

The Power to Destroy



Unimpressive cleaved an earthpony puppet in two with *Vindictive*, then watched as a puppet next to him burst.

“You know,” he called back to Fluttershy, “it isn’t flashy or intimidating, but *damn* that mind-pulverize thing you do is effective.” He split *Vindictive* into thirteen blazing missiles and sent them at a unicorn.

“I d-don’t like it,” Fluttershy said. “It’s no different than using your hooves to hurt somepony.” Unimpressive frowned, not at Fluttershy’s comment, but at the force field the unicorn used to deflect his weapon.

“Well *they* like it.” Unimpressive nodded to the motley group of loyalists who had joined them in holding the tunnel. “Also, could you get that unicorn in the back? I swear he just stuck his tongue out at me.”

Fluttershy sighed and attempted to lock eyes with the pony. “I hope Twilight is okay,” she said after popping the puppet’s brain.

“She can teleport,” he answered as he set a pegasus puppet on fire. What use were pegasi underground? “She’ll be fine.”

“But she’s been so *stressed*,” Fluttershy said softly. “I tried everything—I even offered her a massage.” She ducked to avoid a flying piece of stone, and Unimpressive batted it out of the air with a thought.

“*I* even offered her *hard liquor*,” he answered. “What?” he said upon seeing the look she gave him. “It’s like a massage, but for the *soul*.” Her disapproving stare intensified. “If looks could kill, Flutts.” She locked eyes with another puppet and it burst into nothingness.

It was then that he heard it: a solitary cry of, “*It’s the Cadet!*” His head whipped around immediately. The voice had come from behind them.

He saw the pale green coat through the disorganized mass of his own soldiers, who

were screaming and scattering at the sight of the new arrival. The Cadet's blade whirled to and fro, hacking at the loyalists close by. An earthpony closed with the Cadet, attempting to fight him off, but he was woefully inadequate against the bladecaster, and was quickly cut down.

Unimpressive felt his blood boil. How long had this bastard been inside their defenses, killing evacuees rather than helping his own forces on the front? Rage filled his veins, and he did the only thing that seemed fitting: he pulled out his whiskey.

"Um, Unimpressive..." Fluttershy said as upended the flask. He kept going. "Are you sure this is, um, I mean..." He kept going. "It's just, you," He pulled the flask from his lips and rapped it against his horn, where it made a hollow metallic *clank*. "Oh my."

Unimpressive breathed deeply and suppressed his urge to vomit. "It's good," he wheezed, losing his footing momentarily. "It's a good burn." He patted Fluttershy on the back. "You're in charge now, 'kay?"

"Um, what?"

Unimpressive was already barreling away from her, pushing against his own scattering troops in pursuit of his rival. "Cadet!" he bellowed as he cleared the other loyalists. "Where are you!?"

He spotted him passing through a door a short distance away, and followed. When he pushed through the metal door, he found himself in a wide room. He was alone with—

"*Cadet*," he said venomously to the green unicorn.

"You," the Cadet shot back. Then he sneered. "What is your name, dead pony?"

"You never learned it? I'm surprised."

"You weren't talked about very often."

"You weren't talked about at all. Call me Unimpressive."

The Cadet snorted. "Fitting. Call me the Cadet."

Unimpressive cocked his head to the side. "I already do."

The Cadet looked somewhat put out. "In that case," he said, regaining his composure and casting his bright green blade. He opened his mouth to speak.

"Die?" Unimpressive finished.

"I wasn't going to say die!"

"You were totally going to say die. Which, quite frankly, is a little cliché, above your rank, extremely predictable—" With a small effort of will, *Vindictive* flared into life before him. "—And woefully inaccurate," he finished.

"Auuuuuuugh!" The Cadet came at him swinging.

"A little more original," Unimpressive said offhandedly.

With a flare of white light, the two blades clashed in the air before them, then spread apart to come at one another again. They buzzed and whirled, as the two matched skills with one another. The Cadet was good, but Unimpressive was better. He countered the Cadet's slower, more powerful strokes with his own, but his hoofwork was where he excelled. The Cadet was constantly neglecting his left hind leg, and as a result Unimpressive pushed him back a considerable distance.

"I never understood what the General saw in you over me," his opponent said as their blades danced in the air before them.

"Really?" Unimpressive tried to hide the strain on his face as he pushed *Vindictive* against—actually, he had no idea what the Cadet's blade was called. A searing white light burned where it met his own weapon. "Because I'm sort of kicking your ass right now. Wait, you're talking about Masterstroke, right? Because if Esteem has a bunch of posters of me in his room I'm going to be more than a little weirded out."

"*Masterstroke!*" the Cadet shrieked as he heaved against Unimpressive's blade with all his magical muscle and pushed them away from one another. "You were a troublemaker! A drunk!"

"—But so handsome and charming!" Unimpressive finished with a sly grin as he blocked a set of strikes. "Your timing was off on that third hit, Caddy."

"I should have been his apprentice," the Cadet hissed. "I have power you do not."

Unimpressive answered him by raising an eyebrow. "It's cute how *dramatic* you are—Like this is some final confrontation between two arch-rivals. The real truth is that you're just another royal for me to put down," he lied. Unimpressive had been looking forward to giving this little prick his comeuppance for quite some time.

His comment sent the Cadet over the edge. With a snarl of rage, he took an overhead swing at Unimpressive, which he easily caught on *Vindictive*. Under the light of their clashing

blades, Unimpressive flashed his opponent a grin before hauling off and punching him in the face.

The Cadet reeled, grabbing his muzzle with a hoof. Unfortunately, he still had the wit to use his magical senses and deflect Unimpressive's followup strike. Unimpressive swung at him with a hoof again, but the Cadet caught his hoof in a block.

Unimpressive's shoulders slumped. "He taught you *martial arts*?" he said in what was almost a whine.

The Cadet smiled, and the light from their connecting blades cast eerie shadows over his face. "I'm going to—"

"—Enjoy this?"

"Stop that!" his opponent shrieked before punching out with his hoof in a focused strike. It was a decently thrown punch, and the Cadet had clearly practiced whilst in the military. Unimpressive, however, had practiced whilst drunk in the less reputable Canterlot bars. He was more than up for a scuffle.

He clumsily caught the Cadet's punch with both his forelegs, then reached out with his magic and grabbed the empty flask still attached to his harness. It spun out from under his robe and cracked the Cadet in the teeth. His opponent's head reeled backwards as blood spurted from his bleeding lips and Unimpressive was forced to block the incandescent green blade with his own as the Cadet swung at him wildly.

He paid too much attention to their blades, and the Cadet recovered far faster than he would have expected. Unimpressive felt a hoof drive its way into his chest, and his immediate reaction was to throw up a little, filling his mouth with the burn of whiskey-tasting bile. He spotted another hoof coming his way, and woozily ducked the blow before spitting his sick all over the Cadet.

His foe drew away wearing a look of total revulsion, and Unimpressive swung at him with *Vindictive*. The Cadet deflected the blow and lunged at him, knocking him to the ground. His hooves came down on Unimpressive's neck as his emerald blade kept *Vindictive* away.

"But I see now," the Cadet managed through gritted teeth as Unimpressive pushed his face away with a hoof. "The error was Masterstroke's, not mine. He was a fool, and he sought a fool to tutor."

Unimpressive bit down on one of his forelegs, and the Cadet's grip loosened as he drew away. With a heave, Unimpressive rolled him away and got back onto his hooves.

“That’s really bothering you, isn’t it?”

The table at the center of the room was enveloped in the Cadet’s magical aura, and the room was filled with the sound of wood being torn into splinters. They lunged through the air at Unimpressive, who took cover behind a wide forcefield.

“I was the top of our year. The pick of every officer. You were a nopony. A walking dropout. And he chose *you*.”

Then Unimpressive saw his chance. The easiest win he could possibly pull off. The ultimate cheat. “You want to know why?” The Cadet began to circle him, and Unimpressive circled his rival in turn.

“Enlighten me.”

“The day I got brought up to his office, I thought I was going to get thrown out. Instead I met Princess Celestia.”

“Lies.”

Unimpressive ignored him. “She knighted me,” he whispered, remembering. “You have no idea what a conversation with her can be like.” The knighthood hadn’t changed him. Five minutes with the Princess had. “And while I knelt on the floor, confused as to why a drunken scoundrel was becoming the general’s apprentice, Masterstroke spoke.” Unimpressive levelled his blade at the Cadet. “I’ll tell you what he said, Cadet.”

Then he charged. His bladecasting was superb, his hoofwork flawless. Suddenly the Cadet’s moves seemed predictable. He would follow his opponent’s eyes and examine his hoofwork, watching as the Cadet betrayed exactly where he was going to be next. He met every one of his enemy’s strokes with ease. It was surprising—he had never fought so well in his life.

