

# An Alicorn's War

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Captain Coconut Crunch led a group of over two dozen puppets and half a dozen truepony soldiers through the streets of outer Canterlot. As she moved, the ponies in the streets rushed to get out of her way. None of them would look at her or the puppets. The outer city might not have a strong loyalist presence, but that didn't mean its citizens loved the new regime.

*Well, Coconut thought to herself, it didn't have a strong loyalist presence until they showed up. Now I'm patrolling with thirty soldiers total.* The puppets under her command made her a little uncomfortable, but with the way things had been going recently, they also made her feel a little safer. *Although I'd feel a lot more safe if I had some of those unicorns.* Word amongst Emyrean's army was that even the five didn't fancy fighting Terra's unicorn puppets. Or at least, word was that the unicorn puppets could slow them down.

Those were only rumors, though, and Coconut had heard a lot of rumors about both sides. Some ponies said that General Esteem ate fillies and colts to sustain his eternal youth. The same ponies then turned around and said that the five were actually puppets in disguise.

Coconut, like any warm-blooded pony in Equestria, would have preferred it if Titan and Terra had never come. She would have liked it if Celestia still ruled. She couldn't change the past, however, and neither could any of the loyalists. Celestia was dead, and there was no way any amount of rebelling ponies was going to overthrow their new gods. They were *gods*, after all. Coconut was only trying to keep things orderly and make enough bits to put a roof over her head.

The captain was brought out of her thoughts as a jagged metal spike buried itself into the cobblestones thirty feet away from her. A thin cord ran from the end of the miniature harpoon, leading up to the rooftop of a nearby building. Her eyes followed the cord, and she saw an earthpony standing atop the building, her form silhouetted by the sun behind her. Coconut watched in amazement as the pony fastened the other end of the cord to the rooftop and then jumped off of the four story structure. Somehow, the pony hooked the side of an armored foreleg onto the cord and zip-lined down to the street below, landing with an acrobatic tumble as she tore the harpoon from the cobblestones.

The enemy pony was wearing what had to be the most ridiculous looking set of armor Coconut had ever seen. Strapped to one of her forelegs was a firing mechanism for the bladed grapple hook. She snapped the hook that she had fired earlier into the contraption, and the trailing cord was wound into a receiver on her shoulder. On her other foreleg was a similar

mechanism, and as Coconut watched, the earthpony reached back to where several short blades were strapped to her back. One of the blades clicked into the contraption, and with a another click it was extended to point outward from the pony's foreleg.

Beyond her foreleg armaments, the pony's outfit became even stranger. Small tubing ran from each of the contraptions to several canisters of what Coconut assumed was compressed gas harnessed to the pony's back. Pouches and containers sat alongside the canisters, and a few flaps of fabric hung down from between the gear. Atop her head sat a strange set of goggles that appeared to have several lenses each. She wasn't wearing the goggles over her eyes, but rather had them sitting askew, partially obscured by her wild mane.

What was more, every single piece of the outfit was painted a bright color, and no two pieces shared the same shade. The pony looked more like a circus performer than one of Luna's terrifyingly effective elites.

Despite her silly appearance, Coconut still had to swallow her fear at the sight of the pony. She was fairly certain her squad could take the mare down, but if one of Luna's elites was around, more could appear at any moment. If that happened, she would need air support.

She couldn't let her troops see her be afraid, even if only six of them were real ponies capable of sentient thought. She cleared her throat, and was surprised when the newly arrived enemy did not rush them or run away.

"Pinkamena Diane Pie," Coconut said, managing to keep her voice clear and steady.

"Yep!" The pink earthpony beamed at the sound of her name.

Coconut wondered what she would say next. She hadn't thought the pony would stay still for this long, let alone answer her. Maybe there wouldn't be a fight after all. While she was sure her forces would win against the lone pony, she was also sure that the victory would cost them a few pony lives. She didn't want that. "You are under arrest," she said loudly.

Pinkamena looked up. "Nope!" she said cheerfully, poking at the empty air above her head with a bladed foreleg. "No arrest here!"

*Is she crazy?* Coconut thought, *or just mocking me?* Either way it didn't matter. "Either come quietly or we will be forced to subdue you."

Pinkamena looked around at the civilians who had gathered around to see what the commotion was about. Coconut thought it must be quite a strange sight, a single pony facing down thirty soldiers. "Hear that, everypony?" Pinkamena said loudly. "There's gonna be a fight! Better hightail it outta here so no pony gets hurt!"

Coconut could appreciate what Pinkamena was doing, so she waited for the civilians to clear the street before she gave her order. She turned to her soldiers, and her puppets, all of whom were earthponies. Pegasi took the skies, and unicorns were needed in the inner city, so this far out from the barrier almost all soldiers on the ground were earthponies.

“Take her,” she said. Her soldiers and her puppets charged.

Coconut, being an officer, remained behind. She expected that Pinkamena would fight well. Certainly, the pony had come equipped for a fight. She had the advantage of numbers, though, and her soldiers were not incompetent when it came to hoof-to-hoof combat. Their opponent might take a few of them down with her, but she would eventually fall herself. Or so Coconut Crunch thought. She was wrong.

Pinkamena didn't go down fighting. Pinkamena didn't go down.

She began by raising a foreleg—the one that had the blade attached to it—and pointing at the nearest earthpony. She bit down on a strap with her mouth and pulled, and there was a loud hiss as the contraption expelled a white cloud of gas and the blade was shot through the air. It stuck a puppet in the neck just feet away from Pinkamena.

As the puppet dispersed, Pinkamena rushed forward—faster than Coconut would have thought was possible—and thrust her foreleg into the cloud of dark mist. There was an audible *click*, and Pinkamena emerged from the vanishing cloud with the blade she had used secured to her foreleg once more. She lost no momentum, spinning to bring the blade across the throat of another puppet before they knew she was upon them. She stabbed another in the eye before she cleared the group of charging soldiers, destroying a third puppet within a second of the other two.

Coconut's soldiers and puppets alike experienced a moment of confusion as they reached the place where Pinkamena had been only moments before. They slid to a halt, then turned to find Pinkamena between them and their captain. They charged her again, but not before Pinkamena turned to Coconut and said with a genuinely cheerful smile:

“My name's Pinkie Pie.”

Then Pinkie Pie fired her bladed grapple hook into the nearest earthpony puppet. It dug into the puppet's chest, but was not a lethal blow. Pinkie tugged on the metal cord connecting her foreleg to the puppet, and the puppet staggered forward, thrown off balance. Then, Pinkie ran at the puppet, leaping just before she reached it.

She hit the puppet, hind legs first, and drove her blade into its brain. Before it dispersed, however, Coconut watched Pinkie leap forward, off of the puppet, to send her flipping over the group of soldiers and puppets in an impossibly high jump. While she was in the air, she aimed

her foreleg downward and pulled the firing mechanism with her mouth once more. Her blade shot downward with another release of compressed gas, and was driven point-first through the back of another puppet's neck. Spine, throat, and major arteries severed, it dispersed. Pinkie landed and casually slipped inside the guard of another puppet, grabbing its head and breaking its neck.

Coconut watched with a mixture of horror and amazement as her troops stopped once more to turn and find Pinkie Pie behind them, unscathed. The pony had taken out six puppets and not taken a single hit. In fact, not one of her soldiers had even taken a *swing* at the pony yet.

Pinkie Pie looked around with a grin on her face as she loaded another blade into her strange mechanism. Then she dove into the crowd of soldiers once more, still smiling.

Except this time the first pony she came across was not a puppet, but one Coconut's true pony soldiers. Her soldier turned and kicked out with his hind legs as he approached the pink menace, but Pinkie Pie was simply too fast. She moved to the side, dodging his kick as she retracted her blade, then grabbed one of his hind legs with her forelegs and twisted. Coconut's soldier was thrown to the ground.

*No!* Coconut thought. He had known the risks. All of them did. Coconut still watched in horror as Luna's elite overcame her soldier. No pony should have had to die for King Titan or Princess Luna. *This is wrong.*

Pinkie Pie didn't deliver the finishing blow, though. Instead she simply rolled under a punch and drove her blade into the neck of another puppet before carrying on. Coconut watched as her soldier, confused, got up to rejoin the fight. Pinkie Pie came out of the group of soldiers with two more kills, stopping again to face Coconut and still wearing her crazed grin.

