

The End of War



The divine storm raged against a darkening sky, a swirling vortex of dark nimbus and crackling thunder. The closer Rainbow Dash came to it, the more she found herself awed by the sheer *size* of the thing. It could have swallowed Cloudsdale with ease. And it was *tall*, and *dense*. Flying through that storm would take more than just skill—no pony, no matter how skilled, could hope to control themselves in *that* monstrosity. It would take a kind of suicidal arrogance.

One corner of Rainbow Dash's mouth curled upward into a sidelong grin.

Spitfire fell in beside her, and they flew toward the storm at a regular pace—which for them meant that they were well ahead of the other teams. “Makes you feel small,” Spitfire said over the whistling and roaring of the building wind. “Doesn't it?”

Dash scoffed and waved a hoof. “That?” she said, jerking her head toward the raging thunderhead. “No way. Makes me think Titan has size issues.”

Spitfire's laugh was carried away by the rushing wind. “You're for real, aren't you?”

“Me?” Dash shot back. “What do you mean?”

Spitfire shook her head. “It doesn't even occur to you how dangerous this is, does it? You've never even considered the possibility that we might fail.”

The sky was lit by a sudden flash of lightning, and the compressive boom hit them moments later. “Hey,” Dash said. “The princesses are the ones who've gotta fight Titan. The way I see it, we've got the easy job. And we wouldn't be here if we didn't have a thing for beating the odds.”

They pumped harder against the churning gale, angling upwards for a better point of entry. “I like it,” Spitfire said. “It's a good attitude to have.”

“Plus,” Dash added. “How could we lose when we have *the* Spitfire on our side? Not to sound creepy or anything,” *but you're my idol and I worship you.* “—But I'm uh, a huge fan.”

“Really?” Spitfire asked. “I never got that impression.”

“Well, yeah, I play it—wait, are you being sarcastic?”

“Tell you what,” Spitfire said.

She never finished what she was going to say. A shrill screech grated against Dash's ears and Spitfire was thrown off her flight path as a dark, feathered form smashed into her side. She was gone in half a heartbeat.

Dash tried to pull to a stop, but the turbulent winds made a true stop impossible. She twisted around as she was tossed about, trying desperately to spot Spitfire in the dark of the night. She saw nothing.

“Spitfire!” There had to be something; they couldn't have hit the ground already. Spitfire was still falling, somewhere, with whatever that thing had been. Dash whipped her head back and forth as she felt panic begin to sink in. Her pegasi eyes were strong, but it was just too *dark...*

“Spitfire!” Her shout was stolen by the wind inches from her face.

“What?” the voice of confidence called out from behind her. “Did you think I was totally helpless?”

Dash spun midair and fought to keep herself steady. There, her back to the storm, was Spitfire, and her hooves she held...

It took another flash of lightning for Dash to see it clearly. It looked almost like a mare, but covered from its flank to its ears in thick, brown-black feathers. It had two pointed wings, much bigger than a normal pegasi's. But its face was what caught Dash's eyes and caused her to rule it out as most definitely non-pony. Its eyes were black slits in yellow orbs, and its muzzle was a twisted grin of sharpened teeth under a set of lips that seemed to be perpetually peeled back over the mouth.

“What *is* that?” Dash shouted.

Spitfire nodded her head at a point past Dash, and Rainbow Dash spun to see that the rest of the pegasi had caught up to them. Or at least, the rest of the pegasi in their group. The countersquall group was farther back, preparing a pressure channel.

“Harpy!” Spitfire yelled against the wind. It occurred to Dash that any mundane pony wouldn't be able to hear a word she was saying. Pegasi hearing was more useful than she'd thought, it seemed.

Spitfire let everypony get a good look at the harpy she held as it struggled in futility. “You kill 'em like *this*.” She wrapped a foreleg around one of its wings, then twisted her body, moving her foreleg and the harpy in opposition to one another. There was an audible crunch as the hollow bones in the wing shattered, and Spitfire let the harpy fall from her grasp. It shrieked and beat its one good wing uselessly as it plummeted to its death. “Not too different from the way you'd do a puppet.”

“Now get ready!” Spitfire shouted. “More on the way!”

Dash looked to see dozens of indistinct shapes coming towards them from below. Very faintly, she could hear their shrill cries.

This was bad. They needed to get the storm moving, fast, and the harpies weren't going to let that happen. They couldn't spend all their time fighting. That wasn't why they were there.

“Well?” Spitfire said from beside Rainbow Dash. “You gonna lead the charge, or what?”

Dash looked at her. “What? Me?”

Spitfire smiled. “I'm not the one with the sword. Which I'll sign for you, by the way, provided we survive this.”

The world about to end, her friends in danger, the fate of an army resting on her team's shoulders, and somehow *that* was the incentive that Dash needed. She tucked her wings close to her body, channeling the turbulent air and dropping into a dive. As soon as she cleared her group of pegasi, she drew her blade, the seam between her foreleg and the length of steel becoming charged with attractive force.

“*Thunder and lightning!*” Dash screamed as she fell through a hurricane.

For a moment, she thought that the winds were too strong. That her team hadn't heard her. And then:

“*Wings and steel!*”

Rainbow Dash looked down at the army of harpies beneath her, their wing beats frantic and laborious to keep their ascension through the raging storm. They really should have picked a better position to attack from. And a better enemy to attack.

Dash screamed as the thrill of falling burned through every fiber of her being. But it wasn't just falling: it was the thrill of flying in a thunderstorm amplified tenfold. It was the thrill of battle, of coming within inches of death but taking those inches every time. And it was the thrill of victory, although that one might have been a little preemptive on her part.

Spitfire was right, Dash realized: when she was in the air her worries seemed so easy to handle. It didn't even occur to Dash that they might lose, because *of course* they'd win.

Watch this, Dash thought, her mind on the pegasi behind her. Particularly, on Spitfire.

The first harpy extended a pair of talons toward her as she dropped through the air to meet it. Just as they would have met their mark, however, Dash tilted a wing and spun about, stabilizing directly behind her enemy.

Her blade bisected the harpy just where its neck met its shoulder, the force of Dash's fall behind the super sharp weapon. Dash felt the varied tremors run along the metal as it cleaved through bone, sinew, and skin, and the harpy was split in two.

Her momentum was diminished, but she kept falling face-first nonetheless. Another harpy appeared at the edge of her field of vision, and Dash rolled in midair, safely spinning under the blow of its talons and skewering it through the abdomen.

She threw the dying creature off her blade as the raging winds tossed her about. Dash tried to orient herself as the world spun, but just as she got a sense of which way was up, a claw dug into her armor just over her ribs. Her skin screamed at the pain.

Instinctively, Dash lashed out with her blade. She was rewarded with a keening shriek, and Dash pulled herself away to continue her chaotic fall. Only one way to orient herself now...

Dash flared her wings, and the strength of her fall forcibly tore them open to full extension. She didn't know how much force it took to stop a pegasus falling at terminal velocity. Holding her wings fully extended would spread that force out over time, but Dash had no idea how *much* time. She didn't know how much strain her joints could take. They taught that kind of thing in flight school.

Her wings hit a wall of air, but her body just kept going, swinging forward and threatening to tear her wings out of their sockets. She angled them, trying to divert some of the airflow, and the pressure eased. Soon, Dash came out of her fall in a sweeping arc, angling her momentum back upward.

Dash rocketed back up into the sky just as the gore from her first harpy caught up with her. Flecks of blood spattered her face and armor as she looked up at the battling armies. The harpies had met the majority of her force head on, and many a pegasus and harpy wrestled

each other in free fall.

As she ascended to meet the enemy once more, she spared a glance for the cut on her ribs. It was shallow, and Dash reasoned that most of the damage had been absorbed by Twilight's spells. Dash gave a silent *thank you* to the unicorn. She couldn't take her friends into the air with her, but hey: near-invincibility was a good way to keep them close.

The harpies, for the most part, had their backs to Rainbow Dash. Rainbow Dash, for the most part, had no problem with attacking them from behind.

She felled four more harpies on her second pass through the aerial battlefield, each of them becoming an unsuspecting spray of blood and viscera to her blade. They were nothing to her; so slow, so fragile. It was like dodging snowflakes, like cutting through paper bags. It helped that she had weapons and armor, and all they had were feathers and claws. In the ancient times, did everypony go to war with weapons like these?

