

Daughters and Daughters



Esteem walked with deliberate nonchalance through the scene of the battle. Puppets occupied the streets, doing their best to subdue the loyalists, but they were failing. The earthponies and pegasi were practically useless against a powerful unicorn, and the loyalists had them to spare. Even the unicorns could barely hold their own, though Esteem was not surprised. The strongest race of puppets did little more than throw shards, use telekinesis, and cast *Magic Missile*.

Yes, Esteem reflected, while their purview of skills was enough to subdue the average pony, they were woefully ineffective against the organized, militarized population of inner Canterlot. He shook his head in dismay as he watched a unicorn puppet get crushed under a collapsing building. Their only advantage was in numbers.

Esteem drew a basic shield around himself and the cadet as the dust and debris from the collapsing building reached them. He would need to have the repair crew magically fix the structure sometime within the week. The crew was a useful thing to have. The loyalists and the Royal Army would likely have destroyed inner Canterlot three times over were they not around.

“Cadet.” Esteem stopped and waited for the dust to clear.

“Yes sir?”

“I have in my possession what I believe to be the only copy of *The Power to Destroy*. Remind me when we return to the palace and I will let you read it.”

“I would very much like that, sir.”

“Your performance in the field lately has convinced me that you deserve the knowledge contained within its pages. The way you held against that peachy little unicorn was particularly creative.”

“He was nothing impressive, sir. I should not have let him get away.”

“Unimpressive is not how I would have described him,” Esteem said thoughtfully. “You

survived the entirety of two minutes against one the enemy's strongest bladecasters. It was a feat that deserves no small amount of praise. That said, I'd like you to return to the palace. I can handle things from here on by myself."

As he said the words, a force spell struck the bridge-way above them, causing bits of stone rubble to rain down onto Esteem's shield. He looked on as a group of earthpony puppets were destroyed by a series of azure magic missiles. The bolts of energy burnt holes as wide as a hoof in the earthponies before bursting against the cobblestones.

The Cadet sounded concerned as he spoke. "Are you sure, sir? The loyalists here-"

"*Loyalist*, Cadet. This is the work of one pony. Now go."

"Yes, sir."

Esteem watched lazily as the loyalist's magic finished off the remaining puppets. The color of the spellcrafting had tipped him off to his opponent's identity. He was about to fight one of the strongest unicorns the loyalists possessed. Esteem ran his tongue over a sharpened tooth. He could not have been more pleased.

Once his opponent had destroyed the remainder of the puppets, Esteem drew *Carsomyr's* component shards from beneath his bladecasting robe. The robe was an extremely light garment of pitch black, made of cloth he had ordered specially enchanted to possess a glossy finish. It looked quite fetching on him.

He considered for a moment where his foe might be. Inner Canterlot was characterized by its tall, round buildings and the arcing bridge-ways that ran between them. The streets were narrow, and any building tended to have at least two balconies. The confined spaces and multiple levels of elevation were naturally advantageous to unicorns.

Esteem selected four of *Carsomyr's* shards and charged them with kinetic energy before sending them through the air towards their targets. Two struck the building directly opposite him, burying themselves in the stone walls. The other two were embedded into the underside of a bridge-way and an overhanging balcony. Esteem gently picked an errant strand of mane away from his eyes as he willed the shards to release their payloads.

There was a series of explosions, causing the balcony, the bridge-way, and the building itself to collapse. The four shards of *Carsomyr* sped back through the dust and rubble to interlock with their kin, assembling the full blade before the general.

They were useful things, explosions.

"I will err on the side of caution," Esteem called out, "and assume that you were not killed

by the blast. Well, my good enemy, I'm standing right here. Come out and kill me if you can."

A dozen bright azure bolts of energy spiralled out of the dust towards him, and Esteem disassembled his blade and intercepted all of them with *Carsomyr's* shards.

Then, he cast a complex spell, focusing on a point next to what he calculated as the origin of the missiles. The world around him shifted, and Esteem blitzed through the space between his original position and the point of his spell, a blur of motion. The dust parted as he tore through it with uncanny alacrity. It took him a tenth of a second to cross the distance and land next to his unicorn opponent.

Both of their blades were disassembled in the air behind Esteem, but the General was trained in hoof-to-hoof combat. As he called *Carsomyr* through the air, he struck his enemy in the chest with a foreleg, then swept his other foreleg under him and flipped his opponent to the ground.

Carsomyr assembled in the air next to him, and he brought it downward viciously to slay the other unicorn.

His strike was blocked, however, by another unicorn blade, a glowing shaft of amethyst light.

Esteem immediately drew *Carsomyr* back to deflect an incoming blow from the azure blade, then parried a jab from the amethyst one. He shattered *Carsomyr* for a diversion, then blitzed back to his original position to face his two opponents. Why did everything always have to get so *complicated*?

"You too?" he said to the white mare who had joined their little duel. His blade shards tessellated into the full weapon in front of him as he regarded the two unicorns. "I suppose you two have as good a reason as any to want to me dead." Esteem smiled.

He blitzed in and began to duel the two unicorns. They were good with magic, but their bladecasting was poor, and Esteem could easily hold them both at bay with his lightning-fast strikes. He stood almost motionless between the two unicorns as *Carsomyr* whipped back and forth.

"This is just embarrassing, you two. Surely you have more than *this*?"

The mare backed up a step and her horn flashed. A lightning bolt arced between them, but Esteem was ready for it. He blitzed a short distance backwards and caught the electric spell on his blade, sending it towards the stallion.

The stallion erected a shield in time, and Esteem broke a point-shard off of *Carsomyr*

and buried it into the ground between the two ponies. He blitzed backward again, landing several dozen feet away from the couple, then willed the shard to explode.

Dirt and shattered cobblestones were thrown upward by the blast. Each of the unicorns rolled out of the way in time to avoid most of the damage, but Esteem used his telekinesis to tear a wall off of a nearby store and throw it at the stallion. At the same time, he shattered a nearby window and tossed the glistening shards of glass at the mare. Before the projectiles reached their targets, Esteem used his mobility spell to blur across the distance between himself and the stallion, whom he considered to be the weaker opponent.

Esteem should have had him. The stallion had to use all of his concentration to shield himself from the storefront, and his wife was distracted by the storm of glass. Esteem raised his blade, overjoyed that he was *finally* getting to kill the irritating stallion.

The white mare appeared out of nowhere in the air before him, wielding her blade, and blocked Esteem's swing yet again. The General gritted his teeth in frustration and pushed *Carsomyr* against the mare's blade.

"Run, Midnight!" she shouted. "We can't take him. I'll cover you."

The azure unicorn got to his feet and looked at the two of them. "As soon as he gets to be too much, you get out, okay? No matter *where* I am, you run."

"I know, dear."

"I love you."

"I love you too."

Esteem watched with frustration as the azure unicorn took off down the street. He could chase the unicorn, but where would that get him? Midnight was far from defenseless, and he still had to deal with the stallion's wife.

He looked at her over their clashing blades and let his face break into a wide smile. "She looked just like you, Starlight."

"You son of a *bitch*."

"She screamed for Celestia. *Over and over* again. It wasn't until I was holding her down that she called out for *you*."

Starlight screamed incoherently and lashed out with a series of furiously powerful blows. Esteem blocked them all with ease. He knew that he wasn't going to kill her, not tonight, but that

didn't mean he couldn't have a little fun.

"You know, Starlight, you have a certain determination that I admire. I should think you would make a good wife."

Starlight looked appalled. "Not on an empty sky, General."

"I didn't mean *now*, Starlight, you're far too old for *me*. Twilight was closer to my age, but she lacked your spirit. She was a snivelling coward. Still, our children would have been powerful indeed..."

Starlight spat. "One of these days, Esteem, I'm going to kill you. I don't care if I have to take Canterlot apart brick by brick, I will *hunt you down*. There will be no place you can go where you will be safe from me, do you understand?. I will unmake this world to destroy the bastard who took my daughter away." With that, she vanished.

Esteem let out a long sigh. Teleportation was perhaps the most irritatingly powerful ability he'd ever encountered. Still, he'd sent the loyalists running; that was something at least.



