Sparkle and Twilight



Pinkie Pie's armor was laid out on the table before them. "So what's the yellow?" Twilight asked.

"Pinkie smoke!"

"Pinkie smoke?"

"It's, like, *way* better than regular smoke. I'll show you."

Twilight quickly pulled the canister out of Pinkie's mouth before she could pull the pin and release the wonderful concoction contained within. "I'll take your word for it," she said quickly. "And the red one?"

"It explodes." If Twilight didn't want to see the Pinkie smoke, she *definitely* wouldn't want to see the Pinkie fireball. For use on puppets only.

"Magnitude?" Twilight asked.

"Twenty one point three supertons."

Twilight gave her a flat look. "'Super' isn't a metric prefix, Pinkie."

"Oh." Pinkie looked down, disheartened. "What kind of depressing system wouldn't use super as a prefix?"

"All of them, to my knowledge," Twilight said as she selected another canister. "Okay, this one is just filled with confetti."

Pinkie nodded, glad that Twilight had selected that one next. "Mhm. That's for when I want to shoot confetti."

"And this one here is for when you want to shoot putty*?*"

Pinkie nodded again. “Putty that explodes.”

Twilight froze, then delicately placed the open canister onto the table. “So these are the blades, right here next to the parachute. And they also fit into the launching mechanism along with the harpoon.” It seemed she was speaking more to herself than to Pinkie Pie. Pinkie briefly considered striking up her own solo conversation, but decided not to. She didn’t want to be rude, and everypony talking at once would make it difficult for Twilight to hear herself think. Pinkie knew that Twilight liked to think.

“Modular fitting system,” Twilight continued to muse to herself as she toyed with the parts in the air before her. “Efficient launching mechanism. Ergonomic design and high-traction placements. This is impressive, Pinkie. How come you work in a bakery when you can design and construct something like this?”

For a supposedly smart mare, Twilight could ask some pretty dumb questions. “I can’t exactly throw parties in a machine shop. Somepony could get hurt.”

“I... see,” Twilight said. Pinkie Pie doubted she saw, but said nothing. Twilight blew air through her cheeks and regarded the suit of armor resting on the table before her. “Well,” she said, “I can definitely enchant it to harden your skin. Beyond that, I can’t make any promises.” She pulled the Element of Laughter from her null-space and the glow of her horn began to intensify. “I’ll try to enchant your blades so that you can bring them against a unicorn blade without having them be destroyed. I’ll also try to rework your firing mechanism so that you won’t need to carry around those tanks of compressed gas. And with your permission, I’ll remove the mouth-straps and link the suit to your thoughts.”

Pinkie Pie knew that Twilight didn’t need her permission to cast a mind spell on her, but Twilight didn’t need to be reminded of the fact that Nihilus had abused that power by enslaving Rainbow Dash. “Permission granted!” She gave a mock salute.

Twilight’s horn emitted a burst of magical light so bright it hurt to look at, so Pinkie Pie looked directly at it. When her vision normalized, the Element of Laughter was a single solid pink gem. Twilight gave a short, approving *hmph.* “I *knew* I could reshape the material component without affecting the cuffle,” she said. Again, Pinkie deduced that she was talking to herself.

Then, something seemed to go wrong. Twilight closed her eyes and shook her head as though it were a piggy bank and she was rattling out the last quarter. “Twilight?”

Twilight exhaled sharply, then set her shoulders and opened her eyes. She didn’t say anything.

“Twilight? *Hello!* Earth to Twilight! This is Pinkie Pie, over.”

Twilight put a hoof to her temple and rubbed. “Sorry, Pinkie. It’s just.. that was a lot of complicated magic at once. Last time I did that I started hearing voices.”

That made sense. “So what did they say *this* time?”

Twilight looked at Pinkie as if pondering whether or not to tell her. “Nothing nice,” she said finally. Pinkie figured Twilight was telling her just because she was wacky enough to handle the wacky truth. She pondered the strange sound of the word “wacky” for a moment. Something about it just seemed alien all of the sudden, but that happened with all sorts of words all the time. Sometimes Pinkie Pie sat and thought about how strange her own name sounded.

Pinkie wasn’t talking, so Twilight continued. “It thinks it should be in charge instead of me. Sorry, it thinks we should *both* be in charge.”

“What’s it called?”

“Twilight or Sparkle, take your pick.”

“What’s it like?”

Twilight exhaled through drawn lips again. “I have no idea. Worst case scenario? Like Nihilus. I think it wants me to hurt all the ponies who hurt me.”

Now Pinkie Pie had done it; she’d made Twilight think of Nihilus. “I choose Twilight,” she said.

Twilight was a time where the world was not fully light nor dark, a balance stricken between the two. Whether the world was in the process of getting darker or lighter, twilight facilitated the transition. Twilight’s voice wanted to hurt the ponies that harmed her, but the ponies that harmed her were *evil.* As Luna might say, they needed to die. And even if the voice enjoyed it, it would still be bringing light into the world.

Pinkie Pie did not share *why* she had chosen Twilight with the other mare. “You can be Sparkle,” she said.

Something sparkled when it emitted light in an irregular fashion. But Pinkie Pie was thinking of one *something* in particular—a sparkler. A single, bright point of light spawning millions of miniature stars that lasted for less than a heartbeat before going out. A burning smidgen of incandescence that could not help but attract the attention of all, and fill their hearts with warmth. A point that would eventually give way to the darkness, which would in turn give way to twilight.

Pinkie Pie did not share her viewpoint with Sparkle. Unlike the unicorn, she did not feel the need to explain all of her thoughts aloud. She simply cried, “I like sparklers!”

Sparkle looked like she was about to say something flatly, but she was cut short as Sir Unimpressive came through the metal door with a loud clang.

“Hi!” Pinkie greeted him immediately. “I’m Pinkie Pie!”

Unimpressive looked at her as though she was a child. It was a look Pinkie was accustomed to.

Sparkle eyed him with displeasure. “This is a private meeting between myself and a member of my team, Unimpressive.”

Unimpressive looked from Sparkle to Pinkie Pie, nodded once, then sat at the table and pulled out his metal flask. “Noble wants to see you sometime about creating safe pegasus routes. Buttercup has questions for you too. And not her usual kind—actually important questions. Something about the food system. Starlight has picked out a dozen ponies to become officers, and needs you to teach them the layout of the labyrinth. Midnight also had an excuse to spend time with his daughter, but I forgot it.”

Sparkle gritted her teeth. “They can’t wait a *single* day? Our next meeting is *tomorrow*.”

Unimpressive grinned. “But the problems are happening *right now*. Welcome to being in charge, kid. Actually, you’re doing a mighty fine job of it, from what I hear.”

Sparkle groaned and softly beat her head against the table. Unimpressive offered her some whiskey, which she answered with her signature flat look.

“Just trying to help,” Unimpressive said defensively.

“Well you *can* help,” Twilight said. “Just not me. I want you to teach Pinkie Pie how to bladecast.”

