

Chapter 11

The clashing of swords echoed through the chamber. Twilight was getting frustrated with her relentless dark double. *Ugh, she's like a machine of some kind, she thought as she barely parried another strike. How in the hay am I supposed to defeat her if she doesn't get tired, and can predict all of my attacks?*

Twilight had been fighting only a few seconds, but it felt like several minutes to her. She grimaced as she parried another swing, her doppelganger's face emotionless. Then her eyes widened as she saw the dark energy building along her opponent's blade. "Oh, horseapples!" she cursed, rolling to the side to avoid the worst of the Dark Wave. She winced, and cast a Cure spell subconsciously. "Good thing these powers came with innate instructions, otherwise I'd be up a creek."

A true Paladin would sheathe her sword, came the voice from before.

Twilight blinked, ducking under another swing. "What does that mean?" she asked aloud, puzzled by the odd statement. "How am I supposed to win if my blade's put up?"

Only silence answered her, and she continued to parry. She tried figuring out the voice's statement. *A true Paladin would sheathe her sword? That doesn't make much sense. I mean, everypony knows that when you're under attack, you need to defend yourself. Is it telling me not to? That doesn't make any sense! And if I put the sword away, how am I going to beat –*

The answer hit her like a ton of bricks. Her eyes widened, then she leapt backwards, away from her dark double. Calming her expression, she placed the holy blade in its sheath on her back. Her doppelganger tilted its head curiously.

"I'm not supposed to beat you," Twilight said. "If I killed you, it would be killing a part of myself. A form of suicide, I guess. And a true Paladin would never commit such an act."

For the first time, her double smiled, and spoke. "You speak like a true Paladin," it said in her own voice. "You know the difference between doing what is easy, and doing what is right. Such is how a Paladin should be." With that, it stepped back into the mirror.

You've proven your worth, my sister, the voice from before said. Twilight wasn't sure, but she could almost hear a smile in the voice. **But light and darkness are**

two sides of the same coin, after all. So while you may wield my light, do not forget your own dark roots.

Twilight blinked, and looked over at her dark equipment. As if on cue, it rose up, and faded into her. Blinking, she narrowed her eyes, and felt the darkness within her once more. Yet, it was dormant, overshadowed by the radiance of the Paladin. However, she felt that if need be, she could tap into that power once more.

Still, she was confused. "I thought the point of me coming here was to throw away the dark sword. Why then can I feel it within me?"

To be a true Paladin, you must accept that there is darkness in everypony. Including yourself. The Paladins that came before you were all determined to ignore their own darkness. However, just because something is dark does not mean it is evil. You, having been a Dark Knight, know this better than anypony. And by being the balance between light and dark, you can restore the natural balance of the world. Stop Nightmare Moon.

There was another brilliant flash of light. Twilight winced, blinking the spots out of her eyes. When she looked up, nothing had changed save for one detail. Her reflection in the mirror was now truly her reflection, imitating her in every way.

Twilight looked around, confused. "Just what was that all about? Why did that voice call me 'sister'?" She thought over what the voice had told her. "Well, I understand one thing out of all this. I can't devote myself fully to light or darkness. I have to have a balance between the two. So I can shift between Dark Knight and Paladin at will."

Nodding, she turned around to leave the area. Before doing so, she cast one more glance around. *Still, that voice seemed... familiar, somehow.* Shrugging, she left through the opening in the chamber.

Meanwhile, Starswirl faced off against the group of doppelgangers. Behind him, Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo were on the bridge, minimizing the chances of them being attacked. That pretty much left him free to cast his spells without worrying about hitting the real fillies. There were a couple of tense seconds, before a Sweetie Belle clone charged at him. He blasted it aside with a quick Thunder spell. As it fell to the ground, twitching, it lost its borrowed appearance, reverting to its true form.

"What's wrong, whelps?" Starswirl asked with a snarl in his voice. "Afraid to face

a true master of the arcane?"