She dove back into the fray, trying her best to pick off the harpies that were tangled up with her ponies. With no blades of their own, Dash reasoned her forces would be hard pressed to fend off the harpy claws. They'd need all the help they could get.

Dash gave it to them. She sheared a nearby harpy's wings off at the shoulder and let it fall away from a pegasus with a wounded foreleg. Another harpy fell to simple decapitation, the spray of gore causing Dash to cringe.

Up and down Rainbow Dash went, riding the powerful winds of the storm to travel between her foes. She was born to fly, and they weren't, and that made her superior. So they died. Again and again, until there were none of them left.

Dash hovered in the air, apart, her hair and armor splattered with blood that had made a dozen patterns as it splashed across her body. She looked around at her forces, spotting Spitfire, and she noticed how much they had been thinned. *She'd* been fine during the attack, sure, but the harpies fared far better against her unarmored compatriots.

Still, she was their rallying point, and they had a job to do. "Right," Dash shouted. "Let's get this storm moving! With—"

Dash was cut short. A song had started to play.

And Dash realized that she'd never heard music before. Not real music, not like this. It penetrated the howling winds and the crack of thunder, ingraining itself in her mind like a sliver. It was so soft, and cold, and ethereal. It was nothing like Dash had ever heard before, and she knew that if she stopped hearing it, she'd never hear it again.

She didn't want that to happen, though. The singer was singing for her; it *wanted* her. And she wanted to find it, whatever muse was singing her name. But it was fading; yes, Dash was certain of it. The music was fading, but it was coming from high above them. From the storm.

Without hesitating Dash set off toward the source of the noise, noting with irritation that the others had done the same. Couldn't they see that the music was for *her*? It practically called her name, with its lilting notes and and eerie wails. She pushed her wings further.

Spitfire passed her, and Dash growled in frustration. The singer was *hers*, and no pony else's. She pushed harder, picking up speed. She needed to get there first, needed to find that singer in the raging storm...

Dash tucked herself into Spitfire's wind stream and caught up to the other mare easily. She broke free, pumping her wings furiously, and looked ahead at the churning wall of dark grey storm clouds to see...

There. The most beautiful mare Dash had ever laid eyes on, floating freely just inside the fringe of the storm. She was a white pony, eyes blue like the sky, or the sea, or something. She had no hair, but skin like porcelain. Her mane flowed around her, strands of energy drifting like white seaweed, ignorant of the gale force winds. Her lips were parted sensuously, and from them poured the song, beckoning Rainbow Dash forward.

And so Rainbow Dash went, surging past Spitfire in a burst of speed she didn't know herself to be capable of. She entered the obscuring clouds of the storm, folding her wings to keep them from catching the wind and letting her incredible momentum carry her forward. She saw the beautiful pony's eyes widen in shock: clearly she hadn't expected her to move so fast. To prove herself so *superior*.

Dash sheared the creature's head off.

She stared, dumbfounded, as her blade shattered the pony's glassy neck, and shards of white were swept away by the storm. She hadn't intended to kill it, had she? She'd just wanted go to it, to *be* with it.

To be lured into certain death, Dash realized. The creature had used its song to lure them all into the deadly storm, and Dash had killed it. How?

Wrong, that was how. How many thousands of times had she fought against herself without her own knowledge? How many times had a part of her hidden away as a tiny voice, a slim shred of rebellion. A drop of equinity in a sea of madness. She'd intended to kill the monster the moment she'd first heard it.

Dash felt hooves on her shoulders, and realized that she was being pulled out of the storm. It had probably been a bad idea to hover inside it, she realized as she was thrown into open air.

“Are you alright!” Spitfire shouted over the sound of the storm.

Dash nodded dumbly.

Spitfire grabbed Dash's head in her hooves and turned Dash to look in her eyes. She seemed pleased with what she found, and let Dash go. “That was one of the sirens,” she said. “Resisting their song is supposed to be impossible. Not even unicorn magic will help.”

“Yeah, well,” Dash said, “I've got lots of practice.” She turned to the army. “Listen up!”

They pulled in closer, forming a tight semicircle of fliers. “Stick with the plan!” Dash shouted. “Create a low pressure zone while Spitfire and I head inside and give this big boy a push. Remember, we're aiming for the mountain!” She gestured to the mountain that housed Canterlot. “Now, go!”

They went, and Dash turned inward toward the megastorm. She sighed, though the sound was lost in the winds. “I used to be a weather pony.”

Spitfire barked out a laugh. “And I used to be the undisputed coolest pegasus alive. Tell you what, Rainbow Dash: we survive this, and *you* sign my goggles.”

Ohmygosh ohmygosh ohmygosh—“You're still signing the sword.”

“You bet,” Spitfire said. She blew a breath out from between her cheeks. “This has got to be the craziest and most dangerous thing I have ever done in my life.”

Dash looked from her to the raging storm. “You think that's bad,” she said at last, rolling her shoulders. “One time I punched Titan in the *face*.”



The fury of the storm was nothing compared to that of the gods.

The tempest's center was a churning grey cloudscape, lit to brilliance by Celestia's

seething blade. Each part of the storm, each swirling strand of cloud, was three things to Luna. Elemental power to be tapped, a surface to stand on, and cover.

They had long since left the tranquil surface of the tempest behind and descended into its heart. It was moving now, sweeping its way over the forest and toward Canterlot. The beam of light that had pierced the clouds was gone. The only thing at the eye of the storm was Titan.

Luna and Celestia had to think faster than he did, because he could move faster. They had to strike truer, because he could strike harder. And they had to stay together, because apart he could destroy them in a minute apiece.

All things considered, they were doing an admirable job.

Tightening left flank. Tensing right foreleg. Celestia's thoughts were not vocalized in her mind. Rather, they made Luna note what Titan did almost instantaneously. It was perfect communication. *He's about to round on you, blade high.*

They stood on a scrap of storm cloud as it spun about the center of the maelstrom, each of them indifferent to the gale-force winds. Titan was once again between his daughters, whirling between them and striking with all the force of an asteroid impact.

Celestia's call was right. Titan wheeled on Luna in the split second it took her to register the thought, and found that she had already ducked under half of *Singularity* and thrust *Nadir* into his chest. Her blade sank only inches into Titan's flesh, but his warplate rusted and corroded around it. Titan pulled himself away and struck out again.

Luna's strike had only been a drop in the bucket, but that was enough. If they kept fighting like this, kept being careful, their father would weaken and die. They knew it was possible. They'd seen it happen to him before, when he fought Terra.

Luna felt Celestia's mind run through each of Titan's actions, taking in changes in his stance and expression so small and minute that she wouldn't have noticed them at all. Celestia had always been one to over-think things.

Luna had not. It was exactly her nature to rely on instinct, which was why she was so quick in reacting to Celestia's observations. Between the two of them, they'd eliminated their greatest weaknesses.

Titan caught their blades and threw himself back onto another cloud, pummeling them with a wave of concussed air. "Terra," he said, his alicorn voice piercing the howling winds with ease. "She had control of only one aspect. Delivering your design."

Lightning illuminated the depths of the megastorm, flashing forward to strike Titan's blades

and then tear its way toward Celestia and Luna. They were gone from their tiny cloud before it turned to steam with a hiss.

“She betrayed me,” Titan said. “Much of her design is in you, Luna, but altered with aspects that we...” Titan paused and glanced downward, as though his eyes could pierce the clouds beneath them to see the Everfree below. “—*Distilled* from ponykind. This was as planned, and you became her primary child. But you, Celestia...”

In the instant that he spoke, light flickered through the storm around them. A tiny glimmer on every particle of condensed water, each silvery white droplet touched by Luna's magic. The light built over the course of one of Luna's pounding heartbeats, then broke free from the clouds and converged on Titan.

It wrapped around his legs, clung to his armor, and coated him in frost. Titan looked down at the warplate as it was eaten by Luna's spell, which was working its way up to his neck. His mouth made a twisted line of disgust.

Celestia, on a cloud across from Luna, let loose with a barrage of sunfire. Steam filled the air between her and the king, the clouds unable to withstand the temperature of the focused inferno.

Titan conjured a barrier, a solid black hemisphere unlike anything Luna had ever seen, and it swallowed Celestia's most powerful spell with ease. Titan intended to take the direct hit.

Celestia intended to call his bluff. She grimaced, bearing down on *Zenith* as her horn flared, and the sunfire continued to pour forth into Titan's strange barrier. Finally, he grunted in displeasure.