"What's yours?" she asked as though she had not just violently slain eight puppets.

Coconut managed to find her voice. "Don't come at her all at once!" she shouted, "Spread out! Surround her!" Her soldiers moved to follow her orders.

The pink menace had other ideas, however. She plucked a small, cylindrical container from her harness. It was made of metal and painted red with what Coconut thought looked like a yellow happy face on it. She held it in her teeth as she released the blade from her forearm, then loaded the container into the launcher.

As the soldiers came at her, she aimed at their center and fired. The tiny metal canister was launched through the air with another hiss of compressed gas, and exploded into a cloud of rapidly spreading smoke. The smoke spun and whirled at a dizzying rate, and was of every color imaginable.

No, Coconut corrected herself. It was not every color. Only the bright colors that Pinkie Pie wore. Her soldiers would be easy to distinguish in the cloud, but Luna's elite would be perfectly camouflaged.

She couldn't see what happened next clearly, because she couldn't see the enemy pony. Several times she would catch a glimpse of one of her puppets jerking suddenly and then dispersing. She heard the occasional sound of Pinkie Pie's launching mechanisms going off, and several times heard the sound of her own truepony soldiers grunting as they sustained what Coconut hoped were non-lethal wounds.

She wondered why Pinkie Pie had elected not to kill her soldiers, or even wound them. She had not expected such compassion, and her soldiers were likely not going to return it in kind.

Before she had come to the outer city, she had heard terrible things about the five. While she didn't believe that the loyalists were evil, she did think they were wrong. There was no point in fighting for Luna, no point in causing more chaos in an already troubled time. Titan had won.

At last the smoke began to clear, and Coconut was pleased with what she saw. Ten puppets and all of her soldiers remained, and Pinkie Pie was backed against a wall. Coconut was confident that while Pinkie's combat skills might be superior to that of her soldiers, she couldn't take sixteen ponies at once.

Again, the pink menace seemed to think differently. Pinkie fired her strange bladed grapple-hook upward, yanking on the trailing cord so that the hook dug into the ledge of the stone building behind her. At first, Coconut thought that she was going to run, but then Pinkie detached the metal cord from her foreleg launcher and fed it into a receiving mechanism on her back. She took another strap and put it into her mouth, then tugged. The mechanism on her back that now held the cord whirred, and the length of metal went taut. Pinkie reached up with both her forelegs, and two blades clicked into her foreleg-launchers. She brought her forelegs in front of her, brandishing the weapons.

Pinkie retracted the blades to trip one of Coconut's soldiers, then extended them once more to behead a puppet. She blocked two punches, broke the foreleg of the puppet who had attacked her, then *jumped* over six feet in the air to land behind it and put a blade through the base of its skull.

Coconut's soldiers closed in around her, but Pinkie Pie tugged the strap in her mouth and the cord went taut. As she was pulled towards the wall, she jumped and did a three-quarter backwards somersault through the air, landing with her hind legs on the horizontal surface.

Coconut Crunch watched with growing despair as Pinkie Pie fought her forces from the wall, battling them at a ninety degree angle. Her ponies were fast, but Pinkie Pie was clearly faster and better trained. The pink menace matched them blow for blow, a multicolored blur that jumped and spun along the wall, always out of reach. She destroyed two more puppets in less than ten seconds of lightning-fast combat.

Then, Pinkie Pie jumped away from the wall as her cord went slack once more. She tugged on the cord, and high above them, the grappling harpoon came free. Pinkie Pie landed with the soldiers between herself and the wall, then casually launched both her blades through another puppet's eyes. The pink menace loaded her final blade into an open launcher, then reached up with her other foreleg and fastened the cord of her grapple-harpoon into the other.

A puppet tried to tackle her, and Pinkie Pie rolled out of the way. Then, the puppet was yanked forward as Pinkie's grapple-harpoon caught it in the back. Pinkie executed it with her blade, then reeled in her grapple harpoon until she had about eight feet of slack. She bit down on the cord, then began to swing the cord and harpoon in a small vertical circle with her foreleg.

*"Stop!"* To Coconut's surprise, they did. Pinkie Pie froze in place, letting the grappling harpoon fall to the ground with a clatter. Her soldiers faced the Pinkie warily, but made no move to attack. The puppets simply stopped moving, each of them turning to her in unison.

"We're outmatched. We keep this up and she's going to kill us." At this, her soldiers relaxed visibly. They had apparently been thinking along the same lines. Coconut didn't blame them.

She looked at Pinkie Pie, who was panting as she fed her harpoon's metal cord into a receiver on her back. "Why haven't any pegasi come to reinforce us yet?"

"Well, *duh!* They're fighting."

"Fighting who? You only have one pegasus willing to take the air. We have hundreds of puppets."

"Princess *Luna!*" Pinkie Pie practically sang the name.

Coconut felt the bottom drop out of her stomach. If Luna had finally revealed herself, then something big was happening. It also meant that their pegasi were probably occupied, and Coconut wasn't going to get any help from above. "So what are you doing, then? What are here for?"

At this, Pinkie's grin widened. "Why, you, of course. You're under arrest, Captain Crunch."



Rarity gingerly stepped around a small concentration of rubble as she sliced and diced a nearby earthpony puppet.

Her cut had been towards her: a clean, quick diagonal swipe through the puppet's body. She cringed as she was splattered with conjured blood just moments before it vanished into the dark ether that all puppets became upon death. At this point she wasn't particularly bothered by the false gore that sometimes lingered just long enough to be seen before vanishing. She just hated feeling messy, even for an instant.

She absent mindedly flipped her mane away from her eyes as her blade broke into parts and punched lethal holes into three nearby puppets. She reformed it in time to cleave a charging puppet in two and wrinkled her nostrils in distaste as the dark ether washed over her.

She searched around for more puppets, but found none. Instead, she spotted a pale blue unicorn stallion at the end of the street. She cursed inwardly at the sight of the civilian. Now she would have to escort somepony out of the conflict zone, leaving Applejack to rescue the prisoners on her own. Unless of course Luna or Rainbow Dash decided to put their hooves on the ground for once.

"Hello there," she called out to the civilian. He turned, and she noted for the first time just what he was wearing.

*Did it take me that long to judge him based on his clothes?* She thought to herself.  
*Rarity, my dear, you are becoming too much a soldier! This conflict is not good for you.*

The stallion was wearing a full body white robe, complete with a wide hood. Rarity recognized the outfit immediately— she was wearing the exact same thing. Under her own robe were several thick pads of hardened cloth and a harness for *Vorpal*. It was an extremely light garment, and the mark of a unicorn knight. A bladecaster.

Rarity would have designed her outfit to have a little more flair, but Princess Luna had insisted she conform to traditions. Still, her design skills allowed her to make sure her garment was appropriately beautiful. It was almost incandescently white; she had magically spun the fabric to reflect much more incoming light than any mundane material. It was loose, and tended to billow about her if she moved quickly, but was also so light that it didn't inhibit movement whatsoever. Her mane flowed around her head in lazy curls, spilling down to her drawn back hood, where it coiled against the rippled fabric.

Rarity had grown to like the bladecasting robe; it, along with her white coat, gave her a sort of austere appearance that was intensified by the completely transparent diamonds that made up *Vorpal*.

The other knight stared at her coldly. Rarity noticed that his robe was made of drab white fabric, and wasn't keeping away the dust that came along with the rubble the way hers was. "Dame Rarity," he said coldly. "Knight Bachelorette of the Order Nocturnus. I am Sir Ironhoof, Knight Bachelor of the Natural Order. If you do not surrender to me and face King Titan's judgement, I will be forced to slay you in single combat."

Rarity raised a hoof to her chest. "*Bachelorette?* I am Knight *Commander* of the Order Nocturnus, Sir Ironhoof." This one had actually done quite well, other than mistaking her rank. Titles were important, after all.

Sir Ironhoof tilted his head. "You are the only member of the Order Nocturnus. Luna hasn't had knights for over a thousand years."

"I'm still Knight Commander! And its *Princess* Luna."

He sighed. "You aren't going to come quietly, are you?"

