

# The General



“Seriously,” Twilight said as she galloped after the orange knight. “What do I call you?”

The unicorn ducked into a nearby bookstore, and Twilight was forced to follow. She had been following him through the streets of Canterlot for only a couple seconds, and they were moving ever closer toward the conflict. Twilight heard a heavy rumbling from somewhere outside, and the heavy shelves lining the shop shook and rattled.

The other unicorn smiled wickedly at Twilight from under his tousled brown mane. “Keep using Sir Unimpressive. I like it.”

“But you have to have a *name*, don’t you?”

Sir Unimpressive led them past the heavily laden shelves to a door at the back of the bookshop. “Of course I have a name,” he said, his smile never leaving his face. “I just like yours better.”

He lead her into a smaller street, a road that Twilight was not familiar with. Most of the surrounding buildings were intact, and none of the bridge-ways above them had collapsed, so Twilight reasoned that the street had not experienced any serious fighting.

“Now,” the knight stated matter-of-factly. “We stick close to the buildings and avoid drawing the attention of any trueponies. Got it?”

Twilight’s head was still reeling from the magic drag. Meeting up with the inner city loyalists was their ultimate goal, but she was supposed to meet her friends first. She hoped that everypony was okay. She considered for a moment just what exactly she was doing. “Why am I following a stranger in a black robe?”

“Because,” Sir Unimpressive said as he lifted an eyebrow and puffed out his chest. “Of my natural charm and trustworthy appearance.” With that, he took off down the street, hanging close to the storefronts as he galloped away.

Twilight gave him a flat look before taking off after him. She wasn’t a very physically

active pony, and the knight set a grueling pace. It wasn't long before he had to stop and wait up for her.

Twilight's lungs were burning by the time she caught up with Unimpressive. "Why," Twilight managed between heavy breaths. "Why are we running? There's no other ponies around."

Sir Unimpressive's eyes widened, and Twilight was suddenly thrown to the ground as he struck her with a blast of telekinesis. She hit the cobblestones hard, grunted, then looked up to see the knight erecting a quarter-dome of red light in front of himself. A cluster of broken wooden beams collided with the shield just after it appeared, and the force of the impact was enough to shatter the hardwood. Twilight cringed as she was showered with splinters and sawdust.

Unimpressive batted two more incoming projectiles out of the air with red bursts of moment-field, then turned to Twilight. His expression was one of focus and rage. "Inside!" he shouted.

Someone was trying to kill her.

Her heart thundered in her chest, and she found herself at a loss for what to do. She clumsily got to her hooves, then looked around dazedly. She was thrown to the ground as Unimpressive caused an incoming hunk of stone to explode in midair. "What are you waiting for?" he shouted. "*Run!*"

The message finally go through to Twilight, and she turned and ran, pushing herself through the doorway of another shop. Once inside, she collapsed against the wall and began to hyperventilate, trying to figure out what to do next.

She could die. Right here, in the middle of Canterlot, she could be struck by a block of wood or a stone and her skull would cave in. Or a unicorn puppet could punch a hole in her with one of their metal shards, or turn her to ash with a bolt of energy. An earthpony could choke her to death, or crush her into pulp. A pegasus could break her neck or drop her from such a height as to turn her into a smear on the pavement.

It wouldn't be a noble sacrifice, or a tragic downfall. She would simply *die*, like Coconut had only minutes ago. Her friends would wonder why she never came to meet them, slowly realizing that she never would. Harmony would die with her, and Titan would win. Celestia would perish as a mortal pony, and Luna would be left with a hopeless war.

It was such a solid, simple, terrifying fact that Twilight couldn't focus on anything else. She'd put her herself in danger before, but never *alone*. This was different.

Celestia might have shaped Twilight to be a strategist. She might have ensured that Twilight knew the labyrinth, and that Twilight could organize and mobilize large groups of ponies should she ever need to lead a militia beneath Canterlot, but the Princess had never prepared Twilight for this.

In her mind, Coconut jumped in front of Esteem's blade shard once again, and her throat exploded into a blossoming fountain of crimson as she fell to the ground and Twilight's vision blackened.

"What am I doing?" she whispered to herself. She wasn't a war unicorn. She was a pampered student from Canterlot.

"What are you doing?" Twilight noticed for the first time that Unimpressive was standing over her. "Get up, we need to move."

She stared up at him dumbly. "What happened to the—"

"I killed them. Now let's go. We're barely on the edge of this conflict."

"You *killed* them?"

Unimpressive tilted his head and regarded her for a moment. "Would it help if I told you they were puppets?"

Twilight bit her lip. "I... suppose..."

"They were puppets. Now in the interest of not dying, shall we go?"

Twilight got up. "Why is there so much fighting going on?"

Sir Unimpressive snorted. "Is that a serious question?"

Twilight was starting to develop a dislike of the other unicorn. "Why wouldn't it be?"

He shook his head and began to move to the other side of the shop. "You broke the barrier, kid. Your guys from outer Canterlot are coming in and there are plenty of ponies in inner Canterlot who want to get out. No pony knows how long the barrier is going to stay down, so everypony's making a run for it *right now*. We're covering them, so that the puppets don't run the fleeing civilians down in the streets."

"They'd *kill* them just for trying to get out of the inner city?"

They had reached the front of the shop, and Unimpressive was looking through each of

the windows, pulling blinds down with a hoof and peering outside before moving to the next. "Puppets only ever follow orders. There isn't a drop of equinity in them."

"But who would order them to kill *civilians*?"

The knight gave a humorless laugh. "You've never met the General, have you?"

Twilight felt as though her blood had suddenly turned to ice. "Yes," she said softly. "Yes I have."

Sir Unimpressive turned and regarded her seriously. "Yeah you look like like somepony who's met the General right now, alright." He turned back to the windows. "In the inner city he's a legend. You can fight the puppets. You can fight the trueponies. If you're me, you can even fight the Cadet. But if you see the General, you *run*. Son of a bitch kills for a living. He isn't natural. There's only one pony who's crazy enough to fight him head on." He looked at Twilight, seeming to ponder something for a moment. "Actually..."