Queen Terra was beautiful even by alicorn standards.

Her coat was the vibrant green of grass in springtime, her mane a voluminous mass of sunshine yellow ether. It flowed around her head and neck, radiating outward with a ferocious intensity. Her eyes were a deep, rich brown that seemed to drink in every sight around her with a child-like eagerness. The crown sitting atop her head was made of vines and blossoms, and as Celestia watched the multicolored flowers would open and close, growing before her very eyes.

Terra had a certain *life* about her that Titan lacked. While the King radiated a sense of unshakable stability, Terra was always in motion, always letting something new capture her attentions. When the Queen made some new discovery or found a novel way to entertain herself, she would smile, and the sun itself might look upon her with envy for the way she shone. Or perhaps that was just Celestia.

Had Celestia ever been so beautiful? Certainly *now* she could not compare to the Queen

of the world, but what about when she had been a goddess herself? She doubted she had ever matched Terra's radiance, her charisma, her natural force of personality.

She was mortal— a pony with no magic to speak of, no wings, and no horn. Celestia had believed that she was humble and equine enough to admit that all ponies were equal, that power did not make the pony. That she was no less herself without her magic. The truth was that she hadn't been anything less than the most powerful and arguably the most beautiful pony in Equestria in over a thousand years. Now, she was the weakest, the only mundane pony in existence. She was empty, and the sun obeyed another.

Terra saw Celestia, and her face broke into her magnificent, infectious smile. To a pony who had never met her, it would be beautiful and heartwarming. To Celestia, it was chilling. She knew what made her mother happy.

"Hey, Sunshine."

"Hi mom."

Terra crossed the room suddenly and stopped inches away from her daughter. "Don't call me that, Sunshine." Her mane stretched out licked Celestia's face warmly.

"Don't call me Sunshine."

Terra raised an eyebrow. "And why not?"

"It's not my sun anymore, now is it?"

The strands of Terra's mane pushed against Celestia's face, squeezing into her nostrils and pressing up against her chin. "I suppose you're right," the Queen admitted.

"So you got bored and longed for my conversational skills?"

Terra laughed and licked her lips. "Not entirely, Celestia. You always want to talk about the same old boring things." She walked over to the ancient stone table that sat in the center of the room. "No, I'm just exhausted, you see. King Titan has me making as many puppets as I physically can— which is more than you might expect. It keeps the army in numbers and me weak. Can't have his lady wife try to kill him again, now can he?"

Celestia dropped all pretense. "You despise him, Terra."

Again, Terra laughed, playing with her voice the most beautiful instrument that Celestia had ever heard. That any pony *could* hear. "Of course I despise him, Celestia. He's the only thing more powerful than I am. And for that reason I will never, *ever* be able to escape him."

“You tried before.”

Terra’s face darkened. “I did, yes. And I was cast beneath my own firmament for over a thousand years by my daughters, if you recall. But only after my dear husband brought me to the brink of destruction.”

“I could help you. Together, we could-”

Celestia suddenly felt herself bite down on her tongue in the middle of her sentence as Terra’s magic violently forced her mouth shut.

Terra examined the objects on table before her, rearranging them to her desired order. “Stop being such a child.”

Her magical grip was released, and Celestia fought to speak past her bleeding tongue. “I’m older than you, now, mother.”

“But you aren’t older than him,” Terra answered. “Not all of us together are older than him. Even if we were...”

She levitated a dull metal implement from off of the table beside her. She examined it, smiling, then brought the pointed tool to hover in front of her daughter.

Celestia tried to draw away. “No...”

“He *knows* things, Celestia. He is *three thousand* years old. You can’t imagine the things he is capable of. He can break his mind into pieces that think for themselves. He can make you do whatever he wills just by looking into your eyes. He breaks all the rules, Celestia. You think that any of us could fight the pony who holds himself above trivial things like reality and truth? I tried, and he swatted me down like an insect.”

Terra smiled her beautiful smile again, and Celestia fought against her restraints. The Queen spoke.

“I didn’t come here to have this conversation with you again, Sunshine. This is a leisure visit. I came here for *pleasure*.”

Celestia screamed. “*Empty sky*, Terra! I’m your *daughter!*”

Terra selected another implement. “Do you think that means anything to an alicorn?” she said quietly. The wicked tool descended.

Celestia split her mind two ways as her mother proceeded. She had one mind take the body; it would experience all of her pain. It would scream, and beg, and ask her mother for forgiveness, because Celestia, like any pony, had a breaking point. It would slowly, ever so slowly, go insane, and when that happened Celestia would have to break her mind again, and again after that.

Soon there wouldn't be anything left of her. Her solution was only a temporary one; there was no way she could truly stop herself from experiencing Terra's torture.

"I'd much rather be doing this to Luna, you know. She's the one who betrayed *me*. But you're the one who back-stabbed your dear father, so you're the one he gives me to play with. He's so considerate, wouldn't you agree?"

By now the first Celestia was screaming, and in doing so she was giving Terra what she wanted. The second Celestia was busy observing.

She took note of every expression that crossed Terra's face. Every spasm that wracked her body, every twitch and jerk. She interpreted everything that Terra had said earlier, and everything she was saying now. She had been doing this for over a month. Soon she would put her observations to use.

Terra watched her writhing with a look of satisfaction. "Just be glad that Titan doesn't have the time to do this himself. He could create for you a thousand new ways to experience torment. In a way, I envy you. When I need punishing, there is no pony but him to carry it out."

The Queen turned and walked to where Celestia had been tied to the wall. She leaned in to whisper in Celestia's ear, and her voice was perfectly steady and sane.

"When I met him for the first time," she said softly, "his name was Order. And he was good. Like you were. Like I was." With that, she turned back to the table and selected another tool.

Celestia stared on in utter shock and disbelief. Was Terra telling her the truth? She had assumed that Titan had driven Terra insane, that a thousand years with the King of the world had broken Terra's mind. If what Terra said was true, it confirmed her theory. It also made Terra more deserving of pity than of hate.

Her first mind disagreed.

"You got to be Queen of the world for so long, Celestia. Beautiful and loved at the top of the paradise you created. Me? I used to be like that, too. I used to *sing*, and not a single soul could help but love me when I did. Not even Titan, though he loved how I was loved rather than love me."

Terra seemed as if she couldn't decide between two particularly promising looking tools, so she settled for both of them. Dimly, Celestia's second mind heard her first mind screaming.

"We used to be so *good*." Terra ran her mane along Celestia's cheek. "And look at us now."



"Rainbow Dash?"

The sound of Twilight's voice caused an immediate feeling of fear to surge through Dash's body, and she froze. She regained her composure a moment later. "Uh, yeah?" She focused on making her bed, facing away from the unicorn standing in the doorway.

"I brought you a map of your route to the rendezvous. Pinkie Pie says she has it memorized, but she can be a little unpredictable." Twilight gave an extremely weak laugh.

Dash continued to make her bed, being as slow about it as she could. "Thanks."

"Do you want to talk, Dash?"

"Maybe later."

"Alright. I'll just leave this here."

With that, Twilight left.

As soon as the door was closed, Dash sunk to the floor beside her bed and began to shiver. *It wasn't Twilight*, she thought. *It was Nihilus. Nihilus is dead.*

But that didn't change the fact that the Insanity had conditioned Dash to immediately answer at the sound of Twilight's voice. To feel fear at the very sight of her. To want to obey her every command.

Now, Rainbow Dash was expected to act normally around the unicorn. She couldn't even act normally around Fluttershy, and they had been living together for almost a month. Dash walked over to the doorway and picked the map up off the ground, then began to don her armor. She had the feeling it was going to be a long day.



“I know I *can*,” Twilight was saying as they moved through the dark passageways of the labyrinth, “I’m just not going to.” The cool violet light of her horn illuminated the stone hallway before them.

“Thou hast unthinkable power, Twilight Sparkle. If thou were to fight-”

Twilight’s voice became hard. “I am *not* going to hurt other ponies.”

“Come now Twilight.” Rarity’s lilting tones echoed through the stone corridor. “It is isn’t as though the puppets are *real* ponies.”