Rarity levelled her blade. "It's ironic, really," she said in a conversational tone. "I always dreamed of being rescued by a white knight."

"I see."

A handful of shards of some mundane metal or another were thrown upward from the ground around Ironhoof and towards Rarity. She extended her magical senses, pinging each of the shards with her mind, then split *Vorpal* and sent a diamond fragment after each of them.

The shards and diamonds collided in the air, rebounding off of one another before each bladecaster reformed their blade. Rarity noted that Ironhoof's weapon had only eleven fragments. *Vorpal* had fourteen, and she now knew that she could safely send three shards at him without leaving herself defenseless.

Unfortunately, doing so would kill him. *Vorpal* was not a good weapon for exercising restraint.

Ironhoof charged her as he telekinetically tossed several stones at her. Rarity frowned at the oncoming stones. She couldn't intercept them with *Vorpal* without giving Ironhoof an opening, so she was forced to quickly roll to the side to avoid them. Her bladecasting robe didn't pick up any dirt, but she felt filthy nonetheless.



Ironhoof reached her as she came out of her roll, swinging his blade, a thick length of dull metal. The air around *Vorpal* snapped as Rarity's blade moved incredibly fast to intercept it. Ironhoof's attack had been a competent one, and a clever move at that. He just hadn't taken into account the fact that Rarity outclassed him by an order of magnitude.

His blade was thrown to the side by the force of Rarity's swing, and Rarity had time to slap him across the face with the flat of her blade before batting away another one of his swings. He took another swipe at her, and Rarity ignored it, slapping him across the face again before catching the attack contemptuously at the last moment on her diamond weapon. Ironhoof looked past the two blades at Rarity with disbelief, blood running from one of his nostrils.

"Knight *Commander*," Rarity corrected once again.

It was then that she caught a glint of red reflected back at her in one of *Vorpal*'s composite diamonds. Rarity gave a slight moue as she watched Ironhoof's eyes widen. Things always had to get so *complicated*.

She threw her magical weight against *Vorpal*, pushing Ironhoof and his blade back momentarily. Then, she sent a soft ripple of thought into her blade, willing it to reflect more light than diamonds normally would. She would need the extra visibility for this particular fight. Rarity pivoted in place just in time to deflect two glowing red bolts of energy with her blade.

A unicorn puppet stood at the other end of street, red mane flaring out around its black form. It seemed content to throw magic missiles at her, as unicorn puppets usually did. Rarity thanked Celestia it didn't have any shards to toss. Simple spells she could handle.

She caught the reflection of Ironhoof coming at her in one of *Vorpal*'s facets, and spun to parry and block a rapid series of blows. She ducked a more powerful swipe so as to free *Vorpal* to deflect another pair of magic missiles. She had the sense to aim them at the puppet this time, but it caught them with red bursts of moment-field. The puppets weren't *that* easy to kill.

Rarity was holding against the puppet and Ironhoof, rapidly spinning to face each foe and block their attacks, but she wasn't gaining any ground. It was only a moment of time before she slipped up or they got lucky, and then she would die, which was in no way, shape, or form an acceptable outcome to her.

She jumped as high as she could into the air— which admittedly was not very high— and pushed *Vorpal* beneath her, where she flicked a bit of magic at it. The blade shattered and its shards were sent flying through the air at her opponents.

Ironhoof and the puppet each had the acumen to use their magical senses to detect and deflect *Vorpal*'s shards, but her attack provided a much-needed distraction. She quickly rushed

to put her back to wall and face both her opponents. The, she threw her blade at the puppet once again.

To her dismay, the puppet caught every one of the shards on a moment field as Ironhoof charged her. She drew the shards back through the air and reformed her blade to parry Ironhoof's thrust, then looked at the puppet too late to see several metal shards speeding towards her, encased in red energy.

*It did have shards, she thought, it was just waiting for the ideal moment to use them. When did these brutes get so smart?*

She couldn't use her blade to deflect the shards without exposing herself to Ironhoof, and the strain of constant combat had left her mentally weary enough that she couldn't split part of Vorpai to intercept them.

Thankfully, the building behind her chose that moment to explode.

Rarity caught a glimpse of Ironhoof being showered with splinters and rubble before she was thrown violently to the ground, protected from the collapsing structure by the armored body of another pony.

She made a slight whining noise as her face was pressed against the dirty cobbles. "Thank you, Applejack, for saving my life," she said curtly. "Please stop touching me."

"You ought to show some gratitude, Rares." Applejack rose and shook off several hundred pounds of stone, wood, and glass, completely unscathed. She placed herself between Rarity and the unicorn puppet, then raised an armored foreleg. As Rarity rose and gathered *Vorpai*, she saw a shard strike Applejack's leg and bounce harmlessly away, sparks flying. Applejack caught another shard in her mouth.

Rarity had made Applejack's armor with the assistance of Luna, who was one of the only ponies in Equestria who still knew how earthpony warplates were made. It was an incredibly thick set of mundane steel barding that had been magically folded in upon itself for structural strength. The entire suit weighed more than Applejack herself, and the extra weight helped her gather the momentum she needed to break through solid stone walls.

The armor was a sharp shade of red, and Rarity had made it as ornate as Applejack had let her. The joint and neck were protected by angular plates, and golden filigree spiraled and swirled along the main plates to form intricate Apple designs. Atop her head, her trademark stetson still sat, battered from being forced through at least one building.

Applejack spat blood, metal, and teeth. Then she leaned over and struck Ironhoof, who was pinned beneath some rubble, but otherwise uninjured. He was immediately knocked

unconscious by Applejack's steel-clad hoof.

The unicorn puppet sent more shards and magical missiles their way, but Rarity twisted and spun *Vorpal* to deflect each of them. As she did, AJ spoke.

"Prisoners are mostly free, but we got about twenty puppets and two unicorns two blocks over. Ah figure we can take 'em together."

Rarity threw *Vorpal* at her opponent only to have it deflected once again. She sighed. "Of course you do. Shall we be using discretion or would you rather we simply plow through every obstacle in our way screaming like a bunch of barbarians?"

"Mmm..." Applejack worked her mouth as if the question required serious consideration. "Second one."



The skies were cleared.

It had taken Luna all of several minutes to destroy the puppets that controlled the sky above that particular section of Canterlot. There were perhaps a hundred of them, but they were unarmed and Luna had the help of Rainbow Dash. While a pegasus puppet might not be strong by itself, their mobility allowed them to easily descend upon and overwhelm any forces on the ground. In a matter of minutes, every pegasus puppet within kilometres could be in the same place.

Luna had killed them all. The task had been almost trivial.

Rainbow Dash had been an asset. She was far too fast for the puppets to catch, and would use her mastery of pegasus magic to strike down their foes with fire, lightning, and gale force winds. If an enemy did manage to close with her, she was more than its match physically; Dash was one of the strongest pegasi Luna had ever seen, and Luna had been training her in aerial combat.

Luna had done most of the work, though. She was a full-powered goddess, an alicorn straight from an age where violence and brutality were commonplace. Her opponents might as well have been made of the smoke she reduced them to. She tore them apart with her blade, her hooves, and if they were too far way, her mind. Nothing could withstand her.

“Rainbow Dash.”

The aptly named pegasus came to hover beside her. “What?”

Dash’s armor was a full body suit of tight fitting super hardened cloth that was colored sky blue. Along its edges and joints ran a multicolored trim designed to emulate Dash’s polychromatic mane. Luna and Rarity had worked together to create the skypony barding to afford her maximum protection and flexibility. Luna herself wore a suit under her bladecasting robe, though she had denied Rarity’s request to “spruce it up.” Luna valued appearances, but Rarity’s design sense didn’t exactly conform to her standards when it came to intimidation.

She looked down at a distant intersection. With a small amount of concentration, Luna bent the air in front of her into a lens that magnified the crossroads. Rarity and Applejack were close to one another, locked in combat with several dozen puppets and trueponies.

Dash did not need to be ordered. The air collapsed around the pegasus with a heavy *thrum* as she took off in their direction with her uncanny speed. Luna followed.

Dash landed next to Rarity and Applejack, clearly intent of protecting them. Luna reckoned that they’d be alright, so she sped past them and began to destroy their enemies.

