It was destroyed during the conflict preceding my containment. However, that's a story for another time. Any other questions?”

“I have one.” Riven's instinct took over as she leaped toward the source of the voice. In a blur of movement, she had a calm, but slightly annoyed Jericho Swain pinned under one of her wing's broken blade. “Get off me, fool. If I had honestly meant you harm, I'd be here with Discord and you'd all be dead already, caught with your pants down, as it were.” The

fact that the metaphor passed over the heads all but two of those present didn't phase the crippled tactician at all. "I have an offer."

Riven reluctantly withdrew her blade from Swain's neck, and leered at him as he hobbled toward the group. "Your tongue had best be laden with silver, lest I deprive you of it." The bluntness of the threat caused more than one of those present to flinch, and Fluttershy was nowhere to be seen.

Swain was not among those who had flinched, and his ever-present avian companion clucked disapprovingly at the hostile pegasus. "Discord has returned to me something that it takes a very, very powerful being to return, and that I had almost given up hope of having restored to me. I agreed to go along with it for the explicit purpose of this restoration. However, I'd be a fool to think a creature as capricious as Discord would keep his word once our usefulness had expired. What honor can one expect from an embodiment of chaos? I have no desire to remain in Equestria any longer than necessary, and I have even less desire to join Celestia and Nasus in their stone prisons, or whatever worse fate Discord might conjure up. This brings me to my offer: In exchange for amnesty and safe return to Runeterra as soon as possible, I will assist in the downfall of Discord."

Rainbow Dash snorted. Rarity seemed to share the sentiment, as she regarded Swain coldly. "How can we trust you of all ponies to keep your word? You showed no remorse previously for betraying us. To think I was inclined to trust you after that specious display of gentlecoltly manners."

Pinkie nodded vigorously. "Yeah! Plus your mean friend Singed! He hurt Twilight really bad, and I'm pretty sure he doesn't feel sorry about it! Ponies like you don't care about others, only yourselves and your sick and twisted desires."

Swain chuckled darkly. "My dears, I do not expect you to trust me. I expect you to trust in your own statement, that I do indeed care greatly about myself, and staying with Discord is definitely not in my best interests. I got what I nee-what I wanted from Discord, and now to keep it I have to make sure he loses. As for Singed, his blatant disregard for all life and all consuming desire for scientific progress makes him useful to me, and thus it would be impractical to let such a resource go to waste here in Equestria.

He may not care about ethics, but he certainly cares about funding, and I'm the one who pays his wages. He will do as I bid."

"You're sick, you know that? You're really, really, REALLY sick. I hope you get what's coming to you some day." Rainbow Dash made no effort to hide her disgust and contempt.

Luna walked up to Swain, towering over him despite being significantly younger than her older sister. "I don't like you. I don't want you here in Equestria any longer than necessary and I pity the world that spawned the likes of you. If you betray us, I assure you that even if we are consumed by Discord's insatiable need for chaos, you won't be around to see it or cause any more suffering. What can you offer us?"

Swain smiled like a chessmaster who had just taken the final steps toward checkmate. "For starters? Celestia and Nasus. Discord will be moving against Canterlot. He assume you'll be there, but even if you aren't, it will be a symbolic blow against the morale of Equestria, to discourage any potential opposition. As you well know, ponies aren't mentally prepared for war, and it is unlikely that they will have the strength of spirit to weather the destruction of what represents the power of their goddesses and the pinnacle of their culture. When Discord moves out of the Everfree, the statues formerly known as Celestia and Nasus will be unguarded. I'm relatively sure that since Discord was once trapped by the very same means, these prisons can be shattered just as effectively with the proper application of magic. Once that is done, you will have more than enough firepower to keep Discord occupied for the Elements of Harmony to do their work. Do we have an accord?"

"We do." With the patience only an immortal could summon, Luna refrained from any further comment about how strong the animosity she felt toward the one who had enabled this mess in the first place.

"Then I shall take my leave before Discord suspects anything is amiss. I will send word when Discord moves. It has truly been a pleasure." Swain laughed as he walked out of the door, only to be stopped by Riven, who promptly jammed a hoof into his gut.

"You'll get yours, Swain." Swain scowled darkly at Riven, but made no attempt to retaliate, taking his leave in silence. Riven turned back

toward the others, most of whom wore looks of shock, save Ezreal, who was snickering quietly.

After recovering from his laughter, Ezreal scanned the room. "Hey Shy, it's safe to come out now. Swain just left." A lock from a pink mane and a pair of blue eyes peeked cautiously out from behind a bookshelf, before the entirety of the timid yellow pony was made visible as she rejoined the others.

Rainbow Dash was furious. "Are we seriously going to work with him? After what he's done? After what Singed did to Twilight? This is insane! This is so much bull-"

"Silence!" Princess Luna's voice boomed as she quieted the outraged pegasus, who immediately backed down, intimidated by the alicorn. "I do not like it either, but I'd rather have to deal with him than Discord, and his assistance will return two of our own to us, one of which, I might add, is my sister. So, be still, and prove that the Element of Loyalty is stronger than your personal distaste. Do what is best for not only your friends, but all of Equestria." Cowed, Rainbow Dash bowed her head in acquiescence.

Riven nodded in agreement. "I probably hate that worm more than anyone else here, but Princess Luna is right. Personal feelings are not as important as our overall objective. That being said, we might want to alter our battle plan to account for this. Princess, are you capable of getting us to Everfree as swiftly as our previous visit?"

Luna nodded. "Yes. I have also been in frequent communication with Ryze since the start of this ordeal. His knowledge will prove invaluable, and despite my weakened state, I believe I have found a way that I may still provide assistance. Ryze has told me much of the Summoners involved in the League of Legends, and with his assistance, I believe I might be able to replicate the spirit of the magic involved in summoning. Using this, I will attempt to assist as well as I can, not only as an information relay, but when possible lending magical aid. Adding to this, Ryze has instructed the University of Canterlot's staff on the creation of both healing and the so-called 'mana' potions, as well as a few other magical items that will be of great use. Our forces will be well equipped, and our unicorns will remain focused and at their prime."

“Knowing Ryze, he'll probably keep with his students to make sure they don't forget anything and remain organized. I think that me and Riven should focus on escorting the Elements of Harmony through the battle so that we might reach Discord as safely as possible. Once revived, Nasus and Celestia should be enough to give even Discord a little pause.” Ezreal adjusted his bracer, and looked to Riven for approval of his suggestion.

The latter nodded her assent, and added her input. “We should make sure Nasus and Celestia refrain from engaging or showing themselves until the Elements are almost in position. Discord still might wipe the floor with them again, so the distraction probably won't be very long.”

“Um...I hate to ask, or question a blessing, but why didn't Discord...err...Why didn't he just kill them when he beat them the first time?” Twilight looked extremely uncomfortable approaching the concept of her mentor's death so soon after finding out she was still alive.

“You'll probably find this out for yourself first hand when the six of you become more attuned with the power of the Elements, but there comes a point when something as meager as physical destruction is not nearly enough to keep you down. Immortals have an entirely different set of weaknesses.” Luna spoke in a matter-of-fact tone, as if the workings of immortality were common knowledge. “It is far more economical to weaken and contain an immortal than it is to kill one, as the permanent destruction of a being bound permanently to life itself. If you truly wish to know more about the subject, you should probably ask Nasus after this is over. I believe his species comes with one of the few innate methods of killing immortals. In any case, I believe we have our plans settled then. We should rest. We have no way of knowing how long until Discord makes his move.”

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“Out late for a night on the town?” Discord raised an eyebrow as Swain stepped into the castle.

Swain didn't miss a beat. “I was communing with my companion. As you might suspect, something as mundane as words doesn't always cut it

when dealing with extradimensional entities.” The bird on his shoulder cawed in assent.