“I know, Rarity. I just can’t.”

“Thou *must* understand, Twilight Sparkle, if thou-”

Nihilus tossed Luna through the building as though she were nothing more than a toy. The power was exhilarating. She looked around at the screaming townspories, and lamented the fact that destroying buildings was the only collateral damage she was allowed to cause.

“*I can’t, okay!*” The ponies around her drew back in shock, and Twilight herself was surprised at the volume of her words. “It isn’t like you always choose the hard path either, Princess. A thousand years ago you could have killed your father and didn’t.”

“And *this* is the result, Twilight!” Luna’s voice boomed through the labyrinth. “Do you think I do not wish I had slain them both when I had the chance? I wish it more than thou canst possibly imagine.”

“I’ll stay back and help plan. I’ll break the barriers for you. I’ll use the Elements of Harmony. I’ll enchant everypony’s armor. I just can’t fight, Princess. I’m sorry.”

“So be it,” Luna said stiffly.

After that, a silence fell over the group as they proceed through the labyrinth. Only once did they have to cross a chasm, Twilight blinking to the other side while Luna carried Rarity and Coconut over.

They had decided to take the former captain with them. She already knew more than they could afford to let their enemies know, thanks to Twilight, and Luna had decided that she should remain under the Princess's watchful eye until they could pass her off to the inner city loyalists. Twilight thought it a shame that they had to treat Coconut like an enemy. The mare seemed like a good pony, even if she *did* think Twilight was their race's saviour.

When they arrived at the exit, Twilight disguised them by changing their mane and coat colors. The process would have gone quickly, save for the fact that Rarity spent ten minutes fussing about the color of her mane. Luna knew a much more complex version of the spell, and disguised herself on her own on account of the fact that Twilight couldn't hide her horn and wings. Luna opted to make herself a banana yellow unicorn with a bubblegum pink mane.

"What?" she said in response to Rarity's grimace.

"It's just, um, well..."

"We are disguising ourselves, are we not? I look nothing like Princess Luna! Disguise successful."

Twilight was just happy Rainbow Dash wasn't around. She didn't want Dash to see her using the spell.

Thankfully, the circular metal disc that led to the city opened up in the middle of a warehouse, and no pony was around.

"So Twilight," Coconut said to her as Rarity removed her blademaster's robe and stowed it in Twilight's null-space. Luna's spell disguised both the Princess's robe and her armor.

"Yes, Coconut?"

"Don't you find it a little odd that Celestia taught you both the layout of the labyrinth *and* the basics of warfare?"

"Celestia didn't teach me either of those things. I learned them on my own." Or at least, she had thought she did. Except Celestia had been the one to give her the first maze book, and the one to choose every book on Twilight's first bookshelf.

Was it possible that Princess Celestia had intentionally given Twilight the tools she would need to coordinate a rebellion beneath Canterlot? Had Twilight been manipulated into being another one of Celestia's tools? Was that the Princess's intent from the beginning? She had to admit to herself that it was too perfect a coincidence.

It hurt to think that Celestia, the pony who had been like a second mother to Twilight,

had used her. Twilight didn't believe that she was just a tool to the Princess. Celestia had loved her.

"Then why didn't she come to rescue us, kiddo?"

Twilight stopped dead in her tracks. The voice had come from the back of her mind.

Coconut gave her a concerned look. "Did I say something wrong?"

"N-no," Twilight managed. "It's nothing. Lets just keep going." It had been nothing. Twilight was just stressed and hearing things.

The weather outside was overcast and dreary, and the streets were mostly empty save for a few puppets. The minions stood perfectly still, their soulless glares tracking the party as the progressed into Bolten Square, which was bisected by the colossal white wall that was Emphyrean's barrier.

There, they waited, trying to look inconspicuous. It didn't take long before Twilight spotted an incandescent pink flare soaring through the sky.

Luna turned to the three ponies. "*Act!*" she shouted. Her orders were followed.

Twilight retrieved Rarity's robe from null-space and tossed it to the unicorn. The air around Luna shimmered, and the Princess launched herself into the air as she dropped her disguise. Twilight dropped their own disguises, then turned to face the barrier.

"Keep your distance," she said to Coconut and Rarity. "This could be dangerous, and I need to concentrate." She turned to see that Rarity already had her blade at the ready, and was facing a group of approaching puppets.

Before Rarity could engage them, Luna landed amongst the puppets and obliterated them with several enthusiastic hacks of her corrosive blade. "Right," Twilight said to herself. "I guess you two have that covered." She turned to the looming barrier. "I'll start... my... thing."

Twilight extended her magical senses and began to probe the construct. She concentrated, losing herself in the pattern of its magic and becoming blind to the outside world. She fell into the magic, forgetting about Rainbow Dash, or fighting, or the voice she had heard. She examined Emphyrean's barrier.

The barrier was a wonder: a magical construct that required power on a massive scale. Twilight imagined it took Emphyrean all his magic to sustain it, if he was indeed the alicorn sustaining the barrier. What was more, the spell that constituted the barrier was incredibly complex.

It was a system, and Twilight Sparkle had to break it. In theory, a perfect magical system was impossible; every spell had weak points. *Just like physical matter*, Twilight thought, examining the barrier.

A typical enchantment was like a glass for drinking out of: functional, but also easily breakable. Even a small effort could cause the glass to shatter. This made sense, as an enchanter rarely had to take into account another unicorn deliberately attempting to undo their work.

The barrier was different. Naturally, it had been designed to withstand any unicorn meddling. Rather than being made of glass, it was made of steel; the energy required to change or destroy it would have to far exceed the energy spent to create it.

Twilight didn't have that kind of energy. No pony did. Simply smashing the barrier to pieces was not an option. *Which means I'm going to have to alter the system*, Twilight thought. She felt a small surge of excitement; she was about to start playing with the most powerful spell that had ever existed.

Twilight examined the barrier and determined it was not a conjuration. This much she had already guessed; the very idea was preposterous, and would take a hundred times the energy the barrier did in its current state.

Instead it was a massive moment-field. The barrier would detect when an object moved into its vicinity and then apply an opposing force the same way a physical object might. This way energy was only spent keeping objects or ponies away when it needed to.

Woven within the moment-field was a magical damping field to prevent unicorns from affecting anything through the barrier with their own magic. Nihilus had used a similar field on the cages in her audaciously preposterous flying castle.

The thought of Nihilus didn't bother Twilight Sparkle. She was working.

The moment-field was interwoven with the damping field so that it could be sensed but not affected by unicorn magic. The damping field would have to be destroyed first.

Except the damping field was attached to a kind of web that Twilight had never seen before. It was as though billions of interconnected nodes flowed and pulsed throughout the barrier, directing the energy that constituted the magical construct.

It was with great appreciation that Twilight recognized the web as a collective spell: an enchantment tethered to the other fields.

It meant that Twilight would not be able to affect the barrier in a local fashion. Any energy, any of her magic that was directed at one section of the barrier would immediately be redistributed to the *entire* thing. She couldn't strike it with a hammer; she had to use a paddle.

A collective spell could be destroyed, but whoever created the barrier had also spun an entropy scope to guard the barrier; the scope would intercept any magic Twilight sent at it and split and spread it into harmless energy. Finally, the entropy scope was woven back into the collective spell and protected by a reflex mirror: a spell designed to take her spells' energies and turn them against one another. To top it all off, each defense was protected by the basic suite of spells that an enchanter would normally use to make their enchantments more durable.

Twilight took the barrier in, and a tear rolled down her cheek.

It wasn't a tear of sadness, or a tear of despair. Truthfully, Twilight still had no idea if she was capable of breaking the system. Rather, the emotion that finally broke her stony, logical composure was pure wonder; it was the same thing she had felt the first time she watched Princess Celestia raise the sun.

The barrier was a work of art. A creation of pure genius. Its architect had woven five of the most complex spells Twilight had ever seen together; a feat that had required the balancing of dozens of variables. The architect had to have been able to think in at least five dimensions, had to have had both unbelievable power and total mastery over that power, and had to possess incredible acumen in every aspect of magic Twilight could imagine. They had not only pulled it off, but they had done so seamlessly and elegantly, using the absolute minimum amount of energy possible. Twilight was looking at a wonder of the world, a system as perfect as it could possibly be. A system that was almost infinitely complex but at the same time totally predictable.