Her first target was a unicorn puppet positioned across the square from the trio. As she approached it, she tore several cobblestones from the street below her and hurled them at the puppet with magic. It deflected the stones, then threw a wave of force at her, clearly trying to prevent her from closing the distance between them.

Luna took the spell head-on, and as she was thrown to the ground, she called her unicorn and pegasus magic to form a sophisticated spell. The air around her dropped several dozen degrees and frost coated the ground, her coat, and her black bladecasting robe. She formed several spears of ice out of the moisture held in the air and flung them at the unicorn puppet. At the same time, she lifted several more cobblestones from the street behind the puppet and drew them towards her.

The puppet erected a full force field to deflect the incoming projectiles, but had no way of preventing Luna from closing the distance between them with a powerful flap of her wings. Luna landed beside the unicorn, surrounded in the fog that her winter spell had caused, and cast her blade inside the puppet.

The puppet was eaten away from the inside out, and it dispersed as *Nadir* formed. It was all the colors of the night— the pure white of moonlight, the twinkling shimmer of starlight, and the soft greens and purples of the aurora. *Nadir* caused light to dim, metal to rust, water to freeze, and flesh to deteriorate.

She pulled her blade up to its ready position, causing the black mist leftover from the puppet to swirl around the fog that her drastic temperature spell was creating. She smiled as another unicorn puppet took notice of her.

*Trivial.*

The puppet threw two bolts of magical energy at her. She deflected them with her blade, then countered its telekinetic push with her own, much stronger push. It was staggered, and she closed with it and decapitated the foe with one swipe.

Luna beat her wings once more to land amongst the earthponies that were attacking her own team, and two swipes of *Nadir* downed four foes. Luna joined her trio of ponies and they proceeded to clear the square.

It was not difficult. The arrival of Luna and Rainbow Dash had tipped the scales in their favor, and the remaining puppets went down in less than a minute. The truepony soldiers, few as they were, were rounded up at blade point and brought into a nearby building. Luna, Rarity, Applejack, and Rainbow Dash followed.

The Princess did her best to look intimidating, and it was a successful effort. She was taller than anypony present, wearing a pitch black blademaster's robe, and wielding a spell blade. The air around her was filled with billowing fog, and the ground beneath her hooves frosted over. Her eyes were glowing and her hood was drawn up. The enemy soldiers shivered, though whether from the cold or from Luna's presence, the Princess couldn't tell.

She *was* being a little dramatic, after all. It was the *modus operandi* of alicorns.

"An abysmal lot of foes we find ourselves burdened with upon an equally abysmal afternoon." Her voice boomed through the building around them, and she saw her allies cringe out of the corner of her eye. They didn't like her Royal Canterlot voice. Luna thought it helped to keep things fresh. "Tell us." she dismissed *Nadir* and leaned forward to look the lead soldier- a unicorn- in the eyes. "How might one pass Empyrean's barrier?"

The unicorn's eyes hardened. "Even if I did know the spell, why would I tell you?"

"*Because.*" The unicorn pulled back at the volume of her voice. "We are the only chance thou hast of overthrowing King Titan."

"You can't beat Titan. Even if you could, how can any of us be sure you're a better ruler than him? You're likely to plunge our world into eternal night as soon as you ascend the throne."

Luna practically recoiled. Surely that wasn't what her people thought of her?

The unicorn continued. "We've all heard all about you, *Luna*. You've never gotten along with your sister. You probably laughed when you found out that she was dead. And now you're just an alicorn trying to fill the power vacuum she created."

Luna slowly shook her head. "No," she began, her voice losing its volume. "I- I- I don't-"

"If you really were fighting for the sake of ponykind, Princess, you wouldn't have disappeared for the past month. You wouldn't have killed Twilight Sparkle. Why don't you just marry Empyrean and settle for being his princess. I'm tired of being forced to fight my fellow ponies because you're trying to take advantage of your sister's death. I'm tired of fighting an alicorn's war."

Luna looked at the unicorn in disbelief. He thought she was just as bad as Titan. He thought the fighting was *her* fault. She felt sick.

Suddenly she was standing amidst hundreds of dead ponies on a scorched and barren plain, looking down at a colt without a cutie mark who had died for her. She felt herself butchering ponies from eons ago, their dying cries fueling her thirst for absolute destruction. She had broken their race, then. Had taught ponykind to destroy one another rather than love each other. And they had.

She was vaguely aware of falling to the ground in front of the prince as the temperature in the room dropped even further. Was she doing the same thing now? Was she simply going to lead ponykind down the path of destruction once more? If Twilight never woke up, then they didn't stand a chance against Titan and Terra.

How long would her war go on then? Years? Decades? Would Twilight's friends die in battle or of old age while they searched for a new Element of Magic? What right did she have to ask them to help her and her sister reclaim the throne?

"*Get out.*" Her voice had assumed its usual volume.

No, she had decided; Twilight Sparkle would come back to them and they would rescue Celestia, wherever she was. Luna wasn't fighting for her parents anymore, and she wasn't fighting to kill her sister. She would rescue Celestia, and free ponykind from Titan and Terra once and for all.

A look of surprise crossed the unicorn's face. "We're... free to go?"

"What? Didst thou think we were going to *gobble thee up*? Thine commander is ours and thine prisoners are freed. Thou art of no use to us." Luna didn't know if the first bit was true; hopefully Pinkie Pie had captured her target and Fluttershy had led the prisoners to safety. She stepped to the side to let the unicorn and the other soldiers leave. "Run along."

The captured soldiers left, shivering as they scurried past the frozen princess.

After they had left, Rainbow Dash said dryly, "That could have gone better."

"Ah think maybe next time you ought to turn down the menace, princess."

"Yes," Rarity said, teeth chattering. "Would you mind maybe turning the heat back up, Your Highness?"

With a thought, she warmed the air around them. Luna had no idea how they could keep their spirits so high after almost twenty minutes of on and off combat. She was still thinking on what the unicorn had said.

How could she explain it to them? She couldn't tell the general pony populace that Celestia was alive, because then their enemies would know they knew. If that happened, who knew what Titan would do to his Celestia? She couldn't tell them that Twilight Sparkle was secretly still alive, either; she would instantly become the most wanted mare in Equestria next to Luna herself. And she certainly couldn't tell the population that they had a weapon capable of destroying Titan himself. If her father knew that Twilight and her friends posed a threat, he would almost certainly tell Terra to strike them down. Her mother would wipe Canterlot from the face of Equestria with barely a second thought.

So ponykind had to think that Celestia was dead. That Luna wanted to rule them by herself. That the loyalist cause was hopeless. That their twice-time hero and saviour, the personal servant of Princess Celestia, Twilight Sparkle, had died a monster.

Naturally, Twilight Sparkle had attained virtual messiah status amongst the loyalists. While ponykind wasn't in on the details, Twilight and her friends had effectively saved Equestria twice before. It was probably exactly why Titan had chosen to turn her into his pet monster in the first place. That, and Nihilus Nix Naught could apparently take all of Celestia's magic and give it to his newborn son Empyrean. He had, by enslaving her, effectively destroyed the biggest symbol of hope ponykind had as well as acquiring a useful asset.

In the eyes of ponykind, Twilight Sparkle had died in the Battle of Cloudsdale with Nihilus Nix Naught, whom Luna had slain. Luna had killed their saviour, and it seemed she was even more hated now than she had been before Titan returned.

Ultimately, it didn't matter. If Luna had to be a villain to rescue her sister, than so be it. Ponykind had never loved her as much as they loved Celestia, and they likely never would. If Luna was going to save them from her father, she didn't need them to.

"Fluttershy will have had enough time to lead the prisoners to safety, I should think," she

said, dropping down to a mild volume and doing her best to curb her archaic accent. “Pinkie Pie ought to have captured our captain by now. Let us away to the underground.”

With that, they went home.



Twilight Sparkle did her best to keep things together.

Magic helped. Left alone to her own thoughts, she knew she would lose focus and break down again. So Twilight focused on focusing, keeping herself busy with simple tasks and spells while she decided her next move. She knew she needed to find her former friends and the Princess, but how? She was in the Books and Branches library. Luna could be anywhere.