Discord nodded, and showed no suspicion if he had any. “Ah, yes. Quite an interesting little friend you have there. I might have to meet these Void-dwellers in person one day. They sound like my type of crowd.”

“I assure you, they are nobody's 'crowd'. My goals and theirs were compatible, but their contact with my world is quite limited. Hence the arrangement from which you so graciously freed me from. With that out of the way, I will be able to focus more easily on my immediate goals, but I had to convince my partner that his superiors were not worth following. Luckily, a history of being dismissed and relegated to an ambassadorial role has left him rather disillusioned with the more powerful entities of the Void.” Swain inwardly smirked as he steered the conversation away from his absence. It looked like this was one gambit that was definitely paying off.

Chapter 12

Convalescence

“Gentlecolts, our finest hour is upon us. In short order, we march upon Canterlot itself! After laying waste to the defenses that dearest Celestia has left there, we will capture the Elements of Harmony and deal with them once and for all...and by deal with them I mean kill them. No more wishy-washy brain tricks like last time I fought them.” Discord paced in front of Singed, Swain, and the array of Everfree creatures he had impressed into service using a brain-altering magic that had once almost rendered the Elements inert within their holders. The Spirit of Chaos had underestimated how resistant the Elements would be to his influence, though. It seemed rather obvious that something named 'Harmony' would resist chaos now, but being imprisoned for a millennium or two could addle one's brain. What delicious irony that Celestia could experience the horror that was being aware but unmoving for time eternal. Maybe he'd let her out once madness had taken some time to set in. That could definitely be fun. Of course by then that soul-eater creature would probably have withered into a shell of its former self, but oh well, casualties of war. Still, one toy was better than none. “I'll be leaving a small detachment of canis minors and a major here to keep my prizes safe, but the rest of our forces will be dedicated to the assault on Canterlot.”

Swain mentally flinched. “Would it not be wiser to dedicate all of our forces to the attack? This is the defining moment of our efforts, and being short on numbers could cause us trouble.” The raven nodded and cawed in assent, assuring Discord of the sagacity of Swain's words.

Discord laughed. “Swain, you and Singed both are powerful compared to most other things in Equestria, but I'll be frank, I needed you more for your planning skills than for your strength or magic. The army itself is mostly superficial. It will serve as a power source more than anything, as I thrive on chaos, and battle definitely qualifies. My point in saying this, however, is that you have no idea how strong I truly am, and the only reason I'm even bothering to go through the trouble of breaking into Canterlot instead of just collapsing the mountain itself is that I want to both confirm the deaths of the Elements and to strike a morale blow to

Equestria. If I wanted, the city would be dust in moments. That wouldn't be enough to break the spirits of ponykind, though. I want the city to suffer first. They will bring their best, they'll gather their allies, and then they'll all die, and all will look upon the ruins and wonder where hope has gone. That's going to happen. A few critters missing isn't going to change that at all. On a side note, I look forward to seeing you in action. That bird form is delightfully terrifying. Also ugly."

Swain nodded, conceding the point but rolling his eyes at the last comment.. "Very well then. When do we move out?"

"Oh, don't be such a sourpuss." Discord patted Swain on the head mockingly. "We'll leave tomorrow. It'll be nice and showy, so that they have time to gather themselves for the battle. I want to send a definitive message with this battle: No pony can stand up to me and survive. Not even their best. Now go and do whatever it is mass murderers do before they kill."

Singed smirked at Swain as Discord dismissed them with a wave. "I guess that he makes no distinction between a warrior and a murderer?"

Swain shrugged. "Does the label matter? Both of us are willing and able to do whatever it takes to achieve our goals. I will rule Noxus, and Noxus will be stronger for it. Of course, I've never seen you flinch from sacrificing people to your god of Progress. You know that you're half of the reason Piltover hates Zaun?"

"Of course." Singed returned the shrug. "But I also know people like myself and Dr. Mundo have through our efforts saved as many lives as we have taken. Who does the League come to first when they need an antivenom? Who does everyone turn to when rodents are spreading pestilence and disease through cities? Progress marches on, past our morals and beliefs. Piltover is leagues behind Zaun in the medical sciences, despite their propensity for magic-technology integration. Not even the great healers of Ionia can match what we've done with bodily regeneration. You can't make an omelet without tampering with someone's genetic structure, after all! Let them say what they want about my methods, but I've gotten results where nobody else has, and I've cured as many diseases as I've made poisons. It's all science, and I'm the best at what I do."

Swain tilted his head for a moment before nodding. "True enough. You certainly are a lot more professional about your job than your dear master ever was. Quite a sadistic streak, that one. Still, your point stands valid. Even Riven and I stand in agreement that we all seek to change the world in our own ways. It is so laughably shortsighted to view the world in only the scope of how it affects yourself. The truly brilliant seek to better themselves while bettering the world around them. It's always been my goal to benefit Noxus as much as I could while I ascended to power. People may blanch at the thought, but nobody can deny that the deaths of a few can do much to strengthen the whole. A Noxus without strength would be a Noxus not worth ruling at all. It's a mutually beneficial arrangement."

Singed laughed heartily. "You could conquer the world and still insist on it being an act of charity. You truly are a politician through and through."

"The best politicians are those who are assured of their causes. There is no law against benefiting myself and my country at the same time. In fact, the entirety of Noxian society is built around the concept of bettering ourselves to better Noxus. In any case, you have poisons to make, and I have a letter to send, so I'm afraid I must excuse myself from you for now." With that, Swain retreated to his room, and began composing his message.

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Luna had just finished lowering the moon, her horn's magical sheath dissipating as she relinquished the spell, when she spotted six disdainful eyes watching her in the distance. Silently, the raven glided toward the midnight-hued alicorn and deposited a sealed scroll in front of her before departing just as silently as it came. It had taken much more effort than she remembered to guide the celestial body, but she had never had to assume control over both the sun and the moon simultaneously before. Shaking off the drain it had caused her, she levitated the scroll and broke the seal.

I do not believe Discord suspects anything, but despite my counsel, he has opted to leave a detachment of Canis Minors led by a Canis Major to guard the castle. We will be leaving at dawn, so make haste. This will be my last communication with you before the battle at Canterlot. Discord wishes to make an example of the city to break the spirit of the Equestrian

populace, so he intends it to be a drawn-out pitched battle. His arrogance will be his downfall. Good hunting.

J.S.

Luna finished scanning the letter, and started to head back to Ponyville from the outskirts that she had been keeping vigil at. When she arrived at the Library, Applejack and Riven were already waiting with a groggy-looking Twilight. In the background, Luna could faintly hear Ezreal and Fluttershy struggling to wake up Rainbow Dash, leaving her to assume the voices and sounds from the kitchen originated from Rarity and Spike. The latter had assumed all of Twilight's duties while the six friends had been occupied, and hadn't been present during most of their discussions, but Luna had occasionally seen him about the library. After what seemed like an eternity of alternated nudging, complaining at, and in Fluttershy's case, gently pleading, Rainbow Dash finally descended, flanked by Ezreal and Fluttershy.

Rarity and Spike entered the room shortly thereafter. The dragon was laden with various foodstuffs that the duo had been preparing for the group's breakfast. Luna stood to address the group as they ate. "We'll be leaving within the hour. After you are done eating, each of the Element Bearers should don their Element. Swain has informed me that there will be minor resistance, but I believe Riven and Ezreal should be sufficient to dispatch it. After I teleport us to the castle, I will take my leave to begin working with Ryze to begin synthesizing an overwatch spell that will work similarly to the link between Summoners and champions. I have given Riven an amulet enchanted with a recall spell that will take you to Canterlot when you are finished. From there, we will await Discord's arrival and end this."

