Pony Girl Quest

by user12

Summary

The cast of My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic recreate the adventure story of popular eroge Monster Girl Quest (Monmusu Quest, JAP) right before your very eyes! Starring Spike (Luka), Twilight Sparkle (Alice), Fluttershy (Alma Elma), Pinkie Pie (Tamamo), Applejack (Erubetie), Rainbow Dash (Granberia), Princess Celestia (Ilias), Princess Luna (Promestein), and special guest Rarity (Imp)! Watch this daring boy hero fight a path across Equestria, and into his own heart, for the good of the land! Hold your breath as cute ponies of all persuasions have other plans for what to do with this young dragon's body! Discover what it means to be a hero, in a world where dragonfire looms just overhead! Read it today!

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
This is a story about ends.

//All is dark. A creature approaches with a light.
Creature: Drakeling. Can you hear me, drakeling?
//Is she talking to me? Ow, my head. What just happened?
Drakeling: If you could not talk so loud, maybe, that would be great. Who are you?
C: ...I am that which I am.
//Riddles. Because I need more questions.
Drakeling: Ooh, I've got one: what's big and white and looks nothing like a sphinx?
C: Cease. Today is an important day for you, drakeling. You enter now a land with noble roots, but ones that have been frayed by the approach of evil. You will find many who seek their own benefit at the expense of righteousness, but also many opportunities for the goodness to shine like a star.
Drakeling: I must be entering everywhere that's ever existed. What's with the cheesy language?
//The figure, less a horse than a force, raises her head back.
C: Mockery? Enough advice. Wake up. And try to play the part, lest you be killed.
Drakeling: Wait, no, I didn't mean--
//The creature's light is snuffed out. Nonexistence returns.