It was beyond the chaos of ponykind. Twilight felt terrible for having to destroy it. She tried to fathom what kind of a mind could create such a thing, and decided that the only possible answer was King Titan. It was easy to see why he sought a natural order to all things.

Twilight frowned as she looked upon the barrier again. The moment-field and the damping field were woven together as a block of pure steel. The collective spell meant that she was swinging at them with a pizza paddle instead of a hammer. The reflex mirror meant that the block would swing back and intercept its paddle with its own hammer. If she got past the reflex mirror, the entropy scope would cause her paddle to burst into flames and be reduced to ashes.

The laws of magic state that no system can be perfect, she thought.

After mazes she had done block puzzles: cute little things that helped train a unicorn for polycasting. Most unicorns began polycasting in their twenties. Twilight had started when she was eleven.

The block puzzles were always simple, but never easy. Twilight had needed to push blocks around an enclosed area until she could move a specific block, usually colored red, through to the other side of the enclosure and out an exit hole. The area would normally be clogged by multitudes of other blocks, to the point where there was typically only one solution.

Before a unicorn was ready to polycast, they had to be able to solve the puzzles using the minimum amount of moves possible. This meant that they would have to work *backwards*, determining which block would need to be moved first so as to set off a chain of moves that would bring them victory in the most efficient way possible.

Twilight needed to apply the same strategy here, she reasoned. She needed to turn her paddle back into a hammer. That wouldn't be enough, however. She needed a way to break the block of steel with just a hammer. The force she could deliver might be constant, but the *requisite* force that *would* break the barrier?

A stroke of genius. A spark.

Twilight began to spell-craft, losing herself in the blissful rationality of the process. First, she prepared a spell to peel away the lesser protections surrounding each of the five major obstacles. They were designed to eat any meddlesome spells, so she would give them a poison apple, a spell that they would eat. Her spell would turn them against one another, though, causing the lesser enchantments to eat each other as well.

The lesser enchantments were still cuffed to the collective, however. Twilight couldn't take the system apart piece by piece; she would have to hit it with a series of spells all at once. She mentally readied a spell to uncuff the reflex mirror from the whole, then tied it with a meta-spell to another spell that would provoke the entropy scope.

The entropy scope would try to lash out at Twilight's spell, but when it did Twilight would redirect the reflex mirror with another spell so as to catch and deflect the entropy scope's magical assault. The two would effectively cancel one another out, the entropy scope breaking its own power into useless raw energy. For it to work, Twilight would have to hit the cuffle between the collective and the entropy scope with another spell at the same time as she redirected the reflex mirror. She tied those two spells together with a meta-spell, too.

She was already managing more spells than she would normally have dared attempt to hold in her mind, let alone cast, under normal conditions. She tried to formulate her penultimate spell—the one that was aimed at the collective enchantment, and thus by far the most complex spell she would use—but she failed. She couldn't manage to hold that many ideas in her mind at once. That she had gotten even this far was astounding, but she wasn't going to be able to break the barrier.

"Let me help," said a voice.

Twilight was beyond even the most powerful emotions, floating in a world of logical thought. The voice did not startle her.

"You aren't real," she answered it. *"You were destroyed completely. There were no traces of the Sliver on me when I woke up. I must be insane."*

"I am not Nihilus, and we aren't insane. You know what this is. You know you can use it."

Twilight pondered her own words for a moment. Did she know? It seemed unlikely that she would lie to herself.

"A fracture," she said. *"A piece of my mind split from the whole. How could I split my mind into two parts? Why would anyone do that?"*

"Because," her own thoughts answered her. *"We knew we were changing. We knew that spending so much time with her thoughts would turn us into a monster, too. When we looked through her eyes and watched her do the things she did, we wanted something. Do you remember what it was?"*

"I wanted to be free. Now get out of here."

"We wanted her to die. We wished that we could show her how those spells she was learning were really meant to be cast. Do you remember one of the last things you said to her?"

Twilight tried to ignore the voice, but she couldn't. It was a part of her.

"We told her that she never deserved a moment of happiness, you and I. She begged us for her life, and we told just what we thought of her. And you know what else? It felt good."

A cold feeling crept along the back of Twilight's neck. She wanted to detect some hint of internal manipulation coming from the barrier. She wanted to call the voice a liar. *"A pony can't split their mind into parts. It's impossible."*

"I agree. Funny how we're both still here."

"I don't want to be like you."

"So don't be. I'm not a crazy axe murderer who wants to burn this city to the ground. I'm not out to laugh maniacally as I murder all our enemies. I don't want a silly flying castle. I'm not her. You aren't her. We aren't her. I'm just a little different."

Twilight was skeptical. *“Different how?”*

“For one, I’d exercise a little less modesty. We’re the only pony who can argue with themselves while juggling a suite of meta-spells designed to break the King of the world’s unbreakable shield. I think I have all our pride. Also, you’re being absurdly pacifistic. You don’t want to fight the soulless constructs trying to hurt your friends. What are you so afraid of?”

Twilight knew the other part of her already knew. *“Becoming like her.”*

“You’re smarter than that. Nihilus was almost our exact opposite! You can’t just shut away every part of yourself that reminds you of her! Then you’re only half of Twilight Sparkle. Then you’re broken.”

Twilight had to admit that she was making a lot of sense. The weight of the spells was straining her to her limit. *“So what do you suggest?”*

“We can be strong without being evil. We can protect the ponies we love without torturing the ponies we hate. Our friends seem to manage it quite nicely.”

Twilight reached into her mind, exploring the depths of her consciousness to find the source of the voice. Her voice. *This is so weird, she thought. I’m in way over my head.*

Still, she delved deeper, until she found the piece of herself that had split from the whole. She didn’t even know if splitting one’s consciousness was a magical feat or not. She wondered briefly if she was well and truly insane.

She touched her other self, then took the fragment of her consciousness into the whole. It felt... *right*. As though she had been missing that part of herself since she awoke in Ponyville. She looked again at the barrier, then divided herself once more. Again, it felt natural, as though she was stepping out of horseshoes that were a size too small. Suddenly there were two Twilight Sparkles, neither of them the true Twilight and neither of them a false one. Rather, there was a Twilight and a Sparkle.

The first Twilight held in her mind all of the spells that they had formulated thus far. The second continued the work, adding the remaining two spells, the first of which was monstrously complex and the second of which was brutishly simple. Her two minds held the spells in their thoughts.

“Ready, Twilight?”

“Ready, Sparkle.”

To an ordinary unicorn, what followed might have seemed like an overly complex math

problem; a series of precise allotments of magical energies into their respective formulae. Boring. To Twilight and Sparkle, it was a mix between a heist and a series of coordinated explosions aimed at bringing down the monument of the gods. They followed their own spells as they cast them, letting themselves get absorbed by the energies they were manipulating. If Twilight failed, her mind would probably break. Sparkle reminded her that it might be broken already.

Twilight's spell snuck into the lesser enchantments, vicious little dogs designed to eat incoming magic. They found Twilight's spell and devoured it just as Sparkle severed their cuffle to the whole. The dogs turned on each other, and Twilight and Sparkle immediately moved to their next objective, cascading downwards on a torrent of magical power.

Sparkle blew through the cuffle connecting the reflex mirror to the rest of the system as Twilight handled the more delicate spell to draw the entropy scope's attentions. Both succeeded, and the mirror and scope began to eat away at each other as Twilight and Sparkle rocketed ever downward at what felt like a million miles a second.

It was time for their masterstroke, their ace in the hole. Sparkle readied all of their remaining power into a battering ram of destructive force, and Twilight wove the most complex spell that she— they— had ever cast.

Twilight hit the collective enchantment with a veritable super-spell. She struck at the very nature of the spell, altering its purpose by only a small amount as she stiffened one of the bonds between the nodes that comprised it. The collective spell recognized the new bond as the norm, and every other bond as an anomaly. It quickly worked to correct the fault, causing every bond in the entire collective to change according to Twilight's specifications.