She pulled the *Marvelous Manual of Medical Magics* off of a shelf with a bit of telekinesis and looked up a diagnostic spell. While true healing magic was impossible, there were all sorts of spells that were designed to help with traditional medical treatments. The spell was a complex one, so it took Twilight several minutes of study before she could cast it.

It indicated that she was fine, but that she ought to eat. Twilight didn't feel hungry, and the fruits left out on the table looked as though they had been rotting for weeks. She took note of the state of decay, then searched through the cupboards until she found some oats. To keep herself busy while she forced the oats down with a spoon, she learned a spell to tell her the time. She had calendars and clocks in the library, but nopony had been around to mark the calendars and the clock couldn't tell her the exact date.

When the spell told her that she had been unconscious for almost a month, the spoonful of oats only faltered slightly before continuing along its course. Twilight munched the oats mechanically, then swallowed and decided she had eaten enough.

She pulled the Element of Kindness out of her null-space. The golden necklace wasn't actually the Element of Kindness, but rather one facet of the four-part whole. The whole Element consisted of not just the golden necklace, but also Fluttershy, its magical power, and the idea of kindness itself. It was what conventional unicorn knowledge would have called an impossible enchantment.

Twilight created a spell to follow the necklace's link to the ideal that connected it to both its bearer and its enchantment. She focused on the bearer, holding that portion of the element in her mind. Then, with a small amount of thaumaturgy, she created and cast a spell to find the



bearer in reference to herself.

The spell gave her the general direction of Canterlot. Trying to ignore the implications of such a location, Twilight telekinetically grabbed a map of the capitol while she held the tracking spell and the enchantment in her mind. She unrolled the map and directed a meta-spell at her thaumaturgical one to pinpoint Fluttershy's location on the map.

It marked her position, and Twilight had the good sense to reorganize the spell so as to track Fluttershy relative to the position on the map. The spell gave her the direction of downward. Fluttershy was in the Undercity.

Twilight rolled up the map and deposited it in null-space after marking Fluttershy's position. Canterlot was not far away at all. She managed to make the trip between Canterlot and Ponyville by herself three times within twelve hours when-

She needed to focus, so she began to search the library for things that she might need to take with her. She arranged several foods on the table, then began to pick out books for her trip. For obvious reasons, *Marvelous Manual of Medical Magics* might come in handy. She hoped it wouldn't, but it never hurt to be prepared. She decided the chronology textbook would be of little use, so it would stay.

She moved soundlessly about the library, picking out books and stacking them alongside her travel food on the table. She only found a couple. The majority of the books she examined were useless. Her new copy of *The Astronomical Astronomer's Almanac to All things Astronomy* was useless. *Slumber 101* was useless. *Running in the Running for Dummies* was useless. She carefully placed all of them into a pile for useless books.

As she moved throughout the library, carefully selecting which books to take with her and which books to leave behind, Twilight became slower. Her movements did not become less precise or meticulous, but she began to spend more and more time examining the titles of the tomes. She levitated new books onto the stack at an ever decreasing rate, until finally her glacial pace gave way to absolute stillness.

She stood motionless, hardly breathing, staring at the book she held aloft with magic. Then, she gently set it on the floor and began to cry.

Her tears came with great, wracking sobs that broke the otherwise perfect silence of the library. She fell to the ground, rocking herself back and forth until she could once again focus on what was important. In all, she wasted fifteen minutes of time shaking uncontrollably on the library floor.

She picked up the book, *Draconic Appetites and Ailments*, and set it in the useless pile next to the musical storybook *It's a Wonderful Equestria*. Then, she decided she had picked out

enough books, deposited the useful ones in her null-space, and left.

To draw her attention away from the signs of the extensive repairs that the town had undergone, Twilight recalled and cast an illusion spell to disguise her appearance. She intended first to recolor herself white, but changed her mind and went with a pale red. Unrecognizable, she proceeded towards Canterlot.

When she was clear of the town, Twilight decided that she didn't want to walk. Being alone with her thoughts was counter-productive, so she used a series of teleports to bring her to the city gates. The western gate of Canterlot was still a pile of rubble, and truepony guards as well as puppets were stationed around it and along the walls. What was more, a mysterious curtain of white rose from within the city itself to the sky. Twilight took note of its appearance, then teleported to the other side of the wall.

She appeared in an alleyway, then consulted her map.

When Twilight Sparkle was nine years old, she had become fascinated with mazes. Celestia had left her a book of them on her desk one night, and she got hooked. She would spend hours at a time finishing the little maze books that she could buy at the bookshop with her allowance. After a week, she started doing them in ink instead of graphite. After two weeks, she had asked the owners of the bookshop to order her more complex maze books.

They did. Twilight had never realized how rarely anypony said no to Celestia's most prized pupil.

After three weeks, Celestia took a personal interest in Twilight's "maze craze," as she affectionately dubbed it, and asked Twilight if she had wanted to see a maze in real life.

Twilight had answered that she already knew the palace hedge labyrinth by heart. Not only did it feature prominently in Canterlot's Nightmare Night celebrations, but she could get a bird's eye view of it from the palace.

Celestia had smiled and told her that the labyrinth she had in mind was much bigger. A day later, she had taken Twilight down into the Canterlot Undercity.

It was a sprawling labyrinth that ran beneath all of Canterlot. It was enormous, large enough to hold tens of thousands of ponies at a time, and it was also totally impossible to navigate. In some places it was made up of square passageways and corners, in others it was slides, tunnels, and curves. Making things worse was the fact that the maze fully took advantage of the fact that it existed in three dimensional space. It was also pitch-dark on account of the fact that it was buried under Canterlot.

Twilight hadn't been scared of the dark. Celestia had been with her. The Princess had

explained that the Canterlot Undercity was the most difficult labyrinth that she could possibly give Twilight, and that her test would be in a month.

Twilight was forbidden from entering the Undercity just like every other pony in Canterlot, of course; it was simply too dangerous. A pony could get lost and then starve to death, or fall into one of the many chasms and not be able to get out.

So Princess Celestia had given her four very ancient books on the topic to study from. And study from them Twilight did. The Undercity occupied almost all of her time for the next month. She read the books, analyzed the maps, and made models. She came up with half a dozen theories as to its purpose and its mysterious origin. Eventually, she realized that she could split the enormous labyrinth into smaller mazes and solve each on its own.

After three weeks, she had the entire labyrinth memorized and could come up with a route between any two points in a matter of seconds. Celestia had been thoroughly impressed.

Then Twilight had learned the true purpose of the exercise: to train her mind so as to accustom it to the intense spacial reasoning that she would need to possess. She had inherited the Sparkle family ability to teleport from her mother. She teleported for the first time two weeks later, to the astonishment of her parents.

It wasn't until two years later that Twilight learned, in a rare conversation with another student, that there were *only* four books detailing the Canterlot Undercity, and only two of them contained maps. Celestia had let Twilight in on a very special secret simply to ensure Twilight enjoyed her studies.

A month ago, Twilight had raped her of her godhood, laughing as Celestia begged for mercy.

In the alleyway, Twilight's stony expression flickered slightly as she examined the map once again. There were thirteen entrances to the Undercity spread throughout Canterlot: One at the palace, six in inner Canterlot, and six in outer Canterlot. With the palace at the centre of a circle, each entrance portended an arc length of exactly one-sixth pi radians from its neighbor. She noted where the nearest entrance ought to be on her map and mentally traced a route that would take her to Fluttershy's position.

Then Twilight left the alleyway, still a red unicorn, and travelled the several blocks to the Undercity entrance. On her way, she passed several heavily damaged buildings, and noted dimly that ponies were looking timidly out at her from broken windows and doorways. She ignored them, and noticed no puppets on the way to the entrance.

The portal to the Undercity had been blocked up and cobbled over, like most of the entryways throughout Canterlot. Ponies were not allowed down there on account of how

dangerous it was. Not that anypony could have known where the entrance was in the first place. To Twilight's knowledge, she and Celestia were the only ones who had studied the layout of the Undercity.

She reached out with her magical senses to find the hollow area beneath the earth right where she expected it to be. After a moment of focusing, she teleported.

She found herself alone in darkness, and lit her horn with a bit of illusion magic. The illusion magic immediately reminded her of where she had learned the spell that changed her appearance, and what she had used it for. Rainbow Dash.