“He called me by name,” he recalled. “Then he told me that it meant nothing.”

The Cadet and he were now wading through the ruins of the table. He broke his blade and sent it at Unimpressive, and Unimpressive mirrored the action. For a moment, they were alone amidst over two dozen red and green stars.

“Then he called me by rank—which was now Knight Bachelor. And he told me that it meant nothing.”

The Cadet dove backwards as their blades reformed in the space between them and resumed their clashing.

“And for the next decade he spent every day kicking my ass, so that one day I could turn around and kick yours. Also, I think he hated me: I was kind of lazy and unmotivated. And I made fun of his beard.”

“You still haven’t told me why he chose you,” the Cadet said.

“He told me that it was because I saw the world in a way that others didn’t. Then he told me the secret that Celestia has told to all her greatest commanders but one, and that all her commanders tell to their apprentices. You want to hear it?”

From behind the incandescent light of their clashing blades, the Cadet shot daggers at him. “Enlighten me.”

Unimpressive leaned in and said in a voice that was barely a whisper: “The entire Equestrian military is a front. Everypony in it serves an altogether different purpose from what they believe. Because the most important thing the most powerful mortal pony alive needs to know is that this world is not one to be won by war.”

The Cadet snorted. “Nonsense.”

“Is it? I don’t recall Masterstroke defeating Nightmare Moon and Discord.”

The Cadet’s face fell for a moment before aiming a jab at Unimpressive.

He parried and the Cadet jumped away from his riposte. “Tell me why you’d rather be named Cadet,” he said loudly.

“Because that is who I am!” his opponent cried as their blades wrestled in the air and cut long swaths through the floor beneath them. “Because that is *what* I am, *Unimpressive!*”

“Names mean nothing,” Unimpressive countered. “Titles mean nothing!” Every magelight in the room flared, and the they was bathed in sanguine light. “It is the *cause*, not the pony, that is important! The *deeds*, not the name, that should be remembered!”

The Cadet’s horn flared, and Unimpressive was suddenly caught in an emerald green net that carried him through the air over forty feet to strike the wall behind him.

The Cadet regarded him coolly. “And you call me dramatic,” he called out from across the room. “I think my general taught me lessons that were a little more practical.”

Thirteen balls of meteoric silver rolled harmlessly around the room. Unimpressive’s head lolled on his neck. Where had the Cadet learned to do *that*? It was now or never: “Esteem trusted you with *The Power to Destroy*, huh? How’d you get him to do that?”

From across the room, the Cadet smiled. "The General respects ability," he said smugly. "And I have it. I mastered the binding spell in less than two weeks. Though now..."

He broke his blade and undid his binding spell as the green blade motes pinned Unimpressive to the wall. They seared his flesh, and Unimpressive was glad he was somewhat inebriated.

"He trusts you that much, eh? You're his second in command?"

"I am his apprentice," he said proudly.

"And that's why you fight for that pig? Because he respects your talents?"

"*Pig?*" the Cadet asked incredulously. His blade motes flared, and they burned Unimpressive's flesh. "General Esteem is a master. He is unstoppable. *Everypony* gets out of his way. Nothing is outside his grasp. Now what was it you said about *deeds* being remembered? *You*," he spat, "you will not be remembered." A glowing green ball of light floated up to sit before Unimpressive's right eye.

"One more thing." Unimpressive smiled. "You said that nothing was outside your general's grasp," he stated.

"*Nothing*," the Cadet said forcefully.

"Not even the daughter he's going to replace you with?"

His words left the Cadet wide eyed, and the other unicorn spluttered as words failed him. He gaped as the weight of Unimpressive's words struck him and rang true. The General would rather have Rarity as his apprentice once again. The Cadet fought for the approval of a stallion who would abandon him. He hated the rejection he had received from General Masterstroke so many years ago, and he was going to feel the same rejection again. And finally his expression crested for the briefest moment into something Unimpressive could read from forty feet away: what was the point?

The Cadet's blade burnt out, and the room was filled with the tinny *pings* of thirteen silver orbs dropping listlessly to the floor.

It was simple, really: he had lost his reason to fight. It had been a very weak reason in the first place—what kind of daddy issues must he have to need so much of his boss's approval? A *real* pony needed to fight for a cause. A purpose. A feeling. Unimpressive dropped down to the floor and looked across the room, over the remains of the table and into the Cadet's terrified eyes. A feeling.

Right now, he was feeling *Vindictive*.

The blade formed in front of him as he sprang forward towards the Cadet at top speed. Their duel had been greatly simplified—if Unimpressive reached the Cadet, the Cadet lost. Which meant that over the next forty feet his opponent was going to expend every ounce of power he had trying to kill him. They each had about five seconds to let everything loose.

Unimpressive couldn't help but grin. It was time to get dangerous.

First the Cadet cast his binding spell, and a blazing green net materialized in the air and shot towards Unimpressive. Then the Cadet caused it to burst into darker green flames mid-flight.

Unimpressive could have scoffed. First, at the idea that he would allow the same spell to surprise him twice, and second at the ridiculousness of igniting a binding spell. If the spell hit him, the Cadet won. What was the point of lighting it on fire?

Hoofwork was everything. On his second bound forward from the wall, he pulled his forelegs back as they hit the ground and pivoted to swing his hindquarters forward. He didn't need to be facing the net to cleave it in two. When *Vindictive* cut the net into parts, they sped past his head on either side of him. The proximity burned the back of his head, but his face was safe. His hood was blown up onto his head, and he was turning back around before he hit the ground.

Thirty feet. He broke *Vindictive* and sent thirteen glowing red blade motes spiralling towards the Cadet. His opponent spent precious time batting them out of the air, and Unimpressive was already reforming the blade as the Cadet shot a pale green ball of light his way.

How original.

Twenty feet. The magic missile would reach him before *Vindictive* did. Unimpressive considered jumping to either side or stopping to erect a barrier, but those would slow him down considerably. While ducking would slow him down less, any time he gave the Cadet was time he could spend regaining his conviction and casting his blade.

It was time to pull a Pinkie Pie. He planted one of his front hooves and sprang off the ground as his side swung forward. It was a poor imitation of her style—he had nowhere near the agility she did, and as he flipped over the missile he felt it singe the hair on his back. He completed his turn and hit the ground in what was arguably a landing. He was on four legs and still moving forward, so in Unimpressive's opinion it met the criteria.

Ten feet. Clearly out of ideas, the Cadet sent a wave of telekinetic force at him, then drew the splintered remains of the table toward him. It was an interesting combination; normally the wave would counteract the fragments, but Unimpressive was going to have to counteract the wave.

Whatever. At least neither of them were green. The way they'd been throwing green and red around, you'd think they were having *Hearth's Warming Eve: The Duel*.

Unimpressive cooked up and threw his own wave of force right before the Cadet's hit him, and the two collided in the air. Unimpressive bounded through a churning wall of conflicting residual forces, and the churning air flattened his hood and mane against his neck.

As soon as he hit the ground, he pushed *Vindictive* against the Cadet's neck, then spun them both around to face the oncoming shards of wood, which the Cadet had inexplicably set on fire. As though that would help in *any* way.

Unimpressive managed to stop all of the shards that would have hit him, but sadly only slowed the ones bound for the Cadet to non-lethal speeds. Oh well. He'd live.

He spun them around and pushed the Cadet into the wall, where he pinned him with *Vindictive*. "Open your mouth!" he shouted. When the Cadet did not do as he was told, Unimpressive decided he needed a little prompting, and burnt him with his blade motes. "*Open your mouth!*" The Cadet complied.

He broke a single silver orb away from *Vindictive* and set it on the other unicorn's tongue. "Swallow." The Cadet's eyes widened. "*Swallow!*" He complied.

"Now," Unimpressive said with a grin. "You use any magic or try anything sneaky, I take it out. Tell me you understand."

The Cadet whimpered. "I understand."

Unimpressive's grin widened. "*Good,*" he said. "Now let's go meet General Twilight Sparkle."



She had held them as long as she could.

The problem was that there were always more fleeing ponies, and there were always more puppets. While Dash was strong, she couldn't fight forever, and the puppets apparently could. How was she supposed to be able to take the unicorns with no Pinkie sense or allies? They would tear her to shreds if she got close and wasn't careful.

She did have allies. Not all of the loyalists were fleeing—some of them would stop for a time to help her cover the constant stream of retreating ponies. Retreating ponies who wouldn't have a hope without her. She could not afford to stop fighting. The puppets were coming from everywhere.

