

The Battle of Canterlot



Being woken from the enchanted slumber was not the same as being woken from a regular night of sleep. Rather, Celestia felt as though she were slowly being drawn out of a vat of warm water. Starting with her legs, a strange sensation of bareness came over her, and she immediately felt exposed and cold. It was a pity. The magical sleep had been rather nice.

“Good morning, Sunshine.” Terra had been the one to wake her, just as Terra had been the one to put her to sleep.

“Don’t call me Sunshine,” Celestia said reflexively. “And it’s evening.”

Terra cocked her head. “How do you know it’s evening?”

“There’s a window behind you.”

“Ah. Of course. Can I get you anything to eat? You look positively *skeletal*, Sunshine.”

“What’s got you being so nice?”

Terra held a hoof to her chest. “A mother can’t show concern for her *daughter*?” Celestia was in no mood for games, and let it show on her face. “Oh, fine. We are soon to be allies, you and I.”

Terra had said that she would never help Celestia, and that could mean only one thing. “I don’t get a choice in the matter?” Celestia would love to see Titan try to meddle around in her mind.

“Of course you do, Sunshine! You can choose to do as he says now, or do as he says *next time* he asks.” Terra leaned down to place her muzzle next to Celestia’s ear. “I would advise,” she whispered, “selection of the former.”

The blissful feeling of the magical sleep was wearing away, and Celestia’s legs began to

ache. "And if I don't?"

"Then you lose the chance to save what you love dearest, and he'll make you watch as I strike them down once again."

"You'd cull the population."

"With extreme prejudice. You don't want that, now do you?"

"You want to know what I want?" Celestia said as the pain overrode her better judgement. "I want my godhood back, just for ten minutes. So I could spend them with you, mom."

"I suppose Empyrean *is* stronger than me. Though you didn't grow up in the world I did, Sunshine. I know something about killing." She lifted her head. "He's ready."

Celestia, who had no working legs, was lifted telekinetically and levitated through the air. She noticed that Terra was being uncharacteristically gentle. She was even set down softly when they reached the entrance to the dilapidated castle's courtyard. There, she managed to prop herself up into a position that caused little pain if she balanced herself properly.

Titan sat before her in the center of the room, wearing his characteristic expressionless mask. The first thing Celestia noticed about him was how large he seemed now that she was the size of an average pony. The second was the oppressive sense of presence he exuded now that she no longer had alicorn magic to counteract it. As always, Celestia wondered if his presence was a technique unique to Titan, like Terra's singing. It was easy to pass all of her father's abilities off as the result of his age, but she knew that Titan must have some talent, some dominion of his own. She doubted that it was everything in existence, like he claimed.

"Go to him, daughter," Terra commanded.

Titan took one look at Terra. "Leave us," he said. Terra left without a word.

It took a significant amount of willpower on Celestia's part not to give in to her instincts and try to cover her single ear. His *voice* was like an apocalypse held in a whisper. Was this how Titan always sounded to non-alicorns?

Celestia had to decide whether or not she would obey her mother. She had no working legs, and she certainly did not want to push herself across the floor. But she also didn't want to sit obstinately in place like a child refusing to go to bed when asked. Ultimately, her goal was to get as much information as possible, which meant that for now she would need to play into her father's infantile attempt to humiliate her.

She eased herself forward and began to half-push, half-pull her way to her father. She held her head just above the floor, and her mane dragged along the partially overgrown courtyard.

“All rise,” Titan said. Celestia had to suppress another shudder. “For Princess Celestia. The Second Sister and the ruler of ponykind.”

Second Sister? Since when had that been one of her titles? And since when did Titan think her second to Luna? She continued to struggle across the floor.

“Born of the World and the Rule. Gifted with the Sun and the Mind.”

Celestia made it to Titan and slowly began to prop herself up again. Her father kept going.

“Former General of the King’s armies and Grand Adjudicator of the Law.”

Celestia barely remembered the position as Adjudicator. It had been a while.

Titan looked around at the crumbling palace, and when he spoke, his voice had taken on some semblance of normalcy. “Gaze upon the kingdom you have bought for yourself, daughter. Upon the greatness you have achieved. At the masses who come to worship their princess.”

Celestia smiled faintly. “There is more here for me than you have ever held in your life, Titan.”

Titan tilted his head to the side only slightly. “Explain.”

“I abandoned this palace so long ago. It reminded me of Luna, and the corruption from your prison in the Dark Heart had almost reached us. We moved, but I’ll never forget some of the ponies who grew up right here in this room. I used to do marriages in here, too, you know. We’d take out the glass in the windows so that the songbirds could come and go freely.” She looked her father in the eyes. “You say I have achieved no greatness,” she said. “But I gave them a thousand years of prosperity. Of paradise. Any boast you make will pale in comparison.”

“You are deluded,” he countered levelly. “A defeated god trying to consolidate your loss by convincing yourself that it had value. The happiness of our ponies is nothing. They are dust now, or will become dust within the next century. I have beaten you.”

Celestia did not pay any heed to his words. “The game is not over yet, Titan.”

“When I first spoke with you upon my return, do you remember what I said?”

She knew which sentence he was referring to, despite the fact that upon his return he had run his mouth for nearly ten minutes. "Let's not do this."

"And here we are," Titan said.

Celestia smiled teasingly. "That was almost conversational, father! I didn't know you could be so *loose*."

"Indeed," he replied. "I had to decide on what my approach would be when speaking with you. General Esteem is best moved through shameless boasts. Your sister is angered by being reminded of our rightful place and legacy. Your student's shadow was a simple thing—the focus of our talks was always power. Terra will do as I say unquestioningly so long as I treat her as a confidante, though I admit she manipulates me just as much by allowing me to be so permissive."

"I'm sure your range of roles is very diverse."

"It is not. Still, the subtleties are everything, in the end. With you, I think I will forgo intentional manipulation and speak candidly."

"Which is in itself just another form of manipulation. I will not let my guard down, Titan."

Titan gave an imperceptible nod. "I imagined you wouldn't. I also imagine that you are going to refuse my offer."

"Why would you need me in the first place?"

He pursed his lips, obviously debating whether or not to give her the information they both knew she was after. "Ponykind still resists," he said. "Eradicating the rebels now could make them even more restless—they have never been predictable. If they grow more restless, I will have to give Terra the order to strike them down. You will give prevent this by giving Emyrean council. You will have no other duties."

"You were right," Celestia said dryly. "I refuse. I'm surprised at your insight. It's almost as if a month of living with your wife while you oppressed my people made me dislike you. Or perhaps it was the time you engineered my escape just so you could recapture me to feel smarter than I am for once. Though it might also be the time you took the mare I love like a daughter and put her through a fate worse than death."

"I never understood why you love them so much. You care for this Twilight Sparkle but you will sit idly by as her entire species brings ruin upon itself. You claim to work in their best interests and yet you use them as a weapon against me even now."