The knight looked through another set of blinds once more, then nodded. "Okay Sparkle, we're running to the greenery up the street to our left. There's a little bit of fighting going on, so we'll have to be quick. I'll lead and draw their attention, you follow."

"We're going out *there*? Isn't this where all the fighting is?"

"Yeah, well, we tried the back way and that didn't work out too well, so I figure if we run through the conflict zone screaming, we'll fit in and nopony will notice us. Follow my lead." He walked towards the door.

"Are you crazy? I'm not going out there!"

Unimpressive leaned up against the door, as if testing its weight. Then he turned to Twilight. "Of course you are," he said with another wicked grin. "You want to know why?"

"Humor me."

"Because the only pony who stands their ground against the General is named Starlight Sparkle."

Twilight felt her eyes widen in shock as her mouth dropped open. Before she could say anything in response, the knight had blown the door off its hinges and stepped out into the street.

Twilight marvelled at what Unimpressive considered to be "a little bit" of fighting. Two bridge-ways had collapsed, and puppets occupied the streets in droves. Loyalists were fighting

from within and atop the tall stone structures that characterized inner Canterlot.

Several of the red-maned unicorn puppets turned to the knight as the door exploded outward. He pointed with a hoof at another point down the road. "Look," he cried. "A shameless distraction!"

To the immense discredit of the puppets, most of them looked.

"Follow meeeeeeeeee!" He cried as he took off across the urban battlefield.

Twilight stared after him in disbelief. The unicorn was quite clearly insane. Unfortunately, he also knew her mother. Twilight had little choice. She ran after him.

Sir Unimpressive had been right about one thing: the puppets focused exclusively on him. Twilight watched as he deflected several flying shards of steel and then tossed a couple hundred pounds of debris at his adversary, running all the while. He spun to knock a flying stone out of the air, grinning manically as it burst into a cloud of dust.

Twilight ran after the knight as fast as she could, trying to keep her head low. She knew that if any of the unicorns turned their attention to her for even a second, it would be over. She had no way of defending herself, and Unimpressive was too busy blocking the shots that they were aiming at him to pay attention to her. Her hooves beat against the ground and breath came out in rough gasps as she struggled to keep up with the knight.

At last he broke the door off of another structure and dove inside. Twilight followed, stopping to catch her breath in the relative safety of the building as the knight began to bar the open doorway by piling up furniture and debris.

"You know my mother," she gasped. "She's one of *you*."

"Her and your dad. Upstairs." He jerked his head toward the building's ramp.

Twilight followed him up the ramp, her mind brimming with questions. "Are they *crazy*? They'll be killed!"

Unimpressive looked at her over his shoulder. "I think that's the idea." He reached the top of the ramp and galloped across an intact bridge-way to the upper floors of an adjacent structure. It was a hotel.

Twilight followed, scurrying across the bridge-way as fast as she could manage for fear of being picked off. "What do you mean, 'that's the idea?'"

Unimpressive spoke as his hooves hammered down a flight of stairs to the ground level.

“Think, kid. What’s the one thing your parents love most in the world? The one thing they couldn’t stand to lose? I’ll give you a hint: they only had one.”

Twilight paused at the top of the stairs. “Their child,” she said quietly. She’d been so caught up with her own problems ever since waking up that she hadn’t even thought about it before.

“Bingo,” said Sir Unimpressive.

An earthpony puppet walked into the room, its hoof-taps muffled by the rich red carpet that adorned the ground floor. It stopped, obviously not expecting to encounter anypony inside, then lunged at the knight. Unimpressive rolled to the side as he tore a wooden support from the stairway’s banister, then plunged the makeshift weapon into the back of the puppet’s skull. He twisted it, and the sickening crunching sound of wood could be heard before the puppet vanished. Twilight cringed.

Unimpressive continued to speak as he lead them through the dark interior of the hotel. “Their daughter didn’t just *die*, you see. She was held down by the General as he made her into Titan’s monster. He made sure everyone knew. Then, the princess who you saved from her own nightmare? She killed you rather than set you free.”

Twilight shuddered. “So they joined the loyalists.”

“They broke, kid. Plain and simple. Sad and angry doesn’t begin to describe how they felt, but if it did I’d say Midnight took the *sad* while Starlight took the *angry*. They hate the General, they hate Luna, they hate Titan, and they hate Celestia.”

They pushed through another door, and Unimpressive had to light his horn so they they could see in the darkened hallway. “Celestia? Why *her*?”

“Because if you weren’t her star pupil Titan wouldn’t have wanted you in the first place. Because she put you in the line of fire and then didn’t come to rescue you. Because they gave her their eleven year old daughter and Celestia didn’t keep you safe.”

“That isn’t…” Twilight stopped. It was true. All of it was true. “Celestia loved me. It wasn’t her fault.”

“Well you can tell them that when we meet them, can’t you? Being one of the only real knights on our side, I taught them and a couple others to bladecast. Neither of them are very good, but us magical talents are strong enough in a fight to get away with it. Something wrong?”

Twilight looked at him flatly. “I woke up yesterday from a month long sleep. My friends have become an elite strike team working for Princess Luna. My parents joined the rebels

because they think I'm dead," she said. "And things keep trying to kill me. Yes, something is wrong."

Unimpressive nodded slowly, then offered her the flask of whiskey once more. Twilight shook her head stiffly, and he shrugged before taking a long pull of the flask himself. "Well," he said, "at least I'm having a good day."

From the darkness of a nearby doorway, another puppet emerged. It lunged at Twilight, and for once she managed to react in time. The puppet collided with a transparent violet barrier and then slid to the ground as Twilight drew back in shock.

Unimpressive put the puppet down with a burst of red energy. Then he turned to her. "When exactly were you going to tell me you had your magic back?"

Twilight had no idea how she reacted so quickly. "I... didn't know until now."