So Rainbow Dash had tried to *be* everywhere. It had even worked, at first: she was the fastest pegasus alive, after all. She'd darted between alleyways and rooftops, barking orders to her loyalists as she tore the puppets apart. She'd rush over to intercept magic spells and block thrown punches if it meant saving another pony's life.

It was too exhausting, especially after her fight with Titan. Dash might be one of "the five," but she wasn't invincible. She began to slow down, and take a couple hits. They were minor things, really, but they accumulated.

After awhile her body just stopped listening. Her wings were bruised and battered, and she couldn't fly. Her chest had taken one too many blows, and it hurt to breathe. Everything she had just wasn't cutting it. Finally, in the midst of a group of enemy earthponies, Rainbow Dash fell.

She wasn't going to fail—she couldn't *afford* to fail, not with so many ponies depending on her for cover. She moved to get back up, and was thrown back to the ground as she took a kick in the chest and had the wind knocked out of her. The pain was building to intolerable levels, but Dash could take it. *Had* to take it. She tried to call the power of thunder, but failed. She just couldn't *focus*. She was failing.

A hoof beat her head into the ground, and a splitting pain shot through her muzzle. Rainbow Dash went for her blade, but realized that she had dropped it when she fell. It was only then that she realized that she was going to die unless she did something.

With a thunderous *crack*, the entire world went white, and Dash's eyes—the only thing that *hadn't* been hurting—cried out in pain. She looked away, and her vision slowly returned to her. As it did, she heard explosions, bangs and pops that made the ground shake. Another extremely loud crack sounded out and Dash was glad she was looking away from the source. The entire world was bleached a grayish purple for a moment, as though a lightning bolt had struck not ten feet behind her. It was then that she noticed that every puppet that had been around her moments before was gone.

She rolled over to see that every puppet was gone—over fifty of them had been taken

out in seconds. Before her stood Princess Luna—or so Dash thought at first. It was the mane that seemed so familiar.

Twilight's eyes were hard and unforgiving. They glowed with an inner light, as though within each of them burned a piece of the thunder she had just used to smite her enemies. Her mane was deep blue mass of ethereal energy, blowing in an unfelt breeze. Thin ripples of electric pink and all kinds of shades of purple would occasionally surface from within the swirling expanse, giving it a deep, nebulous look. Around her head orbited a tiny fragment of a purple gemstone.

"Rainbow Dash," she said. Despite her appearance, her voice was soft. "I wronged you. I can't imagine what it must have been like."

She took a step closer to Rainbow Dash, and Dash's first instinct was to draw away. "But you *didn't* have free will, Dash. You weren't yourself. You were Wrong."

Dash closed her eyes. "I made Wrong up. She was an excuse."

"The easiest way to change a pony is to take from them *everything* that they have and work from a blank slate. Nihilus took your friends. She took your pride. She took your loyalty and your flight. She took these things away and then she made her spell force your mind down the darker path. And in the end, you broke free."

"Fluttershy set me free."

"*You* broke free. As soon as Fluttershy opened the door for you, you didn't even hesitate before jumping through it to help a friend in need. And when you did, it wasn't Wrong that came to Pinkie Pie's rescue, it was Rainbow Dash."

This time when Twilight stepped towards her, Dash didn't back away. She remembered chanting her own name inside her head as she descended on her falling friend. *Rainbow Dash*.

"If ever there was a way to break a pony beyond repair, it would be what you went through, Rainbow Dash. But it didn't. Because *you* are not something that can be broken. You can change, you can suffer, and you can die, but you will always be there for the ponies who need you. I couldn't ask for a better friend."

Twilight extended a hoof. "I know you can get up on your own, Rainbow Dash. But I would prefer you take my hoof."

Take my hoof. Dash immediately began to reach for Twilight's outstretched foreleg.

Then she stopped. This wasn't something she was going to do just because of her

subconscious desire to obey Twilight Sparkle. She had to make a choice. Dash saw Twilight swallow nervously, her hoof hanging.

It was an easy choice to make, especially once Dash realized that Twilight wasn't offering help—she was asking for it. Dash took her hoof. She would always be there for her friends. She felt Twilight tap their harmonic connection for the first time ever.



Twilight came out of her blink with a crack and a star-like flash of purple light. Rarity reacted to her arrival first.

"Twilight!" She gasped. "You look absolutely *stunning*, darling."

Twilight looked around her. The Elements of Harmony already told her that Rarity, Applejack, and Pinkie Pie were here, but she was really looking for somepony else.

"Princess Luna," Twilight greeted her monarch with a curt bow. "The tunnels below ground are cleared?"

Luna took her in with an approving glance. "Indeed they are, general. Our last ponies should be arriving hence."

Twilight nodded. "And General Esteem?"

The Princess smiled slightly. "Retreated."

"Excellent. I have ordered every pony I found above ground to convene in Saddle Square. They should all get the message."

"Uh, Saddle Square?" Applejack said. "You sure that's gonna be big enough for over a thousand ponies?"

"I widened it."

Applejack glanced at her mane. "Oh. Alright then."

Twilight turned back to Luna. "I want a promotion."

Luna cocked her head. “General of the Armies of Equestria is the greatest position that thou canst hold.”

“Name me Master General.”

Luna’s eyes narrowed. “That was the rank Titan bestowed upon the leader of his troops.”

“I know. But the leader of his troops was—”

“Celestia,” Luna finished with a widening smile.

“You and she are the only ponies who have ever defeated him. Make me Master General, and we’ll send him a message. I’ll outrank General Esteem as well. And it will be something I choose to do, this time. I *want* this.”

“I will not deny thee the rank, Twilight Sparkle. Thou art now Master General.”

“Excellent. Now do you have any of the night sky to spare, Princess?”

At this, Luna’s smile grew into a full-fledged grin.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Twilight said. “Rarity.” She turned to the other unicorn. “I need a uniform. What do you have that says, ‘Godslayer?’”

Rarity looked like a filly waking up on Hearth’s Warming Eve.



“It’s so *sticky*,” Rarity whined. “How am I supposed to make anything out of this?” She attempted to peel some of the sky off of her hooves with little success.

They had convened in a building on the edge of Saddle Square that Twilight had decided to use as an impromptu headquarters. Everypony was present except for Fluttershy, who would arrive shortly.

Luna was also there, helping Rarity to shape and weave her gift into something Twilight could use. The uniform’s purpose was not to enforce her appearance as Celestia’s successor and ponykind’s general. While it would certainly do those things, its real purpose was to help Rarity remember who she was. Twilight had been half-crazy over the past two weeks,

unconscious the month before that, and trapped inside the Sliver of Darkness the week before that. Rarity needed to stay in touch with the designer she once was, instead of the soldier she had become. As a friend, Rarity's emotional well-being fell on Twilight—but then, Twilight was responsible for everything, now.

Everything. How had Celestia coped with being the ruler of ponykind for a thousand years? How had the princess handled the knowledge that every time she made a mistake, fate would exact a toll of pony lives? What was more, why would Titan ever *want* to hold that position?

"Twilight, *darling*." Twilight had to suppress a smile at the lilt that had returned to her friend's voice. Her plan was meeting some success, at least. "What *is* that thing spinning around your head?"

She plucked the gemstone out of its orbit and made it hover in the air in front of her. "This? This is a piece of the Element of Magic. It carries all my protective enchantments."

Rarity pursed her lips. "I guess you'll have to keep it then, won't you? A shame, really, I had the nicest idea for a *chapeau* in mind, but if you really want the spinning rock it will have to do."

"Hey," said Dash, "how come we have the whole Elements but you only need a piece to protect you?"

Twilight was happy to explain. "Mine doesn't need any power, like yours, because I have all my unicorn magic with me at all times. It just tells my magic how to behave when I channel energy into it, like this." She placed the gemstone back into its orbit and it began to spin faster. It glowed Twilight's standard purple as it eventually formed into a halo of magical light.

"Ooooh," Pinkie said, her eyes widening. "I want to touch it! Can I touch it?"

"That's a bad idea, Pinkie."

Rarity squinted at the glowing circlet. "I suppose I can make it work. A hat wouldn't have gone well with your new mane anyway. How *do* you get it like that?"

"Lots and lots of magic. Rainbow Dash does it when she sonic rainbooms."

"So if that's just a piece," Applejack said, "where's the rest?"

"Equinox," Twilight said simply.

Everypony in the room gave her a confused look except Luna, whose expression

immediately darkened. Applejack spoke up.

“Say again, sugar?”

From her null-space, Twilight pulled another glowing amethyst shard. It drifted lazily around her entire body in a small circle. Then another purple orb winked into place around her, then another, and another. Soon she stood at the centre of a galaxy composed of amethyst stars. There were exactly twenty-seven of them, including the one orbiting her head.