At this, Unimpressive was taken aback. He looked at Sparkle as though she were crazy. “Sure thing,” he drawled. He turned to Pinkie. “First, you take your unicorn magic—*oh wait.*” He threw his forelegs into the air. “I guess that’s that. Come back when you’ve grown a horn.”

“I meant teach her how to fight bladecasters.”

“You want her to fight *bladecasters*? What did she ever do to you?”

“Just do it, Unimpressive.”

“Do you have any idea what a trained unicorn is capable of?”

“Do you have any any idea what *Pinkie Pie* is capable of?”

“Luna fielded me with her two days ago. I’ll admit she’s got skill, but you want to pit *metal* against *magic.* This is something *you* should be doing.”

“It’s not in the cards.”

“You’re going to get your friends killed,” he said airily.

Sparkle was fuming. “Twilight made the same argument, but she was a lot better at it.”

Unimpressive tilted his head to one side. “What?”

Twilight shook her head sharply. “Nothing, just teach Pinkie how to fight a bladecaster.”

“But she’s loonier than a fruitcake!”

This was where Pinkie decided she was needed in the conversation. “There are no loonies in fruitcakes, silly. Only money cakes.”

“You see this? I’m not letting her come at me with sharpened steel.”

“I order you to as your master and commander.”

Unimpressive crossed his arms. “And if I refuse?”

“I’ll tell my mom.”

The knight’s eyes narrowed. “Well played, General,” he said as he rose and screwed the cap back onto his flask. “It would seem you win this round, but the—” Twilight vanished. Unimpressive grumbled something mean about teleporting mares.

Then he turned to Pinkie Pie, who treated him to the largest grin she could manage. Oddly, the expression did not seem to lighten his mood, but rather made him draw back from her slightly.

“So...” he said at length. From the way he let the sentence hang, Pinkie Pie assumed he had forgotten her name. Again.

“I’m Pinkie Pie,” she spouted.

He raised an eyebrow. “I know who you are. You’re the one who likes to bake and make things explode.”

“Those aren’t mutually exclusive.”

“This is going to be *absolutely* excellent.” His voice was dripping with sarcasm. Pinkie didn’t understand why.



“Why are there so many ponies watching us?” Pinkie clicked two blades into the mechanisms on her forelegs and willed them to extend.

Unimpressive shot a glance at the blades. “Witnesses,” he said dryly. “Also, they’re new recruits. The appearance of Twilight Sparkle has everypony in the city scrambling to join up. They need to be taught the basics of bladecasting, so Twilight figured they could come watch.”

Pinkie also knew that Twilight wanted them to see her perform feats that defied all logic. Awing them into obedience was part of Twilight’s plan.

“There’s only like ten of you,” Unimpressive called out to the crowd, “so we’ll keep this lecture informal. I am Sir Unimpressive, of the Knights Solaris.”

“I’m Pinkie Pie!”

Unimpressive gave her a sidelong, irritated glance. “This is Pinkie Pie. Do the opposite of whatever she says.”

“Do the opposite of whatever I say!” Let them try to sort *that* one out.

“Pinkie Pie is one of the five, and I will be teaching her how to fight a bladecaster at Twilight Sparkle’s request. Any questions?”

Everypony present raised a hoof.

“That has to do with bladecasting and not Pinkie Pie.”

Everypony lowered their hoof.

“Right.” Unimpressive’s horn glowed red, and his robe was undone and raised into the air before him. “Bladecasting is as old as Celestia, and if you bladecast, you wear one of these. The robe identifies you to your allies and helps conceal anything you please, such as discs, shards, or whiskey.” He stopped to take a pull from his flask, and the new arrivals seemed somewhat confused. “Black is for teachers, white is for students. Bear in mind that a bladecaster with a white robe is not necessarily a worse bladecaster than one wearing a black. The Cadet can go blade-to-blade with me in a fight, but he wears white.”

A recruit raised a hoof, and Unimpressive jerked his head toward him. “The Cadet?” the recruit asked simply.

“Green fellow. If he has a name, nopony knows it. Also my arch-nemesis.” He took another, smaller pull of whiskey, then wiped his mouth with a hoof. “I hate that guy,” he muttered. “He’s the apprentice to General Esteem,” he said, raising his voice to be heard, “who is the most powerful bladecaster and war unicorn around. If you see the General, you run. Leave him to Luna and the five.”

“That’s me!” Pinkie chirped. “Or, that minus Luna divided by five is me.”

“Anyways, bladecasting. You’ll see underneath the robe I wear a harness. It holds the blade itself. Or rather, the blade fragments. Every unicorn can make and manipulate a blade out of a material related to their special talent. As my special talent is magic, mine is made of meteoric silver.”

Thirteen tiny silver balls detached themselves from Unimpressive’s harness and arced through the air to form a line in front of the unicorn. “Meteoric silver is second only to meteoric *platinum* in terms of enchantability. Celestia didn’t often drop meteors on Equestria, so this stuff is expensive.”

Pinkie deduced that she was needed. “Everypony say *ooooh.*”

“*Ooooh.*”

Unimpressive ignored her. “The average pony can manage about ten or eleven component parts to their blade. I can do thirteen because I’m so impressive.”

“Rarity has fourteen!”

“As does General Esteem.” Unimpressive did not look happy. “Having more components or shards than an opponent gives you a major edge. Every one of these orbs can be infused with any magic I see fit. Together, encapsulated by a single moment field, they form a whole

blade—in my case, *Vindictive.*"

Each of the orbs burst into a burning red light. The lights melded into one another almost instantly, forming a long shaft of glowing crimson. "I can split this into thirteen magical missiles." He did so. "I can make it hot, make it vibrate, make it deflect all other forms of energy, or just flail it around and use it to cut through things. Bladecasting is about versatility.

"A pony can only *ever* have one blade, and that blade is something that you ought to name. To enchant a new set of materials for a new blade— something you would do if you wanted more shards— you have to destroy the old one. Alicorns get a good deal; they don't require material. They can just make their blades out of their own innate magic, which also happens to be even more conducive to enchantment than meteoric platinum."

Unimpressive harnessed his whiskey and put his robe back on. "But that's enough theory," he said. "I imagine most of you are here to see ponies fighting with beam swords, yes?"

"Everypony say *you betcha!*"

The recruits seemed a little put off. Most of them managed a mumbled, "You betcha?" Pinkie Pie decided that she could grow to like being a teacher's assistant.

"One more thing before I show you all why unicorns are superior combatants," he said. "A bladecaster can't cast their blade unless it's for a purpose. You have to fight *for* something, even if this something is just the fight itself. The weak-willed make poor bladecasters. If you can convince an opponent that what they're fighting for is wrong, you will disarm them—if only for a moment."

"Beam sword! Beam sword!"

"I'll make you a deal, Pinkie. I'm not the strongest war unicorn, but I still know some pretty nasty spells. I won't use any war magic if you don't use any of your high-powered explosives."

"Deal."

"Or medium-powered explosives. In fact, let's just rule out all forms of explosives."

This Pinkie Pie had to briefly consider. She noticed most of the new arrivals edging away from them. "Deal."



Rarity screamed.