Riven nodded, and checked one of the saddlebags she was wearing to be sure the amulet was secure. "What sort of resistance will we be encountering, exactly?"

"A pack of Canis wolves, led by a Major. They're large, but not exactly clever." Luna surveyed the group, the greater majority of which had finished eating and had begun to adorn themselves with the magical artifacts known as the Elements of Harmony. Twilight had already secured the tiara that was the Element of Magic to her head, which bore gems in

the likeness of Twilight's cutie mark, and gave a brief shimmer as she set it atop her head. The rest of the Elements came in the form of necklaces, each bearing a gem in a simplified likeness of their bearer's mark. Rainbow Dash had just finished her meal was holding up the Element of Loyalty, while beside her Rarity had already finished donning the Element of Generosity. Kindness was the domain of Fluttershy, while Laughter belonged to Pinkie, who Luna didn't remember arriving at all, but from what Twilight had mentioned, seemed prone to many bizarre occurrences. The last of the Elements, Honesty, rested against Applejack's neck. Though Luna had only interacted with the six on a limited basis, she knew the magic of the Elements only allowed a select few to harness their power, as she had previously wielded Honesty, Generosity, and Kindness against Discord when she and Celestia had staged their original coup against Discord. It was this faith in the Elements themselves that allowed her to move past her reservations against sending the first mortal holders of the Elements into battle. Seeing that preparations complete, she began channeling the teleportation spell.

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Ezreal appeared in a flash at the top of one of the walls surrounding the castle, whistling in appreciation as he surveyed the damage that Nasus had caused on their last visit. The few remaining towers looked sandblasted to the point of being thin and unstable, holes in the ancient stone visible even from his position. The ring of dead plant and animal life around the castle only served to make it seem more like a tomb than a once vibrant and lively castle. With another flash, Ezreal blinked to the opposite side of the castle before spotting his targets. The two statues were draped in strangely festive apparel, and he wasn't sure if what he had spotted on Celestia's face was a mustache drawn on the stone. Vivid azure blooms surrounded the pair, and a lone wolf trotted past the scene, following a new scent it had found. A final flash signaled Ezreal's return to the group. "Celestia and Nasus are in the inner courtyard, surrounded by a bunch of blue flowers. I'm pretty sure the wolves have caught our scent, and we can expect them to be on us any moment. Riven nodded, and took point, her wings, and by extension their blades, extended and ready to meet any unfortunate wolf to stumble upon them in pieces. Ezreal waited for the rest of the group before continuing after them, making sure that no creature would be able to catch them unaware.

It wasn't long before Ezreal was proven right, and each of them could hear the soft padding behind them and all around them as the pack began shuffling through the passageways of the castle toward the courtyard. As Twilight turned her saddened gaze to the defaced statue of her mentor, the first wolf attacked. It dropped in an instant, a few feet short of Twilight as a bolt of arcane energy traveled from Ezreal's horn to its neck, leaving a charred hole that made Twilight shudder and quickly look away.

The battle was in full swing in seconds. Riven leaped from wolf to wolf pausing only when her broken but still wickedly sharp blades would catch on bone, only to swiftly extricate herself to continue in what seemed like a decidedly one-sided battle. Ezreal, for his part danced around the wolves, appearing and disappearing at will among his targets, occasionally sending a spell toward Riven which increased the already considerable speed at which she was dispatching the pests. Pinkie Pie, chipper as ever, found herself wryly amused as she sidestepped a wolf that had been lucky enough to slip past the two warriors only to find itself pouncing onto a patch of the flowers that dotted the courtyard. Even amongst the carnage, the sight of a single puppy skittering about the battlefield was enough to make her giggle.

The pack eventually found itself forced to retreat, the few remnants regrouping for one final assault. Twilight noted grimly that had they not been under Discord's influence, the pack would have long since retreated to spare their numbers further violence. Ezreal and Riven steeled themselves for the conclusion of their bloody task, the former wondering if he could spy another wolf in the distance, struggling to fit through a doorway, but was unable to ascertain any more details from his distance.

The Canis Major, recently returned from guarding the same passageway Ezreal had used to previously free Twilight, decided that enough was enough, and alleviated its frustration at being restrained by something so simple as a doorway by gathering its considerable mass and bursting through it anyway, decimating the stone as it broke through. The wolf was larger than its peers. A lot larger, easily twice as tall as a pony, and, Ezreal guessed, significantly faster. He met Riven's eyes for a moment, understanding her intent as he moved to engage the rest of the smaller wolves.

Riven charged at the wolf headfirst, and with a flap of her wings propelled herself over its head, readying herself to strike at it from above. The wolf was faster than she expected though, and she felt a massive paw slam into her side. The Element Bearers collectively gasped as she clattered to the floor, her skid only stopping as she hit a wall. As the wolf turned to finish its prey, a rainbow-colored blur slammed into the side of its head. Tumbling through the air for a moment before righting herself, Rainbow Dash puffed up. "Hey ugly! You may be faster than her, but I bet you can't catch me!"

The wolf growled in response and took a swipe at Rainbow Dash, who effortlessly moved out of the way. Seeing the beast was distracted, Fluttershy and Rarity raced over to Riven, who was unconscious and bleeding from three long gouges on her side. Pinkie merrily hopped along toward the wolf, humming to herself as she climbed wolf, who had finally managed to corner Rainbow Dash. As she looked up at her tormentor, she saw Pinkie and Applejack astride it, a rope taut around the beast's muzzle. As Twilight's magic dragged Rainbow Dash away, the wolf began to buck in an almost comical fashion, desperately trying to dislodge its unwanted passengers, who were both whooping and hollering despite the gravity of the situation. The humor seemed to be lost upon the wolf, though, and with a furious roar, it snapped the rope binding it. With nothing binding them to the wolf, Pinkie and Applejack were quickly dislodged. It was a moment too late though, as Ezreal shouted to Twilight that he was ready. A telekinetic field enveloped the wolf, and Twilight Sparkle strained at the effort of containing it as the Canis Major began levitating. As if sensing its impending doom, it gave another furious bellow as Ezreal began rising into the air, his horn glowing golden. Crying out, Ezreal unleashed a solid wave of golden magic at the beast. As he dropped to the ground, exhausted, the wolf's head dropped with him, separated from its body. Ezreal nodded to the six. "Do your thing. I'll get Riven bandaged up the rest of the way."

The six Element Bearers gathered in front of the two statues, and Twilight began drawing out and shaping the magic from her five friends, focusing it through the artifact on her head. A few seconds stretched into an eternity as she once again dipped her soul into the magic contained within the Elements of Harmony, and a brilliant, almost blinding tunnel of every color and hue of the rainbow began to envelop the statues.

Celestia surveyed her surroundings for a moment before her eyes finally fell upon the exhausted purple unicorn in front of her. "Well done, my most faithful student. I knew you would not disappoint my faith in you." The princess took a deep breath, appreciatively savoring the air filling her lungs. "I think it's time that we dealt with Discord once and for all."

Chapter 13

Summoning

Rainbow Dash tentatively extended a wing, her ear twitching in response to the gentle scrape of metal on metal. Even in the earliest days of Equestria, when there had been conflict of the magnitude to require armor, the art of the armor-smith had not been refined enough to allow the wings of a pegasus to be feasibly armored, so even Riven's mismatched armor pieces and broken wing blades had caused leaps and bounds in the armor designs of modern times. Riven, for her part, was astounded at the aptitude of Equestrian craftspenies for their combination of magical and mundane production processes as she allowed them to make observations and then replicate in full function her transformed armor. With astounding speed, there had been crafted enough pieces of armor to protect the six Element Bearers, the four otherworldly visitors, and a newly christened unit of Royal Battlemages, hand-picked by Ryze. When approached to have her own weapon repaired, she assured the armorers that due to a series of magic-imbued runes emblazoned upon her wing-blades, their broken nature was more symbolic and aesthetic than in a functional manner. More than that, she did not elaborate.