Sir Unimpressive gave her an incredulous look. "Magic drags are supposed to last for *hours*," he said. "You shook this one in *minutes*. No wonder you could break Empyrean's barrier when all the loyalist's ponies failed."

Twilight looked down at her hooves. "It's... nothing, really."

"Why are we sneaking through a hotel when you could probably take every puppet here? Let's go fight." He turned to go back the way they came.

"Stop!" Twilight called after him. He stopped. "We're not going to go fight."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't fight."

Unimpressive gave her a puzzled look. "Huh?"

"I can't. I don't know how." Except she did know how; she had read every word written in *The Power to Destroy*.

"It's easy," said the knight. "You hurt things with magic. Start by throwing objects around and just work your way up from there. You'll need a battle cry, too. Most loyalists use interchange between 'Celestia' and 'Twilight Sparkle' although you obviously can't use the second one. Incoherent screaming works, too. I go for intimidation factor with mine."

"I'm *not* going to fight."

He grunted, then continued walking down the hallway. “So it’s a morals thing, eh? You’ll grow out of that soon enough.”

Twilight doubted that she would “grow out of” her desire to not become a psychopathic monster. “No, I won’t.”

At last they came to a door at the end of the hallway, and the knight turned off the light of his horn. He nodded to the now visible crack of light coming from under the door. “Puppets,” he said quietly as they were thrown into near pitch darkness.

“What do we do?”

“Easiest way to the hideout is forward. We fight.”

“I’m not-”

“Shhh!” he cut her off. In the darkness, she heard the knight sigh. “Listen, Twilight. You’re right about one thing— I’m a knight. So I *know* something about having ideals. I served indirectly under General Masterstroke, the commander of every soldier in Equestria. He had instructions, you see, from Princess Celestia. Specific instructions for what to do if she was ever overthrown. Namely, overthrown by Nightmare Moon.

“Except when Titan returns, Esteem has a score to settle. He never could handle that Masterstroke was his superior despite the fact that war was his special talent. He blamed the fact that Celestia disliked him— and he was right, she did. So before Masterstroke gets to put his plan into action, Esteem skins him alive and hangs him from the palace gates. Paints the word ‘resist’ behind him with his blood. Our new General has a thing for blood, you see.”

Twilight was suddenly very aware of the fact that she was standing in total darkness with a stranger. “Why is this important?”

“Because who in their right mind is going to try and lead a rebellion after that?”

“You,” she breathed. “You were his second in command.”

“Heh. Not even close, kid, but I was the only willing to step up to the plate once Masterstroke met his end. I teach bladecasting to the few unicorns with the talent to perform and try to keep everypony organized. There’s no pay, but at least now I get to drink on the job. And Celestia’s specific orders were to resist as long as possible, no matter how hopeless things might seem. Because there was still hope. *You’re* that hope, aren’t you?”

The sixth Element of Harmony closed her eyes. “Yes.”



“Well I have some bad news for you, kid. You’ve got power. And not just unicorn power, which you seem to have in spades. *Real* power. There’s a reason half my loyalists scream your name when they charge into battle. They’ll be willing to die for you, Sparkle. That’s all on top of whatever you’re supposed to have that’s going to save us. More power, and power and ideals don’t mix.”

“You’re wrong. I don’t have to hurt others to do good.”

The burnt out lamps of the hallway rattled around them as the building shook slightly. There was still heavy fighting going on outside.

“I don’t disagree,” the knight said softly in the darkness. “But how much good is going to go *undone* from your inaction? How are you going to justify your actions when the enemies you spare your wrath turn around and kill countless ponies? How many innocent lives are going to pay for your selfish ideals?”

“That isn’t fair.”

“This whole world isn’t fair, Sparkle. Not since Titan. You want it to go back to the way it was? You want peace and happiness? You can’t hesitate to do what needs to be done.”

Twilight heard the rustle of his robe and the tinny noise of the lid being unscrewed from his flask of whiskey. He continued speaking moments later. “With me, it’s a couple here and there. I spend lives as little as I can, but don’t think I won’t spend one to save ten. And don’t think I won’t happily kill another pony to stop him from killing me.”

“So, what?” Twilight heard the intensity in her voice. “You’re saying the responsible thing to do is to become a *monster*?”

“Sometimes we have to do bad things for the greater good, kid. The ponies on the other side of that door might be civilians. They might be on our side. They might just be puppets. But they might also be members of the Royal Army, ponies who willingly signed up with Titan. And if they are, I’m going to kill them.”

“They’re real ponies. They deserve a chance.”

“They’re the enemy. They’re on the side that strikes down civilians as they try to leave the inner city. Regardless of circumstance, they made the choice, knowing full well that ponies like me will try to kill them.”

“So that’s it? They *knew* what they were getting themselves into?”

“You still aren’t getting it, Twilight. Maybe I can’t afford to do the right thing, but I can still

hurt the ponies who do the *wrong* thing. I can still console myself for all the evils that I have to do in the name of the greater good by taking a little darkness out of the world. They don't *deserve* anything more out of me. What they deserve is wrath. And so what if I take a little joy from it? I can't help the way I feel. I'm doing this because it's necessary, not because I want to."

Twilight was appalled. "Righteous judgement? That's how you justify murder?"

"Not judgement, exactly. Ask me what the name of my blade is, Twilight."

She heard the flask being tucked beneath his robe once more. Twilight desperately hoped that there weren't any living ponies on the other side of the door. "What?"

There was a hissing noise as the air in front of the knight was filled with a shaft of deep crimson light. The glow from the blade filled the hallway they stood in, and revealed Sir Unimpressive, who stood in front of Twilight, his back to the doorway. The light from the blade reflected off his eyes, giving them a hellish red glow. "*Vindictive*," he said harshly.

Then, he turned and blew the door to the next room into bits.

Twilight cringed as she saw that the interior of the room was filled not with puppets, but with ponies. From the way Sir Unimpressive brandished his blade, she judged that they were enemies. She closed her eyes as the vindictive knight let loose his battle cry:

"None of you are safe!"