Celestia was getting tired of her father. “*You* claim you want me to pacify them, but we both know that if you really needed my help, you’d be too ashamed to ask. This is about your pride, Titan. You can’t stand the idea that after all you’ve put me through I still won’t be your daughter. *Calamity*, Titan. Are you truly so infantile?”

Titan’s eyes narrowed. “I will brook no more insults, girl. You will do as I tell you or suffer the consequences.”

Celestia barked out a laugh. “Consequences? What part of the past month makes you—”

“I will kill Twilight Sparkle.”

Celestia stopped.

“She has been leading the rebellion from your underground labyrinth for the better part of two weeks. It was difficult to find her because of her ability to teleport. Eventually I tracked her down and blanketed the area in a spell to keep her from doing just that.”

“You lie.”

“It is interesting, Celestia. You taught this girl to take your place in the eyes of ponykind, but I have seen her give orders to her troops—she is a mediocre commander. I know that Nihilus wielded the power to destroy, but this Twilight has eschewed combat of all kinds. You have placed your ponies in the hooves of an incompetent pacifist.”

Titan could have learned about Twilight from Nihilus. He was obviously just trying to get to her. The King could not be in two places at once. Could he?

“General Esteem and I have been killing your little ponies since before you entered this room, Celestia. Your flaw is that you attempt to play the player, not the board. Nothing you could have said to me here could have prevented the collapse of your little rebellion.”

“I have no reason to believe you.”

“And yet you must. I have cornered your pupil in a one story wooden structure that faces a fountain shaped as three pegasi dancing. She is pinned to a wall, speaking to herself in a way that is almost a desperate prayer. Your name has come up.”

Celestia knew the building. “I still have no reason to believe you.”

“You composed a magelight spell with her on her twelfth birthday. Shall I continue?”

A stone weight settled at the pit of Celestia's stomach. "Yes."

"You took her to the Canterlot hedge maze her first Nightmare Night in the city."

"What happened to her first copy of *Advanced Alchemy*?"

A pause. "Spike sent you half the pages."

A horrible thought occurred to Celestia. "How are you learning these things?"

"I am causing her pain."

"*Stop!*"

"I have. She has not called your name many times, Celestia, but it is evident that she wishes for you to save her. Is that not what you want as well? To commit divine intervention and save the ponies you love? I am giving you that opportunity—you need only agree to serve me. Only two moves exist before you. Both lead to the conclusion of the immortal game."

Wrong, Titan. Celestia hung her head and gritted her teeth. "I accept," she whispered weakly.

Titan cocked his head to one side. "A lie," he said simply. "I did not truly believe you would submit so early, but I was hopeful."

"*No!* Father, I—"

"You are no alicorn, girl. You can deceive me no longer. This was more a lesson than an offer. You failed, but you will learn. And now," he said, his voice once again taking on his godhood, "Twilight Sparkle will die."



Sparkle didn't know what to do.

They were surrounded. Trapped beneath Canterlot by who knew how many puppets and royals. They needed to escape, but how?

Twilight was quick to answer. "*We fight our way out, of course. Maybe we'll find Esteem*"

on the way.”

Sparkle ignored her. “Applejack is holding them off.” She said. “Where?”

“South,” Dash answered immediately. “She’s doing well so far. Can’t you feel her?”

“We can collapse southwest on a whole lot of enemies.”

The idea was appalling. Although...

“We fight them out through the south,” Sparkle said as her plan took form. “Rarity, Pinkie Pie—find Applejack. Pinkie, give Dash two of your orange capsules. Dash, you need to get through southwest as fast as you possibly can and use them to collapse the tunnel from the entrance. Then you find Luna and *bring her back*, understand?” Dash nodded grimly.

“Mom. You and dad will hold the northeast. Don’t try to push them out—just keep them back and tell any of our ponies coming your way to either help you or head for the south. Same goes for Fluttershy and Unimpressive but with the east. Understand? When everypony is out, I’ll come back for you.”

“What will you be doing?” Her father asked.

“I’ll be leading everypony out and sending you reinforcements. Most of us won’t even know we’re under attack yet.”

“What about the puppets and royals who are already inside?”

“Most of our ponies know how to defend themselves. They’ll have to...” Sparkle gulped. “Make do. Any other questions?”

“Why do I get *Fluttershy*?”

“This is no time for—” Sparkle stopped. “Just *go*! All of you *go*! We’re running out of time!” After a short pause in which nopony said anything, they went. All of them except her father.

“We love you, Twilight. Your mother too. You know that, right?”

“You aren’t his daughter.”

“I know, dad.”

“Stay safe, Twilight.” He left, leaving her alone. Or rather, as alone as Sparkle could get.

"We should be killing."

"What is wrong with you?"

"It is your very nature to disagree with me, Sparkle, so try to think about this logically for once. If we can kill the General here, today, the Royal Army will collapse. Nothing will stand between us and the gods. The purpose of the loyalists will have been fulfilled."

"And they'll die by the hundreds."

"Then make a compromise with me. If you fight you will save lives!"

"You know I can't."

"You can't do anything. How many innocent lives are going to pay for your ideals?"

One way or another, they were about to find out.



Esteem waited.

He didn't even have to enter the tunnels themselves—a foolish idea anyway, considering they could be collapsed. Instead he could just stand in the entrance to the labyrinth, watching his forces push forward. He had brought puppets with him, but their presence was redundant: he wouldn't need any help. Not for this. The majority of his forces were above ground, dealing with the rebels the Princess had taken out for a raid. Waiting for Luna to show herself had been essential—Titan would be keeping her occupied.

He waited, and he waited, and eventually the sounds of battle grew closer. As planned, somepony was pushing his troops back. Unbeknownst to his opponent, they were coming straight for the General himself. He wondered which of the loyalist heroes it would be. The best he could hope for was Twilight Sparkle herself—the worst, somepony who wasn't one of Rarity's friends at all.

While Esteem was *glad* when it was indeed one of Rarity's friends who showed up, he couldn't help but be a little disappointed as well. He had looked forward to a pitched battle

against a skilled opponent fighting desperately for their life. He'd gotten Applejack. An *earthpony*.

He was made aware of her presence when a puppet burst against the far wall of the hallway. Moments later, Applejack rounded the corner and came into view, her polished red armor offset by the ragged brown stetson atop her head, but complimented by the gleaming orange gem at her throat.

"Lieutenant Applejack," he greeted her. Truthfully he had no idea what her title was, but Twilight Sparkle was a general, and Applejack was her second-in-command. Lieutenant seemed to make the most sense.

Applejack looked him over, and Esteem was put off by how little fear he saw in her eyes. Didn't she know who he was?

"Just Applejack," she said. "You Esteem?"