It wasn't a scream of fear, rage, or pain. It was a shout meant to strengthen her blow, an exhalation intended for focus. And strengthen her blow it did— *Vorpal* collided with *Nadir* with such force that Luna skidded backwards several feet along the floor.

Rarity did not let up. She disconnected *Vorpal's* canvas-covered shards and sent them through the air at the Princess, who intercepted each with a mote of *Nadir.* The Princess reformed her weapon and took a horizontal swing at Rarity, but she rolled under it and stabbed at Luna with her own newly reformed blade.

Luna was almost as fast as Rainbow Dash, and managed to sidestep the jab in time. Rarity lunged forward, more to avoid *Nadir* than to close with her enemy, and broke *Vorpal* once again, sending diamonds whipping through the air.

To her surprise, each collided with a dark blue patch of moment field. Getting Luna to use something other than her blade when practicing was something of a victory for Rarity. Obviously she could never hope to defeat an alicorn in single combat, so any superior bladecasting was rewarded by the Princess's other capacities. If Luna wanted to, she could simply hit Rarity with more force than the unicorn could handle, but that wouldn't be very good practice.

Rarity threw herself away from Luna to avoid *Nadir* once more. She landed on her side and skidded along the dirty stone floor as she called *Vorpal's* individual shards to reassemble.

Luna was standing over her in the space of a heartbeat, raising *Nadir* for a finishing blow. Rarity wouldn't actually be *killed* by the strike—if Luna were actually channeling her full power into her blade, Rarity's flesh would already be rotting off her bones and freezing solid before it hit the floor. Still, it would signify a definite loss for Rarity, an outcome that was no longer acceptable. Not even in training.

She let loose another scream, and caught *Nadir* with only two of *Vorpal's* shards. She could only channel a seventh of her telekinetic muscle through a seventh of her blade, but she wasn't looking to block the strike head on.

Instead, she threw the remaining twelve diamonds at Luna and used the force of her blow to flip herself back onto her hooves. Luna blocked the diamonds at the last moments with

Nadir's moon motes, then turned and exchanged a lightning-fast series of blows with Rarity.

Rarity was pushing herself to her limit. Beads of sweat were running down her face and her mane was in disarray. She'd been thrown around on the floor several times that morning, and her normally pristine robe was dirty. Her coat was dark in places where she had collected nicks and scrapes from their mock dueling.

None of it mattered, she reminded herself as she threw her god-princess backwards with a well-timed slash and a snarl. Esteem had brushed her offense away with contemptuous ease the last time they dueled. Rarity would make her father take her seriously the next time they met, which meant that in training she needed to give it her all. There was no appearance to maintain, no reason for her to keep up her demure and cultured image. Esteem was the most skilled bladecaster in the world, and an accomplished war unicorn besides.

Twilight wasn't about to start swinging her magical muscle around, and Titan could apparently show up to ruin Luna's day at any moment, which left Rarity to keep Esteem's blade busy. Her technique would need to be perfect to even *distract* her father.

Luna split and threw *Nadir,* so Rarity instinctively broke *Vorpal* and sent each diamond on an intercept course—an easy thing to do when she was using her magical senses. Luna had broken her weapon into fifteen moon motes, so Rarity prepared to roll and avoid one of the incoming projectiles.

The action was unnecessary. Every piece of both *Vorpal* and *Nadir* was knocked out of the air by a flash of purple light.

"Now that I have your attention," said Twilight.

"*Sorry about that,*" the old Twilight might have said. Or "*Pardon me, but—*". *General* Twilight Sparkle did not ask permission, she gave it. And she certainly didn't apologize. *General* Twilight Sparkle simply knocked twenty-nine blade segments out of the air while simultaneously levitating a clipboard and quill as though it were no small feat. It was, in fact, something totally beyond most unicorns.

Twilight did not look like she was handling her new title well. Her mane was in disarray, her coat was matted in places, and she didn't seem to realize that she hadn't put down her clipboard yet. Despite this, the ponies that gathered to watch Luna and Rarity train—most of them stallions—were looking at her in awe. She looked left, and the ponies to her left backed up to give her space. She looked right, and the ponies to her right backed up to reveal that she had brought Unimpressive with her.

Rarity was covered in sweat and exhausted, so she removed her robe and tossed it to one of the recruits. "Have this washed," she said imperiously. She turned to another recruit.

“Run me a bath. And *you:* fetch me some drinking water.”

Rarity was answered with a triple round of “Yes, Dame Rarity.” Power had its privileges.

“Twilight, my *dear,* you look simply *awful.* Are you *sure* there’s no way I can help lighten your load?”

Twilight sighed. “It looks like practicing with Luna is just as exhausting,” she said. “I can manage. I’m here about Pinkie Pie.”

Rarity blinked. “What about her?”

“I’d like you to continue to teach her how to fight a bladecaster.”

“Isn’t that *his* job?”

“Sir Unimpressive will be training Rainbow Dash from here on out. I finished her weapon this morning.”

Rarity wondered briefly why Twilight was allowed to make Dash a weapon, but *she* wasn’t allowed to give Twilight a uniform.

“I see,” was all Rarity had to say. Rarity didn’t like the idea of taking time out of her own training to help Pinkie Pie, but Twilight certainly didn’t need the added stress of being disagreed with. She looked ragged enough. “How is she?” she asked Unimpressive.

“Faster than any earthpony has a right to be,” He answered. “Dodges blade-motes so well you’d think she actually *could* see the future. She overextends and she’s never learned to mind her surroundings. She’ll drink you under the table with sobriety to spare, though I doubt *you’ll* have that problem, *Knight Commander*. She isn’t a bladecaster, so you won’t need to change the color of your robe.”

“Thank you, *Knight Bachelor*, I will be sure to teach her what you have not.” Not having to change the color of her robe was good. Black was too grim for Rarity. *Although,* she wondered if Luna would have been willing to let her make a robe out of darkness.

“Don’t call me kiddo,” Twilight snapped suddenly. Everypony turned to look at her. Twilight returned their looks sheepishly. “Uh,” she said slowly. “I, um, have to go see Noble about the new pegasi.” There was a purple flash of light, and Twilight vanished.

“Well that was...” Rarity let the sentence hang.

“*Yeah,*” Unimpressive said. “That’s not the first time that’s happened today. She’s losing

it."

This was bad. "Why didn't you *say* anything?"

"I'm saying something now. Your Twilight is hearing voices. I suggest you find a way to fix her."

This was *bad.* "We need to find her again. Find out what's wrong."

"No, *you* need to find her again. *I* need to train your dysfunctional pegasus."

"Her *name,*" Rarity said, growing irritated. "is *Rainbow Dash.*"



It was a length of metal that she could attach to the back of her armor with no straps or sheath. Dash could employ the same form of magical magnetism to attach the weapon to her hoof, where it would become like an extension of her foreleg. Twilight had taken cues from Rarity's work and refined the edge to an extremely small number of quanta—which apparently just meant it was very, very sharp. It was one long, continuous piece of single-edged metal, and its form followed a very slight crescent shape. It was a magic sword. Swords were *cool.*

It wasn't helping at all.