The Elements of Harmony were not intended to take part in the actual battle, which was to be a monumental distraction that would last long enough for the Elements to be arrayed against Discord. Riven and Ezreal would once again be serving as escorts for the Elements as they positioned themselves. When Discord joined the fight, or the Elements got into position, Celestia and Nasus were to engage him directly, augmented by as many anti-magic spells as could be mustered. With Discord engaged, the Elements would be channeled to seal him away until a more permanent solution could be found. Luna would be providing support and intelligence relaying services via a spell network improvised from Ryze's knowledge of summoning magic combined with Luna's magical ability, which even diminished was nothing to look down upon, and would be the catalyst for a limited telepathic connection between herself and everyone on the battlefield. To better suit this role, she would be stationed in the clouds above Canterlot. Every citizen of Canterlot had already been evacuated

into a series of catacombs hidden in the mountain that the capital of Equestria was attached to.

The plan was solid, probably the best that could be made under the circumstances. Even so, Rainbow Dash's stomach lurched at the thought of it, and she refused to even think about what could happen to the unicorns putting themselves in harm's way to deal with Discord's feral army. She had a reputation for being a particularly brave pegasus, having completed many feats of aerial acrobatics that could easily end in permanent injury or worse. This was different, however. At all points in her career as one of Equestria's best fliers, she had been the one in control, the one responsible for her fate. Now, there were creatures actually seeking her and her friends out to *kill* them. It was enough to make anypony feel weak in the knees. The only ones who seemed to be immune to any sort of fear were the four champions. Even Celestia seemed worried, at least for those around her. Those four, though, seemed rock solid. Ezreal continued to laugh and joke as if nothing was wrong. Ryze had spent the entire time barking orders at his trainees, who seemed more scared of him than Discord. Nasus had spent the entire day in the Canterlot Gardens, seemingly in a trance. Riven was standing beside Rainbow Dash. She had easily seen her friend's nervousness, and even though she still felt slightly nauseated, Rainbow Dash felt better for Riven's sound advice, ranging on how to stay focused amidst carnage to how not to lose any of yourself in a battle. She wasn't sure how much of it she was going to remember, but the gesture was there, and appreciated.

Past this, however, Rainbow Dash saw something she wished she had not, though. Past the calm reassurances and companionship, Riven seemed restless, almost eager. Rainbow Dash contemplated that this would be Riven's first pitched battle in a long time, and wondered how much of Riven's remarks about giving in to the chaos of battle originated from first-hand experience. Past that, Rainbow Dash couldn't help but worrying what would become of Riven once she was outside of the influence of Equestria. Adding to that, now she was being forced to accept Swain and Singed as allies, both of which seemed to represent something that she hated.

Riven was trying to shove oddly similar thoughts out of her head at that same moment. Riven had no qualms about violence at all, being born and bred to it like any Noxian, but her time in Equestria had given her

definite qualms about being violent in front of Rainbow Dash, who seemed to think of her as a good being despite her background. Of course, she would do what she had to do, but Riven was definitely not used to feeling reservations about spilling blood. It was immensely relieving that they were not fighting any ponies, which would have caused many complications for Riven's mindset. Discord was another story though. Neither beast nor pony, and probably not mortal. Killing him would probably be out of the question, but still from what she had heard, his previous imprisonment had failed twice, so something more extreme was definitely needed.

“Do you...think anypony will die?” Riven snapped out of her thoughts as Rainbow Dash addressed her. The mare was staring at the floor. “Do you think any of my friends will...” She was unable to finish the sentence.

Riven opened her mouth to say that yes, there was a possibility not everypony would survive the day. Upon looking Rainbow Dash in the eye, though, she couldn't. “I promise you, I'll sooner bleed than see any of your companions fall in the coming bat-” Riven's speech was promptly interrupted by a cyan wing smacking into the side of her head.

Rainbow Dash scowled at Riven. “You just don't get it, do you? You stupid, stupid mare.” Her facial expression was of frustration and annoyance, but her eyes conveyed a gentle mirth. “That group includes you, Riven. You better not let anything happen to you either.” Rainbow Dash smiled at Riven, her voice cracking slightly.

Riven laughed, feeling like an idiot for her blindness. “I...I will keep that in mind, friend. Maybe we will have to show Discord the unique brand of strength that the inhabitants of this land seem to possess firsthand. Worry not, for upon the sunset, we shall all be celebrating our victory with song, feasting, and merriment. Pinkie isn't the only one who knows how to party. I'll have to show you later how Noxians celebrate.” Dash joined with her own laughter, not sure if she should be excited or worried by the prospect.

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Ezreal fidgeted in his armor. It had never been his custom to go into battle heavily protected, relying more on mobility than anything, but it was a nice opportunity to put into practice some of the knowledge he had gained

in his school days. Before he had dropped out to pursue his passion for exploration, he had been enrolled by his parents in one of Piltover's finest schools of techmaturgy, the emerging field of combining high technology with Runeterra's deep magical heritage to produce various 'hextech' items that had drastically changed life on Runeterra while propelling Piltover to the forefront of techno-magical innovation. It had been Piltover to pioneer the magic of visiopathy, a technique that had allowed League matches to be broadcast around the continent of Valoran with ease.

Despite his relatively obvious lack of interest in his education, he had learned enough to replicate some of the hextech concepts used in the League. Specifically, he had spent the past hour working to replicate the popular 'spell vampirism' enchantment. Celestia, relatively unoccupied after refreshing the various defensive spells around Canterlot, immediately took an interest. "Spell vampirism? That sounds rather...Well, to be honest, I'm not sure how it sounds. What exactly is the function of such an enchantment?"

Ezreal began rote recitation of what he'd had to memorize in his youth, too focused on his work to engage properly in a conversation. "When a spell is cast, it is entirely focused, and the magical energies unified. Offensive magic, however, loses this unity when it strikes a target, interacting with the target's natural magical field. This is why an offensive spell diffuses after striking. Whereas some mages, such as Ryze, are naturally adept at harnessing some of the energy that is lost in the process, others are not. However, recent strides in hextech have allowed us to build a kind of magical transistor. This allows those who can manipulate magic to harness and convert this spare offensive energy into something we can use to heal ourselves, as healing magic tends to use similar store-and-release concepts to what hextech uses."

Most of the techno-babble went over Celestia's head, but she believed that she had the basic concept down. "So basically, you heal yourself by hurting others. I suppose that makes vampirism an appropriate term for it, though I must say I find the thought rather unsettling. Your world is truly a fascinating, and I must admit, disturbing place, from what has been described to me, though I understand how Singed and Swain would be a product of it."

Ezreal stood up, affixing a thick circular band to his armor near his ever-present bracer. "It isn't all bad, you know. We've done some pretty amazing things, and not everybody is a force for evil. Yeah, things get a little violent, or even a lot violent sometimes, but we're doing the best we can. The creation of the League speaks for itself as a testament to our desire for peace. We're kinda improvising, and our world doesn't come with two super-powerful princesses to guide us."