After Titan's avatar was slain, there were no puppets left in the square. Luna stood alone at the center of the square, for Rainbow Dash had taken off as soon as the pegasus learned that Rarity and Twilight needed rescuing. Luna had not objected. More than anypony, Rainbow Dash was impossible to give orders to sometimes.

Instead she surveyed her surroundings. Most of the outlying buildings had been heavily damaged, and Titan had left numerous dead ponies to bleed out on the stone ground. There were far more survivors than there were dead, though, and all of them were staring at her, motionless.

It did not unnerve Luna. She had been a princess for over a hundred years before being imprisoned in the moon, and she was no stranger to attention or battlefields. She faced them all,

standing tall and doing her best to look regal and imposing— which, considering her century of practice and her status as mistress of the night, was effective. Luna had no idea how the loyalists would react to her presence: after all, they were supposed to hate her. Still, they had exercised good sense and helped her in her fight against the king.

She looked impassively at the faces of the battle-worn loyalists, knowing full well that their loyalty was to her sister's crown and not hers. They looked back, at the princess who had attempted to cast their world into eternal darkness.

Then they bowed.

Not all of them; some simply stood and continued to stare. But the majority of the fighters, one by one, fell to the ground before her in a gesture of submission and respect. It was such a shocking and strange occurrence that Luna almost forgot what to do next.

"Rise," she commanded. They rose. Luna saw that none of them had the courage to approach her, so she strode towards the mare who had helped her earlier. "Tell me who is in command," she said, careful to phrase it so that it wasn't a question.

"You sent him to rescue Twilight Sparkle."

Luna frowned slightly. "Tell me where he will take her once he has her."

"To our hideout, most likely."

"Take me there. And I need another to rendezvous with my own troops and take them there as well."

Another one of the loyalists spoke to the mare. "You aren't seriously thinking about taking *her* to the hideout, are you?"

The mare turned to him. "Of course I am," she snapped. "You heard her: Twilight Sparkle is alive. Starlight needs to know."

"Think about who you're talking to, Buttercup. That's Princess *Luna*."

"And she saved your life not five minutes ago, you imbecile. Have you even met her before?"

"Well, no..."

"Good, so maybe considering she just saved all our lives, broke the barrier, and brought Twilight Sparkle with her, you could play nice?"

“I, uh...”

“That’s what I thought.” The mare turned to Luna and smiled. “If you’ll follow me, princess...”

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They took Luna to the loyalist lair, which was, unsurprisingly, located in the labyrinth.

“We don’t know the layout of the entire thing,” Buttercup called back to Luna as she guided them through the maze by the light of her horn. “No pony does. If the General and the Royal Army knew where we were, they could easily crush us. Thing is, they have no idea how to get here. You ever try mapping a three dimensional maze with something as stupid as a puppet when the maze itself is full of ponies who will gladly attack you?” She laughed.

“Tell me, er...” Luna had a dislike for some of the “softer” names ponies used nowadays. “-*Buttercup*. How many loyalists are there?”

“Oh, a couple hundred. Not much in a city of seventy five thousand, but it’s enough that we can cause some serious damage when we need to. We’re stretched out over one big section of the maze, with a couple smaller outposts in some of the other sections. We try to map out as much as we can, but we’re not even sure if it’s one big maze that runs under all of Canterlot, or a couple of separated smaller ones. Was it here a thousand years ago, Your Highness?”

Luna realized that Buttercup asking her a question. “Nay, er... *Buttercup*. Canterlot did not exist then. The capitol was in the Everfree.”

“Huh,” Buttercup remarked. “Makes you wonder who built it, huh? You know, Princess, you have a powerful voice...”

Luna sighed inwardly. She just kept *talking*. Was this why Luna never got along with the public?

She knew who built the undercity, of course. It had been Celestia, in preparation for Nightmare Moon’s return. While it was true Celestia had engineered Nightmare’s defeat and Luna’s subsequent freedom at the hooves of the Elements of Harmony, Luna’s twin sister was hardly a pony to limit herself to merely *one* master plan. Luna had little doubt that Celestia had ordered the construction of the underground maze almost a little less than a thousand years ago, then expunged almost all records detailing its layout from pony history.

Then, when the time came, should Nightmare Moon overtake her and rule Equestria, Celestia would still have an agent capable of sowing dissent from the safety of the maze. That unfortunate duty had fallen on the intellectual and reluctant unicorn, Twilight Sparkle, whom Celestia had taught not only the layout of the maze, but the acumen of warfare that she would need to employ it.

It was an incredible feat, Luna reflected, that Celestia had essentially been able to turn her star pupil into a weapon without Twilight ever realizing it. *That* was the true genius behind her sister's plan. With over a thousand years of practice, her twin had put decades into the formulation of a *backup* plan— one that, when it had turned out was unneeded, was never found out by its subjects.

Except now. Titan had returned, and Celestia's pupil was not just the only mortal pony alive to have read *Ponies Make War*— of this Luna was almost certain, as Twilight possessed the only two copies— but she had *also* read *The Power to Destroy*. Celestia had left her sister with a powerful ally indeed.

Luna also knew that Celestia had loved Twilight Sparkle: had loved her like a mother loves a daughter. What must she have felt, when she knowingly planted the seed of a military commander in the impressionable young filly's mind? More importantly, what must Twilight Sparkle feel now, upon realizing that Celestia had played her as a piece in the immortal game?

"We're here!" They had come to a beaten steel door set into the side of the dim hallway. Buttercup used her magic, and the door swung open with an objectionable creak. Luna was trying to make an impression, so she kept her face an expressionless mask as she stepped imperiously through the doorway and into the subterranean headquarters.

She took the lair in. The loyalist headquarters had clearly been in use for quite some time. Like their own base of operations in the labyrinth, they had selected one of the larger, two-story rooms as their command center. The floor was covered by cheap brown carpeting and torches cast a ruddy light from the featureless stone walls. The center of the room was dominated by a heavy round table covered in figures and maps— both printed and hoof-drawn. More centuries-old metal doorways led to what Luna presumed were the other sections of the loyalist hideout. It reasoned to stand that the hideout was accessible— and thus escapable— from many different approaches in the Canterlot undercity.