Dash landed on her back and immediately turned the fall into a roll, throwing herself even farther backwards and flipping back onto her feet. She panted, bringing the blade back up to the ready position that she had been taught.

She had originally despised the idea of the blade, but Twilight—or rather, Astor Coruscare—knew her stuff. The weapon was intuitive and easy to use, promising to save her plenty of time in the field—breaking a puppet's neck in midair was much harder to do than simply slicing it in two.

"You have anger," Unimpressive said. "An interesting change of pace from Pinkie Pie." He levelled *Vindictive* at her, and its deep red light shone in his eyes. "Anger is useful, but only when you *use* it, Rainbow Dash. You are letting it use you."

"Cut the wise-guy act," Dash said through gritted teeth as she took another swing at the black-robed unicorn. He blocked the strike with ease and forced her away.

“Fine then,” the knight said with a smile. Then, he swung his blade at her again and again, hacking forcibly as though he were wielding an axe. He punctuated each attack with a shout. “Stop! Doing! This!”

Dash batted away the blows with some difficulty then came at him with her own. Immediately, his technique changed to something faster and more fluid, and she found herself with her back to the floor.

“Honestly,” Unimpressive said, “you just swing and swing and swing. No blocks, pivots, hoof positioning, or rolls. No thought as to what comes next. It’s like reading a run-on sentence.”

Dash resisted the urge to throw herself at him again. “You’re supposed to be teaching me,” she managed.

“And the fact that you didn’t just attack me shows that you’re learning. Now get up and I’ll show you how a bladecaster crosses his T's and dots his I’s.” Dash rose, and Unimpressive levelled *Vindictive* at her once again. He flashed her a wild grin. “You need to learn how to use punctuation.”

Then he came at her, and it was all Dash could do to keep herself on her hooves. Unimpressive was certainly slower than her, but somehow that didn’t seem to matter.

“Remember, if a jab that modifies your stance follows your attack, you need to shift your weight *as* you strike. You *don’t* have to ground your hind legs together in these instances.” As Unimpressive spoke, he demonstrated, throwing Dash back with a pair of well-placed blows. “*Standalone* strikes get *solid* endings, *and* you ground your hind legs.” Dash found herself pushing with all her weight against *Vindictive*, still losing ground.

With a push, he separated them and put Dash against a wall. Then, he blocked her counterstrike and reversed the direction of his blade in midair, forcing her to duck. “If you reverse direction, place your foreleg *before* you move into the strike, and end the strike with a close-body block, a roll, or a simple jab.” Then Dash was pinned to the wall, a blazing red weapon held to her neck. “Refer to these as examples.”

Dash hated losing, but she had agreed not to use any of her stronger pegasus powers if he didn’t crush her to death with war-spells. It had seemed like a fair idea at the time. “There’s so much to keep track of,” she breathed.

“There is. Which is what you need to practice—you already have a solid technique. Remember that when fighting a bladecaster you just want to distract them with this, and then put them out with your pegasus magic. But they’re going to be throwing spells at you left and right, and if you aren’t paying attention, you die. So ditch the rage.”

Ditch the rage. Dash looked away. “As if it’s that easy.”

At this, Unimpressive laughed, causing a fresh bout of anger to boil in her ears. “Sorry kid, but I think Twilight’s already called dibs on all the mopey angst. You’ll have to find some other angle.” He let her go, and it took an enormous effort of will to not attack him again.

“You don’t even know why I’m angry.”

“No? I figured it had something to do with the fact that you tried to kill your friends during the sack of Ponyville and again in the battle of Cloudsdale, all while under the effects of a spell that doubles as a behavioural conditioner and a method of torture.” Dash looked up, and Unimpressive smiled faintly. “I know more than I let on,” he said.

“You don’t know anything.”

“I know you should probably talk to Twilight Sparkle.”

Fluttershy had been begging her to do the same for almost a week. “That wouldn’t help.”

Unimpressive snorted. “Wouldn’t help *you,* maybe, but the General of the Armies is currently bordering on insanity, and nopony knows why. You think that the way you’re acting now is the way you should deal with this? Tell me you can look at yourself in a mirror.”

“Shut up.”

“Tell me you can meet your friends’ eyes. Tell me that when you’re out in the field you feel nothing as you tear the puppets apart.”

“Shut up!” Dash lost her cool and swung at the unicorn, fully expecting him to block her swing and taunt her some more.

He didn’t.

Rainbow Dash started to pull her swing too late. She flared her wings and locked up her legs in a desperate attempt to stop her weapon from opening his skull, but met little success. Why didn’t he *move?*

The combination of Unimpressive’s telekinetic blast and Dash’s extended wings sent her sprawling. Her wings crumpled under her, and the immediate pain told her that she was going to have some nasty bruises. She heard rather than saw the clopping of his hooves as he moved to stand beside her.

“Maybe you think talking to Twilight isn’t the proper course of action,” he said. “But I suggest you do something, because right now it’s plain as day that you can hardly breathe through all your self-loathing. Which tells me that what you’re doing about it right now *isn’t working.*

“Now *get up.*”



They were not in the labyrinth. Inner Canterlot sprawled out around them, its closely packed structures looming over them and squeezing any earthbound ponies into a bottleneck. Puppets surrounded them. Puppets everywhere: in the streets, on the roofs, there had to be at least two hundred of them. Just how many puppets could Terra make in a day?

Normally, Dash would not stay to fight the puppets. Normally, she would take to the skies and warn the group of loyalists raiding the cannery that there were enemies closing in. *Normally,* she would retreat. But with Pinkie Pie at her back, any situation immediately ceased to be *normal.*

They looked at the circle of constructs surrounding them. Green and blue manes abounded, which meant that the few unicorns were most likely taking shelter inside the surrounding buildings. Dash tapped their connection and drew her own blade as Pinkie Pie drew hers. She decided to let Pinkie Pie lay down the taunt.

Dash had no idea what to call the voice that Pinkie Pie elected to speak with. “Our kung fu is stronger.”

Pinkie Pie was a vibrantly hued whirlwind of destruction, spinning and slashing her way through the puppet ranks with style and panache. Her Pinkie Sense let her dodge most swings with ease, and her blades were now enchanted to slice through puppets as if they were made of paper. She never stopped moving.

Rainbow Dash was a thunderstorm gone to war. Fire burned in her chest and lightning quickened her strikes. Puppets died with a single swipe of her foreleg, a focused flap of her wings, a bolt of thunder drawn from the churning air. She was a force of nature, savagery incarnate, an exemplar of the unbridled primal might that was the birthright of every pegasus, honed by her own brand of mastery.

She ran the back of her weapon through a throat as she crouched low to evade a swing.

Her momentum carried the cut forward, and she sliced neatly through a set of pegasus forelegs. Pinkie tumbled over Dash's back as she lay low, and their positions were reversed. It didn't matter; thanks to the intuitive bond between the Elements of Harmony, Dash knew exactly what Pinkie did—no extra brainpower required.