The collective spell now worked against its original purpose— it would take magical forces and spread them throughout the barrier as intended, but it would not mitigate them over its entire surface area. Instead it would perform the opposite function, actually delivering the entire effect of one blow to every single point on the barrier.

Twilight couldn't break a solid block of steel with a hammer. So she had made the steel a glass, and placed a chisel beneath her hammer. The barrier was still incredibly large; but it was not without its points of cleavage.

In the instant of time that Twilight gave her, Sparkle gleefully pounded on the chisel as hard as she could. Everything they had left, every scrap of magical power, was thrown onto the tiniest point that she could manage.

Her two minds had accomplished their tasks, so they came together into a whole again. *This* was Twilight's purpose, she thought. Not killing or violence or destruction, but the manipulation of forces beyond what most ponies could comprehend. How could her friends

know that what she had done was just as straining and dangerous as mortal combat?

Twilight was brought out of her thoughts and back into the real world with a shock. She felt dizzy and disoriented, and resisted the urge to vomit as she fell to the ground. She had used far too much power, far too much mental discipline, and— what else had she done? She'd split her consciousness into two Twilights; or rather, a Twilight and a Sparkle. She hadn't known such a thing was possible.

She was dimly aware of Coconut, the earthpony who had sworn to serve Twilight the night before, running to her side and supporting her head. Darkness enclosed her field of vision, and she fought it, desperately trying to stay conscious. Coconut was saying something, smiling at her in amazement, but Twilight couldn't hear her.

Then she watched as Coconut looked up in shock at something outside of Twilight's line of sight. Coconut jumped in front of Twilight, and a moment later Twilight felt a wet warmth splash across her face. She watched Coconut fall limply to the ground, a hole in her neck, and realization struck her just as she slipped into unconsciousness.

Twilight had never told Rarity about her father.



Rarity watched as Coconut Crunch collapsed to the ground, blood spraying everywhere. She looked down, at the tiny, chevron-shaped piece of enchanted platinum-iridium that had landed right before her hooves. It was the point-shard of a blade, one that Rarity immediately recognized.

It was impossible. That was all Rarity could think— that there was no way this could be happening. It had been over ten years since she and Sweetie Belle had been taken away and given to a better home. Even with the war going on, Rarity had almost entirely forgotten about... *him*.

Her eyes followed the point-shard as it was dragged across the cobblestones, making a tiny scraping noise and leaving a trail of Coconut's blood. It reached the hooves of another unicorn, then was lifted into the air to affix itself to its proper place on the end a wicked length of metal. Rarity looked beyond the blade she knew to be *Carsomyr*, at the pure white stallion wrapped in a silky black robe. A blood red mane of cascading spikes flowed around his head, framing the two pale blue eyes that Rarity herself had inherited. Esteem smiled.

“I hope you aren’t counting on your alicorn to save you anytime soon,” he said. “I brought my own, you see.”

He blurred through the space between them, appearing beside her suddenly. It was all Rarity could do to look at him in horror, immobilized by a primal terror that had been programmed into her since she was filly. She noticed that there were streaks and spatters of red patterned onto his blademastering robe, difficult to see against the dark black of the fabric. He raised his blade and delicately brushed away a strand of her mane to look into her eyes, then smiled wolfishly.

“My little girl,” said her father. “All grown up.”



It was in the air, after cleaving a pegasus puppet in two, that Luna spotted her father hovering not fifty feet away from her.

It wasn't actually King Titan, of course. Luna would have felt the ancient alicorn's presence almost immediately had he come anywhere near Canterlot. Still, the pony Luna was looking at was undoubtedly her father in some form or another.

It looked very much like a pegasus puppet, with a matte black coat and black wings. This pony's mane was made Titan's flowing white ether, though, and its eyes were a burning white. Upon its flanks burned a ghostly white circle, and another conflux of white energy formed a phantom horn atop its head. It was average sized, and thus much smaller than Titan, but still close to Luna's height.

Luna was more than a little shocked at his appearance, but she did not let the emotion show on her face. She had no idea how strong Titan was in his demi-form, but she had no option other than fighting him. Rarity would have to protect Twilight Sparkle on her own. They could not let the Elements come to harm.

Titan brought himself through the air until he was within reasonable speaking distance of his daughter. “Surrender, Luna,” he said in his unnaturally resonant voice. “Even with me in this fragile form you cannot hope to defeat me. You will wed Empyrean.”

“Never.”

“I see.” Titan looked down to the streets of inner Canterlot. Most of the buildings had

taken extensive damage, and several bridge-ways had collapsed. Flashes of light could be seen where loyalists battled puppets. It appeared as though there was some heavy fighting going on.

“Ponykind,” Titan said with contempt. “I grow tired of their useless attempts to resist. They have forgotten the power of their King. I do not hold it against them, of course. They are a race of beings forever struggling through infancy. I do not wish to harm them, Luna, but they are lost, and they cannot show themselves the way. Direct intervention is necessary.”

“Thou dost not deserve the right to rule them, Titan.”

Titan looked up at her with his emotionless eyes. “And you do?”

Luna swallowed. “No,” she said. “I do not.”

“Interesting.” Titan once again looked down at the chaos of the conflict beneath them. “Ponykind,” he said once again. “They are insignificant specks beneath our hooves, my daughter. Faded reflections of the power and beauty of the alicorn. They need to be reminded of this. And so do you.”

Titan cast his blade, a plain, polished length of pure black. Luna remembered Terra having told her that its name was *Singularity*. She cast *Nadir*. “It has been some time,” Titan mused, “since I have had reason to show off. Let us hope that I am still capable of the grandiose performance that ponykind has come to expect from us. Come.” With that, Titan dove downward towards inner Canterlot.

Luna despised doing as she was told, but what else could she do? Hang defiantly in the air as Titan slaughtered the loyalists below? She dove, following the King.

Titan and Luna landed in the middle of an urban battlefield. Unicorns and puppets were taking shots at each other from across a wide square, and their spells were obliterating the buildings around them. At the center of the square was a mostly intact fountain. When Titan and Luna struck the cobblestones, several of the surrounding ponies stopped to look at them. Some, locked in combat, did not.

That changed when a sphere of concussive force spread outward from the King, knocking every puppet and pony except Luna to the ground and clearing away any debris. Everypony in the square turned to look at Titan and Luna as they faced one another.

Titan spoke. “Bow before your king.”

To the immense credit of the loyalists present, none of them did. They stood looking from Titan to Luna, silent. Titan swept his gaze back and forth across the square, taking in their defiance. “There is a doctrine in the Natural Order. It states that every creature alive owes me its

life, its will, and everything it possesses.”

Luna gritted her teeth. “They owe thee *nothing*, Titan!”

“You are correct, Luna.” Luna tilted her head in confusion, and a murmur went through the loyalists. Titan looked upon them with no trace of expression. “You cannot owe what you do not possess. Have never possessed.” Then his face twisted into a snarl. “You are *mine*.”

Suddenly Titan had crossed the space in between himself and Luna, and he swung at her with *Singularity*. The attack came out of nowhere, and Luna barely managed to block it with her own blade. The force of the blow threw her backwards, and she rolled, coming to her hooves again and skidding across the cobblestones.

When she righted herself, Titan had spun, crossed the square, and sliced a loyalist unicorn into two pieces with a single swing of his blade. He looked almost bored as he stabbed an earthpony in the chest while simultaneously deflecting several chunks of thrown rubble with his magic.

The fighting had resumed, and the loyalists in the square were hopelessly outmatched facing the King and his puppets. What was more, the puppets were acting with a sudden cohesion that they usually lacked, as though Titan’s presence alone made them more intelligent. Which, Luna supposed, was entirely possible. She truly had no idea what kind of magic her father was capable of.

Luna split herself into a swarm of bats and threw herself towards the King. As she sped through the air, she passed over two unicorn puppets, tearing them apart with her thousands of tiny fangs. She reached Titan just as he raised *Singularity* to strike down another pony. Luna reformed in front of Titan’s target, a unicorn, and blocked Titan’s swing with *Nadir*. She tried to stab him.