Twilight hadn't eaten many oats, and had only drunk a little bit of water, so she didn't have much in the way to vomit. Still, she stood shaking, retching up nothing, wasting almost a full minute after the oats were gone. She made a mental note to eat again soon before setting off throughout the labyrinth. Proper nutrition was important.

The various twists and turns of the labyrinth matched what she had in her mind. Without Discord to rearrange a maze at will, Twilight could navigate them with ease, which was probably why she had been so eager to dive into the hedge labyrinth upon hearing his riddle.

As she moved through the tomb-like, silent darkness, she wondered why Fluttershy would be in the Undercity. Hopefully she wasn't lost or hurt. Hopefully she was with the others. Twilight briefly considered checking the other Element bearers, but decided just to press on.

Her journey through the Undercity was for the most part serene. She passed through large rooms and claustrophobia-inducing crawlspaces. She teleported across chasms and pushed open heavy metal doors. Twice, she teleported to another nearby section of the maze, using her acute spatial sense to determine exactly where she ought to be, skipping two whole sub-mazes and saving herself a great deal of time.

Once, when she wandered close to the inner city labyrinth, she found a curtain of white energy blocking a passageway. She imagined that it was the same barrier she had observed from outside the city. She extended her magical senses, but they could not penetrate the barrier. Twilight marvelled at the sheer amount of power it must take to sustain such a thing before moving on.

It was obvious when Twilight had come to Luna's lair. It was set up in what Twilight knew was a small complex near one of the surface entrances. She supposed that they wouldn't have to travel very far to reach the complex, and so were less likely to get lost. She stood outside the metal doorway to their chambers, which was bathed in the purple light of her horn and had been marked with a crescent moon. Then she took a deep breath and opened the door.

Inside was a room entirely different from the cold stone outside. The walls had been

covered with hundreds of cloth hangings done up in warm shades, and the floor had been lined with hardwood. At one end of the room burned a magical fire, in front of which was a plush rug. In the center of the room was a table, upon which was a map of Canterlot. A stairway ran up to an overhanging balcony and four doors, which Twilight assumed led to bedrooms.

Twilight took all of this in without consideration. She was too busy focusing on the room's only occupant. Sitting on the rug, basking in firelight, sipping a mug of hot cocoa, was Fluttershy.

*Twilight was a shadow in the back of Nihilus's mind, looking down on the beaten and bloody pegasus who had cruelly spun her a lie of redemption. It wasn't enough that Fluttershy simply die. No, Nihilus would have Rainbow Dash kill her; would have one friend savagely murder the other. She liked the idea of Rainbow Dash having a few moments of freedom from her nightmare to contemplate killing her most innocent friend.*

Twilight lost the cold, distant viewpoint that had gotten her from the library to Canterlot, and was drawn back into herself. She stood in the doorway, wondering how she could possibly face Fluttershy after what she had done.

She must have made a noise, because Fluttershy looked up from her place in front of the fireplace. She saw Twilight, and her eyes widened, her lips parting slightly in amazement.

Twilight knew she had to say something, anything, to the pegasus before Fluttershy was scared away.

*I'm sorry. It was so woefully inadequate. It wasn't me. But it was still her fault. I didn't want any of it to happen. But it happened anyway, and Twilight couldn't help that. She cycled through a dozen responses and her mind rested on one: You shouldn't have come to rescue me. I didn't deserve it.*

"*Twilight!*" Fluttershy screamed louder than Twilight had ever heard her before. Before Twilight could speak, the pegasus had crossed the room and had her locked in a hug so powerful as to almost suffocate her. "You're back! Oh, *thank Celestia!*" When Twilight didn't hug back, Fluttershy pulled away and looked Twilight in the eyes. "Are you alright? You look terrible."

Twilight stared back into Fluttershy's eyes, confused. In them there was no hatred, no rejection: just pure, simple concern. Concern for Twilight's well-being. Fluttershy was actually *worried* about her, like an overprotective mother instead of a tormented victim. *No*, Twilight realized, not like an overprotective mother. Like a friend.

Twilight couldn't help it. She broke down and began to cry.

For the second time that day, her legs gave way as tears began to stream down her face. "I," she stammered, "I-I-"

“*Shhh*,” Fluttershy hugged her again, gently rubbing her back. Then, the pegasus picked her up as though she were nothing more than a filly and flew them over to sit in front of the fireplace. Twilight was set down on the incredibly thick rug and she felt the warmth of the fire begin to spread through her. She hadn’t realized how *cold* it had been in the labyrinth.

She buried her head in Fluttershy’s coat, and her friend wrapped her almost completely in her wings and forelegs, then nuzzled a sobbing Twilight with her wispy mane. “*Shhh*, I know, Twilight. Let it all out.”

Suddenly Twilight realized why she had tracked the Element of Kindness instead of the others. Some part of her had known that what she wanted, what she really *needed*, was somepony to care for her. A shoulder to cry on. A little kindness.

She was getting tears and mucus all over Fluttershy’s luxuriously soft coat as she sobbed, but the pegasus didn’t seem to mind. She rocked Twilight back and forth as the unicorn gasped for air.

“I-I-I couldn’t do anything.”

“I know, Twilight, let it all go.”

“I couldn’t even close my eyes. I-” Twilight’s entire body shook as she drew in a shuddering breath. “I had to watch.”

“It’s okay, Twilight. You’re safe.”

“You shouldn’t have come for me.”

“Of course we should have, Twilight. We love you.”

“I-I thought,” Twilight squeezed Fluttershy as tightly as she could manage. Fluttershy squeezed back. “I th-thought I was never going to get t-t-to t-talk to any of you ever again. I thought it was o-o-over.”

Fluttershy squeezed her harder than Twilight would have thought possible, then released her. Once again, the pegasus looked Twilight in the eyes. Her voice hardened. “It isn’t over, Twilight. Not yet.”

Twilight nodded numbly, and Fluttershy smiled. “I’ll go fix us some hot cocoa and when I come back we’ll get you cleaned up, alright?” She nodded again, and Fluttershy fluttered away.

Twilight waited, looking into the fire as it crackled merrily. Despite the streaks of tears

running from her eyes, she felt better than she had in a long time. *We love you*, Fluttershy had said. Twilight believed her.

Fluttershy came back with two steaming mugs of cocoa and a box of tissues in her mouth. Twilight happily sipped at her drink and tried not to cringe as Fluttershy dabbed away at her face and neck. Fluttershy did not seem at all discomforted by the fact that Twilight had just broken down and cried under her wings for the better part of twenty minutes. For that fact, Twilight was immensely grateful. It was just one more thing that set Fluttershy apart.

“The others are going to be so happy to see you,” Fluttershy said softly.

“Has it really been a month since Cloudsdale?”

“Mhm,” Fluttershy nodded, “we’ve been in Canterlot causing trouble for the King, but normally there’s somepony back in Ponyville to watch you. Today we needed everyone, though, because Luna was going to fight. They wanted to, um, get rid of all the puppets in the outer city and capture a commanding officer. But then there were also some prisoners that we had to free.”

“You’re still with Luna? How is she?”

“She’s, um... nice.”

“I see. How is everyone else?”

“Well,” Fluttershy began, “Pinkie Pie-”

*“Present!”*

Pinkie Pie burst through the metal door to the labyrinth complex on two legs and covered in colorful armor and gadgets. Right behind her was a brown-coated, white-maned earthpony Twilight had never seen before in her life.

Pinkie Pie saw Twilight, and her eyes widened. There was a hissing noise and a jet of white gas, and a harpoon attached to her foreleg was launched straight downward, where it bounced off the ground and the clattered to a resting position.

*“Twilight!”* She grinned as she began to shed the various pieces of colorful equipment that adorned her. When enough of them had fallen to the ground, Pinkie sprang across the room, pinning Twilight to the floor in another painfully tight bear hug.

“Oh-my-gosh-we-missed-you-so-much-and-now-you’re-back!”

Twilight wheezed under the strain of Pinkie Pie's hug. "Thanks, Pinkie."