Apparently she did know. "*Sir General* Esteem," he corrected. "Titles are imp—"

"Titles don't mean bull," Applejack interrupted him bluntly. "You Rarity's dad?"

Esteem considered readying a set of war-spells, but decided not to. He would most definitely use *Carsomyr* for this. "I am."

Applejack nodded, as if considering this a moment. "Ah know a general and a knight, Esteem. And you're just a jackass."

He blitzed through the space between them, crossing the passageway to stop beside Applejack in an exhilarating heartbeat. There, he drew the fragments of *Carsomyr* out from under his robe and assembled them. Magic sealed the fragments along their fractures as Esteem brought the blade downward, where Applejack caught it with—

Her *hooves*?

It wasn't possible. Granted, Applejack was armored, but *Carsomyr* could quite literally cut through anything non-magical. And just how strong *was* Applejack that she could stop his blade midair with only the strength in her forelegs? Esteem could swing *Carsomyr* with enough magical might to shatter a boulder.

His thought process was interrupted as Applejack threw her weight against *Carsomyr* and sent him flying through the air. He flew incredibly far before landing on his side and immediately throwing himself into a roll. The roll saved his life—as he came to his feet, Applejack's hooves shattered the stone floor he had occupied seconds beforehand.

It seemed that Applejack, despite being an earthpony, was not to be toyed with. It was time to take things seriously.

First, he cast a spell to decrease the traction of the floor that Applejack stood on. Then, he struck her with a pinpoint of telekinesis, sending her sprawling. He leapt towards her as he abolished his friction spell and liquefied the stone beneath her. Applejack struggled, and Esteem had to solidify the stonework before she broke free. His quarry, half-encased in stone, looked up at him as he drove *Carsomyr* into her chest.

It was not easy. Punching a hole in her warplate was hard enough, but underneath it her flesh may as well have been made of steel. Still, when Esteem drew his blade out of the earthpony's chest, it was covered in blood.

It was also missing a piece. Applejack made what sounded like a mix between a grunt and a cough as the chevron-shaped point shard worked its way through her insides. Blood ran down her chin.

"Painful, isn't it? This particular form of execution was taught to me by a griffin. A little brutish, the griffins, but then they don't have our pantheon. On the plus side, they taste delicious."

Applejack's entrance wound had already closed. She was a powerful earthpony indeed—Esteem had never seen such fast regeneration. He looked down at her, contemplating the pony before him.

"I wonder," he stated, more to himself than to the earthpony. "Why would Rarity choose to surround herself with ponies like you? Where did I go wrong?" He jerked the shard upward, and Applejack jerked with it, stifling a scream. The stone encasing her buckled and cracked.

She gritted her teeth and met his eyes. "You don't know a thing—*ugh*—about family."

Esteem claimed even more of her internals, and Applejack wedged her eyes shut. "You would have had me raise my daughter differently?"

"No."

At this Esteem raised an eyebrow. Not just at the statement, but at the fact that the mare could still speak through the pain. "Do explain, lieutenant."

"Rarity is one of the—*augh!*"

"I'm still listening."

“—The best friends a pony could ask for. You were a part of that, even if you are—*ah!*—a jackass. The problem ain’t her. It’s you.”

Esteem ripped the shard out of Applejack’s body and raised his blade for the kill. No matter how powerful the earthpony, decapitation would put them down for good. Applejack needed putting down.

Something caught his attention: a can, rolling and bouncing along the floor behind him to come to a stop at his feet. He looked down, momentarily confused, at the offending canister, on which was written something he couldn’t make out. Applejack smiled, and the realization came crashing down on Esteem all at once.

Explosives.

“Not too bright are ya’, sugarcube?”

He blitzed out of the corridor, landing at the base of the stairs just as the canister detonated. He blew open the doors leading to the street outside then blitzed through those as well, not caring that his trajectory brought him several metres over the street below. Before he hit the ground, he had a shield up.

The flames—which were inexplicably bright pink—gushed out of the structure that hid the labyrinth entrance like blood from a wound. They wrapped around Esteem’s shield, surrounding him in so much pink light that he had to look away. When the explosion subsided, he stood in a wide circle untouched by the pink flames.

It took moments for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. The streets of upper Canterlot were, for once, quite calm. Or rather, this particular street was calm. He knew that somewhere, Titan was fighting Luna as planned.

His new assailant revealed herself moments after he regained his composure. Another earthpony, this one bright pink, came soaring through the air between Esteem and the burning entrance to the labyrinth. It was an impossible leap, made even more unbelievable by the flames she trailed as she flew through the air.

Pinkamena Diane Pie landed inside Esteem’s unburnt circle in a half-crouch. Two short metal blades extended from her forelegs. She looked up at the general and smiled.

“I’m Pinkie Pie.”

“*Die!*” Esteem snarled in response.

He took a swing at her with *Carsomyr*, which she blocked with both blades before spinning away. Unsatisfied, Esteem shattered his weapon and sent fourteen razor-sharp shards at the earthpony. She leapt into the air, turning so as to fit harmlessly through the cluster of blades, then hugged the ground as the shards returned.

She came at him, actually *came towards him*, and swung at him with her blades. The sound of metal ringing against metal rang out through the still-burning street as Esteem caught both strikes separately on his blade.

Pinkie needed to use her forelegs to attack, and this disadvantage was not lost on Esteem. After catching another set of strikes on his blade, he struck her in the belly with a hoof. The earthpony went tumbling backwards, and Esteem went in for the kill.

He threw his blade once again, this time angling the shards downward so that they buried themselves in the cobblestones when Pinkie Pie evaded them. The earthpony did manage to avoid each of the blades, but came out of an evasive roll in the centre of a minefield. She looked up at the general and her eyes widened.

Esteem barely had time to wonder just *how* Pinkie knew they were going to explode before Applejack, still fully-armored but very much alive, came barreling into his field of view and jumped on top of the pink pony, who drew her legs in and made herself as small as possible.

The shards exploded, and for several moments the two were obscured by falling stone and debris. Before the dust had even cleared, however, Applejack was in the process of standing, apparently unharmed.

How could she have survived the explosion? Even the strongest earthponies had trouble with fire, and that had been unnaturally hot fire. Surely Applejack was at her limits. And how could Pinkie Pie have not a scratch on her? Applejack had not covered her entirely, and he doubted Pinkie had the regenerative powers possessed by her partner.

It mattered not. As they rose, Esteem blitzed through the space between them and aimed his blade at Pinkie's head. Esteem expected he would only be able to catch them off-guard long enough to kill one, and Applejack would be running low on magic.

He was more or less correct. Pinkie Pie looked up in time to see the blade descending, but there was no way she could dodge it this time—she was still partway under Applejack. The armored earthpony reacted to Esteem coming out of his blitz, but he could swing *Carsomyr* much faster than she could move a hoof.