Titan took to the air, sending out a wave of concussive force along with the double crack of breaking the sound barrier. Clouds around him scattered, and Luna and Celestia were thrown even farther apart. Luna allowed herself a small smile as she threw herself over to Celestia's cloud. Titan was strong. Titan was inequine. Titan knew spells they'd never even seen and had the power to wipe entire species from the face of his planet.

Titan could die. They'd just proved it to him.

Luna and Celestia turned their gaze skyward. *We might actually win*, Luna thought.

Wouldn't that be something? Celestia thought back.

What do you think he was getting at, with Terra and the children?

I suspect we're about to find out. He likes the sound of his own voice.

Luna watched the dark shape of their father descending back through the hole he'd made in the storm. *Of course he does. He's the only pony he has to talk to.*

Titan struck the cloud above them like an empyrean hammer ringing against an anvil. It burst into tiny droplets that were thrown away by the ripple of his impact. He hovered aloft, his armor perfect once more.

"*You, Celestia.*" His voice reverberated through the storm, as if daring it to try and drown him out. "You were supposed to be a son. A second Empyrean. Instead Terra tried to make you like her mother."

"Is that why you always hated me?" Celestia's voice matched Titan's. "Is that why you hurt me and broke me, taught me never to feel?"

The sky cracked as Celestia cast an angry orange thunderbolt at their father. Titan let it rebound off his chest plate and break against the swirling clouds.

Then they were upon him again, blades performing the dance of war as they struggled to win the game of gods. Their blades buckled and fizzled beneath the power of Titan's weapons, but they didn't relent. They fought perfectly together, pinning their father between them and trapping him under a hail of blows.

"I taught you to *rule!*" Titan shouted above the din. "I taught you to be *strong*. I gave you the mind of a god despite your inherent flaws."

"*Luna!*"

Titan's hind leg came from nowhere, dashing between *Singularity* and *Nadir* to pummel her in the chest. How many times her near-indestructible bones broke from the impact, Luna couldn't have said. She staggered backward, shocking her body into healing itself.

The other half of *Singularity* swung around and stabbed Luna in the chest, and Luna saw past Titan to Celestia, who was busy tearing herself free from a hundred tiny black cords of slimy magical energy. She was, for the moment, alone.

Air bunched itself around her as Luna called her pegasus magic and beat her wings, bringing herself off of Titan's blade and back into the storm. Simultaneously, she sent a blast of telekinesis at her sister to bring her out of Titan's reach, at least momentarily. Titan could only go after one of them.

He chose Luna, easily overtaking her with a beat of his own wings and trapping her under a tempest of blows. *Nadir* worked to stem the flurry of hits, guided by Luna's frantic mind. In the

distance, lightning split the sky once more, back-lighting her father's powerful frame as he bore down on her.

"But each of you," Titan said, his voice an avalanche. "Each of you succumbed to the corruption of ponykind. Each of you chose to give in to what is *easy*, rather than become masters of reality."

Both halves of *Singularity* struck downward and rang against *Nadir*. Luna pulled herself away before her blade could be extinguished, and Celestia landed beside her, free from Titan's bonds. The wind of the storm tore at their manes.

"Are you so lost, Titan?" Luna shouted. "How could you possibly think that any pony would want to be like you? For all your power you are alone and useless. This world *thrived* without you." Of course, it had thrived without her, too.

Titan tilted his head. "You think I am lost? Don't you understand, Luna?"

Thunder broke against Celestia's skin, and Luna found herself facing an oncoming swarm of shattered *Singularity* fragments. She split *Nadir*, but she didn't have nearly as much focus as her father. Blademotes met midair, exploding into bursts of aurorae, but too many black shards of *Singularity* made it through. They shattered Luna's barrier, forced their way past her moment-field, and sunk into her flesh. She went numb where they touched her.

Then *Singularity* formed before her in its two parts, and Titan was there, standing between them in the depths of the storm. His blades rang against theirs, taking ground and giving nothing in return.

"My purpose is the ultimate purpose," he bellowed as he fought. "I am the universal imperative, and I will never ignore my true calling." Luna tried to move in tandem with Celestia, but defense against even half of Titan's assault was almost untenable. It was taking all her focus just to stay in the fight. "I alone understand how this world is meant to function."

"You're a cruel monster!" Celestia screamed. "You were a cruel monster a thousand years ago and you're a cruel monster now! I see it. Luna sees it. All of ponykind sees it. Terra sees it. *Harmony* saw it, Titan."

A clap of thunder, a wave of force, a collision of blades. Celestia and Luna were thrown away from the King as another cloud gave way.

"Harmony," Titan whispered, looking down into the depths of the storm. "Terra told you."

Luna took to the air and hovered apart from Titan, and Celestia took her place alongside her. "We know *everything*, Titan," Luna said.

“No...” Titan said. Slowly, he raised his head to look at them. “No, you do not know everything, my daughters. You call me cruel, but you cannot know cruelty. Cruelty is taking away everything that a pony has worked to create. Cruelty is mocking their ideals as you kill those loyal to them.”

“Empty sky,” Celestia whispered. Lightning flashed between them and the King, bringing them into a colorless day for only a moment.

“I will show you cruelty, daughters. I will take everything that you have worked to build, and then I will take you from each other.”

Ice filled Luna's veins as Titan looked out, through the storm and toward what she knew to be the army of ponykind.

“I will kill your little ponies. And you will arrive too late, helpless.”

With that, Titan broke the sound barrier from a standstill, tearing another hole in his storm. Luna and Celestia said nothing. They followed him, pumping their wings as hard and fast as they could, terrified in the knowledge that Titan was right. He was faster than they were. He was going to get there first.



Rarity, like many other mares, had always admired knights. After all, what lady didn't want a handsome stallion to slay the dragon and spirit them away? A brave, strong, definitely handsome pony to keep them safe from harm. Knights protected the weak. They fought for what was just and true. They knew that ponies could fall, but the ideals they fought for lived forever.

Ponies like Sir Enamorous, the Dragonslayer.

Her father had not been a knight when she was growing up, which had left her free to fantasize. About meeting a real father, a hero, who would come and vanquish the wicked Esteem and take her and her sister away. None had come. After her mother died they were taken from Esteem and given to a foster family.

No great saviour had come for Rarity. No shining knight, no stalwart protector. One night

she'd looked from Sweetie Belle's sleeping form, barely on the cusp of being able to speak, to her foster father, who knew nothing past running his simple ranch. And she'd decided that if the time ever came, Sweetie Belle would have her hero.

And so while she lived and laughed with friends and family, working to perfect her art as a designer, she had also fulfilled a secret quest—a knight's quest. Rarity had been intimately familiar with every one of *Carsomyr's* fourteen bladeshards. She knew the design. It took her almost a year to find the perfect diamonds, then cut them for the deadly edge. Her blade was not identical to her father's—she'd redesigned the bridge and two edge shards for elegance.

It took her two more years to become skilled enough to cast a fourteen shard blade. Ponies at school had shown disdain and awe toward her freakish level of control when it came to telekinesis. Rarity had loved the attention.

She'd kept the weapon hidden. She'd kept it secret. She'd kept it to feel safe. Above all other things, she'd kept it.

Now it was only thing she owned. The only thing that generosity had left to give.

"A dragon, Rarity, is perhaps the most powerful creature in this world, excepting ponies."

Rarity pouted at her father. "Why do I need to know how to kill a dragon? I don't want to—"

Esteem raised a hoof, and Rarity knew that it was time to be silent. "Because," her father said. "As I just said, a dragon is the very creature you have the least likelihood of being able to kill."

"Then why—"

"A dragon has two methods of drawing in breath. One is for air, the other for fire. One sounds like breathing, the other sounds distinct. Like a rush of steam from a train engine."

The dragon before her was easily twice as large as the Carousel Boutique and covered in dark green scales. It glared at Rarity, Applejack, and Pinkie Pie with an intelligence far surpassing that of a simple brute as its claws tore furrows of earth in the ground. With a sound very much like a rush of steam from a train engine, it opened its mouth and began to suck in air.

Oh dear. "Fire!" Rarity shouted. It was unnecessary; Pinkie Pie and Applejack could practically read her thoughts anyway. They were moving before she was.

Rarity ran with Applejack, as always. They took the left, Pinkie Pie took the right, flanking their opponent as it drew in its fire. When they were level with where its wings met its shoulders, it exhaled.