Pinkie Pie gasped as though suddenly coming to a realization. "We need to throw a party! Fluttershy! We need to throw Twilight a party!" She ran up the stairs and through one of the doorways. Moments later, various party paraphernalia were thrown out of the doorway and over the balcony to land in front of the fire.

Twilight dodged a falling roll of streamers and turned her attention to the unknown earthpony. The mare had been giving her a wide-eyed stare since she entered. "Are you..." she trailed off, then slowly approached Twilight. The way she looked Twilight over made her feel like a specimen on display, except from the look on the mare's face she clearly didn't understand what she was seeing.

"Burning blood of Celestia," the mare swore in disbelief. "You're really Twilight Sparkle."

"Um... yes?"

"This... this changes everything. *Everything.*"

Twilight was confused. "I don't understand."

"You're a legend, Twilight. You've saved Equestria twice. When Titan returned and you were... taken, and Celestia killed, most ponies thought that resisting was hopeless. But if you're still alive then... there's hope, isn't there? We can win."

Twilight didn't know how to react. Was there hope? She didn't see why not; they still had the Elements of Harmony, after all. "Yes," she said finally. "We can win. And Celestia isn't dead."

The mare smiled. "It's better than I thought, then. If we actually have a chance of returning things to the way they were before, then all of ponykind would support us. This war would suddenly make sense."

Then the mare did something completely unexpected. She knelt on the carpet before Twilight. "Twilight Sparkle," she said, her voice taking on a ceremonious tone. "I, Captain Coconut Crunch, renounce my loyalty to King Titan and my position as captain in the Royal Army. I hereby swear myself to you as your servant and vassal as Celestia's successor."

Twilight stood frozen, mouth agape. "I'm not her successor," she managed after a time. "What could possibly give you that idea?"

"You're her personal student, aren't you? You've saved Equestria twice, on her orders. Who else would rule in her stead?"



“Her *sister*? Princess Luna?”

“Luna? Luna is ignored at best and despised at worst. The ponies don’t see her as being any better than Titan himself.”

Twilight sighed. She was in way over her head. “Look— Coconut is it? Luna is the rightful ruler of Equestria, and the only reason I’m still alive. She risked her own life to save me. I know she can come off as a little scary, and I know that you think she was Nightmare Moon; but Nightmare Moon and Luna were two completely different entities. I would know.”

“You would know,” Coconut echoed. “That’s what happened to you, isn’t it? That’s who Nihilus really was.”

Slowly, Twilight nodded. “I’ve been asleep for the past month.”

“And now she’s *ba-ack*,” Pinkie Pie said in a sign-song voice before jumping from the overhanging balcony to the carpet in front of the fireplace. She was holding a cake.

Pinkie’s ear twitched, and she suddenly stopped moving. She turned towards the doorway as it opened, encased in the glow of unicorn telekinesis.

“And *do* remember to wipe your hooves this time, Applejack. I did not spend the past three weeks decorating this *hole* simply so that you could-”

As Rarity came through the door, she saw Twilight and suddenly stopped. Applejack ran into her, and they both went tumbling to the floor.

Twilight was once again encased in pony as her friends smothered her with hugs. They squeezed her and asked if she was okay, tears of joy streaming down their faces. Applejack had to be careful not to crush Twilight to death as she was in a massive suit of armor. Rainbow Dash hung back while they smothered her. Twilight tried her best to catch her gaze and failed.

When they had finished, Twilight came face to face with Princess Luna. Luna was not as big as Celestia, but Twilight still had to look up at her. The Princess’s eyes betrayed none of her feelings. After what seemed like forever, she spoke:

“*We are pleased to see thee, Twilight Sparkle.*” Twilight cringed.

“Indoor voice,” Rarity reminded gently.

“Of course,” Luna said in a voice that was still several times louder than it needed to be. “If thou art healthy and well, Twilight, then we ought to begin with our next course of action.”

“Throwing a party!” Pinkie cried.

Luna narrowed her eyes at the bouncing pony. “No, Pinkie. Teaching Twilight Sparkle what ye all already know.”

“In party hats! And everypony still gets cake!”

Luna grumbled.

It was several minutes later, with everypony seated in a semicircle around the magically burning fireplace, eating cake and drinking hot cocoa, that Luna told Twilight everything. Twilight already knew most of what Luna had to say, such as the fact that Titan and Terra were her parents, but she knew almost nothing about the pre-Discordian history that Luna described.

“Dost mine tale satisfy thee, Twilight?” Luna asked after she had finished.

She had a hard time believing the things Luna had said about Celestia. “I suppose,” Twilight said at last. “The name Astor Coruscare sounds familiar.”

“She was Celestia’s most powerful lieutenant. A unicorn trained from birth to make war. She could defeat Celestia or I in single combat by the end of the war. The Coruscare scale is named after her. She is also your distant ancestor.”

Twilight frowned. The part about being related to her was a surprise, but it wasn’t what was bothering her. She didn’t recognize the name from the Coruscare scale. She made a mental note to think on it more later. “So why do you all have suits of armor?” she asked, suddenly having the urge to change the subject.

Rarity interrupted. The unicorn had been eating her slice of cake so slowly and delicately it was barely half-finished. “Oh, aren’t they *gorgeous*, dear? I designed them all, with help from Princess Luna, of course. Although Pinkie Pie made most of hers by herself. Did I tell you I’m a knight?”

“A knight?”

“Knight-Commander of the Order Nocturnus! *Dame Rarity*, as it were.”

Applejack snorted. “Also the *only* member of the Order Nocturnus.”

Rarity sniffed. “In *any* case, its keeps us all a little safer when we’re out causing trouble. I have to wear this robe because I’m a bladecaster.”

Twilight remembered full well what Rarity was capable of. After all, Twilight had met her

father.

She shuddered inwardly at the memory of the stallion who had driven the Sliver through her eye. She reminded herself that she needed to keep things together. Twilight decided that she would wait awhile longer before letting Rarity know who she had run into, and do so in private at least.

“So what about Fluttershy? How can she use earthpony magic?”

“I have not the slightest idea!” Luna practically shouted. “I was hoping that thou couldst explain it to us. Nor do I know how Rainbow Dash freed herself from your spell.”

“*Nihilus*’s spell,” Fluttershy corrected stiffly.

“Of course!” Luna boomed.

“Hmm...” Twilight said. “Enchantments that cuffle to a pony instead of an inanimate object are unstable by their very nature. I suppose it’s possible that if fed enough non-native energy the bondings in the cuffle could break. But for that to happen the enchantment would already need to be extremely weak.”

“It was,” Rainbow Dash said quietly. “Fluttershy used the stare.” She shifted uncomfortably as she spoke to Twilight.

“Well that makes sense, I suppose. Mind magic isn’t supposed to mix.” She brought a hoof to her chin and scratched. “As for Fluttershy using earthpony magic, I don’t know either. It might have something to do with the Elements of Harmony, I suppose that since we have them in our possession, I should study them.”

“Thou wilt not hath the time, Twilight Sparkle. We need to train you.”

Twilight closed her eyes for a moment. She had been afraid Luna would say something like that. “I’m-” She paused, looking up at her friends, Luna, and Coconut. “I’m not going to fight.”

The look that came over Luna’s face was hard. “Why not?”

*Nihilus allowed herself a slight smile as she punted Pinkie Pie off of a balcony to fall to her death. Twilight felt the pain as Rainbow Dash split their face open with the cover of a book. Days earlier, Twilight had watched helplessly as Dash force-fed herself Twilight’s diary.*

“I just can’t.”

"We shalt speak of this later. For now, thou wilt tell me everything thou knowest of my sister."

*Titan said, "This brings me no pleasure, Celestia."*

*Twilight tried to look away, tried to close her eyes, but she couldn't.*

*"Please," Celestia managed weakly.*

*The Sliver tore off Celestia's ear and chewed it thoughtfully, trying to decide on a name while her spell did its work. "You know," she said casually to Celestia, her mouth full of flesh. "She thought you were going to come and save her. Still does, judging by the racket she's making now." She continued to chew on the ear, and blood ran down the corner of her mouth.*

*Twilight could taste it.*

Twilight did her best to keep her cake and cocoa down. "Nihilus took her power and gave it to Emyrean. She's a simple pony now; no magic at all. Mortal."