She tilted her neck slightly to perfectly evade one of Pinkie Pie's magically spring-loaded blades, letting it barely brush against her mane before taking an earthpony through the eye. Already moving, Dash slid past the puppet as it dispersed, removing the head of a pegasus as she sprung into the air and kicked the blade back over to Pinkie's half of the puppets. It struck where Pinkie needed it to, and she reloaded the blade as its victim dispersed.

The puppets were too stupid to keep from coming at them. They crowded in to the point where Dash was taking them out two at a time with swings from her absurdly sharp blade.

This was when Pinkie Pie jumped into Dash's extended forelegs and, with a boost from Dash, sprang into the air. Dash followed her with two beats of her wings, rushing upward at an alarming rate and grabbing Pinkie before she began to shed her upward acceleration and descend.

She tilted her wings, and the world spun until they were both upside down in midair. It was a fight to stay focused in the midst of all the motion, and Dash had difficulty orienting herself—it seemed for a moment as though she was looking up at the city street and the puppets. She didn't mind: tumbling through the air at high speeds with no idea of which way she was facing was exhilarating.

Pinkie Pie's grin told Dash that the pseudo-pegasus felt the same way. As they completed their spin to face downward, she fired away one of her blades and replaced it with a bright red canister. Written in violently yellow-green lettering on the side of the metal container, in a small square of overlapping and disproportional letters that Dash wouldn't have been able to read if not for their harmonic connection, were the words *Pinkie fireball: for use on PuPPets only.*

Pinkie fired, and the mechanism that launched her blades tore the cap from the canister and sent it flying downward much faster than they could fall. Though Dash had never seen Pinkie let loose the explosives before, she knew what came next. At least, she thought she did. She had no idea that the fire itself would be *pink.*

The incendiary detonated in the midst of the constructs with a tremendous roar, and a blossoming cloud of flames spread outward and upward to consume their enemies. Dash spread her wings to slow their fall slightly. As they descended, she beat them once and called the wind, creating a powerful gust to sweep the waning ball of flames outward, where it consumed even more puppets.

She let go of Pinkie Pie, and both of them fell nimbly to the ground where they had stood only moments before. This time, however, there were no puppets nearby—the flames had destroyed dozens of them. The air around them was still hot enough to scorch pony flesh, but Dash endured it unscathed thanks to the Element of Loyalty. Twilight had reshaped it into a red lightning-bolt shaped gem, and it was now affixed to her chest padding. The protective enchantments warded off the heat, among other things.

"That's *hot,* Pinkie." It was true—the air around them was still uncomfortably hot, even if it wasn't scalding. Dash doubted their armor would have been of any use against the full inferno.

Pinkie Pie stifled a giggle, and Dash gave her an unamused look. "Of course it's hot," Pinkie said. "Hot *pink!*"

Pinkie sense: incoming danger. Dash and Pinkie both shot away from each other with identical rolls to avoid a half-dozen sharpened metal shards, gleaming with the red of a unicorn puppet's magic.

Pinkie came out of her roll and returned fire with another metal cylinder. Dash watched as it bounced harmlessly off of a magical barrier protecting three unicorn puppets atop a nearby balcony. She guessed that the fireball had drawn them out.

To Dash's surprise the cylinder exploded shortly after striking the barrier. The majority of the blast was absorbed, and fragments of steel were sent their way. The bits of metal were tiny, and had lost most of their velocity by the time they reached Pinkie and Dash, so they weren't a threat. The shrapnel bounced harmlessly off of Pinkie's and Dash's skin, and Rainbow Dash smiled. As strong as sheet steel, indeed.

Three unicorn puppets, combined with the numerous remaining non-unicorns, were too much for Dash and Pinkie Pie to safely handle on their own. Their armor might let them shrug off most minor blows, but a direct hit from a flying shard would likely kill either them. They weren't Applejack or Fluttershy.

They couldn't take the puppets by themselves, which meant they needed help, which meant help was on the way, which mean they only needed to stall. The most effective way to stall, in their collective opinion, was to attack. So they attacked.

The unicorn puppets could not directly affect Dash or Pinkie with their magic, thanks to Twilight's enchantments. This, combined with their hardened skin, their collective knowledge of the Pinkie sense, and their pegasine senses and reflexes, meant that they could avoid most of the attacks that the unicorns elected to throw their way.

Which they did. The further they were from the unicorns, the more power their enemies would need to use to hurt them. Spells like telekinetic blasts of force lost all viability when they

were so far away. Projectiles fired from up close would give Pinkie and Dash much less time to evade than normal. So they kept their distance from the balcony and continued to hew through the grunts on the ground.

For a pony without wings, Pinkie Pie's speed would have made most pegasi envious. She crossed the scorched and burning cobblestones between them and the earthbound puppets in four strides and a leap, landing with two blades in separate puppets' eyes. She rode her targets to the ground as they dispersed, transitioning seamlessly into a forward roll.

Pinkie Pie was fast, but Dash, being the fastest pegasus alive, had a certain reputation to uphold. By the time Pinkie Pie had come out of her roll, Dash had blazed a polychrome trail and slid her blade through two more puppets. Pinkie Pie came up beside her and used a charging puppet's momentum to to fling it onto the wicked point of Dash's weapon.

Pinkie sense: the building beside them was about to collapse. It was likely the work of the three unicorns. With a single motion, Dash drove her blade through a pegasus' skull and reattached it to her back.

She threw herself onto her back just as Pinkie Pie jumped to land atop her. Hooves connected with hooves, and Dash once again helped Pinkie use her as a springboard to escape the falling building—which still had yet to start collapsing. After launching Pinkie away and above their earthbound enemies, Dash nimbly flipped back onto her chest and took to the air.

She was not a moment too soon. The structure, which was made of stone and multiple stories tall like almost every other structure in Inner Canterlot, shook and buckled under the power of the unicorns' spell. It fell in on itself, and several tons of dust and rubble were pushed out into the surrounding streets. By this time, Dash was long gone, having joined Pinkie Pie in facing the three unicorns.

They threw a volley of shards, which Pinkie half-evaded and half-knocked out of the air with her own sharpened steel. Next was a volley of incandescent red magical missiles, but how could the puppets know that both Pinkie and Dash's weapons could deflect even those?

Still, the earthbound puppets who had not been destroyed by the collapsing structure were closing in behind them, and getting close to the three unicorn puppets was suicide. Soon they would be overwhelmed.

Applejack's timing could not have been more perfect.

She burst through the wall behind them, sending small pieces of stone showering down to the cobbles beneath her. She was covered in her massive set of armor, and when she landed on the street, the stones beneath her cracked. Dash marvelled for a moment at the sheer amount of momentum one would need to break through a solid stone wall headfirst.

Rarity came in after her—or rather, her weapon did. The three ponies all moved slightly to avoid *Vorpal's* glittering diamonds as they shot out from behind Applejack. The unicorn puppets were forced to deflect them or die, and so obviously chose the former. That was all well and good; the diamonds were only a cover for Pinkie Pie's corded harpoon, which she fired into the stone balcony that the unicorns stood upon.