The world was set aflame with emerald. It billowed and curled out from the dragon's maw in a roaring inferno, turning the small amount of foliage into ash and setting several of the sparsely placed ancient trees alight. It swiveled its head toward Rarity and Applejack, and more of the ground vanished in fire. The army hadn't dared come close to the dragon, and none of them were struck by the flames. Smart ponies.

Rarity's hooves pounded against the damp earth as she ran from the fire. How were they supposed to even get close to that thing? Heat built behind her, the temperature rising to almost unbearable levels.

And then nothing. The dragon had run out of flame. Applejack had possessed the sense to count six seconds from start to finish.

It didn't matter if Rarity couldn't get close, she realized. She didn't need to.

Vorpal burst into its fourteen fragments and whipped through the air, a glimmering storm of weaponized magic. The dragon wailed as the diamonds tore through its membranous green wing, then wheeled on Rarity and stepped forward.

Applejack was already rushing up to meet it. She pivoted as the creature's head came around, and her hind legs shot out in a kick, aimed for the dragon's throat.

Its eyes flashed with rage, and it opened its massive maw so that Applejack's hooves met thin air. With speed that defied its massive size, the dragon's head darted forward, its jaws closing around Applejack with a sickening crunch.

Rarity was vaguely aware of Pinkie Pie back-flipping over a tail swipe as she loaded explosives into her foreleg launcher. She assembled *Vorpal* at her side. If that dragon swallowed Applejack whole, Rarity would happily cut its stomach open to get her out.

Applejack didn't intend to go down so easily, however. No sooner had the dragon's teeth clamped shut than they were pried back open. She held herself upside down, hind legs pressing against the roof of the creature's mouth, her back to the bottom. Her face was strained with exertion, but she managed to look out at Rarity.

"Get it!" Applejack shouted. "Right in the kisser!"

Rarity held *Vorpal* before her, parallel to the ground, and felt out the exact trajectory each of its shards would have to take. Applejack needed to get out of its mouth, and in the instant that she did Rarity would have a clear shot. It wasn't as if Rarity could shoot through Applejack's armor. Not with Twilight's enchantments. And even if she could...

Applejack twisted, giving her the barest room for an opening. As she focused on her target, Rarity became aware of a sound that she hadn't noticed before. Like a rush of steam from a train engine.

In an instant, Rarity was sure of two things.

First, that the green dragon's flame was undoubtedly very hot. She knew that a dragon's fire was magical in nature, and became more powerful with age. The unbearable heat that she had felt wash over her earlier—despite her bladecasting robe's protective enchantments and the distance from the flame—attested to that.

This wasn't Pinkie Pie's chemical incendiary or Terra's surgically applied pain fire. This was all the intensity of the fire that had just reduced all nearby foliage to ash, but focused through a funnel as wide as a pony. A funnel that Applejack just happened to be in the middle of.

Applejack could die. They both knew how close she'd come during the Second Battle of Ponyville. Enough injuries and she'd just stop healing, and dragonfire might just have what it would take to kill her.

The second thing came with the recollection of the scream that Applejack had made under Terra's flame. Death or no, clear path of attack or none, Rarity never wanted to hear her make that sound again.

She aimed downward at the thinner scales guarding the dragon's throat and shattered her blade. As expected, the dragon saw the shards coming this time, and knew the damage they could cause. It ducked its head, Applejack still held in its mouth—or holding its mouth open, depending on how one chose to view the situation.

The diamond bladeshards sparked against the dragon's crest, bouncing harmlessly off of several hundred years of hardened scales. At the same time, Applejack rolled herself out of the dragon's mouth and landed on the scorched earth in a heap.

The dragon stopped inhaling, head held low. Rarity's breath caught in her throat.

Applejack scrambled to her hooves and plunged under the dragon's belly just as the blinding channel of green fire glassed the ground she lay on. Rarity watched the mare struggle to stay beneath the creature and out of the range of its flame, counting six seconds as she readied her blade.

Something collided with Rarity's side, and she found herself pinned to the ground by a heavy form. She drew her hooves up to protect her face on instinct, and was rewarded with the splintering feel of a timberwolf's muzzle pressing against her hooves.

It was the other monsters. They were coming to the dragon's aid. The timberwolf bore down on her, sap dripping from its teeth to drizzle across her face. It let out a throaty snarl.

Two gleaming shafts made up of seven diamonds each took their place on either side of its neck, then twisted its head off with an explosion of wood and splinters. Rarity threw herself to her hooves and dusted off as she rejoined the blade.

The six seconds of fire ended as she did so, and Rarity was almost thrown to the ground again by the force of Pinkie Pie's explosive detonating against the dragon's side. It was a poor shot—she'd failed to hit the area where the wing met the flesh—but it still did damage.

The dragon roared, seeming to forget about Applejack, and rounded on Pinkie Pie. It opened its mouth, and that dreadfully familiar sound filled Rarity's ears again. By now it seemed to drown out every other noise in the forest, despite not being very loud in and of itself.

It beat its wings, buffeting Pinkie Pie with a thunderous wave of air and rearing up on its own hind legs. Rarity watched the dragon, reassembling *Vorpal* as she searched for a weak point. There had to be somewhere she could strike.

Pinkie Pie was thrown to the ground, and as the dragon came down it slammed a claw into her. Dirt exploded outward as Pinkie Pie was pinned to the ground by the razor claws. She started to try and wiggle her way free.

There. Just above the apex of its crest the dragon had what appeared to be a soft spot—a lighter patch of green. If she had perfect aim, and could throw her blade hard enough, Rarity might be able to hit its brain. It beat trying to aim into its mouth.

Too late Rarity realized that she was too absorbed in analyzing the creature, and as a result she'd overlooked two important facts.

First, the dragon had Pinkie Pie pinned to the ground and was about to unleash a torrent of fire. There was no question with Pinkie Pie—she simply wouldn't survive the inferno. Rarity needed to hit its head, or its claws, or *something* to save her friend.

Second, she'd forgotten about its tail.

It hit her square in the side, and Rarity lost all semblance of orientation as her hooves left the ground. She was vaguely aware of a second impact, on her other side, before falling to the ground in a heap. Her ears rang and pain stabbed along her sides. Her mouth tasted odd, almost metallic.

Rarity's friends were still in mortal danger. She needed to come to her senses and get up. She needed to help them, somehow.

A tree entered her field of vision—or maybe it had been there all along. Yes, Rarity thought, that was what she'd struck while in the air. She rolled her head to one side, trying to get a view of the dragon.

For the next several seconds, Rarity watched. She saw timberwolves and snakes and all of Titan's other monsters coming toward her to take a quick kill. Past them, the dragon still had Pinkie Pie pinned to the ground, and fire poured out of its maw in a seething green blossom of heat and death.

But it never reached Pinkie Pie. Gripping the dragon by the lower jaw and pulling its head toward the ground was Applejack, screaming as flames flowed like liquid over her forelegs and standing in a pool of molten glass.

It wasn't the scream than Rarity never wanted to hear again. Not a despairing wail of suffering and pain. It was defiance and rage. Endurance and tenacity. Rarity watched Applejack save Pinkie Pie's life, and she tapped their harmonic connection, letting each of Applejack's intangible virtues flow into her being.

Rarity had always been somewhat defenseless. Applejack was nearly invincible, but even Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie could evade almost any attack. Rarity had only the blade, which was more often than not too busy on the offense to be put on the defense. She'd always needed Applejack to protect her, but such was the nature of bladecasting.

Strike hard, strike fast, strike first. It was one of the first things her father had taught her. Bladecasting was the most efficient form of killing there was. Even the gods relied on the weapons to kill their enemies.

Rarity threw herself to her hooves, ignoring the almost crippling pain that sliced through her sides. A timberwolf pounced, aiming to hit her before she'd regained her balance, but even as she came to her hooves Rarity sent a single diamond through its mouth to burst out the back of its head. She rolled under the corpse, and every beast between her and the dragon turned to face a Knight Commander of the Order Nocturna.

A snake was sheared lengthwise in two as it tried to strike. Another timberwolf took a diamond through the eye. Rarity spun through them in a shower of blood and splinters, never losing her place.

Six seconds of flame ended, and the dragon snatched Applejack up in its jaws once more. It shook its head once, not bothering to draw in breath for fire, then pitched Applejack into a nearby tree. Bark and wood shattered as Applejack fell to the ground.