Luna took all of this in, as well as the half-dozen ponies seated around the table. She noted a dull white mare at the table taking *her* in with a wide-eyed look of shock. The mare— who looked strangely familiar— stared at the princess for only a couple of seconds before her shock melted away to reveal unbridled fury. With a flash of light, the enraged mare stood before the curious princess, a length of incandescent amethyst fluctuating in the air before her. She swung it at the alicorn.

Luna was liquid. In one smooth motion gifted by the grace of over a century of combat prowess, she ducked under the amaranthine weapon and simultaneously pivoted on her forelegs to strike the mare in the chest with her hind. She spun around to face Buttercup as her blade-wielding assailant was thrown backwards with just the right amount of force to daze her. Luna split her bladecasting robe into a swarm of wickedly amorphous bats, which rushed the other unicorn before turning into a thick black web and pinning her to the wall. She continued to pivot along her front hooves as she hammered her unicorn will into *Nadir*.

Her blade materialized as she completed her full circle, levelled at the mare she had sent across the room less than a second before. Luna stood facing the room, wearing a set of jet-black pegasine armor— alicorns cast blades out of nothing, and thus did not require bladecasting harnesses. She was almost half a head taller than anypony present, her eyes were glowing, and the air around her crackled as her voluminous mane of ether spun frantically. She had little doubt that she could destroy every pony present.

That was not her goal. She had realized who her assailant had been, and why she had been attacked. These loyalists did not *truly* wish to kill her, they were merely assaulting her for crimes they falsely believed she had committed. Luna could unleash death and destruction in spades, true— but again, she had another goal in mind.

She had thought about it for quite awhile. It was a most perturbing predicament: how would she get the loyalists to trust her? How would she bend the cell of rebellious ponies to her will, so as to use them as resource in aiding the Elements of Harmony? The answer had come to her upon examining the tiny figurine of Celestia that she kept close to her at all times. Luna might not have Celestia's patience or her depth of planning, but she was still over a century old. Of late, she had not gotten many chances to use her immortal wisdom and intellect.

Luna was just another piece, and the time had come for her to play her part. Or was it make her move? Yes; actors played parts, pieces made moves. And while Luna was certainly about to do some acting, there was a reason it was called the immortal *game* and not the immortal *play*.

Between the princess and Twilight's mother stood a cobalt stallion, wielding a blade of similar chroma.

"*Treachery*, Sparkle?" Luna hissed the accusation as her eyes began to glow. "Didst thou truly think a god so foolish?"

From her place on the floor, Twilight's mother propped herself up on her forelegs. Her husband spoke. "You know who we are?"

Luna glowered at the couple with as much menace as she could, briefly considering turning the water vapor around her into frost. No pony spoke, and she drew the moment of

silence out as long as she could, ensuring that every one of the loyalist commanders got a good look at their warrior goddess.

The moment lingered, but before it could pass, Applejack burst through one of the solid metal doors that dotted the walls. She was in her earthpony warplate, and the barding clanged and clacked loudly as the mare took two steps into the room, then froze at the sight of Princess Luna and the loyalists. Fluttershy, Pinkie Pie, Rainbow Dash, and Rarity filled the room behind her, along with the disgruntled stallion who had been sent to collect them. Rarity's coat was covered in matted blood.

Luna watched Applejack comprehend the scene before her. "What in *tarnation*?"

Rarity's blade was assembled in a heartbeat, and Pinkie Pie crossed her forelegs behind her back, then brought them forward with a click, armed with two of her blades. Rainbow Dash was standing next to princess Luna as though she had been there the whole time, wings extended and one hoof off the ground. Fluttershy let out a soft, "Oh my."

By now the other ponies that had been seated around the table had stood, but it was clear that they were woefully outclassed. Even Twilight's mother, a magical talent, had come at Luna in the most amateurish way imaginable, which led the princess to suspect that the mare knew next to nothing about bladecasting.

Luna needed to establish authority over the newcomers. "Say no words," she ordered simply, using her outdoor voice. Then, she turned to the group of loyalists who were not Twilight's parents. "Tell me who is in charge here." The way she spoke the words made it abundantly clear that it was in no way, shape, or form a request.

"Don't answer her!" Twilight's mother cried as she got to her hooves and recast her blade. "That *monster* killed my daughter."

At once, all of Twilight's friends opened their mouths to speak. "*Say no words!*" Luna said forcefully. Even Rainbow Dash obeyed.

Luna turned back to the loyalists, focusing on an aged pegasus who looked scared half to death of her. "Name thine commander!" she barked.

The pegasus staggered backward, then spoke meekly as he failed to meet her eyes. "W-w-we have no commander, Princess."

"What of General Masterstroke?"

"D-d-dead, Princess."

“Who replaced him?”

“No pony,” he said meekly. “We come to decisions jointly. There is no general anymore.”

The stallion who had brought the Element Bearers spoke, despite being pinned to wall by five of *Vorpal's* diamonds. “Don’t answer her questions, Noble. That’s Princess *Luna*.”

From behind her, Luna heard Buttercup’s muffled protests. She allowed the thick strands of arachnoid darkness to sink back to the floor and flow up and around her hooves to reform into her bladecasting robe.

Buttercup spluttered and gasped. “She saved our lives. Starlight attacked her.”

*Starlight*. Twilight’s mother’s name was *Starlight*.

“Of course I attacked her! She killed my daughter!”

Luna dipped into her unicorn magic and slammed the door behind her, cutting off Buttercup mid-protest. None of the loyalists seemed to notice.

“The Princess *obviously* does not come in peace!” protested an earthpony.

“Starlight attacked first!”

“With good reason! She killed Twilight Sparkle!”