The other twenty six collapsed in on themselves, joining to form a long, slender shaft that blazed with a light so intense everypony in the room had to look away. Everypony except for Twilight, of course. She had added a light filter to her protective enchantments.

“*Equinox*,” she repeated. “The spell to enchant a blade is detailed in the earliest chapter of *The Power to Destroy*. It’s also a beautiful piece of magic. I can’t fathom the kind of mind that would create something like it. Titan’s spells are complex, but straightforward. This is art.

“All of us have changed,” she said, looking over her blade at her friends. “Before Nihilus, I would never have considered wielding the power to destroy. Now I will do it only reluctantly, but I still see the beauty in the magic itself. I’ve been denying the change in myself for far too long. I was afraid of becoming a monster. I still am. But I think it would be more terrifying if we *couldn’t* change.

“*Equinox*,” she said. “A perfect balance between light and darkness. I am not afraid of my darkness any longer. I will *always* be Twilight Sparkle.”

Luna stood from where she had been helping Rarity with her fabric and walked over to where Twilight stood. “Thou dost remind me of Celestia.”

Twilight masked her anger well. As far as she was concerned, that was an insult. Celestia was the reason she was there in the first place. Luna leaned in and whispered in her ear.

“*Roof*.” She sounded furious.

Twilight cleared her throat. “I’ll be back. Make sure Rarity doesn’t hurt herself on that fabric while I’m gone.”

“It’s like I’m sewing into solid *oil*! And I swear that star just burnt me!” Rarity wailed.

Twilight blinked up to the roof, where Luna met her in a matter of moments.

“*Equinox*,” the princess stated calmly. “One might wonder *why* thou hast chosen that

particular name.”

“My name is Twilight Sparkle. It seemed to fit.”

“Thou hast no other motives?”

Twilight was beginning to wonder why they had to be away from the others for this.
“What do you mean, other motives?”

“My blade is named *Nadir*.” This Twilight knew; they had been working together for over two weeks. “Celestia’s is *Zenith*.” This Twilight also knew; she had opened a history textbook before. “Terra’s is *Exogenesis*.”

This Twilight didn’t know. “Exogenesis?”

“It is an old word. It refers to the belief that life and magic first came to this world by an asteroid. Creation through destruction. Beauty through catastrophe. Such is Terra’s prerogative.”

“So what’s Titan’s?”

“*Singularity*. Among the many things it can be taken to mean, one stands out. It is everything within the space of nothing. An inescapable void predating time, containing all of existence itself.”

“Something so massive that it curves space more than I can. The dawn of existence.”

“Indeed. The true blade has some interesting properties. Hope you do not ever encounter it, or even the shadow that he wields as a puppet.”

Twilight considered Luna’s words for a moment. “So that’s what this is about,” she said icily. “You think I’m setting myself up as the next Princess Celestia. As a god.”

Luna spoke in low, level tones. “The astral sphere is *our* domain, Twilight Sparkle.”

“*You* were the one who ordered me to become a symbol for ponykind to rally around.”

“I fear, Twilight Sparkle, that thou wilt not relinquish this power.”

At this, Twilight barked out a humorless laugh. “That’s what this is about, then. You think that I’m not going to return Empyrean’s power to its rightful owner. You think I’m going to take it for myself and become Equestria’s new god. I’ll use the Elements to defeat Titan and Terra then become Princess Twilight Sparkle.”

A thought occurred to her. "I could, couldn't I? They all think Celestia is dead. I've already taken her place."

"Celestia considered thee the best of ponies, Twilight Sparkle."

The look that Twilight gave Luna was positively caustic. "I am *well* aware of what Celestia thought of me. She took the best of her little ponies and made them a weapon to be used against Nightmare Moon. If the best of us deserves only manipulation, then what are the rest of us worth, to the alicorns? Oh, I know why she did it, I even *agree* with her reasoning. What's one little filly compared to the safety of Equestria? The only reason—"

"Dost thou truly think that Celestia—"

"*Don't* talk over me!" Twilight snapped. "The only thing that makes Celestia any different from Titan is the fact that she was willing to die to give *us* a chance. Other than that they're just a pair of gods doing what gods do best."

Luna looked as though she was resisting the urge to shout. As a goddess, the sound would have carried over half the city. "And *thou* couldst do better?!"

"*No*," Twilight said adamantly. "You think I want *power*, of all things? I've been a perfect ten on the Coruscate scale since I was eleven. If that wasn't enough, I've had the ear of our eternal God-Princess and a genius intellect besides. If I had *ever* wanted power, I wouldn't live in a tree. I don't want to be Princess Twilight Sparkle any more than I want to be Master General Twilight Sparkle. It's a role I accept only because it's what Celestia programmed me to do—which is what needs to be done. And the fact that my friends and I are the embodiment of the magic of friendship forces us to constantly risk our lives isn't lost on me, either. No, Princess Luna, I don't want power. You alicorns don't seem to be a very happy lot."

Luna looked a little shocked, so Twilight carried on. "Now up to this point you have been forthright about your desire to use me like Celestia did, so I will do you the same courtesy. I intend to destroy your parents, your brother, and General Esteem. If you help me, you will get your sister back. And I can assure you, Princess: I will need your help."

The Princess regarded her, her face an expressionless mask. "Thou hast learned hard lessons, Twilight Sparkle."

"I wasn't given a choice in that regard, either."

"I will help thee. And for what it is worth, Twilight Sparkle, I hope that thou findest happiness when this war is over."

Happiness. The word sounded strange in her mind. "Thank you, Princess. Fluttershy has

just arrived with Unimpressive... and a prisoner. I'll meet you inside."

Luna took flight, and Twilight blinked back into the building and took in her surroundings.

Rarity was still wrestling with Twilight's new uniform in the corner, and Pinkie Pie had apparently decided to help her—by chewing on a piece of the sky. Applejack and Rainbow Dash were conversing in low tones, and from the looks of the hoof gestures Dash was making, they were talking about their previous battle. Fluttershy had barely a scratch on her, but Unimpressive was covered in scrapes and bruises. Between them was a pale green unicorn whom Twilight recognized.

Twilight ignored him at first. "Are you alright, Fluttershy?"

"Oh, I'm fine, Twilight. You look, um..."

"I'm perfectly alright. Never felt better, in fact."

From behind her, Rainbow Dash spoke. "She's back to being *awesome*! Uh, not that you weren't awesome before."

Fluttershy smiled slightly. "Well I'm glad everypony is okay now." The subtext was clear: *because we weren't okay before.*

"I'm fine," Unimpressive said loudly. "Thanks for asking."

Twilight shot him a flat look. "Good to hear."

"Yeah, I back-flipped over a war spell. No big deal. You guys want to hear about it?"

"Not particularly."

Unimpressive looked a bit hurt.

"You," Twilight said to the green unicorn. "I remember you. Nihilus threatened to send your head back to Canterlot in a box. I have a couple questions for you."

The unicorn glowered at her.

"Rainbow Dash," Twilight called out without taking her eyes from the green unicorn.

"Yeah?"

"Go find Spitfire and bring her here. Pinkie Pie, get Noble and Buttercup. Fluttershy, find

my parents.”

Dash saluted before jetting off. Pinkie Pie bounced away with Fluttershy in tow. While it was true Twilight would need her other staff present, she really just didn’t want them around for the interrogation. She would need to go for intimidation—something she had learned a bit about during her time with Nihilus.

She momentarily suspended the majority of her emotions and let herself fall into a cool state of dispassionate reason. The green pony’s resolve to resist her was a just another form of system. One that she could break, if she played her cards right.

“I am going to ask you questions,” she said simply. “You will answer them all truthfully and to the best of your ability.” She approached the unicorn and stood immediately in front of him. “Do you understand?”

He spat at her, and she knocked it out of the air with thought. Then she conjured a single mote of *Equinox* and flicked it across his cheek, drawing blood.

He laughed. “I will not betray my general. No matter how many times you tickle my cheek.”

Twilight cocked her head. “Unicorn blades have interesting properties.”

She shifted to the side slightly, and the green pony was thrown past her. He spun through the air and impacted the wall behind her with a dull thump. Twilight didn’t turn around. Everypony in the room was looking at her, completely silent.

“I can dismantle any magical defense with a touch. The only thing you *won’t* be doing is wasting my time.”

From his place on the wall, the unicorn coughed. “That’s impossible,” he wheezed.