Four more diamonds rained down from above to devastate a ghost-like wolf. Rarity sent

three more to new targets, then used a fourth for leverage, springing off it and over the swipe of a nearby manticore. She landed, facing forward, just as the manticore's other paw was torn away with a wet splash. It pitched forward as its throat followed. By then Rarity had moved on to other targets.

Her hoofwork was perfect, her form divine. She split her focus between each of her assailants, delegating the proper amount of diamonds to each even as she moved through their ranks. She killed them, every one. It was all in the execution.

Until at last not a single foe stood in her path and she faced the dragon itself. Or rather, its tail.

The dragon looked down at Pinkie Pie, then raised its other claw. Four deadly talons gleamed.

Four fragments of *Vorpal* gleamed a little bit more.

Rarity reached the dragon's tail just as her blade reached its outstretched claw. She leapt onto the sinuous limb as each talon was sheared away to tumble off into the night. The dragon shrieked, rearing its head back, and whipping its tail up.

Rarity let go.

She was flying, soaring through the night air with her bloodstained robe fluttering about her. Her blade had gone past the dragon's maimed claw; she called it now, drawing each of the pieces toward her.

Her aim was true. Rarity landed against the base of the dragon's head just as *Vorpal* assembled before her. She braced her impact with muscles built over months of training and wrapped her hind legs around its neck. The dragon reared its head, trying to throw her off.

Rarity decided that it wasn't green. A soldier, maybe even a knight, might call the dragon green. But Rarity was, above all other things, a designer. And her sense of color simply could not abide calling even this evil monster green when it was so *obviously* such a becoming shade of viridian.

Her mane flew back in its springy coils, her robe flowed around her, and *Vorpal* gleamed as she thrust it into a small light patch of scales just above the dragon's crest. She screamed, because that seemed like the appropriate thing to do when slaying a dragon, and she felt her blade slide into the dragon's brain. It split into fourteen fragments that tore the inside of the dragon's skull into mush.

Rarity rode the beast to the ground, feeling the thud of its impact reverberate through her

body. She tapped her harmonic connection to make sure that Applejack and Pinkie Pie were both okay, then clambered to her hooves and stepped out onto the dead dragon's head.

Pinkie Pie had been right. Once more, the beasts of the Everfree were retreating, swarming back to their King's citadel. The army gathered around the fallen dragon, looking up at Rarity.

Rarity looked about, catching Applejack's eye. Applejack made a sort of *go on* expression, jerking her head to the rest of the army.

"Dragonslayer!" a pony shouted. *Rarity the Dragonslayer*. She'd have a hard time explaining *that* one to Spike.

Rarity thrust her blade into the air, and it was met with a chorus of cheers from the army. She let them wash over her, feeling curiously distanced from the thrill of battle. She was a fashion designer to the heart. She just happened to have also slain a dragon.

She turned and leveled *Vorpal* at The Citadel, and the army charged with a new chant of "Ponies make war!" Rarity hopped down and joined Applejack, who had freed Pinkie Pie from under the dragon's claw.

Applejack adjusted her charred stetson. "Didn't know you had... well, *that*... in you, Rares."

"Yeah!" Pinkie Pie sprang to her hooves despite her injuries. "You were like, all twirling and spinning and then you jumped on its tail and I thought—"

"We were there, Pinkie Pie," Applejack said.

"Yes," Rarity said. "Well, the dragon was nothing, really." She winced at the pain stabbing her in the sides. "Titles are important."

They trotted off to join the army as it moved through the woods. The Citadel loomed before them, white light inscribed along its edges in curved and pointed glyphs. It seemed larger than it had before. Closer. The trees began to thin, but the army met no resistance. Where had the creatures gone?

Oh, Rarity realized as she looked ahead. They were probably taking shelter from the storm. It had finally touched down. Rarity heard shouting coming from some of the ponies in the army.

It was a wall of wind and water that stretched hundreds of feet into the sky. What was little more than a fine mist tore its way sidelong through the air, streaming off of the ancient trees to form arcs and patterns. Every branch and leaf on the ground was swept away, leaving only the packed soil behind. And it was coming, approaching them at a frightening speed.

Pinkie Pie shot a harpoon into a tree, wrapping the trailing cord around her chest. Applejack shoved Rarity to the ground and pinned her. It was all Rarity could do to keep her face out of the dirt.

“Stay down!” Applejack shouted.

Rarity looked up at the mare, then shifted so that she was on her back. Applejack looked down at her, their faces inches apart. “I said stay down, Rarity!” Rarity wiggled some more and freed her forelegs. “Consarn it, Rarity! What are you doing?”

“Your hat!” she said, clamping her hooves over the stetson. “This thing is practically *invincible*. I'm not watching it survive all that it has just to see it blow away *now*.”

Applejack sighed and rolled her eyes, but didn't object any further. “Just hang on.”

The storm hit.

The tiny, mist-like droplets of water hit Rarity's face, and they *stung*, so much so that she shut her eyes. She felt the press of the wind against her, and she clung to Applejack's forelegs and clamped her hooves down more tightly on the hat.

Applejack said something, but Rarity couldn't hear it. The howling of the storm filled her ears, and she pressed them back against her head. Applejack's face was so close to hers, Rarity could feel it.

The pegasi had failed. The storm had hit. Which meant they'd lost. The fact finally dawned on Rarity.

What were the other members of the army, who didn't have a super-dense earthpony to hide under, doing? Hugging trees? Dying? Sticks and branches shattered against Applejack's armor, dashed against an immovable object by the force of the wind. What had happened to Twilight and Rainbow Dash? Rarity could hardly imagine anypony flying through winds like these.

How long could Applejack and Rarity survive? Would they eventually succumb to the winds and rain? Or would Titan's spell get them first? How many moments of free will did Rarity have left?

“Applejack,” Rarity tried to say. The wind stole her words away before they'd even left her mouth. She opened her eyes.

Applejack looked down at her, the rim of her hat rippling in the wind and her mane trying to tear itself off her head. Soot blackened her face, but her freckles were still visible. And even

though they were about to die, she still wore an expression of unshakable determination.

Applejack's lips moved, but she wasn't shouting. Rarity traced the words, almost feeling the accent in them, as Applejack spoke. She nodded, and Rarity moved closer.

The wind stopped as the storm passed as quickly as it had come, and Rarity pulled herself away and looked into Applejack's startled eyes. The world wasn't ending just yet.

Applejack rolled off of Rarity and they both stood, doing their best to look anywhere but at one another. Rarity settled for the sky and was rewarded with the sight of Rainbow Dash swooping over the forest to the sound of cheers.

Dash touched down in front of Rarity. "We did it!" she said. "We counter-spun *that* storm and sent it straight toward Canterlot! Am I awesome or what?"

"Yes..." Rarity said, "awesome."

Pinkie Pie slid to a halt beside them. "Wow, Dash! You saved our lives!"

"Uhuh," Applejack said. "Saved our lives."

Dash eyed Applejack. "You look disappointed."

Rarity brushed a little dirt out of her mane. "Moving on..."

Dash cocked her head. "Twilight's back on the ground. She's rounding everypony up for the final approach. I'm hitting the skies. Too many harpies. I'll fly low in case you need me. You guys keep up the charge."

"Ooh!" Pinkie Pie said. "Can I do this one?" Without waiting for an answer, she clambered up onto Applejack's back.

"Ponies!" Pinkie Pie shouted.

Rarity looked around to see their soldiers had gathered around them at a respectable distance. They were battered, bruised, and weary-eyed. Their attention was fixed on Pinkie Pie.

Pinkie thrust a hoof forward, pointing at the ever-growing Citadel. "Make war!"



Ponies make war. And they did. They did because Twilight made them. What else would they do, if she asked it of them? How many lives could she have them throw away before they lost faith?

Twilight shed her wings as she reached the edge of the rising storm and the wind made it too difficult to fly. She turned in the air, bringing herself to face down toward the Everfree Forest and the battle raging below.

Down, past hundreds of clashing pegasi and harpies, at burning swaths of the Everfree and the tiny figures that fought around them. A flash of lightning, a crash of thunder, and the battlefield was revealed to her in stark contrast.

They were losing. That much Twilight could deduce at a glance, the details that had led to her observation followed the conclusion. Their force had become scattered as it pressed on through the woods, and now the army was little more than several disorganized, uneven clumps. They were holding now, but soon they'd move out into the open ground around The Citadel itself.