//The middle of the woods, below a small cliff and waterfall. I awake with a strange purple mare standing over me, opening one of my eyelids.
//I shake my head and she lifts her hoof away. My eyeball is dried out; how long has she been holding it open?
Strange Purple Mare: Finally, I was starting to get worried. Are you awake? How do you feel?
//I close my eyes. I feel confused, disorientated, vulnerable, caught out of the loop. I feel like I'm in the wrong world, that this is nothing I know and so much is expected out of me when I know so little.
Drakeling: ...I have to pee.
SPM: Uh, o-kay. I guess you were out for a long time. And you're talking, which is good. Talking's good. ...Anything else?
//She has a different voice than the creature before. Was that a vision, or is this?
Drakeling: It feels like my brain is on fire.
SPM: That's... less good.
//Should I grab my head and ask what happened? Should I know what happened? Should I not?
SPM: You hit your head pretty badly; you should stay still for now. I've called Nurse Joyful and she's coming as fast as she can.
//The mare lifts each of my eyelids and inspects my eyes. I scratch at the ground with my foot, feeling uncomfortable.
Drakeling: ...What are you doing?
SPM: Looking for oddly dilated pupils. Although that might be a mammal thing.
Drakeling: Why...?
//I'm not a mammal? I feel warmblooded...
SPM: Sign of concussion. Do you feel like vomiting at all? Oh, are you hurt anywhere else?
Drakeling: Hm. I can't feel my hand.
SPM: What?!
//She looks down.
SPM: Oh, that's because I was stepping on it, sorry.
//Sharp pain floods up my arm.
Drakeling: --!! I can feel it now!
SPM: Good!
She beams.
I grab my hand and clutch it close to my chest. Claws? What are those, scales? What the hell is a drakeling, anyway?
A pony in a nurse's outfit bursts into the clearing, carrying a bag of medical supplies in her mouth. Sweat pours down her forehead.
Nurse (Joyful?): I came as fast as I could, Twilight. Is he still unconscious?
Twilight: Nurse Joyful! I'm so glad you're here.
Drakeling: 'Lo.
Twilight steps back, giving me room to breathe. The air tastes different when a pony's not hovering right over me.
Nurse Joyful: Just stay right there, Spike, I'm a trained medical professional.
'Spike'? Is she talking to me? I can't see who else it would be...
Spike(?): 'Kay.
NJ: How long has he been out?
T: About ten minutes. There was no blood; he just hit his head and went limp.
Spike: I can't believe the pupil thing is really important.
'I look down as she opens my eye. The pager on her leg reads "Everfree Forest, 13:43".
NJ: Spike, stay still. Has he vomited, unconsciously or consciously?
T: No.
NJ: ...You're a very lucky drakeling, Spike, and you are a very lucky unicorn, Miss Sparkle.
T: Don't I know it.
NJ: Do you feel like standing up?
Spike: Yes please.
'I stand up.
Spike: I don't--
'My legs give out under me. Nurse Joyful and Twilight rush over, and I stand up again with their help.
'Oh yeah, I have a tail. Forgot about that.
T: What was that?
Spike: Whatever it was, it's gone now.
NJ: Even if you can stand on your own, you should take it easy. Lean on Twilight.
T: What were you saying, Spike?
'...I think I should pretend like I know what's going on. The vision I saw seemed kind of ominous.
Spike: I don't know what I was thinking.
'Technically true.
T: What do you mean?
'...That was not as revealing as I wanted, crap. Uh...
Spike: I woke up after... what, ten minutes? What if I never woke up? Or what if I had died, or been paralyzed completely, or lost my entire memory?
'...Holy crap. I _have_ lost my entire memory! I've lost everything, my whole life! Who am I?
What am I doing here?
Spike: ...
T: You can't blame yourself for hitting your head like that, Spike.
Spike: It sure feels like I can.
'I still have no clue what happened. Come on, throw some exposition my way!
T: Well, don't! I'm at least equally responsible for what happened!
'I sincerely doubt this pony, Twilight, would kill me for losing my memory like the 'Creature' from earlier said. She seems genuinely concerned for my welfare, but am I willing to take that chance?
NJ: As a medical professional, it's not my place to ask just exactly what that was, but if you two guiltbirds could take care of it later...
Spike: Uh, right. 'Course.
NJ: Excellent, eyes forward. How many hooves am I holding up?
//One. I stare at Nurse Joyful. Is that really a person's name? It sounds silly.
NJ: Yes, it's supposed to be a silly question. Answer it anyway.
Spike: One.
NJ: Good. What's your name?
Spike: Spike.
//I think.
NJ: Hers?
Spike: ...Twilight Sparkle.
NJ: Mine?
Spike: Joyful.
NJ: Where are you?
Spike: ...Everfree Forest.
NJ: What's the capital of Equestria?
//...Crap.
Spike: Hold on, let me remember...
//Twilight and Nurse Joyful lean in closer. I look to the sky, and a sudden ray of light bolts down.
Spike: Thirty seven point one million bits margin of error two hundred thousand as of last year.
//She pronounced capital with an 'a', not an 'o'.
NJ: ...Was the snarky answer really necessary?
T: Spike lived in Canterlot for years and we've visited it dozens of times. He's just being cranky.
Spike: Sorry, just woke up.
NJ: If you think you're not going to be okay, Spike, don't hesitate to say so. Are you sure your memory is all right?
Spike: Yes, I'm fine.
NJ: I still want to see you in my office in a few days to follow up. I'll be expecting an appointment with you soon. You know where my office is. Twilight, if anything happens on the way back, page me.
//Twilight nods, and Nurse Joyful leaves.
T: I'm so glad you weren't hurt, now we can go tell--
Spike: I lied. I don't remember anything. Who are you?