His response was a rush from three of the doppelgangers, one each imitating himself, Sweetie Belle, and Scootaloo. He fired off a split Fire spell, battering the three back and shedding their borrowed forms. Starswirl continued firing off spells, until all of the Changelings had been forced into their true forms. Still, the effort left him exhausted, and helpless as the Changelings closed in.

Before anything else could be said, he heard Scootaloo's voice. "Starswirl, hit the dirt!" He didn't hesitate, dropping to his stomach as he suddenly heard the distinct sound of a large spell being charged. He idly wondered how he'd missed it before.

There was a huge roaring sound, and a wave of heat passed over the prone stallion. Looking up, his jaw dropped. The Changelings were all down, some of them still on fire. The closest Changelings were gone, nothing but ash left of them. He continued staring as Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo walked up next to him.

"Thanks for buying us the time, Sir Starswirl," Sweetie Belle said with a smile.

"Yeah, those freaks were no match for a good ol' Pyro!" Scootaloo crowed.

Starswirl picked his jaw up. "Twincasting? I've only ever read about it! You need a very close rapport with the pony you're Twincasting with in order for it to work properly." He looked at the two fillies with a look of respect. "You two are a formidable force when put together."

"Formidable or no, you've forgotten someone!" thundered Chrysalis, stepping forward. Her eyes blazed. "I will make you suffer for slaying my children, mages!"

Starswirl looked up at her, then at the two fillies. "Don't suppose you can use that again anytime soon?"

Scootaloo winced. "Not unless you can buy us another thirty seconds."

Starswirl grimaced. "Bit of a tall order at this point."

Any further conversation was cut off as Chrysalis blasted them with a beam from her horn. Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo were nearly thrown off the cliff, while Starswirl collapsed on the bridge. Scootaloo tried to push herself to her hooves, but Chrysalis stepped toward her, and knocked her onto her back with a forehoof. Then the Changeling Queen began pressing on the filly's neck, causing her to choke.

"*Scotaloo!*" cried Sweetie Belle. "Stop it! You're killing her!"

"That's the general idea," retorted Chrysalis. "Scream all you want, ponies. There is no one here to save you."

The sound of something flying through the air caught her attention, and she looked up. Her eyes widened considerably as she saw a large boulder flying toward her, too close to do anything but take the hit.

CRUNCH!

Chrysalis cried out in pain as the boulder knocked her off of Scootaloo. The pegasus filly drew in several gasps of air, coughing a little. Starswirl and Sweetie Belle blinked, confused by what just happened. Before anything else could be said, the sound of hooves on wood came from behind Starswirl, and something jumped over him.

"You really should know better than to tempt Fate, Chrysalis," came Twilight's voice. "Because Fate has a habit of tormenting those who tempt her. Believe me, I'm speaking from experience."

Looking up, the fillies and Starswirl gasped. Gone was Twilight's dark armor, replaced by a resplendant white suit of armor instead. A flowing cape hung from her shoulders, rippling in the winds on the mountain's summit.

Shoving the boulder off of herself, Chrysalis staggered to her hooves. She stared at Twilight for a moment, stupefied. "How...? How did you get the power of a Paladin so quickly?!"

Twilight smirked. "That's for me to know, and you to not find out." She whipped her sword out of its sheath, stabbing into Chrysalis's chest. The Changeling Queen gasped as Twilight glared at her. "Never come before me again, Chrysalis." With that, Twilight tore her gleaming sword out of Chrysalis.

The Changeling Queen toppled over onto her side, drastically weakened. The holy energy of the sword had felt like fire to her. And it didn't help that Twilight had pierced a lung. As she choked and coughed, her hooves and tail began to decay, fading away into dust.

Scootaloo blinked. "Uh, is that normal for your kind?"

Chrysalis let out a mirthless chuckle. "We Changelings, when we die, dissolve and disappear. Look around you. The corpses of my children have long since vanished. It's only my power that's keeping me around long enough to talk."

Twilight narrowed her eyes. "And what could you possibly want to talk about?"