Titan's army of monsters was thick enough there that the army would be surrounded and butchered. There was no strategy or coordination to the way they fought; they were simply a vast mass of predators, instilled with one idea and one idea only: kill ponies.

It had made the action of killing them morally suspect, at first. These creatures might have been bloodthirsty monsters even before Titan, but they never left the forest. Now an army of ponies was coming into their home and slaughtering them. Twilight had felt bad for the monsters.

At least at first she had.

Her trepidation had melted after she watched a manticores impale a unicorn named Quick Fix with its tail. That manticores had been her first kill—*Equinox*, of course. She'd broken through the magical protection Titan had placed on it to find that it hadn't had its mind influenced in any way at all. The creatures of Titan's army very much had free will, and they *wanted* to be in the field against Ponykind. No mind magic. Just what Celestia would call *influence*.

Twenty six motes of pure magical energy—the twenty seventh made up her halo of

defensive magics—reformed into two equally bright blades beside Twilight as she began to fall through the harpies and her pegasi. Free fall combat had at first been strange to Twilight—even when tapping Rainbow Dash's magic for a slower fall and maneuverability. Soon enough, however, Twilight had grown accustomed to the spatial reasoning required. That was one of her specialties, after all.

Too many harpies, not enough pegasi. And they were also too scattered, too unfocused. All they needed to do was protect the forces on the ground. They should have been flying much lower.

There was a certain thrill in flight and in falling that Twilight was only barely glimpsing the edges of. Gravity pulled her downward, causing her to fall faster and faster. Air pushed back up at her, a wall of resistant force that tore at her mane and would have made her eyes tear, if she hadn't protected them with a spell. What would it feel like, to fly just for fun?

She killed the thought as abruptly as she killed the first harpy. It was an ugly creature: all scale-like feathers and a twisted mouth, with birdlike claws instead of hooves. It hardly had the time to even notice Twilight, let alone evade the blades that crossed through its body and left it to fall through the sky in four neat pieces.

An intelligent creature. Vicious, yes. Savage, for sure. And now dead. Twilight could kill them in half the time and twice the effort it took her to sneeze. And she did.

Her blades split as she sent them at targets, and Twilight had soon fallen past her comparatively slow-moving blademes. Most of them would miss; the harpies were agile enough to evade them, and they were becoming more aware of Twilight by the second. But some of them would hit, and even the sliver of power inside them was enough to strike her enemies dead.

She set her gaze forward and found her next target just as it spun mid-fall to face her. The harpy let a shriek escape its gruesome mouth. Twilight said nothing and showed no expression.

Twilight was moving much faster than the harpy, and their collision knocked it senseless for a moment. Long enough for Twilight to lock her forelegs around it. She felt its talons pressing into her back, but they couldn't penetrate skin hardened by earthpony and unicorn magic. It was like trying to drive a nail through steel.

Twilight drove her forehead into the harpy's face, and it burst open like a watermelon. She felt the grip around her relax and let the harpy fall away.

Her blademes were falling around her now, a swarm of shooting stars that dipped and wove in and out of the screeching harpies. None of them even tried to kill her.

Twilight twisted in the air as she fell toward another one of the creatures, flipping backwards as she grabbed its neck with her forelegs. Snapping it was like breaking a twig to her strength.

She continued to fall, using her hooves to slay her enemies, but they were nothing compared to her blademes. Most of their targets had the sense to move out of the way, but not all of them had the speed. She felled harpies by the dozens.

A pegasus streaked by Twilight's field of vision, and she realized she'd fallen far enough to reach the bulk of their own forces. Blademes wouldn't do, not with ponies grappling the harpies in midair. It was time to change tactics.

Her blades formed before her and Twilight closed her eyes, sweeping out with her magical senses. She found the harpies, dozens of them that were close enough, and marked their positions in her mind.

Then she teleported and stabbed a harpy in the chest, killing it instantly with a surge of magic and freeing the pegasus it held in its grasp. The pegasus—a stallion—barely had time to look relieved before Twilight was gone again.

The next harpy she sheared in half through the belly. It took her a quarter of a second to kill it and move on to the next. And the next. And the next.

She whipped between her enemies, always falling, but not always falling downward. She tore them apart, stopped their hearts, sliced off their heads—whatever ended the harpy's life as quickly as possible so she could move on.

This was how she saved lives, Twilight thought as she cleaved one of the shrieking beasts in two. By killing and killing again. It took her ten seconds to clear the air of over thirty of them.

She held herself aloft with telekinesis, wrapping her hooves in a steady amethyst light. The pegasi around her stared at her in awe. An entire wing saved and a flock of harpies dead in seconds. No wonder they thought she was a god.

“Captain Spitfire,” Twilight said. She'd noticed Spitfire was part of this group as she fell. Perhaps Twilight had even saved her life.

Spitfire glided to Twilight and then saluted as she began to hover. “General.”

“Reign in our air forces. I want the tightest group you can possibly maintain over our ground forces as we assault that Citadel. I'm going to go draw the troops in for a coordinated attack. Understood?”

Spitfire nodded. "Yes ma'am."

Ponies make war. She could have asked them all to die and they would have done it without question. Did they truly think that she was infallible? She was just doing the job she was given, like everyone else in this wretched forest.

Twilight didn't know which battle cry to use, so she settled with Rainbow Dash's. "Thunder and lightning!"

Every pegasus, including Spitfire, answered her call. "Wings and steel!" Every piece of morale Twilight could give them counted, after all.

She let the magic fall away from her hooves and fell into a dive. The forest filled her view, closer now than when she had been at the edge of the megastorm. She'd picked her first target well; the ponies were now almost completely overwhelmed. Through the trees Twilight watched a breaking line of ponies buckle as monster after monster crashed against it. Scorpions tore ponies apart with their pincers. Spiders impaled them with skittering legs. Timberwolves attacked in packs, converging on fallen prey.

And, like the ponies they fought, they'd arranged themselves into a line.

Twilight charged each of her blademes with magical energy and catapulted them toward the ground. They flashed through the air, some of them catching off-guard monsters unawares, but they weren't Twilight's target. Her target was the ground, and she'd hit: twenty six explosive points of magical energy were now embedded just off the pony line.

They detonated just as Twilight pushed herself into a diagonal fall and slowed her descent. She'd aimed her mes as close to the pony line as she could without harming her own soldiers, but that also meant sparing some of the monsters. The remaining beasts she would have to take out personally.

She hit the forest floor with one hoof, keeping the momentum from her fall to move herself forward through the thin line of enemies.

The first to fall was a manticore, slain by the mes of *Equinox* as Twilight called it to her side. The second was a timberwolf, which she stabbed handily.

Ponies were just starting to recover from the explosion and take notice of Twilight: a glowing purple blur, racing effortlessly through their lines and killing everything she touched. This was how Twilight saved lives.

She flipped over a scorpion and drove twenty-six mes of burning energy through its brain. She landed, rolled under a spider's legs, then killed it by recalling *Equinox* even as she turned a

timberwolf's head to dust with her hooves.

It was not a matter of winning or losing for Twilight. No, life and death were reserved for the soldiers that fought under her. For Twilight, it was a matter of time and efficiency. Because no matter how strong she was, if they couldn't get to The Citadel ponykind would cease to be. She couldn't kill every creature in Titan's army on her own. Not in the time they had, that was.

Twilight bucked some kind of ethereal bear into the darkness of the woods as *Equinox* made short work of a plant-beast. Titan had influenced these monsters into trying to kill them. What had Twilight done with ponykind? She'd made them fight for her, with words and perceptions. They were dying for their hero, their master general, their new god.

The last monster, a cockatrice, fell into quarters as Twilight's blades snapped into position beside her. She cast a spell to clean the blood and ichor from her body, and it misted into the air around her as her cape settled onto her back.

"Ponies!" she cried, as though every single one of them wasn't already staring at her in awe.

I'm one of you, she wanted to shout. Don't look at me like that. There's a swath of hundreds of corpses from here to Ponyville to prove that I'm not the pony you think I am.

"Reform your ranks and meet the next division. You need to move counterclockwise to The Citadel. Wait at the edge of the forest for the final attack. Am I understood?"

Twilight received a vague chorus of assent. "Good," she said. "I'll be leading the final attack. Until then..." She drew in a breath. "Stay safe."

Then she was gone, teleporting to the next cluster of isolated ponies. She landed in the middle of a section of forest very much like the one she had left, except once again surrounded by monsters. Twilight set to work immediately. This had, after all, been expected and accounted for.