//A library built into a tree. Twilight closes the front door behind me, and in silence closes all the windows. When she is done, she presses her head against the stairwell.
T: Everything.
Spike: Everything.
T: _Everything_ everything?
Spike: Saying a word twice doesn't change its meaning.
T: And _why_ didn't you tell Nurse Joyful?
//I shrug. It's probably best not to mention the vision.
T: There must be some sort of spell for this.
//Twilight starts looking through the library's collection of arcane tomes, placing them back as she rejects each one.
Spike: You can cast spells? Are you any good at it? I'm not sure I want a novice spellcaster mucking about with my head.
T: All unicorns can cast spells, but I... what do you remember about me?
//Nothing, we've been over this.
Spike: I know your name is Twilight Sparkle; you're a unicorn from Ponyville, a town where a library inside a tree is a mundane sight. You know who I am and who Nurse Joyful is, and... that's all I know.
T: Nothing else? Not being friends for years, ever since you were a little hatchling -- a tiny dragon? We were ordered to Ponyville by the old Princess to study magic? Wacky adventures learning how
to make and keep friendships? Sending reports about our learning to Celestia?
I shrug. Nothing in the library triggers any memory. The telescope is shiny, though.
T: ...Do you remember anyone else?
I think for a moment. Who was that pony in the dream?
Spike: I remember a tall pony, the size of a horse, white with wings and a long horn. Is that anyone?
Twilight stops her search for books, and puts my head between her front hooves. She looks at my eyes. I'm a bit taller than her (and a bit slimmer, too).
T: Celestia? Why would you remember Celestia?
Spike: Why would I remember Celestia?
A long pause. Twilight lets go of me and continues shuffling through the shelves.
T: ...I have no idea.
I hop up on a table and start idly swinging my legs. I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do.
Spike: So how did I hit my head?
T: You were chasing a bird that had stolen an amulet from you. I tried to give chase, but by the time I caught up to you, you were going over the waterfall.
Spike: Didn't you say you were equally responsible for what happened? How are you responsible for that?
She takes a quick breath.
T: The only reason we were in the Everfree Forest was to gather more lactarius deliciosus mushrooms because I couldn't gather enough on my own to make Zecora the tea I promised her next Tuesday with the time I already scheduled for mushroom gathering on Wednesday, because I forgot to take into account the lactarius deliciosus's similarity to the lactarius rubrilacteus which also grows in the same region because I hadn't yet read that far in my mushroom guide because I decided to sleep in Monday!
Spike: It definitely sounds like it was all your fault.
T: I was lazy and you paid the price, but I can fix this. I think.
What if you can't?
Spike: Who's Zecora, anyone I know? Knew?
T: A zebra who I'm good friends with; lives in the Everfree Forest. Ah, here's the section!
Twilight levitates a few books off of the shelf, using magic from her horn. She inspects the books for a half minute, face darkening.
T: No, no, no! Detecting Confabulations, False Memory Syndrome And You, The Dark Science: Creating Memories Vol. 2, nothing about recovering lost memory!
Spike: Why would a public library have a book called "The Dark Science: Creating Memories"? And why would there be a _second volume_?
T: A particularly lax library oversight committee and strong historical relevance clauses in censorship laws. Also, no one goes to this part of the library.
Spike: Why not?
Twilight shakes her head and mutters:
T: No one likes magic theory.
A knock on the door.
Voice From Beyond Door: Twilight? Are you home?
T: (Hey, could you do me a favor?)
Spike: (Not say or do anything?)
T: (You catch on pretty quick!)
Spike: (Staying paralyzed with indecision is really my only gameplan here.)
Twilight opens the door.
T: Fluttershy!