When the diamond blade intercepted *Carsomyr*, his frustration was overshadowed by his excitement. He stood, bearing down on his daughter's weapon with all his magical might, and it slowly bent toward Pinkie Pie.

Applejack took a swing at him with a hoof, which he evaded by springing to the side. Pinkie Pie finally managed to roll out from under Applejack, and came at him with a series of wickedly fast strikes. Esteem deflected them all with *Carsomyr* as he kicked her in the chest, sending her reeling backwards. His magical senses made him aware of *Vorpal*'s incoming shards, and he split his own blade to deflect them. Simultaneously, he cast a spell to remove the traction from the cobbles beneath Pinkie Pie, causing her to slide helplessly onto her belly.

When he reassembled *Carsomyr*, he brought the shards in low. Pinkie Pie jumped over them, but Applejack was tripped by the closely clustered shards of platinum-iridium. He didn't bother trying to kill the earthpony, instead leaping over her and aiming a jab at Pinkie. By now Rarity had reformed her blade, and it met his own above the pink pony once again. Esteem landed on the near-frictionless cobbles, and he exchanged blows with *Vorpal* as he slid past the helpless earthpony to position himself behind his daughter.

While Rarity's bladecasting robe looked pristine, his daughter appeared to have sprinted the whole way to their location. Sweat beaded her forehead, and strands of her mane were stuck to her coat. She was breathing heavily.

He held her blade against his, ready to react to any set of strikes she might throw his way. He was well aware of the two earthponies behind her.

"Do we *really* have to do this again, Rarity? You know you can't beat *me*."

Slowly, she detached one of *Vorpal*'s shards from the whole and lifted it to her face, where she used it to tuck a strand of mane behind her ears. "*Dame* Rarity, General. Titles are important. And while I can't beat you, *we* can."

Esteem ran his tongue over a sharpened tooth. "I see that contrary to my lessons you are still relying on others. King Titan believes the best way to reform a pony is to start by taking everything they hold dear away from them. I wonder, my Rarity, how much left do you have to lose? How many of your friends will I have to kill before you admit just how flawed your worldview is?"

Rarity took several steps away from him to stand between her two friends. Her blade lazily detached from *Carsomyr* to drift towards her. "I will not tell you again, General. I am Knight Commander, and you will address me as such."

Esteem looked the group of Luna's elites over. "All of you at once?" he said. He tightened the bonds between *Carsomyr*'s shards so much that the metal almost squealed. "Oh yes."



Sparkle popped into the mess with a larger burst of light than usual—her goal was to get as much attention as possible. Her appearance tended to have that effect on the loyalists anyway.

"We are under attack!" she cried. If any set of eyes in the mess wasn't already on her, it was now. She took the room in at a glance. "Noble!" she barked.

The aged pegasus saluted immediately. By now everypony was standing. "I need a group of fighting ponies to the north and another to the east. *Everypony* non-essential heads through to the south. No other tunnel is a viable exit. There are enemies already inside, so be prepared for heavy fighting. Am I understood?"

Noble took each piece of bad news in stride. "Yes, ma'am."

A brief but perfectly aimed sojourn through space later, Sparkle was with her parents. When she arrived, they were not doing well.

Her magical senses told her everything she needed to know as the light from her teleport cleared. She knocked several unicorn shards out of the way, then undid a moment field so her father's blade could reach a unicorn puppet. Then, she blanketed the entire hallway in a spell that further bent the curvature of space, increasing the gravity in the narrow corridor by almost forty percent. She turned to her parents, who she had rendered unaffected. They were staring at her in amazement.

"Help is on the way. This should last about twenty seconds."

"Twenty seven," Twilight corrected as they blinked away.



"This isn't good," Fluttershy said, more to herself than to any other pony. "This isn't good at all." She flew after Unimpressive as he barreled through the labyrinth's passages toward the main eastern tunnel. Ponies who had apparently been warned of the attack scurried past them

as they went.

"This *isn't good*? And here I was under the impression Twilight *wanted* to be attacked." Unimpressive answered with his typical sarcasm. "She said you always come through when you're needed. Please tell me that means you're a badass." Fluttershy winced at his language, and the expression was not lost on Unimpressive. "You don't fight either, do you?"

"I-I-I don't... I mean—"

"You're kidding me. For Celestia's elite task force you guys sure have a strange way of getting things done."

"Well, um, Celestia's elite task force never really existed."

At this Unimpressive looked back at her sharply. "What?"

"Twilight and Luna have been telling that to everypony so they'd listen to us." It felt good to get that off her chest. Fluttershy hated lying, even indirectly.

"Well then where do *you* come from?"

"I'm, um, well, I take care of the creatures in Ponyville. Or I did."

"So after all this time you're all *volunteers*? What about Nightmare Moon? Discord?"

"Well," Fluttershy began, intending to tell him about how they had met Twilight Sparkle.

She didn't get to finish her sentence. They rounded a corner and came face to face with a unicorn puppet.

"Get *back*," Unimpressive commanded as he drew his blade. The unicorn attacked him with a series of glowing red energy bolts, which he batted out of the air.

"Hey!" Fluttershy called loudly. Or rather, relatively loudly. The unicorn heard her, which was her goal. It shifted its attention from Unimpressive to Fluttershy, and she *stared*. Her mind broke through the familiar barrier between her will and its, and it vanished. Fluttershy shuddered.

Unimpressive looked back at her with an eyebrow cocked. "You don't know how to fight, huh? What was that?"

Fluttershy shifted uncomfortably. "Well, I can sort of, um, dominate any creature's free will by looking into its eyes, and the puppets don't have free will, so..." She let the sentence

hang.

“So you can instantly kill the unicorns everypony has so much trouble with. One would think that would have come up in the past *two and a half weeks* you have been here.”

“Oh, I’m sorry!” Fluttershy said with perfect honesty. “I’m sort of quiet. I don’t know where it comes from.”

“With a name like Fluttershy, who would have thought? Though I suppose I’m Unimpressive, so it isn’t like names are an accurate way to gauge a pony’s personality.”

“Um, isn’t Unimpressive a nickname?”

He shot her a disapproving glare. “Can we just move on? I’m feeling really inadequate after the unicorn thing.”

“I’ll let you fight the next one,” she offered.



Luna should have been flying over Canterlot. It was almost routine now. Dash or Luna would regularly patrol to find any pegasus puppets and destroy them so as to maintain dominion over Inner Canterlot’s airspace. The pegasi numbers had dwindled so much in the past few weeks that they had started using other, slower soldiers to draw them out. Now the patrol was just a formality—there was no question as to who owned Inner Canterlot.

Except by the time Dash had blown the tunnel and escaped to open air, the streets of Canterlot were in the oh-so-familiar chaos of battle. She had immediately taken flight so as to gain a better view, and was treated to birds-eye-view of the conflict. It seemed as though every troop General Esteem could muster was in the field, attacking any loyalists who had been outside. In the distance, she saw the unmistakable pink glow of the Pinkie fireball.