Twilight turned and approached the unicorn. As she did so, she lifted him until his face was level with hers. “Odd, then, that I have a hold on your body and you’re pinned to a wall.” She forced his head to turn until she was whispering into his ear. “You know what else I have? *martial immunity*.”

She let him fall to the floor, and her voice became harsh. “I can break all sorts of rules, kiddo, and if you don’t give me what I am asking for, I’ll take it from you with mind magic. No possible action you can take precludes my acquisition of your knowledge.”

Twilight felt a hoof on her shoulder. It was Applejack. “Uh, Twi?”

"I know what I'm doing, Applejack."

The unicorn's face was turning red from the blood flow. "What do you want to know?"

"Where is Queen Terra?"

He coughed again. "I don't know."

Applejack gritted her teeth. "*Lie*," she stated boldly.

Twilight composed a spell. She worked from her knowledge of the Element of Honesty itself, imitating its magic to create something that would force the green stallion to tell the truth. She was surprised how easily it came to her. It was much, much easier to manipulate the Elements now that she was Twilight Sparkle; she had learned as much when she forged *Equinox* during her conflict with Titan.

The unicorn shuddered as her spell hit him, and Twilight took him down from the wall in time for him to vomit all over the floor.

"Aggressive mind magic doesn't feel very good, does it? Be glad I didn't use the spell Titan used on me."

"Also," Unimpressive threw in. "A piece of *Vindictive* is still sitting inside you. Don't think that you can get rid of me *that* easily."

The unicorn coughed again before looking up at her blearily. "No," he said. "It doesn't feel very good at all." Then his hoof shot up to his mouth.

"I'm glad to see that it's working," Twilight said. "Now, onto my questions..."



"Almost three hundred of us are dead," Noble said angrily as soon as he entered their command centre. "The royals are on the retreat for now but they could turn around any minute. And they *will*, as soon as they realize just how weak we are right now. Mind telling me why you have everypony sitting out in the open, general?"

Noble was the last to arrive. Her friends, her parents, Noble, Buttercup, Unimpressive, Spitfire, and Luna were all present. It was time for her to dictate their next course of action.

"You think we should go to ground?"

"Yes. Inner Canterlot is ours only momentarily."

"What would hiding again do? They've already proved that they can find us. No, I have other plans."

"Those plans being?"

"Retribution." Twilight nodded to Rarity and Luna, and they both lifted her new uniform into the air and moved to stand on either side of her as she spoke.

"Retribution?!" Noble asked incredulously. "We can't win a war of attrition, not with the royals. We might be able to do some damage, but they'll hit us back just as hard."

The first thing to go on were her shoes. Four relatively tiny slippers made from a blue that was so dark as to be almost black were slipped over her hooves. Once on, they instantly hardened into a glossy metal that hugged the contours of her hooves perfectly. "No," Twilight said. "They won't."

"And why is that?"

Next was her suit. Rarity and Luna each took a piece of oddly-shaped sky fabric and draped them over Twilight. Then, they set to work joining the two to one another with magic, sealing them together first along her legs and belly, and finally up her chest. The fabric covered every bit of her up to her neck. It was still the dark blue of the night sky, but was not quite as dark as her shoes. What was more, it had a strange *depth* to it, as though Twilight were wearing an ocean, or more accurately, the sky. Twilight wondered how she was ever going to take the uniform off, or if she was even *supposed* to ever take it off.

"Because," she said in answer to Noble's question, "they won't exist."

Next Rarity affixed a row of gleaming stars to Twilight's suit along the seam that ran up one side of her chest. Twilight wondered why she needed buttons when her uniform was magically sealed onto her body—and stretched to fit it perfectly.

Noble apparently had nothing to say in response to Twilight's declaration, so she continued. "This isn't a counterattack," she said as Rarity adjusted her buttons. "This is extermination."

Luna touched her horn to the seam under the buttons where the two fabrics met, and it changed in color to a perfectly straight blue-purple stripe that ran down her body and each of

her legs. Twilight smiled slightly. It was the color of the last light of dusk.

"We end this war tonight. The puppets, Esteem, Empyrean, Terra, *and* Titan. I've gathered information and come up with a plan to get all of them. To do it I will need everypony's cooperation. Ending this war is the ultimate goal of everypony in this room and everypony outside in that square. As such your cooperation is expected."

She gave Noble a meaningful look, and he nodded slowly. Rarity fixed a collar of the same blue-purple color around Twilight's neck, and Luna fused it in place with magic. No, Twilight decided, the uniform was definitely not meant to come off.

"Spitfire."

"Go ahead, general."

"I need you to gather every pegasus capable of manipulating the feral clouds. Dash, you're with her. We need the biggest storm cloud you can manage over Empyrean's barrier. The puppets don't have the ability to manipulate the weather, because Titan doesn't want the weather to be manipulated. The cloud will give our trained pegasi ammunition to bombard the enemy with and cover our approach from the sky."

"What about the royals?"

"They have far fewer trueponies than we do. Engaging us in the cloud would be suicide."

Rarity and Luna began attaching a harness over top of the skin-tight suit. Twilight was glad that the purple-blue harness was not very complicated. With the ability to tuck her blade away in null-space, she had no reason to store things on her person. Still, she supposed it looked nice.

"While you're doing that, my mother and father will gather a team and hit the glass factory. Break the glass, break the equipment, break everything you can break. We need to arm our unicorns within the next twenty minutes. That said, Buttercup will go back into the labyrinth with a group of ponies to salvage what she can from the armory. She knows the layout best."

"Everypony else, get the army ready. Your presence outside will be good for morale. They just suffered heavy losses. They'll need it."

Noble cleared his throat. "What will you be doing?"

"Supervising," Twilight said curtly. "I can be everywhere at once."

The elder pegasus still looked wary. "If we do this, they'll know we're coming. They'll be

prepared. We'll be facing every unit the Royal Army can muster as soon as you break that barrier."

The last piece of Twilight's uniform was the cloak. It almost reminded her of the one she wore as Mare-Do-Well. Except this one was the pitch black of the night sky seen from a mountaintop, and was covered in burning stars. Luna and Rarity fastened the cloak under her collar with a sunburst. Twilight was almost certain that the clasp had been Luna's idea. The Princess was reminding her that she was Celestia's general. As if she could forget.

As she gave the clasp a couple tugs, Rarity looked at Twilight, her eyes questioning. *Do you like it?*

Twilight gave a small smile and a slight nod. Yes.

"Twenty minutes will most definitely give them time to prepare," Twilight said. "But only just. Esteem won't have much time to second guess any of his actions."

Noble cocked his head. "What are you planning?"

Twilight conjured an illusory facsimile of the Canterlot palace. "Well..."



Minutes later, their meeting had concluded and everypony was rushing to complete their tasks. Twilight had two more things to do.

"Unimpressive."

The other unicorn stopped and regarded her. "Do I actually get a job? Because mingling kind of isn't my thing."

Twilight exhaled through her lips. "When the fighting breaks out, I need you to stay alive. Understand?"

"Gee, now that you've instructed me to, I suppose I *will* try to stay alive."

"No, Unimpressive. Not *try*. You will live. Do you understand me?"

"You know there's more to surviving on the battlefield than resolve, Twilight."

"I don't care what situation you get yourself into. You will consider your own life to be more valuable than anypony's, excluding the five."

Unimpressive's smile faded slowly. "What are you planning?"

"How did you become a knight?"

"Twilight, I don't think—"

"I have places to be, Unimpressive. *Answer me!*"

He considered her for a moment. "Celestia knighted me herself. Made Masterstroke take care of me and train me. Why?"

Twilight nodded, her suspicions confirmed. "She had no idea I was going to come along," she said to herself, "and she *needed* to know she had a pony she could count on when the time came. A pony who was a magical talent, and who she could teach how to make war." She grabbed Unimpressive by the shoulders. "*You* need to survive. You know all of my friends by now."

"You are making zero sense right now, Twilight."

"Every part of my plan needs a backup plan. Including the contingency that I die."

"You can't *die!*"

"I don't intend to," she said with a smile. "But there's more to surviving on the battlefield than resolve, isn't there?"

Twilight vanished, leaving the knight to stand alone and baffled.



"Okay, Rarity, ten minutes to go-time. Give me the rules, hard and fast."

Rarity arched an eyebrow at Twilight as she cast her blade. "Don't," she said simply.

"Don't?"

Rarity laughed melodiously. "If my talent suddenly became magic, do you think I could learn to outdo *you* in ten minutes?"

"Oh come on," Twilight said. "That's—"

"*Exactly* the same, darling. He became the best mortal bladecaster alive for two decades, and he's been getting better ever since. He's worth two of me when I'm at my best. You aren't going to learn anything useful in ten minutes. It isn't like it's just one spell, Twilight—it's as complicated and deep an art as the rest of war magic combined."