Fluttershy: Oh, I'm sorry. If I knew you were reorganizing I wouldn't have come; I'm afraid I'm giving you more work.
Twilight levitates the book inside and puts it on a pile.
FS: It was wonderful.
T: Good, good!
//Twilight motions to close the door.
FS: The incubus was no trouble at all once I'd done a little research; thank you again for digging that book out for me.
T: It's no problem at all! If you'd mind, I'm also in the middle of a little research right now, so...
//Twilight smiles. It looks more sheepish and prompting than false.
FS: ...Twilight? Is something wrong?
//Still smiling.
T: ...No!
//Twilight closes the door.
Spike: (You are a terrible liar).
T: (I hate lying to Fluttershy.)
//From beyond the door, Fluttershy says:
FS: Twilight, I'm sorry if I'm being forward, but I think something _is_ wrong.
Spike: (Why? Do you feel guilty?)
T: (No. I can never get away with it.)
FS: Please open the door.
T: (Before I met Fluttershy, I never imagined that empathy could be a supernatural ability.)
//Twilight opens the door.
T: Come on in.
FS: I do hope I'm not imposing, but you look very worried, and I know if I had a problem I'd feel just awful if no one wanted to help me.
T: I'm not the one with the problem.
Spike: Hi, Fluttershy.
//She looks at me for a long while. I swing my legs and look around; an owl swoops through the window to perch on the telescope and then flies away.
FS: It sounds like you're saying that for the first time.
//Damn, she's good.
T: He lost his memory.
FS: Oh? I'm sorry to hear that, Spike. It must be so terrifying for you, not knowing where you've been and what you've been doing. Do you mind if I ask how far back you can't remember?
Spike: Nothing. I have nothing at all. How old am I, anyway?
//Fluttershy holds a hoof to her mouth.
FS: ...My goodness...
//Twilight sits down in front of a bookshelf, staring at it in defeat.
T: Nothing. I have nothing at all. Not one good book.
//Fluttershy looks down at the floor, pawing at it once. Then she looks back and forth between us purple folk.
Spike: Hey, do you use that telescope all that often?
T: No, why?
//I shrug.
Spike: Just wondering.
FS: This is just... horrible!
//Fluttershy launches into the air, flying about with nervous energy and yellow wings.
FS: You don't remember a single thing? Who you are? Who you've been? Who we are, and who we've been? Adventures or lessons learned or moments with close ones? Do you remember anything?
//We’re? Close ones?
Spike: ...Were you guys my friends before this happened?
T: Spike, we _are_ your friends.
FS: And we always will be, no matter what.
Spike: Then do I want my memories back? Be honest; I wasn't a serial killer of some sort?
FS: No, of course not, Spike! Um, the serial killer. You aren't a bad person.
T: Besides, the event of total amnesia could be considered a change in personhood that would free you from any responsibility for your hypothetical grisly murders.
FS: Do you feel you want your memories back?
//...Yes, I do. No matter who I was.
Spike: ...Maybe being any sort of person is better than being no person at all.
//A clock spits out a small green bird and chirps eight times. The sun outside is rapidly fading.
T: Celestia's wings, it's getting late. Fluttershy, would you mind staying here with Spike for a while? I want to see what the magic library in Canterlot has on memory restoration.
FS: Of course not, it would be terrible to have to be alone right now.
T: Thanks.
//Twilight walks out of the room, and a POP is heard. Fluttershy sits down next to me.
FS: If there's anything you want to ask about, or anything I can do for you, please don't hesitate to ask.
Spike: Right now, I don't have enough understanding about anything to form a question to know more. But thank you.
FS: ...I'm sorry.
Spike: You apologize a lot, don't you?
//Fluttershy smiles, and nods.
FS: Don't worry. In time, you'll know enough to start asking questions. One day, you may start to find answers.
//For a minute, I stare at the setting sun through the window left open by the owl.
Spike: Actually, I do have a question. What's an incubus?