That they had managed to at least fight their way out of the tunnel was good. Dash hoped they were okay, but she needed to focus on her own task: find Luna. As she was looking for a goddess at war, her task should be a simple one.

That was what worried Dash. Had Twilight deliberately given her the easiest job because she was angry with her? Rainbow Dash told herself that Twilight’s decision had made sense; Dash was the fastest pony on the team, and the only pegasus other than Fluttershy.

Her prediction about finding the princess proved true. After less than thirty seconds of sweeping, her pegasus eyes spotted the princess in one of the main streets of Canterlot. She was alone, except for—

“Him again,” Dash breathed. King Titan in puppet form.

Luna was fighting Titan blade-to-blade, much like she had two weeks prior. She was alone, which Dash knew was bad. Luna might normally be an unstoppable force, but Titan was just as powerful.

Dash reckoned she had surprised the King once before, so it wouldn't hurt to do it again. She sped around the two of them until she was to Titan's back and Luna was facing her. Then she moved in, blazing a rainbow trail so as to ensure Luna saw her before shooting straight upwards for the clouds. Hopefully the Princess got the message.

The clouds had not been cooperative ever since Titan's return. Dash flew to the heart of a particularly large one and drew upon her pegasus magic, noting how much she had to focus to alter the cloud. They had been growing increasingly feral day by day. Soon they would be no different from the ones over the Everfree Forest.

Still, Dash was no stranger to taming clouds, and her pegasine vision pierced the precipitation as though it were merely air. Below, Luna had Titan in the air, presenting her a perfect target. She gathered every speck of energy in the cloud, took aim, and released.

Then worries of Twilight Sparkle melted away, and Dash forgot entirely about Wrong. She lost herself in the sheer energy of her attack, and the exhilaration of the contest took over. There was no competition greater than mortal combat.

The crack of thunder was still sounding in her ears as she struck the King of the world with a bolt of multi-hued lightning thicker around than she was. She shot past him, landing with three hooves on the charred cobbles. In her last hoof she held her blade.

This time it seemed both Titan and Luna were more prepared for the thunderbolt. Luna immediately lunged at the King, and he batted her out of the air with a wave of telekinesis that could have toppled a building. Then he hit the ground next to Dash and stabbed at her with his blade.

Rainbow Dash knew not to try to take Titan head-on. She flung herself upward and over the King, spinning over him as she sailed through the air. Titan's blade bit into empty stones, and he immediately tore it free and swung it over his head toward the pegasus.

The strike came lightning-fast, and Dash instinctively raised her own weapon to block it.

When their blades connected, the power of Titan's blow sent a jarring shock through her foreleg and sent her reeling. Were it not for the magical link between her leg and her weapon, it would surely have been knocked away.

Luna came back around to attack her father from the other side, and they traded blows so quickly that Dash's eyes could only follow thanks to her pegasus senses. Titan's horn flashed, and Dash wondered what spell the King was trying to best his daughter with. It was only when the stones beneath her glossed over with a lightless black that she realized he was trying to kill *her*.

Her first instinct was to take off. She tried to, but her legs stuck to the stone as if she were bolted in place. She looked down in a panic and saw *blackness*, crawling up her legs to cover her body.

It was not any particular form of concentration, but rather the stark terror Dash felt at the sight of the darkness that gave her the strength she used to escape. She tore free from his spell and only stopped ascending when she realized that the darkness had stayed on the ground. She looked down, and where she had been standing a moment earlier was only a tiny crater filled with dust.

She wondered if she would have been able to shake Titan's spell if not for Twilight's enchantments. While Dash was no unicorn, she was almost certain that Titan's magic would not normally be so easy to shake. Not for the first time, she regretted the way she had handled their conversation earlier.

Dash shook her head vigorously. She needed to *focus*. She beat her wings forcibly and hit the ground in another crouch moments later. Titan was fighting Luna, and the two would throw occasional spells at one another, but it was clear that Luna was losing ground. She looked at the King. He wasn't to be feared; he was just trying to kill her. That Dash could handle. That was a daily occurrence.

No, if anything Dash should be angry at the self-declared King of the world. There was nothing that had happened to her, or to any of them, that could not be blamed on Titan. He had plunged their world into war, set General Esteem against ponykind, mortalized Celestia, and ordered Twilight to be afflicted with the Sliver of Darkness. And now Dash was being given a chance to beat him to death.

Yes, Dash thought as she let loose a vicious battle cry: anger she could use.

She came in low and swung her blade at him. He ducked, busy with Luna, and Rainbow Dash swung up to kick him in the neck. Titan struck Luna's blade hard enough to send her reeling, and he brought it around to cleave Rainbow Dash in two.

———She angled her weapon as she caught the strike, and it glanced away harmlessly. For a moment Dash found herself inside his guard, and she attempted to scythe off the King's head. Her sword ricocheted off an invisible barrier, and Dash crouched low as she regained her footing.

Dash thought that all she had to keep track of was his blade, but she was wrong. As she jumped over another wide swing, Titan struck out with a hoof and hit her in the chest. She slid back across the cobbles, wind knocked out of her, as Titan turned back to his daughter.

Breathe, Dash thought. She focused everything she had on the idea of sucking air into her lungs. Luna needed her, and Twilight needed Luna.

It helped that she was a pegasus, and air naturally did what she wanted it to. While normally that was things like thinning out in front of her and gathering under her wings, the same elemental command extended to something as simple as this. Dash filled her lungs with air in a desperate gasp. Then she did it again, and again.

She sped across the distance between herself and Titan and made to cut at the King.

This time, she was careful. As Titan knocked her blade back with his own, she used the momentum he gave her to spin away from his follow-up strike and swing at him again from the other direction.

They fought on. Rainbow Dash, despite her usual pride, knew that her purpose was not to kill, or even harm Titan. Luna was a far better warrior than she, could take a beating, and sling spells around besides. Dash distracted the King, forcing him to pay attention to her or be sliced in twain.

It worked. She was too fast for Titan to harm without giving her his full attention, and so was free to find creative ways to attack him. Dash hit him with her blade, her hooves, her elemental lightning—anything she could think of.

Luna came at him with her corrosive blade, the powers of winter, and her bare hooves. Dash had to wonder briefly where all the gods had learned hoof-to-hoof combat—they certainly didn't fight using any style she had ever seen. They could carry on a duel with blades and a bout of martial combat simultaneously.

The trio of combatants rarely stayed in the same place for long—all of them had wings. That, and the spells that Luna and Titan threw around were devastating. Dash's armor was strong, but she couldn't survive the building-crushing force of Titan's telekinesis, or any of his stranger, more sinister magics. Her only hope was to take flight and flee momentarily whenever one came her way.