Titan parried lazily even as he tore the wall away from a nearby building, breaking it into splinters before casting them at his daughter. The unicorn behind Luna threw up a shield spell to block the splinters as Luna continued to duel the King.

She called the powers of winter, and the ground beneath her frosted over as she threw several shards of ice at the King. At the same time, she split *Nadir* into a dozen magic missiles and cast them through the air at the puppets across the square.

Titan shattered the icicles with several contemptuous sweeps of *Singularity*, then used his own shield spell to block the fragments of wood that the rescued unicorn had decided to throw at him. He attacked her again, and Luna beat her wings and flipped over Titan’s swing even as she reformed *Nadir*.

Her blade had killed six puppets when she split it into missiles, opening the way for several loyalists to escape. Instead they stayed, aiding their comrades in fighting the other puppets.

Titan and Luna exchanged a series of lightning-fast blows as they dueled their way across the square. It was clear that the King was a much better bladecaster than she, and Luna was pushed back. The King simply walked towards her, staring dispassionately at the Princess as *Singularity* beat aside every single one of her blows.

Their allegiances had been made abundantly clear, and occasionally a puppet or a pony would aim a spell at the Princess or the King. Titan easily deflected or shielded any incoming magical attacks, but Luna struggled to keep pace.

Luna dodged a swing too slowly, and *Singularity* opened a deep gash along her back, just barely missing her wings. Then, Titan struck her with a hammer blow of telekinesis, knocking her backwards and into the fountain that occupied the center of the square. He struck her with his mind once again, and the stone fountain shattered, the blow sending Luna sprawling amongst the rubble.

Titan was not trying to kill Luna. He turned away from her, flapped his wings, and crossed the square once again to begin killing ponies.

Pain made its presence known in every part of Luna's body, but she did not let it deter her. She stood up and followed the King. Again, he raised his blade to strike down a loyalist, this one an earthpony. Again, *Nadir* intercepted his blow.

Titan threw his magical weight behind *Singularity*, pressing downward on Luna's blade. The Princess grunted and threw her weight against *Nadir*. Her blade flared.

"Save him," Titan said, referring to the pony Luna was protecting. "Save him today and he will die tomorrow. Or a week from now. Or in decades. It matters not, Luna. Every pony will die, and I will rule every pony. These truths are immutable. Why fight alongside these mortals when you could rule them as a god?"

Luna met her father's eyes as she concentrated completely on pushing away his blade. "I would rather fight as one of *them*," she managed, "and *die*." She threw Titan back, and noticed that the loyalists had taken out most of Titan's puppets. Many of them were watching her fight the King. "Than turn my back on mine and Celestia's kingdom. Thou art wrong, *Titan*," she spat his name out like a curse. "They do not exist to serve us. We exist to serve them."

"When did you become so lost, child?" Titan swung at her, and Luna once again beat her wings and flipped over the king. She landed, and Titan's blade came down at her from above. She blocked it with *Nadir*, but the force of the blow was jarring. While Titan tossed several

chunks of solid stone at her while she was staggered.

A stone struck her, bouncing off her body and threatening to throw her off balance, but she had enough earthpony magic to be fine otherwise. The rest of the stones struck a flimsy unicorn barrier in the air while Luna continued to duel the King.

It was the loyalists. They were helping her.

“Do you truly think that you can accomplish anything here?” Titan walked lazily toward Luna while the princess pushed herself to her limits to keep up with the speed of his blade. “No loss I suffer is permanent. I am eternal and unyielding. If it takes me a century to quell ponykind’s rebellion, then so be it.”

He continued to throw things at her as they dueled. Wood, glass, and stone were stricken out of the air by any loyalists who had the magic to spare. A block of stone caught her in the side once again, however, and Luna was thrown to the ground. Luna struggled to stand as *Nadir* was extinguished. She couldn’t rise in time.

Titan raised *Singularity* to deal her a debilitating wound, but as he brought it down it was blocked in the air by another spell blade. Luna looked up to see a loyalist bladecaster wielding a deep red shaft of light standing above her. The unicorn was wearing a black bladecasting robe, and his face was strained with exertion and defiance.

Luna rolled out from under the clashing blades, but before she could attack Titan herself, another unicorn joined the first and struck the surprised King with a pinpoint burst of force. Titan was thrown backwards into the center of the square.

The mare who had struck the King smiled as Luna got to her hooves. “And here we were under the impression that you were one of the bad guys,” she said. “Long live the Princess, I suppose.”

The bladecaster let out a noncommittal grunt. “More like death to the King.”

Luna looked from one unicorn to the other, trying to make a decision. “Thou,” she finally said to the bladecaster.

He raised an eyebrow at her. “Nice voice.”

Luna ignored the remark. “Twilight Sparkle is unconscious in Bolten Square. Thou *must* retrieveth her and see her to safety.”

“Twilight Sparkle?”

“She is a lavender unicorn.”

“-I know what color she is. You’re telling me she’s alive?”

“Indeed. I cannot save her,” Luna said, looking towards Titan as he picked himself up in the center of the square. The King did not look harmed in the slightest. Luna was approaching her limits. “I am needed here. Please.”

The bladecaster seemed to consider her command for a moment, then sighed. “I suppose I can spare a minute for Twilight Sparkle. The way everypony talks about her around here, you’d think she was the best pony alive.” The bladecaster dismissed his weapon and ran off.

Then she turned to the other unicorn. “Keep thine distance from the King,” she said. She flew at her father once again.

Titan beat his wings and met her in midair, and Luna was thrown to the ground. Before he could have at her with his blade, though, a unicorn tossed a wooden beam at his head. He batted it away with *Singularity*, but another unicorn threw a swarm of glass at him.

Another bubble of concussive force expanded outward from the King, and everypony, as well as the few puppets remaining in the square, was thrown to the ground once more. Luna immediately threw herself to her hooves and exchanged another series of blows with her father. As they fought, Titan spoke. “You fight for them,” he said steadily. “But see how impotent their attempts to harm me really are.”

Titan caused the ground beneath Luna to buckle as she parried a jab, and she was once again thrown onto her back. Her father pinned her. “Ponykind,” he said, “is powerless to stop the likes of us.” He raised his blade.

Luna smiled, and Titan paused. She looked up at the King, past him, far into the air behind him. “We shall see,” she said simply.

Then she used her magic to create her own telekinetic burst, a miniature explosion between the two of them. Luna was thrown backwards against the ground, and several of her bones broke from the impact. Titan was thrown upward, into the air, where Rainbow Dash struck.

It was a bolt of polychrome lightning as thick around as a tree trunk. The entire square was lit up by the intensity of the thunderstrike, and Luna had to shut her eyes. The lightning bolt speared the king directly through the middle, and Rainbow Dash landed beneath him, one foreleg extended for balance as she landed nimbly on the ground.

Then, she shot upward and kicked the King of the world in the face.

They landed apart from each other, with Titan between Luna and Rainbow Dash. Dash looked past the King at Luna. "There's *alicorn* puppets?" she said incredulously.

Luna spat out a mouthful of blood and prepared to stand back up. "Be careful," she managed. Luna did not want to see Dash's temerity get her killed.

With his back turned to Luna, the Princess could only hear what the king was saying. "I am no puppet, girl. Die now."

He charged, swinging *Singularity* horizontally, and Rainbow Dash flipped over the blade as she kicked him in the face once again with her hind legs. She spun to avoid a stab and punched Titan in the chest, then rolled away from another strike.

"You think that your blows can harm me, child?"

"No," Dash said. "But they do a pretty good job of distracting you."

Luna stabbed Titan in the back, and *Nadir* devoured the King's conjured flesh. She tore the blade upward, rending Titan in two, and the King dissipated like any other puppet.

Dash looked at the Princess. "The others were safe, so I figured I'd come help out. Did you see that awesome lightning bolt? It was like-" She caught the look that Luna was giving her and stopped. "Are you alright?"

Luna examined herself. Her flesh had been pulverized in places, making her form seem oddly misshapen. She knew that she was carrying around several broken bones. Other than those things, she was quite fine. "I am, Rainbow Dash."

"Where's Twilight?"

"I sent somepony after her. Hopefully she will be fine."