She was Astor Coruscare, reaving through living flesh as easily as one might part a cloud of mist. She was Princess Terra, rending her foes apart to protect her own. She was both of them in combat but neither of them in mind, because she was Princess Celestia, callously thinking to her next move as she executed a single play. She killed them, and she felt nothing, because she was King Titan, and they were nothing before her.

She was anything but Twilight Sparkle. Twilight Sparkle couldn't do *this*. Or maybe she could. Twilight Sparkle was Celestia's master general and the Godslayer. Twilight Sparkle was perfect. She was just trying her hardest to be that mare, to be Twilight Sparkle.

Her failure was inevitable. No mare could be in all places at all times—not even her. She ordered entire groups of ponies into form, heedless of how many they'd already lost.

But she also came across battles that had been lost. Too late, Twilight would come out of a teleport to find herself surrounded by the fallen, not a living pony soul in sight. Monsters would look up from their meals to find themselves in the presence of ponykind's newest god. And then Twilight, as Princess Terra, would punish them for her failure.

In the end, the forces she drew together were far more meager than she had hoped they'd be. They'd simply suffered too many casualties. In fact, according to *Ponies Make War*, her army should have lost morale, broken ranks, and fled by now. Was their devotion to Twilight truly so great, or did they simply realize that this was their last stand?

Twilight came out of a teleport to find herself in the midst of the vanguard. Here, at least, they'd held the line, thanks in part to her friends. A few short seconds and she'd helped them drive away the last of the monsters.

Beaten and battered ponies watched at her expectantly through the thinning trees of the Everfree Forest. Again, Twilight found herself detesting the look in their eyes. She could hear them mutter her name, whispering between one another about the appearance of their saviour. Twilight set her shoulders and took a deep breath. It was time to stop wallowing in her identity crisis and focus on the task at hoof: securing The Citadel.

“The rest of the army is converging on our position!” Twilight shouted. “When they get here, we're forming new ranks and assaulting the Citadel as a whole. Titan has a whole new army out there. This is the last chance any of you will get to rest.” Twilight reasoned they could be ready in less than five minutes. It was a good thing, too—that spell was nearing completion. She could feel it.

She strode over to her friends. Rainbow Dash sported numerous cuts and scrapes, and what appeared to be a new pair of goggles. Pinkie Pie's leg was still wrapped up, and she held it apart from the ground. At least now she seemed to be happier. Twilight wondered what had caused her change in attitude.

At first glance Rarity seemed to be okay, but Twilight soon realized that her breathing was labored. What was more, she kept fidgeting, as though she was nervous about something. The end of the world, and Rarity was worrying.

Applejack looked perfectly healthy, and her armor was barely scratched. She'd look perfectly healthy until she died.

Twilight looked them all over, trying to figure out what she could possibly say. What words would fully encapsulate the way she felt about the four mares in front of her? How could she

express her worry, her gratitude, her guilt, and her need?

She felt almost silly, wearing her uniform in front of them. Twilight Sparkle wasn't their god. To them, Twilight Sparkle was a friend, a librarian, a bit of a dork.

"Thank you," she said.

Applejack cocked her head. "What for?"

"For looking at me the way you do." Twilight turned her head to face the ponies of the army. "They look at me like... like they've always looked at Celestia. To them I'm perfect. An idea. And no matter how hard I try to be the pony they think I am, to *deserve* the way they treat me, I fail. Ponies die. Just like the labyrinth."

A pause. "Uh, you're welcome?" Applejack said.

Twilight eyed her friend, wondering just how that hat still existed. "Right," she said. "The final approach. We're in front."

Dash scoffed. "Obviously."

"We do this, and we do this together," Twilight said. "If experience has taught us anything, it's that running off on my own is almost always the worst possible plan."

Pinkie Pie snickered. Applejack and Rainbow Dash exchanged a look.

"We were wondering when you were going to realize that, dear," Rarity said.

"Now you can stop dying!" Pinkie Pie said.

"Thanks." Twilight turned again to look at the army. "I'm going to go get everything organized." She thought about teleporting, but decided that she could walk. They had the time.

A short while later Twilight stood again before the army of ponykind, ready to lead them past the treeline and into the final push. The Citadel stood behind her, towering over the trees of the forest, now reaching up into a cloudless sky.

"Ponies," Twilight said. "This is the end. This is how we take back our world. One final push is all that remains, and they know it. You've seen them fight, now. They're bigger than we are. Stronger."

"Not stronger than you!" a voice shouted out. "Godslayer!"

“*Godslayer!*”

Twilight waited for the cheers to die down. “Not stronger than *us*,” she said finally. “Because while we fight a legion of individuals, we fight them as one. They are a swarm of a thousand nightmares, but *we* are the wrath of an entire species!

“Ponies!” she shouted. “This is our final hour. Stand *with* one another. Fight *for* each other. Act in harmony, for *that* is our one true strength.”

She cast *Equinox* and turned around, coming face to face with her friends. She raised her blade, preparing to signal the charge.

“And you think you don't deserve their loyalty,” Dash said quietly.

Twilight called lightning from a clear sky, and a thin bolt crashed its way through the air to strike *Equinox*. She felt her blade drink in the energy and seethe with elemental might. She didn't even know she could do that; she'd just called the lightning for dramatic effect. She'd have to remember to keep that particular one in mind.

Her hooves hit the ground, taking her past her friends and out to the front of the stampeding army. She didn't need to look back to know that they followed her: her friends, the army, everyone. The underbrush grew sparse. The trees thinned. Ahead, Twilight could see where they broke into The Citadel clearing.

Merely an hour before, Titan had raised the ancient device from the earth, shattering the plateau and tearing the forest apart. Then he'd seemingly blown away the debris, flattening trees too close to the blast.

The result was a pit, a massive impression in the earth around The Citadel, deeper than the rest of the forest by only a few meters. The scattered fragments of the plateau littered the dirty ground, pushed into the earth by Titan's magic. Some were as small as pieces of gravel, others were as big as a barn. Together they formed a surface to stand on instead of the uneven earth.

Twilight looked at their approach and gritted her teeth.

It was filled with Titan's damnable monsters. Teeming with them. Thousands of skittering horrors and nightmarish creatures swarmed within the pit, shrieking and chittering at the meager armies of ponykind.

There were just *so many* of them. And more were coming, shadows crawling out of the far edges of the Everfree Forest. Thousands compared to hundreds, all crammed within the last couple kilometers of distance to Harmony's Citadel.

They were vastly outnumbered, by beings far superior in combat than them. It wasn't fair. But then, nothing about Titan or the war ever had been.

Twilight Sparkle's hooves pressed into diminishing grass as she ran, beating the dirt as she moved to meet their enemies. She felt the tremor of a hundred other ponies following behind her with each step. The air was so fresh here, and smelled faintly of pine needles, it felt almost deceptive. Twilight opened her mouth as she reached the edge of the pit and screamed.

She split *Equinox* and divided her mind into two. One went over the vast amount of war spells they could employ. The other called upon their other magics. Each of them took a blade.

Then she reached the edge of the pit and jumped. For an instant she felt like she was frozen in that moment. She was in the air, cloak billowing, bearing down on Titan's army, her four friends falling beside her.

Had it really only been two months? One month, even, for Twilight? They'd gone from being a group of townspanies to being ponykind's iconic heroes. They were weapons of war, now, each of them nigh invulnerable and deadly.

The monsters of the Everfree looked up through multifaceted eyes and empty pits, expecting mortal ponies for devouring.

They got Twilight Sparkle instead.

Her hooves touched the ground even as the twin blades of *Equinox* found and slew two targets. She spun and leapt over the falling corpse of a scorpion, wind roaring in her ears, as she split her blade and sent it into the mass of her enemies.

Every monster she failed to kill was picked up by her friends. Rarity took the legs off a spider, then handily dispatched it with *Vorpal*. A hoof-blade whirled by Twilight, a flash of steel in the moonlight, and took another spider in the eyes. Rainbow Dash was beside Twilight in an instant, covering her left with her absurdly sharp blade, moving faster than Twilight could follow. Applejack batted a pack of timberwolves out of the air, grunting as she split their wooden bodies with her armored hooves.