Rarity gingerly stepped out from behind Applejack, and Dash noticed a diamond-shaped gem gleaming at her throat—the Element of Generosity. Applejack's armor sported her own Element. With Twilight's enchantments, their coats deflected shrapnel and splinters as though they were confetti.

"There was a door six feet to our left, Applejack," Rarity said in her operatic tones. "You actually *damaged* the door frame as you burst through the wall beside it."

Their collective consensus was clear: Dash and Pinkie would fend off the mass of constructs coming at them from the street; Rarity and Applejack would take care of the three unicorns. Assist as required.

Pinkie tossed the cord that trailed her harpoon to Applejack as she loaded another blade. Applejack took the length of braided metal, wrapped it around a foreleg, then tugged on it with the strength of a colossus. The entire balcony was torn away from the building just as Dash and Pinkie turned to meet the oncoming throng.

With a beat of her wings, she sent herself somersaulting through the air above the first puppet and slashed downward at its head. It dispersed just as she landed and crouched low to avoid the series of diamonds that Rarity had sent into the group. She had time to come up and drive the back of her blade through an earthpony's eye, then wrench it out and send the tip into another's heart. She flipped into the air to avoid the diamonds as they made the return trip, then sent herself downward with a beat of her wings.

As she moved through the space between her and the ground, Dash called the power of lightning.

It was a difficult and somewhat exhausting thing to do, even for a pegasus of her calibre. Still, she wasn't about to let Rarity come away with more kills than her. As Dash hit the ground, lightning arced out to the half-dozen puppets closest to her with deadly force, and they were all slain instantly.

With a small break in the puppets around her, Dash pumped herself through the air back towards the unicorns. They had all cushioned their fall with magic, and were standing amidst the rubble of the fallen balcony. The puppets had conjured a force field to ward away Applejack's kick—which had been about as effective as an umbrella in a cyclone. The recoil from their

breaking shield had sent the unicorns sprawling. Now it was just a question of how many they could destroy while their defenses were down.

Dash skidded to a perfect stop above one of the three within a heartbeat, then drove the point of her blade through its chin and into its brain. Applejack pulverized a skull, and the stone beneath it, with her brutish strength. Each of them moved as Pinkie Pie, over fifty feet away, vaulted into the air and took a perfectly aimed shot at the third puppet.

The puppet came to just in time to deflect the oncoming blade, and was instead destroyed by the three diamonds that ripped through its neck. Over fifty feet away, Pinkie Pie landed on a quartet of similar gems in midair.

She was brought over the small swarm of puppets and leapt to stand beside her friends as they faced down the diminished group of enemies. Rainbow Dash twirled her weapon in anticipation. Applejack ran a hoof along the brim of her stetson. Pinkie Pie brandished her loaded forelegs. Rarity blew an errant strand of mane out of her eyes as *Vorpal* reassembled beside her and was levelled at the oncoming horde. Not a single one of them needed to speak a word. They all knew that they were thinking the same thing:

This was *hardly* fair.



“Rainbow Dash,” Applejack said once they were deep beneath Canterlot and heading back to their rooms.

“What’s up, AJ?”

Applejack stopped, and Rainbow Dash, Pinkie Pie, Rarity, and Fluttershy—they had met up with her at the cannery—all stopped with her. “We need to talk, Dash.”

Dash wasn’t much for uncomfortable conversation topics. But then, who was? “What?”

“It’s about Twilight, sugarcube.”

Of course it was. “We aren’t having this conversation.” She made to move past Applejack, but the earthpony blocked her way.

“We don’t know exactly what went on between you and Nihilus, and we don’t need to.

But Twilight—”

“I *said,*” Dash said angrily, “We aren’t. Having. This. Conversation.” She gave Applejack a shove, but her obstinate friend didn’t move an inch.

“You aren’t okay, Dash! You hardly talk at all anymore and you’ve been avoiding Twi like the plague. You get so into fighting the puppets it’s like—”

“I *like* it?” Dash looked into Applejack’s eyes, challenging her.

“Like you’ve got something to *prove.*”

“Forget it, AJ. I’m fine. I don’t need—”

Fluttershy pushed her way in between Applejack and Dash and looked the pegasus in the eye. “She needs *you.*” Dash was shocked to see that Fluttershy looked almost... angry?

“She’s talking to herself. Hearing voices. She doesn’t get any sleep at night and she’s avoiding the parents who she thought she was never going to see again. The last time any of us spoke to her was two days ago. She won’t listen to us, Dash. And you understand better than anypony here what’s wrong.”

Dash backed away. “None of you understand.”

“Ah *understand,*” Applejack said, raising her voice. “That you aren’t helping a friend in need.”

A friend? Hardly. Dash took another step back. “You guys can’t ask me to do this. This isn’t fair!”

“It isn’t,” Rarity said quietly into her ear. “It isn’t fair that the remains of my life’s work and my only home lie rotting in Ponyville.”

Fluttershy still looked angry. “It isn’t fair that I haven’t cared for a creature in over two weeks.”

Applejack was next. “It ain’t fair that Ah haven’t seen my family since the day Ah almost died.”

“If they know who we are,” Pinkie Pie said somberly, “how do we know any of us will have homes to go back to?”

“We’re supposed to save the world,” Rarity said. “But I think Nihilus got something

right—Twilight is what leads us to victory every time. Twilight is our power. And Twilight is *killing* herself. She *needs* you, Rainbow Dash, and we need *her*."

Rainbow Dash quivered and backed against the wall. "I..." She couldn't possibly talk to Twilight. Twilight *knew.* But if she really was Twilight's only hope...

Dash's next words came out as a whimper. "I'll do it."



She found Twilight in a smaller room nestled in the corridors between their quarters and the mess. Apparently, Twilight had not actually been sleeping in the room she shared with Fluttershy for the past two nights. Normally the expansive maze would have made the unicorn impossible to find, but Dash could just tap Twilight Sparkle through their harmonic connection and learn not only her location, but the exact layout of the maze around her. It made the endless hours she had spent memorizing the layout of the thing with Pinkie Pie redundant.

Getting Twilight to actually stay and talk to them for more than a couple seconds was apparently something her friends could no longer do. What was worse, they still had no idea what was driving the mare to act so strangely. Dash hoped that Twilight would stick around and listen to her, even if it meant having the conversation that she had been dreading. Twilight *knew.*

Like every one of the Labyrinth's original doors, the one leading to Twilight's hideout was made of metal. As Dash approached it, she heard a single voice coming from inside. Twilight was talking to somepony.

"No, no! My name is Twilight Sparkle. I am Twilight Sparkle."

Twilight was practically shouting, and sounded extremely distressed. Whoever was in the room with her, they were making her upset. Could it be her parents? Fluttershy had said she was avoiding them. Luna? Luna could certainly be... distressing.

"Stop it!" Twilight cried suddenly. *"No no no* no!*"*

Dash burst through the door without a second thought. The room inside was small, and sported little furnishings other than the standard table, fireplace and magelights. Twilight stood in the center of the room, her back to Dash, looking over a half-dozen maps strewn across the tiny worktable. She was alone.