Twilight sagged. She was really looking forward to the blade thing.

"Still," Rarity said, putting a hoof to her chin, "I suppose that you can shoot it around and swing at anything without a blade of its own. When it comes to Esteem, just keep teleporting around and throw buildings at him, or whatever it is you do."

"Got it."

"Are you sure you want to do this, Twilight? He's *strong*. His talent is war itself—he gets all kinds of spells to go along with that. *Brutish* magics, that he can cast with relative ease."

"I'm only going to be distracting him, Rarity. He's too proud to pass up a challenge for the title of strongest unicorn alive."

But there was more to it than that. Esteem had smiled as he pushed the Sliver of Darkness through Twilight's eye. Twilight had spoken before of retribution, but there was more to it than that. The memory of the agony, the desperation, and the abandonment she had felt came back to her unbidden. She could admit to herself that the real word she should have used was vengeance. Unrestrained, unmitigated vengeance.

"You know," Twilight said quietly, "that if I get the chance to kill him, I'm not going to pass it up. Every day he's alive more ponies die."

"I hope that you don't," Rarity said somberly. "I wish I could do it, just so you wouldn't have to."

"You're a good friend, Rarity. Anything you'd like me to tell him for you?" Twilight grinned.

"*Twilight!* That is *not* funny. He and I are done. I have nothing to say to him."

"Right then. I'll see you in the court. Stay safe."

Rarity gave her a meaningful look. "You too."



"I have a couple of wagons coming to pick up the shards," Twilight said as she came out of her teleport. "Get ready to pack everything up and move out."

Starlight Sparkle regarded her coolly. "That's no way to greet your mother."

"Sorry. I'm in full-blown general-mode."

Her mother worked her mouth for several seconds. "Take me with you," she said suddenly.

"Take you with me?" Twilight asked flatly.

"Against the General. I can teleport. I'll be able to get out when you do. I'm as good a war unicorn as Unimpressive, and almost as good at bladecasting."

"Then who would look after dad?"

"Your father can look after himself," her mother said urgently. "It's *you* that I'm worried about."

"I can take care of myself. Perfect ten, remember?"

"I remember," her mother said quietly. "I remember giving my daughter to Celestia because of it. That's what almost killed you in the first place."

Twilight sighed. "Mom, I know you want me to be safe. But I'm not safe. I haven't been safe. I won't *be* safe until this is over. And nothing you can do is going to change that. So please, stop trying to rid this world of everything that can hurt me. It's too big a job for you, and getting hurt is a part of who we are."

Her mother's face went through a myriad of expressions within the space of a heartbeat. Anger, regret, sadness—Twilight was hard-pressed to read them all. But eventually she landed on the one Twilight had been going for—resolve.

"You never used to argue with your mother."

“*You* never used to fight evil with a magic sword.”

Her mother hugged her. “Stay safe, daughter. I am proud of you. Your father would say the same if he weren’t busy lifting tonnes and tonnes of glass.”

“I won’t lie, giving *you* chores for once was a little gratifying.”

Her mother gave her a flat look.



Empyrean's second barrier was much easier to break than the first.

It was smaller. Not just a little smaller, but smaller in a volumetric sense—smaller by a cubed proportion. Not only that, but Empyrean hadn’t been maintaining the spell very well—it had already proved ineffective, so why should he? Twilight also knew the motions she needed to go through already. She didn’t need to come up with a solution, only *reproduce* one.

She probably didn’t even need to split her mind to break the thing. Still, she did it anyway, breaking her consciousness into two parts.

She named the second part Sparkle. It was actually a terrible name, considering they were both identical minds—the warmongering Twilight and the pacifist Sparkle were now in both of them. Still, no naming conventions existed for mind splitting, so Twilight worked with what she knew.

Sparkle handled the spells to destroy the barrier while Twilight kept watch outside. Loss of sight was not an acceptable side effect, this time. She had to make sure that Esteem was not sending scouts outside the barrier.

The haziness of Empyrean’s shield meant that she could only see about three meters of the other side, and none of her magical senses penetrated the field. If something were to come through to kill her, she would have little warning. It was nerve wracking, but tedious.

Seconds turned into minutes as Sparkle took her time with their spells. She made sure the work she was doing could be seen, making lots of shock waves and colorful bursts appear on both sides of the proximate barrier. It was as if she were striking it with a giant hammer.

Finally it went down, shattering along its enormous length. Twilight admired the way it broke, fracturing into millions of equal pieces that dissolved before they hit the ground. Then she looked out at the entirety of the Royal Army.

It was composed mostly of puppets, but there were trueponies interspersed throughout the legion. At a glance, Twilight would estimate that they totalled somewhere around a thousand—almost two hundred more than the number of ponies she had brought. What was worse, the average puppet could take the average pony in a fight—though it was also true that Twilight had brought several above average ponies. The Royal Army had gathered at the point where Twilight broke the barrier, ready to meet the army that *she* led against them.

Except Twilight was alone.

“This?” Twilight called out to the army of ponies and puppets. “This isn’t the loyalist army. This isn’t even the reserve.”

Of course Esteem would order them to form up in anticipation of a head-on engagement—such an engagement would surely end in his favor. With twenty minutes to get the entire army organized, he had probably been too busy with preparations to realize that Twilight wasn’t attacking out of desperation.

“This isn’t me using the power to destroy against ponykind. This isn’t even me offering to surrender after the events of tonight.”

She had chosen the point of entry deliberately. Directly behind the Royal Army was the thirteenth entrance to the labyrinth. It was the very entrance Celestia had used to show her the thing in the first place.

“This isn’t even the right direction, so you should probably all turn around. This is a distraction.”

It was then that Unimpressive blew the lid off of the labyrinth entrance in the loudest and most audacious manner possible. He leapt out of the undercity as the giant metal cylinder clanged to the ground behind him. Twilight thought she saw him take a drink from his flask, and wondered briefly where the knight kept getting his alcohol.

From out behind him spilled the unicorns of the loyalist army. The first ones out were the strongest—Twilight saw her mother’s and father’s blades glowing against the dark of the night quite clearly. They didn’t throw any spells at the Royal Army, but rather focused entirely on defending themselves and the ponies who were still clambering out of the opening. The first barrage of spells the Royal Army threw met a polychrome shield powered by dozens of the strongest unicorns in the world.

That was when the bulk of her forces struck. They came from the two approaches beside her, swarming up the streets and onto the well-cut grass of the palace's plaza. They weren't going to attack the Royal Army from the front, but rather would manoeuvre around to its sides, assaulting the army where it was disorganized and unprotected.

Ponies in the Royal Army barked orders, and they began to hastily reform their ranks to meet the oncoming horde.

Moments before the two forces met, the skies opened and over a hundred pegasi came pouring down, raining thunder and lightning on their foes. Twilight noted that the distinct, prismatic bolt that was most definitely Rainbow Dash's hit their enemies first. Under the barrage of sound, light, and electricity, the Royals covered their eyes and ears. They were blind and ineffective.

This was when her force collided with theirs; when every unicorn under her command abandoned their defense and let loose their own attacks. The Royal Army did not meet its foes head on as an organized force, but rather was crushed from three sides as its ranks descended into chaos.

"This?" Twilight said to herself quietly. "This is not a fight you can win."

Then she teleported, focusing quite a bit so as to cover the immense distance. She landed far past the battling armies, at the foot of the palace. Chateau Emyrean did not look much different from the last time she saw it, other than the fact that the extensive damage caused by Titan and Celestia had been repaired.

She had a multi-part task to accomplish. Just like Emyrean's barrier or the Royal Army, her enemies were a system she would need to dismantle. It was time to begin, starting with pride.

"Esteem!" she cried, her voice carrying for kilometers thanks to a simple spell. *"Esteem! You dare to call yourself my better. I, who have destroyed gods and worse. You are nothing before me. Not an equal, not a rival, not a pony. Come, General. Come and die."*

She waited. Dimly she heard the sound of the fighting ponies far behind her. Esteem's pride would hopefully prompt him to stay and fight her rather than join his army with his reserve.

More importantly, Twilight had played *Titan's* pride. She hadn't even *mentioned* the eldest of the gods, instead opting to taunt a mortal pony. She had spoken of destroying gods as though he were simply another item on her itinerary.

Hopefully both of them would stay behind in the interest of killing her rather than taking

the field. Twilight's friends were already exhausted, meaning Esteem could do untold damage—in addition to rallying his forces. Worse still would be Titan—his mere presence gave puppets extra sentience. With him on the field, the unicorn puppets would be able to cast even deadlier spells. Twilight could not let this happen, especially since Luna was not part of the fight.