She had it easy, though. Luna was pushed through buildings, battered into the ground, engulfed in achromatic flames, and bound in seamless white cords. Each time Titan hit her with a spell, she got back up. And for each spell Titan landed on his daughter, she got a hit on him. Titan was encased in ice, thrown through buildings himself, pelted with shards of glass, and impaled by a street sign. The way he reacted to the injuries was more akin to the way one might react to getting caught out in the rain.

At last Luna and Dash came at Titan from opposite sides of a flat stone rooftop, and he broke his black blade into two pieces and caught each of their strikes. His chest still sported a gaping hole from where he had been impaled, and it wasn't healing.

"I am going to lose this battle," he said calmly as he held their weapons in place. "I will not even kill you, girl. How disappointing. I should think that—"

"Whatever," Dash said as she swung at him again. He evaded her blade, then Luna's, but then Dash carved a deep cut into his neck. He faltered, and Luna stabbed him in the chest. His blade vanished, and Dash took his head off with a rapid swing.

Physical combat was more exerting than any other activity Dash had experienced, and she exhaled as she dropped to sit on the rooftop and sheathed her weapon. "Twilight needs you," she breathed. "We're under attack. Go in through the south. Everypony is evacuating." If her friends were still fighting, they wouldn't be for long. She wished she was close enough to tap the Elements of Harmony and see if they were okay.

"*Catastrophe*," Luna cursed icily. "Is everypony using the south?"

"Yes. The others are all collapsed, or filled with enemies."

"And how is Twilight getting our ponies out?"

"She's leading them out herself."

"And the puppets in the streets? What does she intend to do about them?"

"I don't know."

"Where will she lead our troops?"

"I don't know."

Luna seemed to work this over in her head. "Hast thou any other orders?"

"No."

Luna spread her wings. “Then keep our fleeing ponies safe above ground.”

The Princess took off, and Dash lifted herself onto her feet. Wondering whether or not her friends were alive was exhausting. So was wondering whether or not they would beat Titan for good. If they did, would Dash ever get over Wrong?

She wished she could just suck it up and get over it. That she could put it all behind her and live like a normal pony again. Celestia only knew that she *wanted* to—and all of her friends probably wanted it to. It would be better for everypony, herself and Twilight included. But knowing that it was what she *should* do, that it would be *right* was not enough. She could no more ignore the lessons learned as Wrong than she could walk through solid stone.

Dash threw herself into the air to survey the city below her. There were indeed still puppets in the streets—a great deal of them. She drew her blade as she dove towards the first. She couldn’t make up for past wrongs.

But she could do this.



Titan found her before she had led the first group away.

Sparkle had alerted everypony she could find—which was quite a few. She had sent some to help her parents and Fluttershy, and sent the rest away. She had taken her own group, almost a hundred in number, and led them to the collapsed tunnel between the mess and the quarters. There had been fighting along the way—their tunnels had been breached. Sparkle had let the loyalists handle it as she shielded them from harm.

Repairing the collapsed tunnel was an incredibly difficult feat, so it took Sparkle several moments. When the debris was cleared and the tunnel intact, she saw him.

“Him,” Twilight said venomously.

Titan’s avatar stood, surrounded by puppets, at the other end of the vast corridor. How he had known where to find her was a mystery to Sparkle.

Titan spoke not to Sparkle, but to the ponies she led. “You choose *her* as your deity, even over Luna. A mortal pony, over a god. You will watch her die. Then you will die, godless.”

Sparkle faced the King of the world, urging her legs not to tremble. Despite the hundred ponies behind her, she felt alone.

"Buttercup?" she asked softly. Sparkle had picked the earthpony up in the quarters.

"General?" The worry in her voice was clear.

"You're in charge now. Lead them out."

Before Buttercup could protest, Sparkle teleported to the other end of the corridor, putting herself on the other side of King. "I'm over here!" she called out.

"Make him suffer. Humiliate him. You are the strongest war unicorn in the world."

Titan tilted his head slightly. "I had forgotten that you were a Coruscare."

Twilight saw Buttercup and the other ponies take off behind the King. They would have to go the long way around, but they would at least survive. Hopefully. "I am a Sparkle."

"You are a pony," he said, as though that was all that needed saying. "I know not why they rally around you. You have made three mortal errors in the past minute. There is nothing divine about you but your tenuous link to Celestia."

"Fight," Twilight urged her. *"Fire, thunder, entropy and ice."*

Titan kept going when she didn't answer him. "I see the fear in your eyes, Coruscare. You are not your ancestor. You do not breathe death as she did."

"Show him that he's wrong," Twilight begged. *"Cut light and break gravity. Bend minds and devour flesh."*

"These ponies worship you for what you should be. For what you represent. But the mind of a child and the heart of an infant are within you. Surrender and I will stop this attack."

"The power to destroy!" Twilight cried. *"The power to destroy!"*

Sparkle considered both of their words for only a moment before answering them.

"No," she said simply. Then, in a burst of purple light, she vanished.



Rarity, Applejack, and Pinkie Pie were flawless.

Rarity did her best to keep her father's blade busy. *Vorpal* danced through the air, performing maneuvers that were elegant in their simplicity. It shimmered in the light of Pinkie's dying flames, and bright white sparks shot out from between it and *Carsomyr* wherever they met.

Applejack did little more than put herself in harm's way. With Rarity's magical senses, and Pinkie's Pinkie sense, there was little that the earthpony did not see coming. While she would occasionally take a swing at Esteem, she was far too slow to hit the General. Instead she intercepted war spells and thrown shards, brushing off blows that would have killed Pinkie Pie.

Pinkie herself was an unpredictable blur of motion. Esteem batted away canisters filled with confetti and had to deal with the earthpony's extreme martial arts. She rolled and jumped from place to place, demanding attention with her ranged strikes as well as her blades.

They were synchronized perfectly. When Rarity came from one side, Pinkie would come from another. When Esteem threw his shards at Pinkie, she would dodge most of them as Rarity knocked the others out of the air. When the General let loose a war spell, Applejack would cover Rarity with her body as Pinkie leapt out of the way.

Even so, it became apparent less than thirty seconds into their conflict that they were only fighting for survival. Esteem was war itself. He moved between them like liquid, thwarting their attacks and forcing far too much defensive action. His war spells were devastating things that made each of them run for cover. Rarity knew he was talented, but preparing so much magic while fighting with his blade was extremely praiseworthy.

What was worse, every time he came close to striking one of them it was a brush with death. Every time they broke through his defenses, however, he simply batted them away with a moment-field. For that reason alone he was going to win.

And he smiled. Rarity had originally thought of her father's grin as something predatory, mostly due to his sharpened teeth, but now she realized that it was not animalistic at all. The predators of the Everfree Forest killed to eat. Esteem killed for fun. His maniac's grin was entirely equine.