Celestia nodded. As much as she'd like to think her little ponies would do the right thing on their own most of the time, or at the very least have the right spirit about their actions, there was no way to deny the influence having two immortal rulers had over the shaping of Equestrian history. Celestia and Luna had directly passed down their values to the ponies, and over time it had been permanently engrained into every pony of Equestria to try their best to be kind and good to their fellow pony, or at the very least that is what Celestia had intended. Runeterra, on the other hand, had lost most of its deities long ago in what were called the Rune Wars. In fact, the tears of the same goddess that created Runeterra were prized as magical artifacts. The remaining deities had apparently distanced themselves from Runeterra, fearful of the death and destruction the peoples of the continent were capable of. Thus, Valoran had no role models or kind hand to guide it as its populace recovered from the environmentally devastating Rune Wars. Now that she considered it, it was amazing that the societies hadn't completely self-destructed, and even more amazing that they had managed to find a way to keep their conflicts in check, at least for the most part.

Ezreal continued, breaking apart Celestia's train of thought. "I mean, I've seen some pretty amazing things here, yeah. Having complete control over the weather is unheard of on Valoran, but here it's a daily part of life for pegasi. That being said, there's a guy in the League who can quite literally shift people back in time. Who knows, one day there might be controlled time travel for all because of him, and we can revert some of the damage the Rune Wars have done to the environment. There's another guy who learned how to transmute his entire body into another substance. Albeit, he's kinda psychotic, and turning into a sentient pool of blood is a bit freaky, but still, it's impressive. We're a pretty violent bunch at times, it's regrettably true, but we've done some amazing things. We've caged the physical embodiment of destruction and change as it raged across the land, we've opened portals across dimensions and drawn assistance from across the stars to help in our struggle to curb our more destructive

appetites, and we never back down from a challenge as a species. Humanity definitely isn't all bad, and we're definitely trying.”

“I concede the point then. I know very little of your world, and I know that in different situations, different beings take away different lessons from a situation, and it is not always the right lesson,” Celestia spoke, her tone thoughtful, “I do believe you when you say that your race is trying, though, and I wish you the best. I cannot condone your more violent practices, but perhaps my opinion on the matter isn't the most valid.”

'TESTING. THIS IS A TEST. THINK TO RESPOND. THE LINK WILL INTERPRET THE INTENT.' Celestia and Ezreal both flinched as Luna's voice blasted through the minds of those in the vicinity at full volume.

Celestia quickly regained her composure, being somewhat accustomed to Luna's tendency to overdo the volume of public announcements. *'It works, Luna, but try to see if you can tone down the intensity at which you broadcast. It might also be prudent to make the broadcast a little less universal.'*

'My apologies for the volume.' Celestia rolled her eyes, knowing by Luna's embarrassed tone exactly what her facial expression would be at the moment, downcast and scrunched up as she tried to maintain her composure. *'The link will be finalized between myself, Celestia, the Element Bearers, and the champions prior to the battle. Ryze will relay relevant information to the Royal Battlemages.'*

There was a pause. *“Lieutenant Stofen has just reported in. Discord's forces have been spotted ascending the mountain. Prepare yourselves.”*

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Discord surveyed the scene before him. Hundreds of creatures from the Everfree Forest were marching. 'Twas a beautiful sight, really, and it would be the last thing that those in Canterlot would see before Discord razed the castle and city to the ground. Beside him, Swain marched in silence. The tactician had been unusually silent for the journey, seeming quite pensive. Discord had spent a few minutes trying to figure out what the stallion was planning before getting bored. Whatever it was, Discord wouldn't give him much chance to execute it. The Spirit of Chaos might

have been one of the most magically powerful beings in Equestria, but he knew nothing of magical theory or finesse, both of which were required to do something as complicated as making a bridge between dimensions. Thus, it fell to Discord to dispose of his tools before they realized he couldn't actually fulfill his promises. It really was a pity, though. It wasn't every century that ponies like Singed and Swain came along, completely willing to sacrifice the well-being of others for their ambitions, and it really would be a shame to see them go. Unfortunately, such is the nature of siding with chaos and destruction, in that both often required sacrifice to sustain them, and the pair would make excellent fuel for the fires of disharmony.

It was also unfortunate that he had to leave behind the Ursa Major, but the creature was slow, and the short trip would have been protracted quite a bit by the behemoth. Adding to that, he was depending on the battle between the creatures and the defenders to be relatively even, so that he could bask in as much of the magically-empowering chaos of battle to break down the last of the warding spells on the castle, which Celestia had been undoubtedly augmenting throughout the years. He knew the alicorn to be a bit hot-headed when it came to those she grew attached to, or at least more attached to than the average pony, but she was also an experienced ruler, so he couldn't count on her making too many mistakes.

Finally, the castle was in sight, and Discord squirmed in gleeful anticipation of rending the city asunder in a cascade of blood and fire. Soon, he would deal with Celestia and her brat sister once and for all, and end eons of conflict between chaos and harmony. Silvery strands of magic erupted from each limb, and split off into thousands of strings as Discord implanted one command into the thoughts of the unfortunate creatures under his control: Attack.

Chapter 14

Mended Stone

One of the newly christened Battlemages shifted nervously on his feet. In front of him and his comrades, Discord stood at the head of the massive array of creatures that were gathered in front of Canterlot's gates. It was several minutes of an agonizing wait as the Spirit of Chaos heaved against the magical wards Celestia had put in place so many years ago. Discord threw bolts of condensed magical power at the city, causing the sky to light up as his siege exploded against the magical barrier in flashes of crimson and gold. Nopony was hopeful that Discord would be stopped at the barrier. Several were already beginning to ready offensive spells as the blue rippling and flickering across the barrier became more lasting and evident. All of the Royal Battlemages stood apart from the unicorn at the head of the group, though. Ryze was crackling with enough magic and electricity to cause minor burns to anypony that stepped near him, a fierce example to what awaited Discord's forces when the barrier fell. Though his enemy was incapable of being intimidated, the mage knew a show of confidence and defiance would do well for his students' morale. Thus, he continued his vigil as the crash of magic against magic became louder and louder, until, finally, the moment everypony had been waiting for came. The barrier fell.

Discord's insane laughter echoed across the battlefield as chaos erupted immediately. Ryze became alight as bolts of magical energy soared from his horn to the pair of manticores that had smashed through the gates without a second thought. As if a signal had been given, the Battlemages unleashed their own spells, various gouts of flame, ice, and other elemental magics finding their targets. Enscorcelled creatures fell to the ground in droves, their bodies being swept aside just as quickly by the flood pouring into the city. Ryze saw some of his unicorns begin to balk at the effort of holding back the tide. "Hold fast! We must thin their numbers more to clear a path!" The mages redoubled their efforts, but even so, it was apparent that they were being forced back.

Ryze continued, feeling the magic flowing through him and through his enemies. A Canis Major fell to the ground before him, twitching in uncontrollable, electricity-induced seizures. There was almost a berth around him, not because the creatures were avoiding him, but due to the sheer amount of magical lightning arcing from creature to creature. A slight pause in the flood of enemies gave him a moment to take a swig of a shimmering blue concoction, one of many bottles that lined each side of his heavy armor. Unlike most magicians of the League, Ryze preferred to spend most of his battles clad in plate. His connection with magic was innate, and it drew entirely from his willpower and focus. He took pride in not needing some silly ring or enchanted hat to augment his strength, and instead opted to make himself as impervious to damage as he could. Even so, even he was beginning to tire from the flood of creatures. *'Fall back to the castle. We're almost ready.'* Luna's voice had been the only thing he had been waiting on. Signaling a fighting retreat with a bright orange magical flare, he began gradually pulling backwards toward the castle, taking care to make sure every one of his mages made it before him.

With a dull crash, the gates of the castle closed, another delay for Discord to deal with as he continued disarming the magics guarding the city. Ryze rallied his troops. "Okay. Here's the hard part. We have to hold out until Discord himself is inside the castle, and we have to keep his attention on us. When the Elements are almost in position, Celestia and Nasus will engage Discord. While he's distracted, the Elements will deal with him. Prepare yourselves. Drink a potion or two. They'll break in any second."