//All is dark. A creature approaches with a light.
Creature: Drakeling.
Spike: I found out who I am, by the way; I'm Spike.
C: A rose's embrace by any name.
//That's sweet of... hold on, is she calling me a prick?
C: Your adaptation to the role expected of you by those around you has been quick. It is fortunate that you followed my advice, young Spike, and played the part. A gear that twists away from its position is quickly mangled in the machine.
//Does this pony say anything in a straightforward manner?
Spike: Someone said you looked like Celestia. Are you Celestia?
C: Yes. I am Celestia.
Spike: Okay. Why is that important?
//Celestia pauses, blinking once.
C: It is possible, if you are clever, to reach conclusions even from what little information you are given. What sort of entity communicates with others through the network of dreams?
Spike: I'm not asleep.
//She looks amused.
C: Oh? What happened after you asked your once friend what an incubus was?
Spike: She ignored me, made some chickenblood soup that I really think was just hot water in a red bowl and I sat down in front of the telescope to watch the stars.
//Celestia smiles and nods.
Spike: I closed my eyes because I was tired, and the slumping forward was really because my back was in an awkward position for about an hour fine I'm asleep are you happy.
C: What kind of person holds coherent conversations in her sleep with a mysterious visitor, on the advent of great change in her life?
//Her'? I'm not a girl.
Spike: ...Someone who's worth the attention of power. I can't tell if that says more about you, or me.
C: You are worthy of my attention, young Spike, not for who you are, but for who you will be.
Spike: I don't know either.
//A tiny sphere emerges from behind Celestia's ear. With only the slightest movements of her head, it zooms far in front of us, and inflates to colossal size.
Spike: You must win a lot at marbles.
//The sphere looks perfectly smooth, blue and green with streaks of white.
C: This is your world. More correctly, this is my world, for I have created it from the raw nothingness that came before it, and I oversee all within. You are simply one note in its song.
Spike: Why's this part white?
//I touch it. It's cold. That's snow.
Spike: Oh, it's snow. Right.
//Celestia looks on patiently as I stir away some floating whiteness with a finger. Those parts must have been clouds instead of snow. There must be a whole bunch of white things in the world that aren't snow.
C: It is normally the hoof of a deity that intercedes upon this world, Spike.
Spike: Oh, sorry.
//I watch the world slowly roll away for a minute. Hold on, how did I know that was snow?
Spike: Wait, I've never seen snow before. Or heard of it.
C: I am of the understanding that this is how amnesia works.
Spike: Then how do I even know what it is? Scratch that, how do I even know how to talk? Why do I remember motor control if I don't remember anything else?
C: It is one of the peculiarities of the brain's physical structure, little drakeling. You hit your head very hard, but you are neither dead or dumb yet.
Spike: 'Yet', she says. Real motivational speaker, you are.
C: Your mid-life encounter with tabula rasa is liberating, in a way you do not appreciate.
//Tabula Rasa? I haven't met anyone by that name.
//The world stops rolling, and simply hovers in front of us. With a dramatic wave of her wings, a large section of it is highlighted, and is set toward us in a specific orientation.
Spike: It looks like a bunny seducing a giraffe.
//She mutters:
C: You know, they always say that, but I never manage to see it...
Spike: Anyway, how is not remembering anything 'liberating'?
C: Do you see this land?
Spike: The bunny, the giraffe, or the giant--
C: All of it is called Equestria, and you live somewhere in it. All children born into this world, foal and hatchling and cub alike, are born without knowledge of language, motor skills, categories of precipitation--
Spike: 'This' world? Is there some other planet I should know about?
C: While all of those with ability are shaped and biased by their upbringing, never able to divide the state of the world from their own experiences.
Spike: Uh... okay.
//The highlighting fades.
C: Your rare circumstance allows you to enter the world with an open and questing mind, not subject to the limitations present in the minds of others. You can see the world as it is, not how others wish you to see it.
Spike: Then why'd you tell me to play the part in the first place?
//Celestia stays silent for a long while, staring at a part of the world. She eventually responds:
C: Some of us must put on an act for others to advance the greater good.
//I stand up, to stretch out my leg.
Spike: Here's hoping you won't ask me to put on a pony costume or something else freaky.
In case you haven't noticed, I'm a dragon, not a pony. I think.