She matched a set of strikes aimed at her, but the strain of constant combat was wearing on her. She was slowing down, and they both knew it. If they couldn't come up with something soon, Esteem would have them. Her father smiled at her over their blades.

"You know, my Rarity," he began casually.

Pinkie Pie came at him from behind, and he threw Rarity away with a push of *Carsomyr*, then turned and beat at her with the blade. As she blocked his strike, he drove a hoof into her chest. Pinkie flew backwards, and Esteem pursued, leading with his blade. Applejack jumped in front of her and caught the blade on her armored forelegs. Her hind legs trembled and she gritted her teeth in exertion as the general bore down on her.

Then Rarity came at her father again, screaming savagely as *Vorpal* met *Carsomyr* again and again. Esteem had to almost shout to be heard over the din of the colliding blades.

"The philosophical implications of this battle are quite intriguing. You rely on one another to survive, and because of it your friends are going to die."

He forced his blade against hers with all his magical might, and Rarity struggled to stand as she was pushed across the cobbles. Behind him, Rarity saw Applejack helping Pinkie Pie to stand up. Esteem brought his face so close she could feel his breath against her cheek.

"This is the cost of reliance on others, my daughter. *Failure. Mediocrity.*"

Their blades dipped ever closer to Rarity, and *Vorpal* cut into her cheek with ease. Rarity drew back.

"I gave you *everything*. I made you *superior*. And you squander your gifts by helping the lesser. By siding with the disciple of a dead god."

"So why is it," Rarity said as she drew away from the blade inching closer to her face. "That you need *my* approval?"

Esteem's eyes narrowed. Rarity saw her chance.

She heaved back her foreleg and punched him in the face as hard as she possibly could. He was not prepared for the strike, and his head snapped back. The force of her punch pushed one of his sharpened teeth into his lip, and when he brought his head back around a trickle of blood ran from his mouth.

His icy blue eyes were filled with rage as he pushed her to the ground. Then he spat on her. "Ungrateful bitch!" he yelled.

He threw *Carsomyr*'s fragments into the ground at her feet and leapt away. Rarity barely had time to register what was happening before she was running for her life.

The shards exploded when Rarity was only a short distance away, and a wave of force and stone threw her forward like a rag-doll. She didn't know how far she skidded across the street before she came to a halt. When she stopped, she felt no pain, and her ears wouldn't stop ringing.

She didn't know how long she lay there, dazed, before reality came back to her. She tried telling herself to stand, and managed to flop weakly onto her side. From there she saw everything.

Applejack was face down on the ground, unmoving. Rarity tapped their harmonic connection and learned to her relief that she was alive. Pinkie Pie was fighting Esteem alone.

It appeared as though the only reason she was still alive was because Esteem had abandoned any semblance of technique in favor of blind rage. He screamed as he struck Pinkie's blades again and again, and Rarity wondered how the pink pony's forelegs were able to endure the force he was hitting her with.

She took a cut across the face, and another tore open her chest armor. Every time she blocked one of *Carsomyr*'s swings, it took her longer to raise her legs again. Finally, Esteem batted her forelegs away and sent her to the ground. She did not get up.

Rarity had to help her, but she could barely move. *Vorpal* lay scattered around her, but she didn't have the focus to cast it.

Her father turned to her, looked right at her, and licked Pinkie's blood from a piece of his blade. Then, flung the shards into the ground around her and blurred backwards through the air toward Applejack. Pinkie Pie didn't move. Why didn't she move?

The ground under Pinkie Pie erupted into a shower of stones and dirt, and Rarity couldn't look away. Esteem's blade shards reassembled into the whole before him, as what had the rubble fell to the street to reveal—

Pinkie Pie, unharmed, lying on a circular patch of cobblestones amidst the tiny crater. Around her glowed a deep blue sphere, in front of which stood Princess Luna.

"General," she said coolly.

"Luna," he stammered.

"*Princess* Luna," she corrected. "And my goal is to save my little ponies, not waste time

killing you. *Run.*"

He looked around, obviously not sure what to do. His eyes fell on Rarity.

"This," he breathed venomously, "this is not—"

"I have *nothing* to say to you, Esteem. You are not my general and you are not my father. *Begone.*"

Esteem looked like he was about to reply, but Luna made at him, and his reaction was to cast his motion spell to take him down half the street. Though it was too far away for her to see, Rarity knew it was her that he looked at before turning and running away.



Titan finally caught her above ground.

She had no idea how he was able to pursue her, but she was grateful that he was. She had bounced around the labyrinth, shielding loyalists and guiding them to the only escape route. Every time, Titan would show up after only a short wait to kill her. She would lead him away from the ponies, then teleport to a new location.

Eventually, she had decided the best place to lead him would be away from the compound entirely, and teleported to the inner city streets. There, she had found an abundance of puppets, but they couldn't really hurt her.

Twilight had not stopped urging her to destroy them. "*They're only puppets,*" she had said. "*Use the tools you were given.*"

Sparkle, as always, had declined.

"*You can't use our power to destroy, can you?*" Twilight had said. "*You physically can't do it.*"

"*I... don't think so,*" Sparkle had admitted. After that, Twilight had left her alone.

The puppets weren't exactly a problem, but they were exhausting to deal with. Sparkle had blinked past a fountain and into a building, hoping Titan had followed her.

That's when he had cut her off.

It was like losing a sense she hadn't even known she possessed. One moment she could freely command the space around her, and the next she just *couldn't*. She knew it was possible to prevent her from teleporting an object or a pony, but she'd never not been able to move *herself*.

The first thing she had done was immediately turn to the exit. She found Titan in the doorway.

"I know more of your lineage than you do, Coruscate. I know how to defeat you."

Sparkle trembled at the sight of the King. She needed a way out. She turned around, looking for any kind of backdoor, but there was none. She would have to get by the King himself.

A pain exploded in her head, and before she knew what was happening, she was being pinned to the back wall by a set of magically conjured white cords as Titan looked on. Titan had bound her as soon as she looked away. How could she have been so *foolish*?

"I do not understand why they obey you over me," Titan said impassively. "Perhaps it is your link to Celestia. But while you are extraordinary as a pony, as a deity you are quite mundane."

It wasn't over yet. Sparkle tapped into her magical senses and probed Titan's binding spell, looking for a way to break it. No system was indestructible.

"Celestia," Titan said simply. "You will tell me a memory you have of her. One that she treasures."

Sparkle was instantly confused. Was this why Titan hadn't killed her? What would he need with a memory?

"Defy him. Celestia is nothing to us."

"I won't."

Titan cocked his head to one side slightly, as if genuinely surprised that she had refused him. Then, his ghostly horn glowed slightly, and a tiny white orb zipped forward into Sparkle's eye.