"And Rarity?"

Luna considered this for a moment. "I am not sure."



Less than a second after he brushed her mane away, Esteem tried to murder Rarity.

His blade snapped back, and then came arcing down towards her head, a silvery blur. Rarity managed to raise *Vorpal* in time to catch her father's blow. *My father*, she thought. She began to hyperventilate. This couldn't be happening.

Esteem regarded the point where their two blades met. "Good," he said. "It seems that Princess Luna has been building upon my lessons."

Rarity felt like she was a filly again. She wanted to run away, to hide in a closet, to jump beneath the covers with her mother.

Except her mother had never been able to protect her. She had attended her father's lessons, every time.

"Y-y-you're," she stammered. "You're-"

"Young?" It was true; her father looked ten years younger than when Rarity had seen him last. He looked as though he was her age. "Yes, Rarity, I *am* quite a bit younger now. My new job comes with excellent benefits. But I don't want to talk about *work*."

He lowered his blade, turned around, and walked a short distance to face inner Canterlot. "We have so much catching up to do!" he called out. "To start, why don't you show me all the things you've learned while you were away and I'll show *you* inner Canterlot!"

Rarity tried to kill him.

It was simple, really; her father was the enemy. She had watched him murder Coconut Crunch in cold blood just moments before. She doubted that she had a hope of defeating him in single combat, so she attacked him when his back was turned.

In a perfect world, Rarity might have been able to capture or imprison her father. Certainly, that would have been preferable to killing him. But the world wasn't perfect. Not anymore.

She shattered *Vorpal* and threw the shards at her father. Before they had crossed half the distance between her and her father, however, every shard was met in the air by a fragment of *Carsomyr*. The blade shards ricocheted off of each other, and Rarity noticed with dismay that her father's blade reformed much faster than her own.

Her father had not turned around. "You want to start with yourself? Alright. Your shatter is quite effective, and certainly has *speed*, but it lacks *precision*, my Rarity. Still, admirable

nonetheless.”

Suddenly he was behind her, moving through the air between them more quickly than Rarity would have thought possible. “Let’s go check out the city, shall we?”

Then he attacked her, and it was all Rarity could to keep herself alive. Her father’s blows came faster than she could track, and she began to use her magical senses to follow his blade rather than her eyes. With every blow he beat Rarity back another step into the city, and they had travelled two blocks before Rarity realized that he wasn’t trying to kill her at all. He could do that any time he pleased.

He forced her back to the edge of a conflict between the loyalists and the Royal Army, and then her father struck her blade so hard that *Vorpal* shattered and she was thrown to the ground. He slowly turned in place to face down the street.

“This, Rarity, is a proper shatter.” He broke his blade and sent the pieces after an earthpony over a hundred feet away.

The shards bit into the earthpony’s body in more than one place, and he went down with a horribly short yelp. Then, her father recalled the pieces, and the pony was dragged towards them across the road.

“You see how accurate my strike was,” her father said as the moaning pony left a smear of blood in his wake. “You see how I maintained control despite the distance? You should strive for these things, my daughter.”

Rarity looked at her father in horror. Finally, she found the courage to speak. “*Monster.*”

The earthpony came to a stop between them, and he was jerked upward as the pieces of metal lodged inside his body were pulled into the air to reform her father’s blade. “A monster, am I?” He met her eyes.

“So be it.”

With three wide, vicious sweeps of *Carsomyr*, Rarity’s father spread the helpless earthpony all over the street around them. Rarity and her father were both covered in him.

Esteem looked her over. “I *am* sorry, my Rarity. The red does not go with your mane nearly as well it does with mine. I shall be more considerate in the future.”

Rarity threw her blade at her father again, but it was a futile gesture; Esteem batted it away effortlessly. She tried to hit him again and again, and each time he deflected her blows.

“Come now, Rarity. Cease this childish nonsense. I would like you to come with me back to the palace.”

Rarity looked up at the stallion who had just murdered another pony in cold blood. At the stallion who had made her childhood a constant torment. At her father, who had killed her mother.

He noticed the look of disgust on her face. “I didn’t honestly expect you to agree at first, of course. But you will.”

Rarity’s answer was to shatter her blade and throw it at Esteem. Again, he effortlessly thwarted her attack. “This is not a fight, my daughter.” He came at her again, and once more Rarity could barely keep up with his incredible alacrity. She was forced back, through a doorway that lacked a door and into a stone house. Her father continued to speak. “This is not a contest of wills.”

He slapped *Vorpal* with his blade hard enough to send Rarity rolling. She parried a jab as she stepped backwards onto a ramp leading to the upper stories.

Having the high ground didn’t help against her father. His blade pivoted into and out of attacks with a haste that Rarity doubted even Luna could have matched. What was more, Esteem’s art was perfect; each block flowed into a cut, each cut forced her own blade into a compromising position. He and his blade moved with a symbiotic, liquid-like grace that even Rarity had to admit was beautiful. He was always in control, always dictating her actions through the force of his own.

It was his talent, his art. What use was Rarity’s talent here? What was beautiful about the innocent blood that soaked her face and mane?

He stopped and spoke when they had reached the third story. “You will come with me to the palace, Rarity. I will not settle for any other outcome.”

“I shall do no such thing!”

He turned *Carsomyr* flat and slapped her across the face before she could move her own radiant weapon to intercept him. He had not softened the blow, and Rarity tasted blood.

“Very well,” he said merrily.

They continued, and Rarity was pushed out of the building and onto an overhanging bridge-way. Her father struck Rarity’s blade so hard that it broke once again, and Rarity almost lost the will to reform it. She looked down, over the edges of the thin bridge connecting two structures, into the narrow streets below.

Canterlot was in chaos. Windows were shattered, fragments of glass glistening in the streets. Doorways had been blown off their hinges, and here and there a structure was missing a corner, or a wall had collapsed. The tall buildings cast long shadows over the cluttered streets below.

Puppets and soldiers of the Royal army battled loyalists from between the decimated buildings. Earthponies in makeshift armor wrestled their fellow ponies in the street, and colorful blasts of magic zipped and arced between the two sides. The smaller spells dented the streets and buildings when they missed. The larger ones created pony-sized holes.

And there were corpses. Not very many, but enough.

She looked over *Vorpal*, at her smiling father, who she had been dueling for almost ten minutes. She felt her bladecasting robe, wet with blood, sticking to her coat. "What am I doing here?" she whispered. "This isn't me."

Her father answered her. "You are doing what I taught you to, Rarity."

She couldn't defeat Esteem, but that didn't mean that she couldn't defy him. "I will never be like you."

He laughed. "You are perhaps the strongest bladecaster I have ever met, my daughter. Do you think that any other pony could keep that pace with me for more than thirty seconds? You have the gift, Rarity."

Blood was dripping from Rarity's mane and running down her face. "I don't want it," she said. She jerked her head toward the fighting below them. "This is barbaric," she said.

"Tell me, my Rarity. Would you still be alive were it not for my training? Have you not used your blade to protect your friends and bring ruin to your enemies? I gave you knowledge. I gave you power. And with it you have performed *magnificently*."

He turned and flung a shard of *Carsomyr* into a unicorn below them. Rarity knew she should have looked away, but her better judgement failed her. She watched the unicorn explode from the inside out. Her father continued.

"You may despise me, my daughter, but I never sought your love. I had to give you the tools you would need in Titan's new world. Not just to survive, but to *excel*. I made you... *superior*."

Rarity took a step back from her father as she fully realized the weight of his words. "No..." she said. "You couldn't have known."

Esteem forcefully took a step towards her. "Little girl," he said. "Of course I knew. My talent, my *purpose*, is war. *War.*"

His mouth twisted into a snarl, and he shattered his blade and sent the enchanted shards tearing through the air around them. They bit into the street, the buildings, and even some of the ponies below.

"No!"

The shards exploded, and the street below them was obliterated. Puppets and ponies on both sides were crushed and torn to shreds by flying stone and splinters. Despite the noise, Rarity could still clearly hear her father shouting.