Chrysalis chuckled again, and it turned into a full-blown belly laugh, though it trailed off into a hacking cough seconds later. "I just wanted to tell you, Twilight Sparkle, you've earned my respect. You saw through my disguise, then struck me down when I had one of your friends helpless. Nightmare Moon has sorely underestimated you. I regret that I won't be there when you finally take her down."

Starswirl arched an eyebrow. "So, you truly don't have any loyalty to Nightmare Moon?"

Chrysalis scowled, even as her legs almost completely disintegrated. "She tore me from the one pony that I honestly loved, and kept me starved, weakening me. She kept me strong enough to be useful, but not so strong that I could rise against her."

Starswirl scowled. "How could you love anypony? I thought you fed on such emotions, Chrysalis."

Chrysalis glared at him, but then sighed. "You're correct. My kind does feed on love. However, after you and your daughter blasted me away that one time, I landed near the kingdom of Epona. Their king took me in, and helped nurse me back to health. As it turned out, he'd recently lost his wife, the queen."

Chrysalis smiled, a true smile rather than an evil smirk. "When he learned of my ability to take other ponies' forms, he had me pose as his wife. He hadn't spread the news of her death yet, so it went rather well. As time went on, he fell for me. The true me, not the visage of his wife that I posed as. And I came to love him as well. Him, and his daughter. She never knew the difference between me and her mother."

Her expression darkened. "But then Nightmare Moon trapped some of my children, and lured me out of the castle. She trapped me, and laughed at me. She told me I'd become weak, that I'd become a pony myself. Oh, my heart ached for the stallion I loved. If only I could see him one more time..."

Twilight bit her lip. *Should I mention what the Elder told me?* After a moment, she decided against it. "I'll give her one for you, Chrysalis. And if I ever go to Epona, I'll let the king know."

Chrysalis blinked, and smiled at Twilight, as her body below the neck had vanished. Soon, the Changeling Queen had completely disintegrated. Twilight and the others stood in silence a moment.

"Was she truly evil?" asked Scootaloo after a moment. "Or was she just misunderstood?"

Starswirl looked uncomfortable. "She was definitely evil when she tried posing as my daughter once before. But she seemed genuinely different in her final moments."

Twilight scowled. "One more life on Nightmare Moon's hooves," she ground out.

Sweetie Belle nodded. "She'll get what's coming to her. But nevermind that, Twilight, look at you! You're a Paladin!"

Twilight blinked, and smiled. "So I am."

Scootaloo shook her head in disbelief. "Man, and here I was, giving you such a hard time." She hung her head. "I'm sorry, Twilight."

The lavender mare waved a hoof. "Don't worry about it. We all make mistakes from time to time."

Starswirl blinked for a moment, staring at Twilight. "I... I remember now! All of my spells! I can use them again!"

Twilight's smile widened. "Really?! That'll be a big help!"

Starswirl nodded, then blinked again. "What? There's more... Me... teor?"

Sweetie Belle's eyes widened. "You learned Meteor? How?!"

"I'm uncertain," Starswirl admitted. "Perhaps witnessing somepony harnessing the power of a Paladin is the trigger. Regardless, I now have what I need to avenge Clover's death!"

Twilight waved a hoof to draw attention. "Hold on, Starswirl. Let's not go flying off the handle here. We should get back to Maresidia, and tell the Elder what's happened."

Starswirl blinked, then nodded. "Very well. Gather round, everypony."

They did so, and Starswirl's horn glowed. An arcane circle appeared beneath them. Twilight recognized it as the Teleport spell. The wind whirled around them, and moments later, there was no sign that they'd been on the mountain at all.

The citizens of Maresidia blinked as a flash of energy heralded the arrival of the four travelers. While Starswirl drew some attention, seeing as how famous he was, Twilight drew more still. With her glimmering white armor, she looked far different than before. Shocked stares and mutters soon surrounded them.

"Her... a Paladin? Impossible..."

"Could she really have survived Mt. Ordeals?"

"Isn't that Sir Starswirl with her? Why would he help her?"

"What about Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo?"

"I heard the Elder ordered them to help her."

The stares and mutterings came to a halt as a familiar dark blue unicorn approached the group. Twilight looked him in the eyes. Pokey Pierce's animosity had not decreased since the last time she'd seen him.