C: We will get your tasks in a moment. For now: you may have heard something about me in your waking hours. Can you remember what it is?

Spike: Hmm... was it, 'sending reports about our learning to Celestia'?

//Celestia laughs heartily.

C: It was a time of great mirth for me.

Spike: Are you the Princess of Equestria, then?

C: A deity becoming royalty, in the opposite of the more usual, but I abdicated that throne.

//You can do that?

Spike: Why?

//Celestia turns away. She closes her eyes for a long time, as the world beside us fades away.

C: That is a question not answered simply.

//Oh boy, storytime!

C: In the early days of my world, millenia before your existence, power and rule were synonymous: those who ruled did so because no one could stop them; the idea of who _should_ rule was meaningless. Naturality dominated all social systems, and the lives of all intelligent creatures were subject to continued terrors. The strong singularly dominated the weak, and took from them whatever they could for the reason that they could. I looked upon this result with great dismay, but I could not figure out how to make any lasting change.

Spike: At some point you had to, the world's not like that now.

C: One idea arose centering around divine authority: if perfection could be distilled into, or found residing in, religious doctrine, then could those most representative of religious doctrine be the necessary rulers? The answer was no, but it inspired within me another question: instead of the rule of those most able to imitate the gods, why couldn't a goddess herself rule?

Spike: But that didn't work?

C: Depends, if you consider over a dozen centuries of relative stability and happiness a failure.

//The deity who cares about the world as her own, and whose arrival was possibly the best thing to happen to it... got up and left one day?

Spike: Then why'd you leave?

C: If mortals require a deity to live in harmony, do they deserve to get it?

Wavering Voice One: ...Hello Twilight, I heard you were in town, so I wanted to ask...

Spike: The hell was that?

C: You're dreaming, Spike. That was real.

Spike: Reality affects your dreams?

C: It does mine.

Wavering Voice Two: ...I don't want to give you the wrong impression...

C: Our time is quickly finishing, so I will tell you this: you may think your own thoughts about power and the ability to rule, but she who rules Equestria today does not deserve to; she is false, a con mare and a crook. She is, plainly, evil.

Spike: Why? What's she done?

C: You'll find out.

WVO: ...damaged his memory? He has no idea who even I am?...

C: You must venture forth as a just storm, bringing my judgment to the mare who has made herself beyond reproach. Become a beacon for your people, one that binds the scattered together by your will and lights a path for them to follow. Gain the power, and learn the world, so that you yourself know why the false Princess of Equestria must be overthrown. Destroy her, and bring Equestria into a new day.

Spike: 'Just storm'?! 'Beacon for my people'? You're throwing a lot of metaphors and I'm not catching them.

//I need a metaphor glove.

Spike: Why are you telling me this? I'm not a Hero or anything, even if you say I'm going to be...

//Celestia lowers her head, spreads her wings, and speaks in a low tone:
C: ...It is possible I may reverse the loss which has been inflicted on you. But I need the resources of Canterlot Castle to do it.
Spike: What?!
//Is that really true?!
WVT: ...hit his head pretty bad.
WVO: I'm sure...
C: I see a mountain region where dragons are huddled together, fearing violence at the hands of ponies trying to take the land and resources for themselves. I see a city filled with oppression and hostility, keeping labor and income in the hands of the privileged by the thick of a truncheon. I see an heiress with an ailing father poised to tear Equestria apart through imperceptible monetary schemes. I see a vile creature looking to raise a legendary battalion to walk the world once again under her control. I see a seasoned warrior training a fearsome army to take the throne by force.
And I see a false Princess who has allowed these threats to arise, only maintaining tenuous control of Equestria through the assistance of her powerful friends. She has to die for the good of the world. Kill her.
//Regicide, then. Why couldn't she have said that in the first place?
Spike: Is that really the task given to me by the creator of the universe? A deity wants some putz with a crown dead?
C: It is. Awaken.
//I wake up.