And then ponies were spilling out over the edge and onto the battlefield, roaring with the wrath of ponykind. Unicorns flung shards of steel and any projectiles they could get their hooves on in a devastating opening salvo. Earthponies rushed in to crush their opponents to death or skewer them with makeshift weapons that they held in their teeth. Above them, a wave of pegasi clashed with Titan's harpies, the dead left to fall and break open upon the ground.

They pushed forward, and Twilight found it too easy to become lost in the chaos. This was

not the forest, where their enemies were spread thin, only to come at them a few at a time. They pressed in around her, and the air became thick with blood and ichor. She was frantic: throwing blademes to intercept monsters as they threatened to strike killing blows on her troops.

Twilight tried to get an idea of how far they still had to go as she butchered the creatures of the Everfree. They'd need to break the enemy's morale in order to win—there was no way they could kill them all. But what would terrify Titan's army into retreat when it obviously had such superior numbers?

They fought on, and no matter how many she killed, more would replace them. Twilight began to feel herself panicking every time she came to face the army. Flashes of her soldiers dying lived in her mind long after she'd turned away.

She watched an earthpony have his belly torn open by a pack of timberwolves, then saw them fight over his insides. She saw a unicorn split almost in two by a massive scorpion's stinger. A spider pinned one of her ponies to the ground, then punched a hole in her chest with its front legs. It did it again, and again, and again, until Twilight destroyed it with a flick of her blade.

Twilight allowed herself only a moment to look down at the mare. She wanted to say she was sorry, that she couldn't save them all. But the mare was already dead, eyes filmed over as blood leaked from her mutilated wounds into a pool around her.

This was where Twilight was supposed to get angry, she knew. She ought to have turned around and attacked Titan's army with redoubled efforts. Instead she felt almost numb as she ripped back into the enemy ranks. There was no way they could overcome these numbers. She'd led them into a death trap.

The worst part was that she'd do it again, given the chance. Lying down and submitting to Titan just wasn't an option for her or ponykind. They had to fight, but no matter how great their cause, they were only mortal.

Twilight knew that she couldn't give in to despair. Luna had shown her as much. Even if they were hopelessly outnumbered, even if she couldn't bear to see another pony's dead eyes, she couldn't give up. They would win. They had to.

That was when she heard it—or rather, *felt* it. The sound came to them from the ground, a deep, faint rumble that was like two boulders being ground together. Twilight barely had time to wonder what it was before leaping back into the fray.

Soon, however, the sound came again, much louder than it had before. This time Twilight recognized what it was: a roar.

Every creature in Titan's army stopped and began to back away across the broken plain. Twilight watched them retreat with awe.

“Stop!” she ordered to her army. “Hold!” She needed to know what was going on before she ordered them back into combat, but she had a feeling it wasn't good.

Thump. A wave of sound hit her, like the beating of an impossibly large drum. The roar sounded again.

Thump. That was when Twilight saw the missing stars. An entire piece of the sky was gone. Or rather, something was blocking it from view.

Thump. Something enormous and perfectly black. “Dragon,” Twilight whispered. “That's Exakktus.”

Thump. The roar he let out was now deafening. Ponies covered their ears.

Thump. “But that would mean...” Applejack began.

Thump. “Fluttershy...” Pinkie Pie looked into the sky.

Thump. The force of his wing beats stirred their manes, and his form began to take shape against the night sky. “She didn't make it,” Rainbow Dash whispered.

Thump. Rarity moved to stand beside Twilight, her mouth a rigid line as she looked up at the approaching dragon. “Twilight,” she said, eyes brimming with tears. “If I make you a knight, will you kill him for me?”

Thump. Exakktus stretched his wings wide to glide toward their position. He was massive—as big as the great hall of Canterlot Castle. Twilight didn't even know if she *could* fight that. His fire could probably kill her in one go if she wasn't careful.

Had he killed Fluttershy? Or had Fluttershy even made it to his lair? Did she wander through the dark of the forest and fall prey to another monster? Was she afraid in her final moments? Had it been quick and painless?

Twilight had let her go. The first of her friends to die for ponykind's saviour. She had a feeling that Fluttershy wouldn't be the last.

Would Twilight watch them all die, here, tonight? Would she slowly be stripped of her powers and friends until at last she was nothing but a scared little unicorn, alone in a field of corpses? Twilight couldn't face that eventuality. She'd have to die insane.

A familiar, five note tune rang out over the Everfree.

Twilight had never been so glad, so relieved, to hear anypony's voice—to hear *anything*—as much as Fluttershy's song.

She realized then that she couldn't lose them. Not any of them. They were her entire reason for fighting, her only measure of sanity in an insane world. And if they went, Twilight would go with them.

It didn't matter if she had to wade through the corpses of gods and nightmares to do it, Twilight would make sure her friends were safe.

Exakktus roared, and it was followed again by the closing notes to Fluttershy's song. It was Fluttershy's voice, yes, but it was *different* somehow. It carried with it an eerie echo, a shadow of itself that carried the sound far and wide.

Suddenly Twilight felt herself remembering what it was like to feel green grass under her hooves on a clear summer day. The cool scent of the Carousel boutique, coupled with the soft sound of fabric and little hum from Rarity. The cloyingly sweet taste of one of Pinkie Pie's cupcakes on her tongue.

Exakktus came in low, swooping over Titan's army and creating a gale of wind between the ground and his enormous wings. He opened his mouth wide, and a sound like a hissing mountain filled the air. Twilight thought that she could make out a small form riding on his neck, yellow and pink, jump into the air. Fluttershy.

Exakktus's fire was almost like an absence of light. It blossomed forth from a jagged maw like a spreading pool of ink, overtaking everything on the ground beneath him. He beat his wings, pushing himself forward and carrying his massive form over Titan's army.

He landed directly between Twilight and The Citadel, at the center of the legion of monsters, and crushed dozens beneath ancient claws. A sweep of his tail killed half a hundred as he began to inhale again with a grinding hiss.

Fluttershy sang her five notes, and a wave of warm feelings washed over Twilight once again. The sound of a bunny happily munching on a carrot. Rainbow Dash ruffling her mane and wearing a cocksure grin. Applejack tossing her an apple that she'd polished on her saddlebag.

Twilight didn't know how, but Fluttershy was calming the entire army in the face of the largest dragon anypony had ever seen. Exakktus was on their side. There was no need to worry. Everything was going to be alright.

Titan's army ran, screeching and wailing, away from Exakktus as he released another gout

of pitch-black flame. They clambered past The Citadel, out toward the sides of the depressed battlefield. The ones that had been caught between Exakktus and the army ran toward Twilight. They'd rather face the army of ponykind than Exakktus the Black.

Twilight couldn't blame them. She watched the dragon's fire recede, leaving only a cloud of ash in its wake. Could even *she* fight something like that?

The fleeing monsters were practically charging now, multitudes of legs carrying them across the broken plain toward the ponies. It was a frantic thing, the desperate attack of a creature backed into a corner. Whereas before they had fought to kill, now they would fight to survive.

Fluttershy glided down through the air, her wings held stiff, and landed beside Twilight. All of them ceased staring at Exakktus, and started staring at Fluttershy.

Thin, vivid green vines wound their way up her legs and around her body, perfectly symmetrical. Here and there, a strangely shaped pair of leaves would adorn her form. They made her look almost feral, like some kind of primal warrior come to deliver nature's wrath.

Atop her head sat an ever-growing, ever-shifting crown, held to her head by thorns driven into her skin. Several trickles of blood ran down from where the crown met flesh. What was it that Terra had been called? The Princess of the Forest.

Her mane billowed about and licked her face, a soft pink aura encasing a hard expression.

"Fluttershy," Twilight said. "You look..."

"Terrifying," Rarity said.

Fluttershy looked at each of them in turn, and the tiniest hint of a smile graced her stony features. She turned to face the charging creatures.

"They kill each other," she said, and her voice was accompanied by that thrum of power. Twilight recognized it almost immediately: it was the same voice alicorns used.

"It's their way," Fluttershy continued. "They fight and kill and die for food. For territory. For sex. Each of them could live in our world, but they don't. This is what they are. It's what they want to be."

The sound of their enemy's steps came closer and closer, but nothing could drown out the melody that was Fluttershy's voice.

"As the spider snares the fly and the lizard eats the spider, they kill and they die. It's their

way.” Fluttershy looked back, past Twilight and to where Twilight knew lay the mutilated corpses of their fallen. “And for a single night,” she said softly, turning back to the charging army, “it’s my way too.”

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Chapter 23: [The Immortal’s Endgame](#)

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