"I suppose you think being a Paladin makes you something special?" he sneered. "That being a white knight washes away your past sins?"

Twilight didn't rise to the bait. "Nothing I do will wash away the blood on my hooves. But I can at least start making up for what I've done. Nothing I do or say will bring your sister, or anyone I killed, back to life. But if I bring the one who ordered the raid to justice..." She left the sentence hanging.

Pokey's sneer softened. "I suppose that's the best I can ask for. At least you acknowledge your own crimes. I won't try to kill you anymore. But don't expect me to help you, either."

"Wouldn't dream of it," Twilight deadpanned, as she turned to walk to the temple in the back of the town.

Sweetie Belle, Scootaloo, and Starswirl followed her. The elder unicorn coughed a little. "Dare I ask what that was about?"

Twilight sighed. "I told you before that I led the raid on Maresidia, right? Well, during the raid, that unicorn's sister was killed. So when I showed up at the city gates, alone, he didn't exactly take kindly to my presence."

Starswirl winced. "Ah. Yes, I can see how he might be a little upset."

The four of them walked into the temple. Twilight spotted the Elder in the sitting room off to the side, and trotted over. Her hoofsteps caused him to look up, and his eyes widened. Then he smiled.

"Well done, Twilight Sparkle! I must admit, I had my doubts about you. Thank you for proving me wrong," the Elder said with a smile.

Before Twilight could say anything, Sweetie Belle stepped forward. "She's broken every expectation I had of her."

"Yeah, I'd say she passed with flying colors," Scootaloo added.

Twilight blinked. "Passed?"

The Elder had the good grace to look sheepish. "Apologies, but I assigned them to keep an eye on you, as well as escort you. I had to make sure that you truly weren't a threat. For all I knew, you could have been a first-rate actress."

Twilight looked down. "After what I did, I can't say I blame you."

The Elder looked at the two fillies. "I declare your mission a success, girls."

"YES!" the two cried in unison. They lifted up their robes to look at their flanks... only to find them stubbornly blank. "Aw..." they sighed.

Twilight chuckled. "Cutie Mark Crusaders, huh?"

The Elder smiled and nodded. Then he cocked his head. "Still, you took far less time than I thought to get to Mt. Ordeals and back."

Starswirl stepped forward. "A handy Teleport spell can shave off days of travel,

old friend."

"Starswirl?" The Elder blinked. "Whatever are you doing here?"

Sweetie Belle piped up. "We met him on Mt. Ordeals."

"And he learned Meteor, believe it or not!" Scootaloo added.

"Meteor?!" The Elder gasped. "Is the damage to the world's order so bad already that those seals have been released?"

"I don't know, and I don't rightly care," Starswirl said. "All I know is that I have the power needed to avenge Clover!"

"Your adoptive daughter?" The Elder asked. "What happened?"

"She was slain when Clydecyan was attacked," Twilight answered. "I thought I mentioned that when we were talking before."

The Elder nodded. "Ah, of course. Forgive me, old friend. My memory isn't as good as it once was."

Starswirl chuckled. "I know the feeling all too well." He sobered quickly. "Still, using this power I can destroy Nightmare Moon and avenge Clover's death."

The Elder shook his head sadly. "Revenge is a foolhardy course of action, Starswirl. Especially with a power as dangerous as Meteor."

"Say what you will," Starswirl bit out, "but my course of action is clear."

The Elder sighed. "There never was talking you out of anything you wanted to do," he commented.

"Now there's a case of the pot calling the kettle black," Starswirl quipped. "You were just as bad, if I recall."

The Elder and Starswirl shared a laugh at old memories. Twilight coughed. "Ahem. Elder, do you have a means for us to get to Colton and take an airship?"

The Elder nodded. "I'll have the Road of Tartarus unsealed. After the raid, the mages in town sealed it off due to spite. But it's the fastest way to get to Colton. It leads

directly into the town." As he spoke, he nodded to a white mage standing nearby. The mage nodded back, and left. The Elder spoke again. "The Road of Tartarus is a dangerous path. But I'm confident that as a Paladin, you can overcome the darkness on such a road."