It was extraordinarily dark out—the massive storm cloud meant that the only visible stars sat upon Twilight's back. In addition to her very slightly luminescent mane and eyes, the only other light came from the softly glowing lines along her skin-tight suit. It was fortunate that an easy spell allowed her to see in the dark perfectly—she watched as the wide double-doors to the palace opened.

Out came puppets and trueponies. Twilight stopped counting at five dozen, concluding that Esteem was sending out his entire reserve.

This was her other task. Esteem had, like any sensible pony, kept a portion of his soldiers in the easily-defensible keep. They could reinforce the Royal Army in the field and flank her own forces, turning the engagement in his favor. Twilight would make sure that the reinforcements never reached the battlefield—even if there *were* around two hundred of them.

Even with her vision spell, her enemies were colorless forms set against almost total blackness. Twilight could barely make out the silhouette of the palace, its many towers rising behind them. Occasionally, a powerful burst of light from the distant conflict would briefly illuminate the elegant spires. The sound of two hundred sets of hooves clapping against the shallow stone steps leading to the main entrance filled her ears.

The main avenue to the palace was set on a slight enough incline that the steps were not only shallow, but staggered in sets of five. The simple terrain would make for an honest battlefield. Twilight closed her eyes and tapped into her magical senses while communicating with her second mind.

Precision and care were paramount. Sparkle would handle the mind and the magic. She would interpret all the information their magical senses delivered, as their basic five senses were unreliable. She would also prepare any more complicated spells, as well as directing the flow of combat. Her detachment from the body would give her a good view of the bigger picture. Sparkle would coordinate.

Body and blade would go to Twilight. She wouldn't have to think more than a second ahead at any point in time. She could focus on fulfilling their current task as efficiently as possible. Her spells would be the ones that Twilight could cast without thought—simple things like moment fields and telekinesis. Sparkle would line up the targets. Twilight would pull the trigger.

Twilight stood, eyes closed, as the enemy soldiers filled the space around her. She was

effectively blind to any attack that they might throw at her, but she didn't worry. Sparkle had her back. She trusted herself.

Unicorns, Sparkle informed her. There were many unicorns. As was sensible, they would be covering the non-unicorns in the small bit of trivial protective magic required to keep her from directly tampering with them. As defeating two hundred ponies through indirect manipulations such as projectiles, telekinesis, and the blade would be exhausting, she would have to remove their protections. Unconsciousness and death would do this nicely. So would any contact with her grossly powerful new weapon, *Equinox*. Though to be fair, stripping their defenses away with her blade would be pointless when she could simply channel enough energy through the weapon to reduce any pony to ash.

"Why are we still waiting?" she asked with polite curiosity.

"It seemed rational to wait for them to begin. The destruction caused by their barrage should level everything around us. The seconds it takes them to realize that we have disappeared and rearm themselves will be seconds that we will spend well."

"Sensible enough," Twilight said to herself. *"You speak of them as though they are a whole."*

"They are not, which means—"

"—Weaknesses of the individual should be taken into account."

"Placing you in the immediate vicinity of a pony should trigger a strong reaction of self-defense—"

"Causing unity with the whole to break away."

"You'll be moving around quite a bit."

"Fine by me." Twilight could get used to having two minds. Sparkle was very agreeable.

"Go!"

Twilight opened her eyes and saw *light*. So many spells were coming at her simultaneously, she was momentarily blinded.

Sparkle teleported her away, into the midst of the enemy ranks. Twilight felt her hooves contact smooth stone, and the ground shook moments later as the barrage of arcane energy hit its mark. She still couldn't see.

Puppet, Sparkle planted the thought in her mind without words. Twilight didn't need to see what Sparkle felt. She cast *Equinox* and swung it through the air gracefully. It connected with what she assumed was her target, and she felt the blade eat its way through a foot of stone as it continued along its downward arc. She may have overshot things a little.

Missiles incoming. Puppet, truepony.

Her vision was starting to return to her. She broke eight blade motes from *Equinox* and sent them to intercept the incoming attack. Then, she broke away four more and sent them at a puppet as she sent the rest of *Equinox* at a truepony's chest. Twilight didn't cut into the pony—rather, her blade knocked him back like a club as she dismantled his defenses and put him out with her sleeping spell.

Eight blade-motes returned to her, having each deflected an incoming projectile. By now her vision was almost back, and the glowing purple orbs were practically distinct forms. Behind her, a unicorn puppet caught the other four motes on a moment-field. Twilight snapped them back onto her blade immediately.

Only seconds had passed since their initial barrage, but more and more of the enemies were beginning to take notice of her. They needed to keep moving.

This one.

Twilight sent every single piece of *Equinox* at a unicorn puppet over forty meters away. Certainly *four* pieces of the Element of Magic wielded by the Bearer of the Element of Magic might be something a puppet could deal with, but twenty-seven was beyond their capacity to handle in anything but large numbers. She had to squint to see through her impaired vision, but she watched with some satisfaction as the puppet was obliterated by her weapon.

Now here. This one and this one.

Sparkle teleported them so that they were behind the unicorn puppet as it dispersed. Twilight caught her blade just in time to jam it through a surprised puppet's eye, then break it into motes and send them flying out around her. Three more puppets went down before she even started having to worry about defending herself.

As she picked a number of energy projectiles out of the air whilst simultaneously shearing a puppet in two, the absurdity of the situation occurred to her. They were trying to fight her with *magic*. The very idea was preposterous.

"Pride is good," Sparkle said. "I'm being cautious, so pride has no ill effects."

Twilight couldn't agree more.

On Sparkle's orders, she teleported fifty meters into the air and held herself aloft. She was facing downward, and was treated with a good view of Esteem's reserve. They had suffered very little losses, but were still scrambling around, disorganized. Her ability to be in so many places at once was obviously not something they were prepared to deal with.

She charged each fragment of *Equinox* and sent them ripping through the air to a set of predetermined locations. Most of the puppets they were aimed at looked up in time. Some did not. Several tufts of black mist arose as the parts of *Equinox* buried themselves into the stone steps. Twilight prepared to detonate them, but stopped when she saw that she would likely kill several trueponies.

"Just that one."

Twilight caused the single piece of *Equinox* to explode in a burst of incandescent violet, noting with satisfaction that only puppets were harmed in the blast. Then, just as the first spells thrown by the ponies on the ground began to reach her, Sparkle teleported them to the crater they had just created.

She hardened their skin so that it would deflect the falling rubble as Twilight pulled the fragment of *Equinox* out of the ground. Sparkle showed her where to aim, and she had driven the tiny point of light through another unicorn puppet before they realized where she was. Sparkle removed the traction from the ground in a seemingly random section of the battlefield as Twilight willed the next fragment to detonate. As she teleported away once more, she noticed the ponies sliding helplessly on the ground.

She came out of the teleport and retrieved the second mote of her blade. Once again she spent a very short amount of time dispatching the foes around her before detonating another piece of *Equinox* and leaving. This time she came out in the middle of the tractionless ground Sparkle had created moments ago.

"You think ahead," she said with approval.

And she did. Twilight was violent, if meticulous. She skewered their enemies or broke apart their defenses before putting them to sleep. She was almost mechanical in her movements, the model of combat efficiency. She didn't just *defeat* her enemies—she did so while using the least amount of time and energy possible. She was never in one place for more than a couple seconds, but she never failed to leave a few downed opponents in her wake.

Sparkle, though, was a mastermind. She made sure that their movements were entirely unpredictable—she'd set up a pattern just to change their movements and counter the enemies' expectations. When a truepony started to command, or otherwise exude anything other than blind panic, they would appear moments later to put them down. Their appearances directed the

flow of the enemy, herding trueponies away from the buried blade-motes.

Twilight didn't even know that Sparkle was also tapping their harmonic connection. The fact was made known to her when, between blade-motes fifteen and sixteen, she was directed to teleport back to where Applejack and Pinkie were fighting. She emerged in the center of a conflict that was pure chaos, deflected half a dozen incoming magic missiles, executed two unicorn puppets, then wordlessly left.

The short disappearance cost her. When she returned to a space fifty meters above Esteem's reserve, it certainly looked more organized, albeit diminished. To shake things up, Sparkle nullified gravity in one area as Twilight fell through the air. They also set another area on fire and detonated two more blade-motes before hitting the ground. She landed gracelessly, stayed to attract another wasteful volley of spells, then popped out of the air to resume collecting her weapon.

She amplified her voice again as she came out of a teleport and skidded to a halt next to puppet. *Play his pride. Save intimidation tactics for the encounter itself.* She began to call out to Esteem once more. *"Where are you?!"* The puppet fell into two pieces and dispersed. *"Or has Rarity's rejection broken your mind?"*

Shield.