“Twilight Sparkle was past saving! I’m sorry, Midnight, but it had to be said—”

“If you were a father—”

“Why don’t we let the Princess talk?”

“Maybe if she’d put that blade away—”

Luna watched them argue impassively, thankful that her team had the sense to say nothing and go along with her plan, despite not knowing what she was up to. The loyalists argued in circles, shouting at each other and occasionally shooting Luna or one of her ponies a nervous look. It was clear that they were not going to come to a conclusion. That they were not going to trust Princess Luna.

Luna watched as one of Rainbow Dash’s ears twitched. She shot a glance at Pinkie Pie, whose attention seemed to also have been caught by something else. The princess had been looking for these signs. She tuned in her own hearing, her senses slightly enhanced by her



pegasus magic, to hear a voice echoing from outside the chamber. She prepared to deliver her masterstroke.

“You never told me!” the familiar voice accused faintly. “You never, not even *once*, thought to *maybe* mention that we were going to the *labyrinth*? I know the entire thing by heart. We could have bypassed the fighting entirely!”

By now, several of the arguing ponies had picked up on the approaching voices and fallen silent. Luna opened the door behind her to let Buttercup back in.

A vaguely familiar, slightly slurred voice answered Twilight. “You didn’t even bring it up. You could have brought it up, you know. Something like ‘I can go anywhere I please while avoiding all danger, want to do that instead?’ And I would’ve been like ‘Yeah, let’s do that. That sounds good.’”

“I didn’t *bring it up*? What did you expect? ‘Good afternoon, my name is Twilight Sparkle, and I can circumnavigate the Canterlot undercity labyrinth.’ That’s how I greet all strangers.”

At the sound of Twilight speaking her own name, everypony in the room feel deathly silent. Fittingly, Starlight and her husband looked like they were hearing a ghost.

Her team parted, and Twilight entered the room with the bladecaster Luna had sent after her earlier. She took in Luna, who had *Nadir* raised, Rarity, who had somepony pinned to the wall, and her other friends in combat stances. She saw the group of loyalists around the table, who had ceased arguing to shamelessly and openly stare at her. Most of all, she saw her parents.

Luna made her play.

“Beloved subjects,” her voice smashed the silence like a sledgehammer shattering an ice sculpture. She used the word “beloved” the way Terra might say “mercy”. “I deliver to thee the last hope of *our* species, a mare of considerable renown. You may have heard of her.”

Twilight spoke softly. “Mom?”

*This* was Luna’s game. She might be able to win the loyalty of a few ponies on the battlefield, but the simple truth was that ponykind was *never* going to unite under *her*.

“The twice-proved saviour of ponykind and all of Equestria.”

“Dad?”

Luna needed a unified, cohesive rebel faction, but that wasn’t going to happen by her

alone. She could continue to be what they expected of her— a warrior goddess, a force of fear, an uncompromising dictator who had once tried to plunge the world into eternal night. But now, they would have the assurance that she was on *their* side. What was more bolstering than setting the demon you feared on your enemies?

“Prized pupil of my sister, her Royal Highness Princess Celestia. Also the most powerful unicorn in the world.”

Each of Twilight’s parents had tears running down their face. Her father found words first. “Twilight?”

They would unite, but not under Luna. Under the *known* quantity, under the closest thing they had to Princess Celestia, their beloved ruler. Under a pony whose honor was completely free of the ugly stains that marred Luna’s. Most importantly, under a pony who happened to be under Luna’s influence.

“Master strategist, accomplished leader. The only pony alive who can navigate the Canterlot labyrinth. The newly appointed leader of my own militia. Your daughter, delivered to you, back from the dead.”

Twilight was hugging her parents, her back to the Princess. Luna caught Starlight’s eyes, and the mother gave Luna a look of gratitude so deep and profound that Luna knew she would never be able to fully appreciate it— for the Princess was not a mother herself. Luna turned to the table of loyalists. It was all about *posturing*.

“General Twilight Sparkle.”



“I didn’t tell you,” Terra’s conversational tone rang throughout the room as she went about her task. “Somepony broke one of Titan’s magic bubbles. Just *shattered* it, really. I told you about the barriers, right?”

Celestia, occupied, did not respond to the question.

“In any case, I imagine that your daddy is none too pleased. I’m supposed to find out how Luna was able to undo his magic. He’s under the impression that no pony but you could do such a thing. What else were you supposed to tell me?” Terra brought a hoof to her chin, but whether she was contemplating the table before her or her own question Celestia couldn’t know.

“Ah!” she said at last, making a selection. “You’re supposed to tell me how you beat Nightmare Moon and Discord! If Titan really cared, he could just tear the information out of your mind, of course. But he doesn’t like making the trip out here. Remember that time I hit an artery?”

Terra had gotten too sloppy one day, and Celestia had thought she was going to die. Instead, her mother returned with her father in tow not ten minutes later. Titan had closed the wound with magic as though the feat weren’t blatantly impossible, scolded his wife, and left.

“In any case,” Terra carried on, “it’s obvious you’re just here to keep me occupied. He doesn’t actually care about information, being undefeatable and all.”

That was her father’s mistake. How could an alicorn of three thousand years be so hopelessly arrogant as to think himself invincible? Titan was a greater spellcaster than even Celestia had been; the alicorn wove magic with the meticulous care and patience of a master craftspony. Still, if there was a pony capable of undoing his work, it would have to be Twilight Sparkle. Not even Luna could match the sheer force of talent possessed by the Element of Magic.

It meant that Twilight was alive; there could be no other explanation. If Twilight was alive, then there was hope. Not just a distant hope, either— a real, immediate hope, something that ponykind could reach out and touch. They would not have to suffer for decades under Titan’s reign like they had with Discord.

Is also meant that Twilight was going to learn just what lengths Celestia had gone to in order to protect her kingdom. It meant that Twilight would learn that her beloved mentor, who had treated her like a daughter, had played her as a piece in the immortal game since she was eleven years old. Twilight would despise her.

Finally, it meant that Celestia could no longer afford to be patient.