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Discord laughed in delight as he swept aside another barrier. "Beautiful, isn't it, Swain?" The recipient of the statement shrugged, all business as he, Discord, and Singed walked through the rubble that was swiftly becoming the dominating aesthetic of the city. "Oh, fine. Be a spoilsport. In any case it won't be long till we've broken into the castle and found the Elements of Harmony, and then you'll get your just reward."

"I look forward to each of getting what we deserve." Swain said, his voice dripping with honey and venom. Discord laughed again, seemingly giddy from the carnage around him. Singed silently trotted behind the group, saying nothing even as they reached the castle walls. The duo

remained nonplussed as the Spirit of Chaos began tearing apart the last of the magics barring their entry, only briefly catching Ryze's eye as the gates smashed open and the creatures started pouring into the castle.

Discord raised an eyebrow and smirked gently, a strikingly understated facial expression for a creature who had been so prone to extremes thus far. Swain was instantly on alert. "So, Swain... you have given me many tales of leading your troops into battle, and slaying many enemies. Why do you refrain now? Perhaps there is something staying your hoof?"

"I find it more prudent to save my strength for the real fight. Ryze will eventually be overwhelmed, but there will still be Riven and Ezreal to deal with, both of whom are formidable opponents in their own right. It would be impractical to waste my efforts and strength on the rest of the fodder." Swain's voice remained flat and monotone.

"Very practical, very logical." Discord nodded sagely. "It also reeks of lies. You saw the way I dealt with both Nasus and Celestia without any real effort. I already told you that you weren't here for your power so much as your brain, and perhaps if you'd remembered that you'd have made a more convincing lie." Neither Discord nor Swain took their eyes off one another, and neither one of them heard a pop and a faint fizzing noise nearby as Singed uncorked a bottle and began to chug. Continuing to smirk arrogantly, Discord sidled toward Swain. "Of course, you're not a stupid pony, by far. Who would honestly trust the Spirit of Chaos to be honest and straightforward? What you don't get is that it doesn't matter, though."

Discord began to raise a paw toward Swain, but Singed was faster, slamming Swain aside in a rush. The bolt of magical energy whizzed harmlessly past the pair. Infuriated, Discord began snaking a magical grip around Singed...only for the stallion to slip to the ground a few seconds later, laughing as foam and spittle leaked out of his mouth. Huffing and sputtering, Singed regarded Discord. "Mercury...Also known as quicksilver...magic absorbing properties...Makes nice boots..." Discord, utterly confused, but no less enraged, began casting fire and lightning at the stallion, becoming increasingly frustrated as the unnaturally quick stallion continued to evade his grasp, not noticing Swain fighting his way past the hordes to get away from the scene.

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Ezreal shifted restlessly on his hooves. He, Riven, and the six bearers of the Elements of Harmony had been waiting, silently hidden in a side room whilst the battle raged in the courtyard. He had participated in his fair share of ambushes, but most of those that he had been part of in the League had been rather spur-of-the-moment, and didn't involve waiting this long. They had been huddle in the relatively small room for over three hours now, and it had only been thirty minutes since they had heard Luna give the order to retreat.

The wait had been hard to bear, and each second seemed like a minute as Discord's forces slowly pushed the defenders back. The six Element Bearers had taken the time especially harshly, and Fluttershy was practically in tears at the stress of knowing only she and her friends could defeat the monster. The others weren't faring particularly better, though Rainbow Dash seemed at least somewhat composed. Twilight Sparkle, Rarity, and Applejack were engaged in hushed speculation of how the battle was progressing. Riven and Ezreal were both silent, the former slightly annoyed at the security risk the chatting posed, but unable to find the heart to tell the inexperienced ponies to be perfectly still and quiet under an immense stress. To do so would be unreasonable and might detract from their performance later.

More waiting. Discord had become distracted by something after breaking down the castle gates, but was now beginning to move in, slowly dismantling the magic hindering him along the way. It wouldn't be long before he was in position. Ezreal practically jumped for joy when the order finally came from Luna. *'Elements of Harmony, move into position.'* After taking a brief moment to shepherd Fluttershy out of her corner, the eight began moving toward their target.

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Ryze was only mildly surprised when Singed went flying past him. "You? What the h-Why are you here?"

Singed laughed madly, and coughed up some blood. "I decided to try being a pegasus. Discord helped, but I decided it wasn't for me." Singed

managed to get up and wobble a few steps forward before collapsing. Ryze wasn't moved by much pity.

After telling one of his mages to 'clean that mess up before someone trips on it', Ryze surveyed the situation. Discord was approaching just as steadily as before, though he looked a little less jolly about it. The tide of creatures hadn't subsided, but had faltered slightly. "When our surprise arrives, focus on clearing out the creatures around them. They'll have a hard enough time without being distracted." Ryze took a swig from a health potion and cast the bottle aside. *'Any time now, Luna.'*

'Celestia and Nasus, engage Discord. The Elements are almost in position.' Luna's voice echoed through Ryze's head, and he turned to look at Discord as the penultimate step of their trap was sprung. Nasus and Celestia appeared in a blinding flash in front of Discord, who staggered backward in surprise.

The Spirit of Chaos had to take a moment to recover. He had figured that Swain would betray him, but only now, as the two former statues stood before him, did he understand the scope of Swain's deceit. Words escaped him as he began to consider how he would wreak vengeance upon the general once he had dealt with the Elements. He was interrupted, however, by Nasus and Celestia taking advantage of his stunned state. The former charged straight at Discord, his dull golden armor adorned with emeralds that gave off the same ghastly shimmer that appeared when Nasus had previously fed off of the wolf. The latter began strafing, firing streams of concentrated, bone-dissolving light at Discord. Discord howled in pain and outrage, lashing out at Celestia with his talons. The blinding light shining off of Celestia's own brilliantly finished armor proved too much for his eyes, however, and his claws swiped harmlessly through the air. Nasus took the opportunity to ram all of his considerable bulk into Discord, toppling him over.

In but a moment, Discord had recovered, his eyes glowing briefly as they were altered in mere seconds to suit the new situation. Flinging Nasus aside, he summoned a telekinetic spell, hurling a large section of the castle's ramparts at Celestia, who barely avoided the speedy projectile. Nasus was back on his hooves almost as soon as he had landed, his eyes pulsing as he summoned his aging spell. Discord only paused for a moment before shaking off the effects and waving a paw toward Nasus, who was catapulted into the air as the ground beneath him erupted upward,

ripping a noticeable gash in the armor on his stomach and paving the way for a few drops of crimson to fall to the ground. Celestia's assault hadn't abated though, and Discord soon found himself using his power to rid himself of a host of new burns along his back and head, giving Nasus time to consume the spirit of a nearby wolf to close his own wounds. This back and forth continued without any sign of waning for several minutes, and true to the plan, Discord had no knowledge of the eight ponies that were rapidly getting closer.

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Riven stepped carefully over one of the necks of a recently felled hydra. The massive, multi-headed reptile had only proven a slight delay for her and Ezreal, each too focused on their objective to allow something so large and clumsy to obstruct their path for long. In the distance, they could hear the sounds of Discord battling Celestia and Nasus, and before long, the battle was in sight as well. Even more than the battleground around them, the site of the immortals' fight was littered with destruction and debris. What had taken years of crafting by the ancestors of Canterlot's citizenry had been destroyed in hours. Majestic spires and lovingly constructed domes lay in ruination now, the one beautiful motif of black, gold, and white now almost completely obscured by the gray clouds of dust and red glow of fire. Ezreal was eerily reminded of various ruins he had previously explored in his time on Valoran, though most were not on fire.