Luna nodded. "I had thought as much." Her voice was almost at an appropriate volume by now. "Though a spell that doth remove a pony's magic is supposed to be impossible."

Twilight looked down, so that Rainbow Dash was no longer in her field of vision. "I break the rules," she said. "In any case, Titan gave Celestia to Terra. I don't know where she is."

Luna nodded stiffly, her expression unreadable. "Emyrean will know. Now that we have Twilight, we can move against him."

"But you said that there was a barrier between us and the inner city."

"Indeed. A barrier that thou shalt shatter."

"I can't. That's-"

"Thou didst *reorder* the Coruscare scale, Twilight Sparkle. Thou said thineself that thou doth break the rules."

"I-" Twilight paused. An alicorn's magical barrier would be almost impossible to destroy. The laws of magic stated that no system was perfect, though. "I'll try," she offered. "But I would need as much surface area as possible. And as much time as you can get me."

Luna rose and strode over the table. Everypony followed, and soon they had formed a circle around the map of Canterlot. Twilight noticed several of what looked like monpony

figures wrought to resemble Luna, Twilight, and her friends. The only pony missing was Pinkie Pie, who Twilight presumed was represented by the figurine that looked like a top hat.

“The ideal location would be Bolten Square,” Luna mused. “But that is halfway across the city. The pegasi would spot us before we were halfway there. There will also be reinforcements coming through the barrier throughout the day tomorrow after our actions today. And even if we do break the barrier we will need ground to go to.”

“Almost certainly,” Coconut added. “We usually come through on Bay Street, if that’s any help.”

Luna gave her an icy look. “Thou art a prisoner, Captain. I shall not trust a word that thou speaketh.”

“She’s telling the truth,” said Twilight.

“And how dost thou knoweth this?”

“Well, where else would they use?” Twilight said. “They would need one of the major streets for width, just for efficiency. Roan Street is too close to *here*, where I assume you have been operating out of for awhile now, so they wouldn’t use it.” She looked up at Luna.

“Go on,” the Princess said.

“Princess Lane is too close to the city walls. The barrier intersects Sorrel Street through the Canterlot School of the Fine Arts, making it a perfect ambush site from our side. If I recall correctly, the school has a long overhang that would corral pegasi to one method of approach and the plaza would give us the high ground. The same can be said for Prince Street, but from the other side. If they tried to get a sizable force through the loyalists from the inner city could stand on the bridgeways and tear them apart with an easy escape route through the glass factory. Not to mention the factory itself would provide them with lots of ammunition.”

Twilight began to highlight points on the map. “So that leaves Main Street, Starsworl Avenue, Alicorn Way, and Bay Street as potential main roads to send your troops down. Except you’re sending troops through the barrier; you need to ensure they’re appropriately provisioned and that they can get to their posts in the most efficient way possible. Which means that you have to hit the cannery, the logistics office, and then come out near whatever you’re using for a barracks, which I’ll assume is the steel mill due to its size, defensibility, and proximity to high class housing that you could put officers in to enforce the chain of command.

“The only streets that do this are Alicorn and Bay. So how do we eliminate Alicorn? Simple: morale. Alicorn runs through a heavy residential district; Bay, an industrial one. You want to expose your soldiers to as few starving civilians as you possibly can, for fear that they

will defect. And you certainly don't want to give your civilians a reminder that they're living in a military state. So you send your soldiers along Bay, and if anything the factory workers are encouraged to slack off less as they pass."

Twilight conjured an image of the Undercity labyrinth and had it hover above the map of Canterlot. She began to highlight different passageways. "So Applejack, Pinkie Pie, Rainbow Dash, and Fluttershy take *this* route through the labyrinth. They attack the column of reinforcements coming through the barrier *here* while they're on their way to the barracks. Then they draw them back *here*, in the opposite direction of Bolten Square. Then they take this entrance into the Undercity— it's buried under the sweet shop on the corner of Alicorn and Crown, you'll have to dig. They take *this* route through the labyrinth." She highlighted more sections in another color. "If all goes well and the barrier goes down, they can rendezvous with us *here*." Another highlight. "If not, getting back to this place shouldn't be too hard, you just follow this route *here*." More color coded highlights.

"Meanwhile, right after you've started the distraction, Luna, Rarity and I emerge through *this* entrance and walk one block to Bolten Square. There will still be pegasi and some puppets and soldiers who will catch sight of us, I'm sure, but I can at least disguise us until we get to the actual barrier. I do my best to break the barrier, and if I fail, we go back the way we came. They won't be able to track us through the labyrinth because they don't know its layout. If I *succeed*, however, we push through into the inner city.

"We don't use force; the barrier coming down will hopefully have created chaos. I take advantage of that chaos to once again disguise us and we use *this* entrance and *this* route to get to our rendezvous. After that we lay low and look for the inner city loyalists." She looked up for the first time at the room's other occupants. "Make sense?"

They were all staring at her as though she'd grown an extra horn. "Twilight," said Applejack, "where in the *hay* did you get a map of the labyrinth?"

"Well, um, Celestia taught me when I was little. Well, not really, I taught myself, she just gave me the books I needed. I never thought that it would be useful knowledge to have."

"And where," Luna said quietly, "didst thou learn strategy, tactics, and logistics?"

"I did a book report on it when I was fourteen."

Rarity tilted her head. "Princess Celestia had you learn about warfare?"

"Well, no," Twilight said defensively. "I picked the book out myself."

"You picked a book about *warfare* when you were fourteen?"

"I-" Twilight thought back, remembering... "No," she said. "No I didn't. I mean, I thought I did, but..." She frowned. "Celestia had just given me my own rooms, complete with enough shelves to hold an entire library. There were only a couple dozen books when she gave it to me though, and she said I should pick one to do my report on. She said that I should pick something we'd never covered before so that I'd learn something new. She said that she always spoiled me with lessons about the things I loved— magic, science, history— and that I should pick something that *doesn't* interest me this time. It was just a suggestion, of course, but when her Royal Highness Princess Celestia gives you a suggestion...

"We'd covered almost every topic on the bookshelf. I had to choose a book that I didn't find interesting and that I knew nothing about. And only one book fit those criteria. The book Celestia made sure was there. That's where I've heard that name before. The book's author was named Astor. No Coruscare, just Astor."

"*What!?*" The volume of Luna's voice caused the map to slide across the table. "*My sister had thou readeth that book?*"

"It didn't make any sense, and I hated it. It was about how to kill each other. It argued that it was in our *nature* to kill each other. It described warfare on a scale that Equestria had never seen before. It was incredibly detailed, but the author was crazy. They kept referencing battles that never happened, events that didn't occur."

Luna's eyes were wild. "They did happen, Twilight Sparkle. Almost every written word that existed before the time of Discord was destroyed. Celestia and I decided that history would begin with the end of him. But Astor was special to Celestia, so she kept five things that Astor had written. The first was her diary. Then she kept two copies of Astor's first book, *The Power to Destroy*. It details every war-spell from Astor's time."

"I remember that book," Twilight said softly. "Nihilus read it." *The Power to Destroy* was the quintessential tome concerning war magic. It did not credit any author, and Twilight had assumed it was an anthology. To think that one pony could have invented so many ways to weaponize magic made Twilight feel ill. Astor Coruscare, her ancestor, had created *Magic Missile*.

Rainbow Dash shifted uncomfortably once again. Her face was unreadable.

"Celestia also kept two copies of Astor's *other* book. A book that could arm ponykind with terrible knowledge. Knowledge that could be used to assemble mass armies and slay each other by the tens of thousands. Knowledge usable by any pony wishing to make war, regardless of their magical power. Knowledge that had no place in the world we wanted to create."

"I have both copies," Twilight said softly. "One in my rooms in Canterlot, and the other in the Ponyville library. Except I brought that one with me." She pulled it out of null-space and set it

gently onto the table.

Pinkie Pie grabbed it first. She *ooed* dramatically as she picked it up. “Why does this book give me chills?” Pinkie said as she opened the cover. Everypony but Twilight and Luna leaned in.

“Well,” Applejack said, “What does it say?”

Pinkie Pie cleared her throat and read the very first page. “Astor presents,” she read loudly.

*“Ponies Make War.”*

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Chapter 10 : [Daughters and Daughters](#)

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