Her head lolled from one shoulder to another. “You once told me,” she managed weakly, “that alicorns came in pairs.”

Terra snorted in derision. “We are *not* going to talk about *this*, Sunshine.”

Celestia persisted nonetheless. “Don’t call me Sunshine,” she grunted. “So what happened? Why are you so much younger than your husband?”

Terra regarded Celestia coolly as she slapped her daughter across the face with telekinesis. “You are not to ever ask me questions, Celestia. This you know.”

Celestia’s looked back up at her mother, her face numb. A dull ache throbbed in her cheekbones, but they weren’t broken. “Did he lock you under the world for a couple millenia just like your daughters?”

Another slap. “Silence!”

The impotent mare coughed. “That happens to you a lot, huh?”

One of Terra’s metal implements came to hover just under Celestia’s collar. There was a sound similar to a pony biting into an apple, followed by the former princess’s scream. Celestia carried on. “You go on about how beautiful you are. About how everypony loved you. Well you never sang to me, Terra. And I’m your daughter.”

With a crash, Terra violently upended the stone table and brought every single one of her tools to hover before the broken princess.

“You aren’t his wife; you’re his bruiser. You aren’t a queen; you’re a thug. That’s what he sees in you. Not beauty or value. Muscle. Everypony in the world despises you— even your own daughters.”

Real rage boiled behind Terra’s eyes as she snapped Celestia’s jaw shut. “You don’t want to say what you’re about to say, *Sunshine*.”

Her grip loosened, and Celestia managed to convincingly mimic a smile as she looked into her mother’s eyes. “He doesn’t love you,” she said triumphantly

A baleful shriek tore its way out of Terra’s mouth as the queen of the world sent every implement soaring towards Celestia in an assault that would surely kill her.

This was the moment; the time when Celestia put her entire face behind the act of lying. She exhaled slightly, parted her lips, widened her eyes, and tilted the edges of her mouth upward into something that was barely a smile. She looked at the swarm of blades coming towards her with a hope for release, and Terra saw her expression.

The Queen just barely stopped her tools before they turned Celestia into a pony pincushion. “You,” she breathed, “You’re trying to get me to kill you.”

Celestia hung her head.

“You want to die. You’ve probably been preparing the words you need to send me over the edge now for weeks.” Suddenly Terra was beside Celestia, her muzzle in the fallen monarch’s ear. “*Clever girl.*”

The Queen turned away and began to reorganize the tools of her trade. “Sadly...” She chuckled softly. “Not clever enough.”

It was hours later that Terra left to perform her duties. Celestia could not have given the exact time, as she no longer always knew the exact position of the sun. She had never developed the ability to tell time without it, as she had reasoned she would never have the need.

Terra had been extremely foolish, her newly spliced first mind thought well after she had gone. One would think that a being of almost a thousand years could maintain their composure, but then Celestia *had* also slowly worked out *just* what to say. Who would have thought that Terra’s sense of self-worth consisted almost entirely of the fact that she was loved? Loved, no less, by the very King she had betrayed. Perhaps her betrayal had really been an attempt to prove herself to her older husband. The thought was worth investigating later.

Her second mind marvelled at the fact that Terra had believed she wanted to *kill* herself. If Celestia had truly wanted to die, she would have found a much more efficient way of accomplishing the task. Terra believed she had seen through their play, but in reality it had simply hidden a much greater set of moves. Such was Celestia’s prerogative.

No, they did not want to kill themselves. Their goals were far more ambitious. Terra believed her powerless, but the Queen knew very little when it came to power.

Celestia’s third mind took the body— which was in very poor condition— and shifted the hidden blade so that it pressed against her hoof. *That* was what they had accomplished. First, they played Terra’s rage, asserting that she was unloved, and then they played her pride— Terra was overjoyed at having thwarted Celestia’s attempted suicide. Rage and pride were two things that Terra had in spades, and Celestia had blinded her with them. Terra had not noticed that she was short one of her precious little implements.

It was a dull thing, and it took Celestia some time to cut through the straps that bound them to the wall. They fell to the floor, then stood.

They could stand. That had been their biggest worry, that with their body in the state it was in, they wouldn’t be able to function. Certainly, her third mind felt intense pain, but after a quick diagnostic Celestia determined that they were suffering from nothing crippling.

They awkwardly limped over to Terra’s upturned table and examined their options for weaponry. Her second mind flattened the strong emotional response she experienced upon looking at the tools— they needed to think objectively. She had no clue when Terra was going to

return— her mother was extremely unpredictable.

Celestia was taking several enormous risks by attempting the escape with the limited information they possessed. Even if Terra did not return, they still had no idea where they were, or if there were other guards around. But if Twilight Sparkle was alive, Celestia was not going to wait for a perfect opportunity. Twilight would need them, so they would take the risk.

They would *always* take that risk.

They agreed upon a long blade meant for carving that curved wickedly to a needle point, and the third Celestia flipped it into her mouth. Their chamber had no doorway, so it was easy for Celestia to check around the corner with the reflection in the blade. They found one earthpony puppet in a stone hallway to her left, and that was it.

Celestia's first mind pondered for a moment why Terra would have only a single earthpony to guard her— the queen could conjure the puppets at will. It seemed much too easy.

Still, they had no other direction to travel but forward, and Terra was well known for her arrogance. The third mind stumbled into the hallway, brandishing the blade between their teeth.

The earthpony saw them, took them in, and charged. They expected this.

Celestia was in no physical condition to fight an earthpony head on, so they simply observed. They calculated every one of the earthpony's possible angles of approach, and the way that the third mind would counter each of them so as to quickly slay the minion. They eventually selected a course of action that left no room for failure.

The third mind simply spun and fell at the puppet as it neared. The puppet charged, but Celestia took the brunt of the blow with a shoulder, and the puppet pushed its own neck onto the blade she held in her mouth. As they crashed to the floor, the Princess worked the blade so as to ensure a kill, and the puppet dispersed. Celestia unsteadily got back onto her feet and rearmed herself. Then they proceeded down the hall.