Twilight was not about to take any chances, so she made sure the bubble of energy that she wrapped herself in was the strongest she could muster. It paid off—moments later fourteen charged blade shards collided with her shield carrying enough power to make her take notice.

Sparkle teleported her away just moments before the shards exploded. Twilight found herself standing atop the stairs, right next to the palace doors and General Esteem himself.

Kill him.

She thrust her blade through the air at the general, but he simply crossed the distance between them and the smoking crater he had left in the space of a heartbeat. They each assembled their blades in full.

"General," Esteem greeted her loudly from over thirty meters away.

"*Master* General," Twilight corrected. "Titles are important."

Esteem let out a snort of annoyance. "So you've come to *kill* me, have you?" He looked behind him at what had to be at least a hundred soldiers. "I seem to have brought an army with me."

Twilight teleported directly into the center of the reserve, noting gleefully that Esteem seemed to have overlooked a crucial fact:

Not a single one of his remaining soldiers was a unicorn.

Every puppet dispersed as Twilight froze the water in their brains. Every pony fell to the ground as Sparkle put them to sleep. Of course Esteem wouldn't bother protecting his own army.

"Nice bathrobe," Twilight said casually to the only pony between her and the palace. She was fully aware that she had shown up in a suit made from the night sky, a cloak made of starlight, and a halo of pure energy. *Intimidation. Pride.* "Surrender, and you get a jail cell. Fight, and you die."

Esteem barked out a humorless laugh. "I am the hoof of god. The will of Titan himself. I've seen you beg for your mother. Titan isn't scared of you, and neither am I."

"I'm only asking so that when I tell every other pony that I gave you the chance to surrender, I won't be lying. I don't want to be a liar."

"Only a murderer, apparently."

Twilight gave a very slight nod. "I don't want to be that either, but necessity dictates. I figured if I offered now, you'd refuse. But if I offered when I had you pinned to wall, you'd say yes. You're too sick and dangerous to put in a jail cell. I'm too good to tell lies. This was the natural solution."

"Well then, *Master* General Sparkle, I suppose this can only end one way, can't it?"

"It would seem so, General Esteem."

"I *have* been looking forward to this," he replied with a smile as he spread his hooves and rolled his shoulders.

"*You have a plan, right?*" Rapidly jumping around and causing chaos amongst a group of vastly inferior enemies was one thing; fighting the most skilled bladecaster in the world was another. Twilight had absolutely *no* idea how to use her weapon in close quarters, and physically she left a lot to be desired.

His advantage, Sparkle shot back in pure thought form. *Experience. Our advantages: Power. Mobility.*

Esteem crossed the distance between them in a tenth of a second and smoothly moved

to slice her in half. Twilight barely managed to teleport away in time.

Scratch mobility.

As she came out of her teleport Esteem threw his blade at her in fragments, and she was forced to deflect them with her own weapon. Then he pushed his way through the air between them and reassembled his weapon. Twilight didn't wait for him to swing, blinking away as soon as he got close.

Be a thug.

She tore a block of stone the size of several ponies from the nearby palace and another from the ground in front of her. Then she tossed the two massive projectiles at him, annoyed that she had to resort to such simple magic.

Esteem shot shards of his blade into both of the converging blocks and caused them to explode, sending fragments of stone everywhere. He began to run toward her despite the tons of stone still sailing his way.

Twilight was quick to remove the traction from the ground beneath him, but Esteem jumped into the air just in time to avoid falling. He planted two hooves on a piece of stone as it turned beneath him in the air, then sprang forward with the grace of a pegasus. The tiny bits of flying rubble bounced harmlessly off his skin as he spun once before landing with all four hooves on the ground.

He's good. Twilight wasn't sure where the thought originated. With another motion spell, Esteem crossed the distance between them and tried to kill her.

His experience was paying off. Esteem no doubt knew every way in which she could attack him: he had been doing this for awhile, after all. She wasn't going to get to him using conventional means.

Twilight teleported up to the palace's entrance, waiting for Sparkle to inform her of Esteem's next incoming attack. She didn't: Esteem remained where they had been moments before.

"Fascinating, isn't it?" he called out. "A *real* unicorn duel? All our power to destroy, and yet we are both still so *fragile*. Two exquisite glass figurines at the center of a maelstrom."

Keep talking. I'll come up with a plan.

"More like painting over a masterpiece instead of creating your own. This is a terrible way to use magic."

"I disagree. Perhaps you do not see the beauty in it because you are so inept."

Intimidation. Pride.

"Nihilus made the same mistake," Twilight called out to him.

Esteem scoffed. "Nihilus was an idiot."

"She was," Twilight agreed. "She had the mind of a child and the power of a demi-god. You think that all the spells you got from your book are the pinnacle of magical warfare? So did Nihilus. While she spent all her time memorizing formulae, I was improving them. Over a thousand years have passed since Astor Coruscare wrote the book on killing with magic. A thousand years of magical development that I can apply to her spells."

"And yet you throw rocks at me and swing your blade around like a bat."

More time.

"Do you know what I asked Rarity before I came here?"

Esteem's expression darkened. "Do tell."

"I asked her if she had anything to say to you before you died. She didn't. She could have talked me out of coming here, you know. I was giving her the chance to. Instead she gave me advice. Even she wants you to die."

The muscles in Esteem's neck tensed. "What was her advice?"

"Not to go blade-to-blade with you."

"Good advice," he drawled. "Anything else?"

Stay safe, Twilight thought.

That was when Esteem smiled. Twilight found it odd that he should be smiling—she had gotten him angry just a moment ago. *Stay safe*, her mother's voice echoed Rarity's words inside her head. No, Esteem should definitely not be smiling. She heard a soft *pitter-patter* and looked down to see her blood pooling on the stone ground below her. *Stay safe*, her father had said.

That was when Titan pulled his blade out of her midsection.

This isn't right, Twilight thought before collapsing to the ground. Titan could easily have

killed her instantly if he had stabbed her. Why leave her to bleed out on the ground? How come she didn't feel any pain? And why didn't her other mind detect Titan coming with magic?

"I tried," Sparkle said faintly before fading back into the whole.

Then there was pain. Yes, there was most definitely pain. She had been stabbed straight through, from her back to her belly. That would explain all the blood. Twilight had once read about exactly how much blood she had in her body. Now, she couldn't remember the figure.

A gleaming metal point dragged its way over the stones and through the expanding pool of vital fluid. "Did you think," Esteem said quietly, "that this was a storybook?" He leaned in to whisper in her ear. "That you, the champion of good, would show up here and do battle with I, the champion of evil, and defeat me in single combat, winning the day for ponykind? You think I won't cheat just because I'm winning?"

Twilight was beginning to feel incredibly cold, and her legs were starting to shake. Esteem continued. "Do you think that this is the way of the world? Allow me to teach you just how dark this world really is."

She felt another sharp pain in her chest, and weakly tried to double over as Esteem's blade shard hooked itself on her insides. She felt a tug, and was dragged through a pool of her own blood and into the Canterlot palace. She cried gritted her teeth. This had been a possibility. This outcome was acceptable, if not preferred.

As she slid on her punctured back across the floor, Esteem continued to speak. "Painful, isn't it? This particular form of execution was taught to me by a griffin." He deposited her after a short distance, right at the beginning of the palace's massive atrium. Twilight could tell where she was by the pillars she could barely see.

She had a plan B. She had prepared for the contingency of her own death. She just had to accept that this was happening and make peace with it. All that was left now was to not go out the way she had last time. No pony was coming to save her. No pony could.

The blade twisted inside her, and Twilight felt something snap. "I don't think you have much time left, Master General Sparkle," Esteem said softly. "So I will be brief. Everything that you intended to accomplish will not come to pass. Everything you have accomplished thus far will be undone. You will die, and Rarity will despair."

Twilight felt like she should say something. But what could she say? Nothing to give away her plans, certainly. A taunt? Esteem seemed resilient to those. Something for herself, then. Something that meant a lot to her.

She felt something cold and flat pushing on her face, and was forced to look up into

Esteem's eyes as he leaned over her. "You will forever be known as the pony who failed her kind. That is your legacy. And when you die, I am going to strip the flesh from your face and eat it."

She didn't pay much attention to his words. *Friendship*, she had decided. She would die with her friends on her mind, knowing that her sacrifice had bought ponykind a chance. Twilight opened her mouth to speak, and discovered that it had been filled with blood. Oh well. She closed her eyes.

One way or another, it would all be over soon.

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Chapter Sixteen: [God](#)

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