The six bearers of the Elements of Harmony trailed behind, but not by much, their expressions ranging from Fluttershy's sheer terror to Pinkie's almost oblivious bouncing through the carnage. Rainbow Dash, Twilight Sparkle, Rarity, and Applejack had remained completely silent, their faces set in grim determination as they waded through the battle. The latter of those had even on occasion lent her efforts to plant her hooves squarely into the face of a wayward wolf that the two guardians had been too busy to deal with at the time. Sooner than any of them expected, Discord's form loomed in front of them.

Nasus and Celestia, under instruction from Luna, had saved their most ferocious attacks until now, and as the group approached the Spirit of Chaos from behind, they beheld a strangely beautiful, yet almost blinding mixture of Nasus' emerald magics and Celestia's pure white conjurations. A familiar sandstorm had begun to kick up, dust and embers flying through

the air around the area. Discord wasn't anywhere near done though, and as the assaulting animals began withering and dying in droves around the storm, he reached for his most foul magics.

Discord felt the chaos of the battle flowing through him like a current of electricity. The entire time that the fight had been raging, he had been basking in the death and destruction, growing stronger for it, and finally, like a vessel as cracked and broken as his mind, the chaos stored within Discord unleashed itself. Reality seemed to implode, and time seemed to move at half of its normal speed. With a roar, the mixture of dust, debris, and fire coalesced into a solid tendril of molten stone, which slammed into Nasus with enough force to leave a crater. The ruined buildings themselves began to animate, shifting and morphing until they could begin dragging themselves toward the defenders. As the ground shook and heaved, the Elements could barely keep their footing as they continued their approach. Ezreal reeled backward when a previously fallen wolf stood to its feet, blood dripping from its neck, and howled before staggering toward him to be put down again.

Discord couldn't even bring himself to laugh or gloat, barely withstanding the flood of wild, uncontrollable chaos magic flowing out of him. As Celestia squirmed within his grasp, he wanted to say something, to convey what he was feeling, but the magnitude of his own strength was scouring his mind as thoroughly as the city around him. Overwhelmed by chaos, he did not see Twilight Sparkle behind him, a jewel-encrusted crown atop her head glowing in tandem with her eyes. He did not see the six bearers of the Elements of Harmony lifting into the air as the ancient powers of the artifacts took hold. He did not see a beam of light emitting from each of the magical necklaces that adorned the other five. He did not see each beam wrap itself around a central, shockingly violet pillar of light generated by Twilight Sparkle. He did not see the light unravel itself into a wave of colors, gleaming with every part of the spectrum. The only thing he saw was Celestia's proud smile toward her student. A moment later, he saw nothing at all.

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Reality seemed to shift back into itself a moment later. Riven sidestepped as a recently animated building collapsed on itself. Riven wandered the battlefield for a few minutes, feeling an unusual restlessness

and incompleteness about herself. Becoming more and more agitated, she searched the battlefield, not quite sure what she was looking for. It wasn't long before this search became a frenzy, as she madly dashed over the ruins and rubble toward the smashed gates of Canterlot. It was there that she finally comprehended her search.

Swain wasn't quite unconscious, but he was delirious enough from blood loss not to notice Riven's arrival. Scattered around him were dozens of slain creatures, ranging from manticores to Canis Majors to a few hydras. Riven felt a strange sense of calmness as her previous frenzy subsided, and she seemed to be almost on autopilot as she staggered numbly toward the barely breathing form. In the back of her mind, she was vaguely aware that she hated this being. She barely registered that as her overwhelming instincts told her that this being needed to die.

Riven extended a bladed wing toward Swain's throat...

Chapter 15

Pony, Man, and Monster

"Is this what you want?" Riven didn't acknowledge Rainbow Dash's question for several moments, torn between basking in the long-awaited moment where she could have revenge and the ever-growing influence that Rainbow Dash, Equestria, and the concepts that both presented and represented. The quickly extending silence worried Rainbow Dash, but not as much as Riven's labored response.

"Yes. This is what I want. I want this creature dead. He and Singed are directly responsible for the deaths of my comrades, and he more than anyone else is responsible for the state of my homeland. Yes. I want him to die." Riven was shaking at this point, but she made no further move to kill the incapacitated Swain. "But I'm not going to kill him. Killing him won't repair my homeland, killing him won't bring back my comrades-in-arms. Killing him would only destabilize Noxus' political structure, paving the way for someone just as depraved with half the restraint."

"That's...probably more thought than I would have put into it, to be honest, but I don't know much about politics." Rainbow Dash wasn't quite sure what to say past that, feeling completely unequipped to deal with this situation.

"I'd be lying to both of us if I said those were the main reasons that stayed my blade right now." Riven finally lowered her wing, letting her blade fall harmlessly away from Swain's throat. "Noxus is a harsh place, and it truly tests the characters of the citizens. Our morals and our ethics are what truly make us who we are. I have always fought for an honorable Noxus, that fights to strengthen itself so that one day we need to fight no longer. Even Swain has some sort of twisted set of ethics, somewhere past the ambition and greed. One day, I will probably kill Swain, but I need to do so on my own terms, if I am to prove the superiority of my philosophy. His death will mean nothing if I end his life while he is unable to fight back, and Noxus will simply view me as another opportunist out to rule. My heritage is that of a warrior. By nature, a heritage that calls for refinement through

conflict. Despite this, those who feel as I do value life. It's a sad reality that our world is harsh enough to require conflict, but I believe that it is through mastering the conflict that our world forces upon us that we will ascend past it."

"But conflict doesn't always require death, though. Couldn't you find a way to prove your point that doesn't involve shedding blood? After today, I don't know how you could stand to live in your world the way you do. I'm gonna have nightmares about wolves for years." Rainbow Dash wanted to find a way to tell Riven that the world didn't have to be as she viewed it, but wasn't sure how.

"True...Perhaps leaving Swain alive after defeating him could prove the weakness of his philosophy of senseless death in sacrifice to himself and Noxus even more effectively. With the existence of the League, war is much less necessary, but vesting all of our faith in one entity to solve our problems leads to complacency..." Riven paused, thoughtful. "One could still try to keep a guard trained for external threats, but as years of peace pass, even that would grow weaker..." Riven paused once more, as if coming to a horrible realization. "Vigilance is impossible to maintain without constant conflict. The longer we go without threats, the more easily beaten we are by new ones that arise. We can never ascend past the need for conflict. Humanity is doomed."

Rainbow Dash felt the beginnings of an idea stir within her. "Maybe it takes more than just conflict, though? You're right...your world doesn't have immortal princesses to watch over you...unless something in the nature of your world changes, you'll always need to know how to defend yourself. The way it sounds though, there's almost always some sort of threat to keep you on your toes...and since you already said that refinement through combat can't work, why not keep your knowledge of fighting, and use it to defend yourself while you find a better way? Maybe a way to strengthen Noxus through unity instead of conflict. You may always need to know how to fight, but you can use what you know to make it safe for those who don't while they put their skills to work to make Noxus and all of Valoran a better place!"

Riven smiled softly. "Well, eliminating war and violence may be impossible, but I suppose that trying to diminish them in other ways could

work.” Riven's eye's widened as she remembered the original subject of their conversation. “Ah, and speaking of which, perhaps I could begin to show Swain this new method of thinking firsthand...by keeping him from bleeding out. Could you get a medic over here while I stabilize him.” Rainbow Dash was gone in a rainbow-hued blur of motion, while Riven uncorked the last of her health potions.