Her first and second minds were immediately stricken by a sense of familiarity before that had made it halfway. It didn't take them long to determine what its source was: they had used to live here. This was the Palace of the Royal Pony Sisters in the Everfree Forest. Their escape had just gotten much, much easier.

The strain of maintaining a triple consciousness was weighing on the malnourished princess, so they merged back into a whole. Celestia was glad that Terra had not thought to deprive her of sleep: her mental capacities would have been crippled.

She checked around the corner to find another earthpony guard, this one with its back to

her. It was simple matter of sneaking up behind it and driving her blade into one of the six kill points located on the back of a pony's skull. Terra had taught her well. Celestia remembered the layout of the castle, and she knew exactly where she needed to go. She half-walked, half-limped down a spiral staircase as slowly as she could, keeping an eye out for more puppets.

She would not go directly to Ponyville. The journey was not a long one, but it would take her long enough that Terra would have returned before she made it. The Queen would undoubtedly scour the forest between Ponyville and the ruined castle. Instead, Celestia would travel inward, toward the Dark Heart of the Forest. She wouldn't actually *approach* the Heart; that would be suicide. Celestia intended to loop back around to Canterlot. She knew enough to make the denizens of the Everfree leave her alone, and she could forage enough to survive with.

First she needed to get clear of the broken-down palace. Terra could have had puppets in the air above the ruined palace, so Celestia slowly made her way downward toward the moat. It was little more than a glorified ditch, now, but it was her best chance of getting out without being spotted from the air. She momentarily split her mind once more to deal with the pain that came from rolling around in the dirt whilst covered in burns, then crept out along the ditch, hoping that she would go unsighted thanks to her camouflage.

Her hope was in vain. Less than twenty meters from the edge of the forest, she was brought face-first to the ground by a pegasus puppet.

Her heart thundered in her chest as she squirmed weakly under the brutish minion. It stood atop her with a hoof on the back of her neck, pressing her face to the dirt. It pinned all but one foreleg with its other limbs. In her weakened state, Celestia was powerless against the puppet.

*No*, she thought forcefully. She would not allow herself to be captured so close to freedom.

She thought about her subjects, who had been victims to Titan's reign for over a month. All of them had been forced into her father's nightmarish idea of a world, thrust into a place where the only way of life was war and violence. The thought made her angry. She thought about the upturned stone table back in the palace, and the plethora of gleaming instruments of torment scattered across the floor. She thought about Terra, smiling her beautiful smile as she chose which of them to use. The thought made her terrified. She thought about Twilight, a young mare who had once again become responsible for the fate of their world, and who had suffered a fate worse than death simply because she had been close to Celestia. The thought made her ashamed.

Celestia did not scream, because she didn't want to attract attention. She simply lashed

out with her free foreleg, as hard as her withered and broken body would allow her to, and broke the knee digging into the back of her neck. She knew enough to hit the puppet exactly where she was supposed to.

To her surprise, it let out a grunt of pain.

Celestia turned to see not a puppet, but a chestnut-coated pegasus of perhaps thirty years with a yellow mane. Her attacker was a living, breathing pony. One of the subjects she had sworn to protect. Except she wasn't his ruler anymore.

Titan was.

She had lost her knife, but it was a poor substitute for *Zenith* anyway. The pegasus recoiled exactly as she had determined he would, and Celestia threw her shoulder back and pulled her legs in with just the right amount of force to free her from its grasp. She struck out with one hoof as he regained his balance, hitting him just above the hinge of his jaw.

His mouth instantly sprang open, and Celestia stuffed her other foreleg down his maw. A look of shock crossed the pegasus's face, and Celestia pulled herself close to him, bit onto his mane, and pressed her free foreleg over his nostrils.

She would not go back to endless taunting and torture. She would not be forced to remain idle while her people suffered under her father's reign any longer. She would not be powerless. Celestia was a player in the immortal game, and this world *would* be a paradise for ponykind.

The pegasus tried to make some noise to warn other guards, but Celestia knew exactly what she was doing. She was physically weaker than he, but she had pinned his head under the weight of her entire body. He tried to pry her forelegs away, and when that failed, he beat at her and flapped his wings uselessly. He bit down, but Celestia did not relent. What was this minuscule iota of pain when measured against the totality of her experiences?

What was one pony life measured against the fate of their entire species?

"Not... powerless," she uttered as her victim stopped moving. "Never... powerless." Terra had been clever to enlist truepony guards; it had almost worked, had almost stopped her.

Celestia dragged the corpse into the Everfree Forest and hid it. She could not have the dead pegasus mark her passage. Then, she set off through the brush toward the Dark Heart of the Everfree Forest, refusing to stop for the rest that her body cried out for.

She wanted to cry with joy at having finally escaped. She wanted to break down and weep for the misguided pony she had slain. She wanted her legs to stop hurting, and food to eat



other than the bitter foliage of the Everfree. She wanted the *sun*. She wanted to be a *god* again.

Almost two hours later, Celestia was curled up in a poorly made shelter, absent-mindedly rubbing a foreleg despite the fact that it had been clean for over an hour. That was when lightning split the sky, when the earth shook, and storm clouds coalesced to release a torrential downpour of rain. It all happened within seconds. Celestia considered her mother's rage.

Terra had plenty of rage. Celestia could have said anything to get her mother to try to kill her. What she had chosen, however, were the words "he doesn't love you". Without Celestia to entertain her, Terra would be spending an awful lot of time with her husband. Except now Terra would fixate on Celestia's words. She would wonder just *what* exactly made her Titan's wife. She would begin to resent him.

Celestia was getting soaked, but it was warm enough out that she didn't mind. The rain was almost soothing where it didn't strike her burns. Alone in the Everfree Forest, the fallen princess felt a moment of peace for the first time in a month as she slid Terra and herself back onto the board of the immortal game.

Celestia was back.

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Chapter 12: [Entirely Predictable](#)

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