Sparkle would have used the word "unimaginable" to describe the pain, but that would have been incorrect: she was experiencing it. Of course it was imaginable. It was not the the

screaming, splitting agony of a burn, or the wet, prickling torment of a cut, or the dull, throbbing ache of a broken bone. Rather, it was as if all of these things had been combined and then had their excesses trimmed away. The common element was isolated and distilled into what Titan was forcing her to experience. When it stopped, her head hung limply.

"The memory, unicorn."

Right. There was a memory. One that Titan wanted. One that Celestia treasured.

Evidently she took too long, because the pain returned. Even the few seconds that Titan held her inside the pain were too much for her to bear.

"Birthday!" she screamed as soon as it stopped. Titan cocked his head.

Twilight gasped. There were tears running down her face. "When I turned twelve. We made a magelight. It was my first created spell." Creating her own spells at barely twelve years old. No wonder Celestia had manipulated her into killing her enemies.

"Celestia," she said weakly, with full knowledge that her god was not coming to save her. She wasn't hoping for divine intervention. She spoke her god's name as an accusation.

"Not our god, kiddo. Not any more."

"This is the price of defiance," Titan said. "This is the result of the best of your race resisting. They die by the hundreds as you give in to my demands. Another memory, pony."

"You can defy him. Break his spells."

But that wasn't true. Even with her vast intellect and talent Sparkle couldn't focus through this—

Pain! It was like being given a new sense of the word solely for the purpose of suffering. What kind of mind could create such a spell?

"Nightmare Night," Sparkle whimpered. "She brought me to the hedge maze my first year at the palace. I got scared by a vampony and she told me they weren't real. She told me she'd raise the sun for me if I ever met one for real."

But Twilight Sparkle had met a beast with sharpened fangs, a beast who drank blood. A pony who had held her down and turned her into a monster. Celestia had not come for her then.

"Give me the pain, Sparkle. Fight him. Please."

Titan was still for a moment. "What happened to your first copy of *Advanced Alchemy*?"

She waited too long again, and once again he drowned her mind in agony. Was it the same pain, or a whole new experience? She couldn't remember.

Sparkle closed her eyes when it was finished. She didn't want to die. "Spike sent Celestia half the pages."

Give me the pain. Fight him. Please.

Twilight had offered to take her pain away. Was it a desperate act of self-preservation, or was she truly trying to help?

"Both."

She thought of Nihilus Nix Naught. Nihilus, who had so gleefully lived to destroy everything that Twilight held dear. Nihilus, who had broken Rainbow Dash and murdered Fluttershy. Nihilus, whom Twilight had murdered. Nihilus, who had begged for mercy and met cold indifference. Certainly Twilight resembled her in some ways, but their differences were fundamental.

She thought of Esteem, who had gone against everything that ponykind was supposed to stand for. A monster and a murderer who killed for pleasure instead of necessity. The kind of pony who could hit his daughter and call it right.

And before her was Titan, worst of them all. How many deaths was this single pony responsible for? What kind of mind did he have, that he could subject her to cold-blooded torture simply because it was the most efficient way to get what he wanted? He had given his daughter over to his sadistic wife and left his people with the likes of Nihilus and Esteem.

Finally, Celestia. Celestia, who had looked a hopeful eleven year old filly in the eyes and seen a weapon. Celestia, who Twilight had idolized. Celestia, who had used her for the greater good. Celestia, who was only any different because she had a more righteous agenda. Celestia, who hadn't come to save her.

Sparkle opened her eyes. *"I need you."*

"I'm right here, kiddo."

"You want to know why they follow me, Titan? It's because I'm *not* one of the gods. I am *not* one of *you*. Your immortality purges your equinity. I won't let you hurt them any more. You don't deserve to rule anything."

"Your sensibilities fail you, Coruscare. " Titan levelled his black blade at her. "Die now."

There was a spark.

It was a beautiful morning, and Twilight struggled hopelessly as Nihilus destroyed Rarity's home. Nihilus gloated, and Twilight despaired. She was helpless.

Rarity was attacking them with a unicorn blade, and Twilight saw her chance. She screamed at Nihilus, and the parasite listened. Naught barely managed to save them in time, and was rewarded with a long gash along her face. It didn't matter. Twilight had learned that they could die.

Days of watching Rainbow Dash suffer. Of feeling an entertainment that was not her own. Of watching Nihilus use her as a plaything.

Then she had picked up the book. The book that Twilight had realized was a plant. Celestia had once told her that nothing is truly random. This book, this was not random. Twilight came up with a plan. The plan to kill Nihilus Nix Naught.

They had won the Battle of Cloudsdale, and the only missing pieces were Pinkie Pie and Fluttershy. Soon her friends would be safe.

Except now Nihilus was going back on her word. Now she was killing Fluttershy. No, now she was making Dash kill Fluttershy. Twilight wanted to destroy her. She wanted it more than she could bear. She felt real hate, hate like she had never felt before.

But they won. They won, and no thanks to her efforts. A rainbow beam descended towards them, and Twilight felt herself smile at the doomed parasite. She deserved worse.

And then she realized just how much she had changed. What she was truly capable of. Fluttershy had said it: Twilight could do evil. If she could change this much, what was to prevent her from changing more? What was in place to prevent her from becoming a monster?

She was.

And without knowing how, she broke herself. She fed her hate and her pride to a dark place in her mind. She made sure she would never hurt another pony again. She would never change.

Titan's blade came toward her, and met a blazing point of purple energy, where it stopped in midair.

"My name is not Coruscare," she said. Titan lifted an eyebrow.

She undid his pain spell with a thought. It was a simple thing, when she had the focus. A spell within her own body was easy to claim and negate when she had a hold on herself. Which she did—otherwise Titan would not have had to use his binding spell in the first place. She examined the binding spell, and decided the bonds that held her to the wall were too complex to break.

The wall was not.

She submerged herself in her magic—all of it. A calm came over her, and the fears and worries that had plagued her moments before vanished. Her horn glowed. Her eyes burned. Her mane etherealized. The wall behind her was torn away. The bonds that held her lost their hold. She took a step forward as she fell away from the wall, and Titan was forced back.

“My name is not unicorn.”

Splinters ricocheted harmlessly off her skin as she proceeded calmly towards the door, pushing against Titan with a growing amount of telekinetic force. The roof caved in, then burst into violet flames around her. Titan was forced back further, as the floorboards were torn away, wood and nails all, to expose the packed earth beneath. More walls were blown away, and she continued moving. By the time she got to the door frame it was the only thing left.

“My name is not pony.”

She released the energy that she was using to hold his blade, and threw the god of gods across the square and through a fountain made of three carved pegasi. To her indifference, he got back up. The streets were filled with puppets.

Then she said something she knew to be honest, and the saying of it brought a smile to her face.

“My name is *Twilight Sparkle*.”

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Chapter Fifteen: [The Power to Destroy](#)

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