“You just want me to kill them,” she said to herself. “You’d just kill them all with a smile on your face. You aren’t Twilight Sparkle.”

Twilight had not even noticed Dash’s entrance. Her mane, which was normally straight as a razor blade, was a tangled mess of stiff locks springing out in all different directions. Her coat was matted and unkempt. As Dash watched, Twilight stomped a hoof against the table and began to shout.

“*Don’t. Call. Me. Kiddo!”* As she spoke, every magelight in the room dimmed and the fire burning in the fireplace turned purple.

“Twilight?”

Twilight’s head snapped around and she locked eyes with Dash, and the lights in the room slowly returned to normal. The skin around her eyes was pink and puffy, giving her the appearance of somepony who had recently been crying. Twilight didn’t say anything.

Dash didn’t say anything either. What was there to say? The silence hung between them, suffocatingly oppressing. Dash had to say something, anything:

“Are you okay?”

Slowly, Twilight raised an eyebrow.

Dash shifted uncomfortably under Twilight’s gaze. She *knew.* “I uh, I guess not, huh?”

“What gave you that idea?”

Sarcasm was good. At least, Dash thought sarcasm was good. Twilight might be willing to talk. Now what?

“You were talking to yourself.”

Twilight snorted. “Tell me about it. I can see why she had so much trouble.”

She wasn’t giving Dash much to work with. “Why who had so much much trouble?”

Twilight cocked her head to one side. “Nihilus, of course. Isn’t that why you’re here?”

She *knew.* “No! I mean, I’m just here to... to...” Dash struggled with the words.

“To help me.”

“Yeah.” Now that she said it, it seemed rather weak.

“No need to worry,” Twilight said, “I’ll be fine.” She turned back to her table. “You can go now.”

“You aren’t fine! You’re hiding from your friends and your parents so you can scream at yourself!”

“I told you,” Twilight snapped, “I didn’t mean to say those things out loud. And it’s clear to me that I can’t hide from my friends even if I want to.”

“But *why* are you hiding from them?”

“Them?”

At this, Dash’s heart sank. “I meant—”

“That you and I aren’t friends. I may be a bit thick when it comes to communicating with other ponies, but I got *that* message, Dash.”

Dash gritted her teeth. Why was Twilight being so *difficult?* “This isn’t about you and I,” she said.

“It’s just about me. Everyone else has failed so now you’re the only pony left to fix me. Because as has become increasingly apparent, I’m broken.”

“I—” Dash was tired of being evasive. “That is exactly what this is about.”

Twilight seemed a little taken aback. “Is it now?”

“Rarity thinks you can’t handle seeing how much your mother has changed. Applejack thinks the stress of being in charge has gotten to you. Fluttershy thinks you’re afraid of becoming like Nihilus. Pinkie Pie won’t call you anything but Sparkle and insists that you’re two minds in one body—which almost makes sense after seeing you scream at yourself.”

“And what do *you* think, Rainbow Dash?”

Dash had to stop and think about her question. “I... don’t know,” she finished weakly. “We haven’t really talked since the night before you went to see Celestia.” Dash didn’t even remember what they had talked *about*. It hadn’t seemed like an important conversation at the time.

Twilight turned back to the table and spoke to the empty room before her. “Rarity is right.

My mother used to sing me to sleep and tuck me in at night. It made me feel safe. Now she tells me that if anything tries to hurt me again, she'll..." Twilight sighed. "It doesn't make me feel safe.

"Applejack is also right. The recruitment initiatives were an overwhelming success. Just like everything else I've done since I got here. There are now over a thousand ponies looking to me for leadership. Everypony comes to *me* when something goes wrong. The workload is overwhelming, and there's *nopony* that *I* can go to who will help me solve my problems—I'm the top of the pyramid. I got a good night's sleep last night, and it was my first in over a week. You know how I managed it? I made a spell to knock a pony unconscious instantly, then cast it on myself.

"Fluttershy is right, too, but I don't think you need me to elaborate as to why. I lived with every action Nihilus took, and every twisted thought behind them. I became much more like her than anypony is willing to believe, in the end."

"You aren't like her," Dash said somberly.

"That's the thing, Dash—Pinkie Pie is more right than any of them. I didn't want to believe it at first, couldn't face the fact that I wasn't who I claimed to be. That's when I started hearing voices. Twilight, whispering in my ear from the back of my brain. At first she'd help me with magic. Help me focus. But I'm keeping her down. She wants out, and I won't let her out."

Dash took a step from Twilight as a feeling of dread began to eat away at her insides. "What are you talking about, Twilight?"

"That's who I'm talking to, Rainbow Dash. My darker half. That's why I can't talk to my parents or my friends. Because they think that I'm somepony I'm not. Because I'm keeping a terrible secret."

"Twilight?"

Twilight turned to face and breathed out a single sentence:

"I am not Twilight Sparkle."

Nihilus leaned down, placing her muzzle next to Dash's ear. "I was counting on you to be too stupid to realize that little fact before it was too late," she whispered. "And lo and behold*, you did not fail to disappoint." She slowly drew her horn down along Dash's neck and brought the point to rest directly against the center of her chest. "No, you imbecilic little fool." Her voice had become a hiss.*

"I am not Twilight Sparkle."

Dash had crossed the room, kicked out the unicorn's legs, and pinned her to the floor in a heartbeat. The edge of her blade dug into the groove of the unicorn's chin, and she kept a close watch on her horn, ready to respond to even the tiniest flash of magic.

"Dash?" the unicorn looked up at her with an expression of pure terror, and Dash was forced to acknowledge one simple fact: this *was* Twilight. Or at least, it certainly wasn't Nihilus. And Dash had stopped just shy of killing her.

Dash recoiled immediately, dropping the blade that Twilight had made her to the floor with a clatter. "I..." She began. But what could she say?

There were tears in Twilight's eyes. Dash had made her cry. "I'm sorry," she said weakly.

Twilight picked herself up off the floor. "It's okay." she said. "Poor choice of words."

"It isn't okay," Dash said. "It was *wrong.*"

When Twilight spoke it was barely a whisper. "I was wondering when you were going to bring her up."

Dash didn't want to talk about Wrong. "You don't have to say it like that," she said. "I know you know."

Twilight cocked her head again. "Know what?"

Dash had to sit down. Had it really never occurred to Twilight? "I *am* Wrong. Or at least I was. They all think that her spell made me into something I'm not, but the truth is..." Dash swallowed. "The truth is that I did it all myself. I tried to stop, I really did, but I couldn't fight it. Wrong was just a name I gave myself so that I could feel less of the pain. I *hated* every one of you. I tried to *kill* Applejack and Fluttershy. There isn't anything I did as Wrong that I'm not capable of doing now. The spell just helped me along."

"Is that why you won't talk to me? Why you barely talk to anyone else?"

"I don't talk to anypony else because they all think I was a victim, like you. They think that the spell was something I overcame at the last minute to save everyone. The truth is that Fluttershy broke it as I willingly choked the life out of her. And I'm the Element of Loyalty."