Twilight blinked. "Ah, right, I need to mention something. I haven't completely given up the powers of a Dark Knight."

That surprised everypony present. "What does that mean?" Scootaloo asked.

"Well, when I gained the powers of a Paladin, a light told me that dedicating myself to pure light would unbalance the world just as much as if I was dedicated to the dark sword." As Twilight spoke, her armor shifted and blurred, until she was once again wearing the dark armor. "By balancing both light and darkness within myself, I can restore the balance of the world."

The Elder slowly nodded. "That makes a certain amount of sense. Strangely, what few records we have of Paladins show that the eras they were in remained peaceful for only a short amount of time. Perhaps it's because previous Paladins were too in favor of light over darkness."

Twilight nodded, shifting back into her Paladin attire. "That's what the light said. It also called me 'sister'." She drew the blade she'd been given. "I still don't know what to make of that."

The Elder gasped on seeing the sword. "That blade! May I look at it?"

Twilight carefully floated it over to him, and he looked it over. "As I thought. There's a Maresidian legend engraved on this blade!"

"A legend?" chorused the other four.

"Yes, it goes like this," answered the Elder.

**One born of a dragon
Bearing darkness and light,
Shall rise to the heavens
Over the still land.
The moon's light eternal
Brings a promise to Gaia
With bounty and grace.**

"With the existence of this blade, and the fact that you bear both darkness and light within you, I can only conclude that you are the one spoken of in the legend, Twilight Sparkle," the Elder finished.

Twilight's head swam. *I'm part of a legend? From Maresidia? That's preposterous! What does half of that legend even mean?* Still, there was one thing she couldn't deny. *'Bearing darkness and light' can only refer to me. I mean, there hasn't been anyone else in history that can use both powers!*

The Elder continued. "If there is anypony capable of stopping Nightmare Moon, it is you, Twilight Sparkle. You must defeat her, if peace is to return to the world!"

Twilight was silent for a few more moments, then she looked up. "I don't rightly know what this legend entails. But I swore to defeat Nightmare Moon before I learned of this. I'll rescue Rarity, return the crystals to their rightful places, and defeat Nightmare Moon!"

Starswirl stepped up beside her. "You won't do so alone. I will aid you, as best as I can."

"So will we!" Sweetie Belle said, stepping to Twilight's other side.

"Yeah! We're not going to let you have all the fun!" Scootaloo added.

The Elder sighed. "Sweetie Belle, Scootaloo, while I'm sure Twilight appreciates your enthusiasm, you do have studies to attend to here in Maresidia."

"Not for another month, Elder!" Scootaloo said pointedly. "You said it yourself! And I'm sure we can wrap everything up in a month!"

Sweetie Belle nodded. "Besides, this is bigger than our studies! This is the fate of the world itself!"

Starswirl chuckled. "They've got you there, old friend. Don't worry, I'll make sure nothing happens to them."

The Elder considered this for a moment, then sighed, chuckling wearily. "Very well. I suppose forcing two talented mages to study while the world is coming apart at the seams is rather pointless." He then clapped his hooves over his ears. Twilight and every other mage within earshot did the same, as did Starswirl after a moment.

He made it just in time. "***CUTIE MARK CRUSADER WORLD SAVIORS! YAAAAY!!!!!***"

Starswirl groaned as he removed his hooves from his ears. "Dare I ask?"

"They're obsessed with getting their Cutie Marks, old friend," the Elder said.

"Ah. I see," the sage replied.

Twilight coughed. "Everypony, if we're going, we'd better get going soon. The longer we stay here, the more likely it is that Nightmare Moon will do something else to upset the natural order of the world."

The other three nodded, just as the white mage came back. "The Road of Tartarus has been opened, sir," she said.

The four travelers started to leave, but paused as the Elder called back to them. "Good luck, everypony. For the sake of all the world, stop Nightmare Moon!"

With a nod, the four left, heading to the building containing the Road of Tartarus.