"*War, Rarity!* It is a part of the natural order, a part of our very *species!* It comes as easily to us as love and loathing, as virtue and vice! It separates the weak and the worthless from the powerful and the privileged! War ruins the individual, but it tempers the race!"

He snapped the pieces of his blade together so quickly that several of them blew through the edges of the bridge-way to reach their proper position. Then, he thrust the blade into the stone before him.

"Celestia sat on her throne," he spat, "playing god, and she *lobotomized* our race, Rarity. She expunged from history our greatest conflicts and burnt the books that *we* had written. In the name of her *greater good*, she presumed to take from us our natural right, and for a thousand years our race stagnated. What right did she have to decide what we could and could not do? I was born to kill. A warrior pony in a world without war. How *dare* she deny me a life of purpose."

"No..." Rarity took another step away from her father.

"It was I who brought Titan back into this world!" he declared triumphantly. "I who redeemed our species!"

Rarity looked at her father. At the intensity of his eyes, the hard set of his mouth. She realized that he wasn't lying, not to her or to himself. Esteem was perfectly sane.

What was more, he had taken her entire world from her. He had reduced her life as a happy business owner and a loving sister to ashes. He had taken from her a life where her biggest worries were deadlines and the quirky antics of her friends.

"And when your dear mother Honey Dew learned about the King, she wanted nothing to do with it. She wanted to tell the Princess. She wanted to run. But you already know how that turned out, don't you, my Rarity?"

Rarity attacked again, throwing all of her magical weight into a single thrust. Halfway through the movement of her attack, she shattered her blade, and fourteen separate, razor sharp diamonds sped towards her father in a cluster faster than Rarity had ever made them move.

Her father caught every shard on a moment-field, then broke his own blade and drove the shards into Rarity's glimmering diamonds. They were beaten off the bridge-way to land on the ground below as Rarity was thrown to the floor of the bridge.

"You are beaten," he said, levelling *Carsomyr* at her. "It is *useless* to resist! Don't let yourself be destroyed as your mother did!"

"I'm not like you. I'll never be like you."

"You can destroy Emyrean, Rarity. You and your friends. He knows this. He fears it. Join me and your reward will be greater than anything you can imagine. You and I will rule Canterlot as father and daughter. Eternal youth will be yours, my Rarity, and a place amongst the new nobility. Not a flock of politicking, spoiled brats, but a nobility made of the *noble*. A nobility made of the powerful and graceful, of the beautiful and terrible. You will be loved and respected by all, and nothing your heart could desire would be outside your grasp. Not even the lives of your friends."

Again, Rarity looked into her father's intense blue eyes and saw that he was telling her the truth. If she became his daughter, she would have it all. She would live forever young as a sophisticate, with the ability to set trends and wear whatever she wished. Without her, Rarity's friends would have no choice but to retire their war efforts, and Rarity could ensure that they lived in safety.

She would be powerful, too. She was already. Esteem could fashion her into a weapon as deadly as she was beautiful, and she would bring woe to those who opposed her. Her enemies, without exception, would die. She would have respect, fear, admiration, and security. Even if her father was a monster, who could refuse such a thing?

It was then that Rarity felt something else, a heaviness inside her that was not at all uncomfortable. It made her grit her teeth, raise her chin, and return the intensity of her father's stare. It flowed through her, strengthening her resolve, powering her defiance. Her friends were better than a safe compromise made with her father. They were better than a superficial unicorn who only sought the approval of others. She would not let them down. Rarity was feeling loyalty.

Then, with a shock, Rarity realized that she was *feeling Loyalty*. She knew, just as she knew that the sky was never empty, that Rainbow Dash was only seconds away from her. She knew that Dash knew exactly where she was, and, inexplicably, she knew how she was going to

escape.

She tapped Dash's defiance, Dash's unyielding determination, and Dash's indomitable willpower. She took the emotions, the traits, and spun them around inside herself, weaving Dash's drive into something that she could appreciate. That she could use.

"You aren't beautiful."

Esteem's eyes flashed. "What did you say?"

"You're *pretty*," she spat. "You have *form* and *function*. You have a dedication to *aesthetics*. But you're rotten on the inside. Twisted and black. Your soul is a dead, withered thing and anyone who sees you can tell that you're *hideous* within. You measure others by their ability to kill as you surrender your mind to a philosophy of tyranny and oppression. Well *my* talent is beauty, and *that* is the standard by which *I* measure you! And I find you *worthless!* The *shame* I feel at having *you* for a father!"

Esteem took a step back, mortified, and his mouth once again twisted into a snarl. Rarity rolled off of the bridge.

She knew exactly when and how to fall, for some reason. Exactly what position she would need to assume so as to let Rainbow Dash catch her. And catch her Rainbow Dash did.

Rarity called and assembled her blade from the streets below to deflect the blow that Esteem aimed at the pegasus as they flew away. Dash was fast, incredibly fast, and Esteem only managed one long-range assault before they were well out of his range and above the city.

"I thought knights were supposed to do the rescuing," Dash said.

Rarity gave her a flat look, but then she felt her expression soften. "Thank you, Rainbow Dash, for saving my life. I... I am glad I have friends like you."



A lucid haziness permeated Twilight's being and she was dimly aware of the cold, smooth cobblestones beneath her. She tried to remember what had woken her from her blissful slumber, but the information escaped her like water falling through her hooves. Feeling slowly flooded back into her chillingly numb limbs as she opened her eyes and was treated to the sight of four pale orange hooves resting on the road before her.

“Sparkle! Sparkle, get up!”

That was what had woken her from her soothing sleep, she thought dazedly. That voice. Did it sound familiar? She slowly turned her head upward, and the motion felt strangely light to her, as though her head were weighted differently. She looked at the pony who was calling her name, a brown maned, pale orange unicorn in a thin black blademastering robe.

“You’re... a knight. A blademaster.” She couldn’t remember if that was important or not. Her thoughts were a muddled mixture sloshing about in her brain.

He quirked an eyebrow at her. “Me? I’m nopony impressive. *You*, on the other hoof, are Celestia’s most faithful.”

Twilight lethargically got to her hooves. “I’m... Twilight Sparkle. That sounds right.” She felt a little dizzy.

The other unicorn buried his face in a hoof. “Listen, Twilight. You just broke Empyrean’s barrier. From the looks of things you did it by yourself. You’re on a magic drag, which means you aren’t thinking straight. Don’t try to use any magic for the next little while, either, understand?”

Slowly, Twilight nodded, her awkward-feeling head bobbing up and down erratically. She knew what a magic drag was, but she had never experienced one before. They only happened when unicorns ran out of magic. Distantly, she heard what sounded like explosions and ponies shouting.

“Here,” the other unicorn said as he levitated a small metal flask out from under his robe. “This might help.” He unscrewed the cap and handed it to her. Twilight took several gulps of the potion, which burned her throat furiously as it went down. She coughed, her stomach threatening to heave its contents onto the smooth cobbles below.

“What kind of potion *is* that?” she spluttered between hacks.

“Potion?” The unicorn looked at her with a mixture between confusion and amusement. “That’s whiskey. Good whiskey, I might add. Helps to take the edge off.”

Twilight’s senses were starting to return to her. “Where’s Luna? Rarity?”

“Heh. Your princess is the one who sent me to come get you. I’m sure she’s also got whoever else you just mentioned. The entrance to the loyalist hideout is blocks from here. I can get you there, but you will need to do exactly as I say. There’s heavy fighting going on, and while normally I’d be happy to spend as much time as possible melting some enemy faces, you’re important and stuff. The sooner we get moving, the better. Between us and the hideout is

half a city of pissed off ponies and puppets trying to kill each other through gratuitous application of fire and explosions.”

Twilight considered what the knight had said. She lifted each of her legs in turn to test its mobility, then shook her head, hoping to clear her murky thoughts. She blinked hard once, then nodded to the bladecaster. What had he called himself? *No pony impressive*.

He took a long pull of his whiskey before tucking it away beneath the black robe. “I hope you’re ready to fight for your life.” He grinned.

Twilight had the feeling the day was just getting started. She sighed. “Alright, Sir Unimpressive. Lead the way.”

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Chapter 11: [The General](#)

[A thanks goes out to The Prereaders](#)