Now Dash couldn't look at Twilight. "I don't talk to you," she said quietly, "because every time I hear your voice I want to get down on my knees and lick the dirt from your hooves. I learned early on to do what she wanted me to. Do you have any idea what it's like for a pony like me to feel that way? Every time I see you I want to follow your every command, and I hate myself for it. I hate myself so much I can hardly breathe."

“You couldn’t have resisted that spell, Rainbow Dash.”

“I’m the *Element* of *Loyalty*!”

“Which is exactly *why* she came for you first! Most unicorns aren’t even *capable* of the kind of power that spell requires. She hit you with over *four times* the amount of energy the template calls for. That you broke free with the ability to form coherent *sentences* is astounding, let alone beat Nihilus half to death!”

“Somehow that doesn’t cheer me up.”

“Well it should. Ponies *choose* who they are, Dash. The spell she used took that choice away from you. *Anypony* would have done what you did.”

“That still doesn’t change the fact that I remember everything I did. That I know what I’m capable of. That I want to beg and scrape every time I hear your voice.”

“I’m sorry, Dash. I can’t change that.”

Then Rainbow Dash got an idea. “Yes,” she breathed. “Yes you can.” She looked up at Twilight, who was already backing away from her.

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “I wouldn’t.”

“You can take my memories, can’t you?! You could make all of this go away.” Dash began to step towards her.

“No, Rainbow Dash. You’d become an abomination.”

“I’m an abomination now!” she shrieked.

“I can’t!”

“Yes you can!”

“I *won’t!*”

“Why *not*?!”

“You don’t know what it’s like for me!” Twilight cried. “I see magic in *everything*. It’s like a second language to me—one that the world never stops speaking. Other ponies see the formulae and the numbers and the symbols but they miss the intrinsic *beauty* of it all! Magic is a

force of *life*, not just a tool to be used. The very nature of the power that I wield cries out for the goodness in ponykind, cries out with the need to create, to improve the lives of us all.

"I am not Astor Coruscare. I am not General Esteem. I am not the tool that Celestia wants me to be. I cannot in good conscience take up the power to destroy, Rainbow Dash, not even if you think it could heal you. To do so would go against everything I believe in."

"And that voice in the back of your head?"

"*Don't.*"

"What does it believe in? You said yourself that ponies get to choose who they are."

"It's no better than her, Dash. You haven't heard the things it says."

"No better than her? You're the one taking away free will. *You're* the one who's no better."

"Dash, please."

"Ponies get to choose who they are? Then let me choose *this*. Take it *away,* Twilight. I don't want to feel like this anymore."

"I *can't!*"

"You *won't*. But I wasn't asking *you.* I was asking Twilight Sparkle. You're locking part of yourself away because you're afraid of it. You're fighting yourself, and now you're turning your back on me. You aren't Twilight Sparkle. You're a hypocrite."

The unicorn's eyes filled with tears, and before Dash could get another word in, she disappeared.

Rainbow Dash ran to the spot that Twilight had occupied only moments before. "Come back here!" she screamed. "Coward!" She flipped the table and watched all of Twilight's precious maps scatter. "*Coward!*" Before the table hit the ground, she struck it with a hoof and it exploded into splinters.

Only then did she realize that her task had been to help Twilight, not herself. Of *course* Twilight wasn't acting like Twilight—that was why Dash had come to her in the first place. And she had failed.

"Well," Dash muttered to herself amidst the ruins of the broken table. "That went well."



“I am not Twilight Sparkle. Classic.”

“I needed to get her off the subject of me and onto the subject of Wrong.”

“Because you wanted to help her, or because you can’t bear to think about me?”

“Both,” Sparkle found herself admitting. *“You know I can’t lie to myself.”*

“You can’t do anything,” Twilight retorted. *“That’s the problem.”*

“I’ve done things!” she said defensively. *“I organized and recruited eight hundred ponies!”*

“Twilight Sparkle could have done that without going insane, and helped her friends in the field besides.”

“I won’t set you loose.”

“Because of some twisted sense of self-preservation!”

“Because you’re a monster!”

“I am!” Twilight declared. *“But both of us together wouldn’t be! Your compassion, my brutality! Your brilliance, my pride! Your logical approach combined with my cold-heartedness would mean we would be a pony who could do what needed to be done. We wouldn’t suffer from guilt or ideals as we gave Esteem his comeuppance. We would be Twilight Sparkle. We would be perfect. We would be unstoppable.”*

“Listen to yourself! The old Twilight Sparkle would never—”

“The old Twilight Sparkle is dead, and the new one never woke up. You know what she was capable of by the time Nihilus died.”

“She didn’t want to be that pony. She put you away.”

“But would she still do that now? Why don’t you come over here and we’ll find out?”

Sparkle—just Sparkle—rubbed her temple with a hoof. The Twilight Sparkle who wrote Princess Celestia weekly letters and learned about the magic of friendship was not a thing of the past. That Twilight Sparkle would live on through her while the monster she had become would remain locked away. She'd rather let Twilight drive her insane than succumb and become who knows what kind of pony.

"Are you going to say something?" Unimpressive asked slowly. "You just kind of popped in and started staring at the wall."

Sparkle looked around to find herself in the war room. Was that where she had teleported herself to? Unimpressive was the only pony present. "Why are you here?"

"I'm meeting your mother to discuss two of our magical recruits," he said. "Why are *you* here?"

"I don't know," she said dumbly, "this is just where I aimed, I guess."

"You look like trash," Unimpressive remarked. "Your mom's going to flip."

"You aren't going to ask me if I'm okay?"

He laughed. "What kind of a stupid question would that be? You obviously aren't."

Sparkle shut her eyes. "I should go."

It was then that her friends burst one of the metal doors and trampled into the room. Sparkle immediately considered teleporting away, but stopped when she saw the looks on their faces—not concern or anger, but panic. She noticed one of them was missing.

"Where's Applejack?"

"Holding them off," Fluttershy answered through labored breaths.

"Holding who off?

"They're here, Twilight. Puppets, in the tunnels. South and southwest."

"They know where we are," Sparkle said softly. "We have to get everypony out."

There was a blinding purple flash, and Twilight's mother appeared beside her. She took the room in at a glance.

She was covered in blood.

“We’re under attack,” she said to Sparkle. “The north and east are crawling with royals.”

Sparkle wasn’t supposed to give orders in battle. “Where’s Luna?”

“In the field,” Unimpressive said. “Above ground.”

This was bad. Sparkle couldn’t handle working under pressure. “We need to use the southwestern,” she said, doing her best to sound authoritative.

“It’s collapsed,” said the voice of her father. Of course he was coming. He’d just had to run all the way here.

Midnight joined their group. “So is eastern and northeastern. And the two passages between quarters and mess.”

“What does that leave?” Unimpressive asked. Everypony turned to Sparkle. She knew the Canterlot labyrinth by heart.

Except that was the problem. “Nothing,” she said numbly. “It leaves nothing. We’re trapped.”

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Chapter Fourteen: The Battle of Canterlot

A thanks goes out to The Prereaders