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“My little ponies...my faithful and loyal subjects...today, we have seen blood shed in Equestria for the first time in many ages. Discord's treachery will leave scars upon Canterlot and the Everfree Forest for many generations. Today we have fought for our lives and our values.” Celestia paused, letting her words sink in as she addressed the citizenry of Canterlot. “But today is not a day of sadness, but of joy and revelry. Discord is vanquished, and soon we will give to him a prison from which he cannot escape. Harmony is free to reign in Equestria once more, thanks to the heroism of a few brave travelers, the bearers of the Elements of Harmony, and the brave soldiers who volunteered to become Royal Battlemages. Now, more than ever, I would like to thank the latter, for without your aid, the Element Bearers and their guardians could never have accomplished their task. My own role in the battle is laughable beside their bravery in the face of conflict the likes of which they had never seen or been trained for previously.”

Another dramatic pause. “It is thanks to this assembly of heroes that Canterlot will live to see another day, a day of a Canterlot not only restored, but surpassing the beauty of its former self, to better reflect the persona of the brave souls residing within it. To this end, I will not be commissioning the royal treasury, but my own private funds as Princess of Equestria to aid in the reconstruction of Canterlot. I will also be lending my own strength and magics to speed the process along, and I urge any who wish to show their appreciation to our heroes to do the same. I say that we show our own bravery in the face of such evils as Discord who would seek to destroy all we hold dear, and embrace the future with everything it brings, for despite what chaos might seek to rend us asunder, despite what hatred might fester in the hearts of dark beings, despite what evil ambitions might try to drive away our love for each other, we are one. Harmony prevails! Equestria prevails!”

Celestia stepped down from the piece of rubble she had been standing on, her brilliant white coat still immaculate despite the dust and debris around her. Striding regally through the applauding crowd, occasionally smiling at one subject or greeting another, she eventually drew her way into the castle, where a somewhat smaller crowd awaited her. Twilight Sparkle and the other bearers of the Elements were waiting inside, along with Princess Luna, Ezreal, Riven, Nasus, and Ryze. "You all did very well. I'm proud to call you my friends and allies. Canterlot will be rebuilt, and the Everfree Forest repopulated, and we'll be stronger for it. I won't make the same mistake twice, though. The Royal Battlemages will be merged back into the rest of the Royal Guard, and this time the role will be more than ceremonial. If another Discord emerges, we will be ready."

Nasus stepped forward. "Myself, Ryze, and a few of the unicorns from the University of Canterlot finished the spell you requested. It was difficult not to permanently damage his soul in the process, but Discord has been severed from the greater bulk of his magical ability. He will be ready for release and rehabilitation at your discretion."

"Very good. That brings us to our next matter...It has truly been an honor to know you all, but a bargain is a bargain, and I would not begrudge you your homes. Shortly before Discord attacked, the University also completed a spell that we are fairly certain will send you home, to be executed by the Elements of Harmony. As for our other two...allies... They fulfilled their end, so I see no reason to make myself a liar. They will be sent as well, as soon as they are fetched from incarceration." Celestia nodded in respect to the warriors. "I wish you all the best of luck in your travels. We will reconvene in an hour to begin the spell. I must take my leave of you for now, as there is much to be done. I will see you all again when it is time."

Tearful goodbyes were exchanged, some more tearful than others as Ryze couldn't find the heart to keep the six Element Bearers from hugging him as they wished him and the others well. Even Riven found herself hit by a pang of regret as she realized that she would most likely never see the one who had showed her what she had lacked again. "Soldiers of Noxus were taught never to say goodbye...it meant that they didn't think they were coming home again. I don't think I'll be coming back, but I still can't find it in

me to say it. I think that perhaps I'll still think of this place as holding a little bit of home for me though, and be sure I will not forget you."

"Yeah. You're pretty cool, you know that?" Rainbow Dash laughed, pretending that she didn't feel any wetness at her eyes. "Maybe if you had the time, you could become almost as good at flying as me. Life's dumb like that sometimes, yeah?" Riven laughed with her, and the two walked away, their conversation succumbing to the bittersweet nature of friends parting ways.

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Farewells given, belongings gathered, and friends present, the six champions entered the ritual chamber. In olden days, when the superstition that magic was bound to words and not mind was present, the room had been used for elaborate incantations and processions. Now, the room found use as an isolated and quiet location for groups of unicorns to cast complex spells without being disturbed.

Twelve ponies encircled the group, alternating between a University researcher and one of the six Elements of Harmony. Celestia and Luna both stood in front of the group, the former finishing her explanation of the spell's mechanics to the six. "Anyway, the spell will take you to the closest thing it can interpret to home. If there are no more questions, we are ready to begin. Good luck, and farewell."

The unicorns began their work quickly, each of the Elements' artifacts beginning to light up on a brilliant array of colors as the spell took hold. The colors swirled around the six, engulfing them in a blinding vortex as they began to rise into the air.

The world went white.

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Swain opened his eyes, swaying slightly as his vision came into focus. He smiled slightly as he lifted his hand, flexing it as the flood of familiar sensations reached his brain. Around him, the trappings of a general of Noxus surrounded him. Taking a moment, he let the satisfaction of a job well-done soak in. To his delight, the saddlebag he had previously

been wearing was on the floor behind him. Peeking inside, the gleam of the shattered Nightmare's Regalia greeted him. Allowing himself a moment of pride, he paused only when he saw something else behind it. Pulling out the scroll, he unraveled it.

We have had combat. Surely we will have more. Now, I desire words as well.

Riven

Swain cocked his head. It was going to be an interesting night indeed.

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Singed followed a similar pattern of actions to Swain, at first. After adding the samples he had gathered from Equestria to his stores, he set the giant potion bottle that normally adorned his back aside, and strode out onto his balcony, giving him a wide view of his home city of Zaun. Singed felt a pang of nostalgia as he surveyed the smog-filled skies of his homeland, and inspected the clusters of magical industrial complexes. It was slightly unfortunate that he'd have to make the commute to the Institute of War again, but perhaps he was due for a vacation anyway. Maybe a trip to Ionia, perhaps a week or two on the beaches with a surf board. Clear his head, sort out his new inspirations for various compounds he was going to make with his new samples. Walking back inside, he opened one of his cabinets, searching for an entirely different sort of chemical.

Singed poured a glass of the white wine, and began packing.

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Riven froze. Something wasn't quite right here. It was her home, yes. The scraps of armor, the broken and blunted blades, the war mementos... Everything was exactly as she left it before preparing for that last, fateful match on the Twisted Treeline, but her instincts were screaming at her that something wasn't right here. She stalked through her home, hefting her broken runeblade. Her personal armory was as it should be. Her food

stores were intact. Her bedroom was...The blade clattered to the ground as she beheld the unconscious form before her. Words evaded her.

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Twilight Sparkle awoke, and tried to rise. She promptly fell to the ground as she failed to get her hooves beneath her...A problem she soon realized was caused by her lack of hooves. After a few seconds of panicked flailing, she managed to prop herself up on her new appendages, only to see Nasus and Ryze before her. The former turned to the latter. "We might have a problem."

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End – League of Discord

To be continued in The Redemption of Jericho Swain

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A word from the author:

So yeah. This has been an interesting journey. I gotta say I didn't expect my first venture into writing in so long to be A)well-received and B)Pony-related. Gotta say, totally didn't see either of those coming.

Anyway, as implied, this particular part of the saga may be over, but I actually intend to make this a three-part series, so if I haven't bored you yet, stay tuned. While I'm at it, I'd like to thank all of my friends for their support, as well as the bronies from League of Legends who have read my stuff.(If you play league and want to play with bronies too, go to the chat rooms and open 'bronies'. We pretty much rock.) I'd also like to thank Stofen from the League of Legends forums for posting my story on the forums and helping me get a few more readers. Anyway, I've had tons of fun, gonna be writing bunches more stuff soon, so if this little abomination

hasn't turned you away, keep an eye out for the further adventures of the mane six, now with 100% more Runeterra.