//Twilight's tree/house. The telescope angles up and out the window in front of me. Someone has put a blanket around my shoulders.
Rarity: Is there a reason, Twilight, that the library is absolutely buried in the written word? More literally than the usual?
//Books cover the floor of the library about a foot deep, except for little paths that wind through the mess to different shelves. Rarity and Twilight are walking in one of the pathways.
Twilight: I've been trying to find spell research that deals with memory, but magical healing is a tricky subject and information doubly so -- not to mention there are no peer-reviewed publications focused on either topic until the last one point five years.
R: Ah, yes, and who do we have to thank for that, again?
T: How many times do I have to say that it wasn't her fault? There was no 'secret magic blacklist', just an unfortunate configuration of tax codes and grant distributions.
R: Of course; a deity would never impede scientific progress.
//A journey across the land to fight the good fight, and defeat a powerful evil monster at the end (I'm sure hidden away in a terrible underground lair in a bog somewhere where people are tortured daily and the air is acid)... that sounds dangerous...
R: It's not as if the ex-Princess was exactly _straightforward_ in her dealings, dear. I mean, you of all ponies should know that best.
T: And what exactly do you mean by that?
R: Twilight, come on, girl! Are you so infatuated with the old mare that you can't see how many tests she put you through?
T: You mean, _existential threats to Equestria_?
\And totally like I'm meant to be some sort of... hero, or something. I mean, come on, this is crazy! Heroes are the slay-the-dragon, rescue-the-damsel-in-distress kind of guys, and I just happen to be a dragon!
R: Balderdash. It is dreadfully obvious all true dangers which we have been through were manufactured. Every single one, false as her divinity. You've never wondered why each and every 'threat to Equestria' was unforeseeable in the extreme?
T: And why doesn't it seem that way to me?
R: Rationalization?
//...But I totally want to do it. A little drakeling wandering the land, challenging evil with only his
fists and personal charisma? Come on -- _total_ _badass_. Besides, what better way to experience what the world is about than by attacking it head-on, and who better to do it than someone with no attachments? You say I'm meant to be a hero, and I agree! I'll be a Hero in the name of Celestia, bringing justice to the cruel and defending the weak!

T: It's not like that.

R: Then explain to me, Twilight, how none of the threats we seem to have defeated had any retrograde impact on contemporary society, despite seeming so dramatic and intense. You know, beyond the easily planted, odd rumor?

T: You sound like a conspiracy theorist!

//You just want to do this to get your memories back.

//...\Admit it, it's true.

//Celestia told me about the world and what I should look out for, what I should be doing instead of worrying about the past and feeling sorry for me. A pony like that I can certainly get behind.

R: I will agree with you on one thing, dear. 'Celestia did it' _is_ a valid answer for most everything.

//A telescope could be very useful on a journey across the land. If my opponents are going to be as powerful as Celestia warned they would be, maybe it would be best to scout them out before I attack...

T: Now, Rarity, I know this is going to be a huge favor to ask, but--

R: Spike? What _are_ you doing with the telescope?

Spike: Twilight, you said you didn't use the telescope all that often. Would you mind if I had it?

//Twilight looks bewildered.

T: Uh... 'had it'?

Spike: Uh, is personal ownership not a thing in Equestria? Like an if-a-thing-exists-everyone-uses-it deal, or can people possess things?

T: Y-yeah, Spike, you can have it, but I'm more confused about why you want the telescope at all...

R: It allows him to see what is far away before it comes near.

T: Really, because I heard smart ponies would put it a certain place--

//I leap from the stairs with the telescope in my hand, eliciting gasps from both unicorns. The landing is no trouble.

R: Do be careful, dear, you might hurt yourself!

Spike: Girl, you are not nearly old or Southern enough to be calling people 'dear'. It just sounds like you're trying too hard.

T: Spike! This is Rarity, a good friend of yours and mine, and memory loss or not you have no right to be rude to her!

Spike: ...Sorry, Miss Rarity. No offense meant.

R: I accept your apology, Spike.

//I start searching through the stacks of books, looking for anything that might help. Do they have a 'Hero' section?

//Wait, start looking for information about dragons. It's likely there's someone who knew you.

//Don't Twilight and Fluttershy know who I was?

//Yeah, but they're ponies. You probably didn't spend much time with them. There has to be a dragon who knew you.

T: ...Spike?

Spike: Do you have a book on non-avian overland migration patterns in here?

R: Why, Spike, would you be looking for something like that?

//To find out where be dragons.

Spike: Hey, I lost my memory, right? Relearning everything has to start somewhere. What about biographies of current political leaders? An autobiography will do.

//I need to know who the false Princess is if I'm going to defeat her.

T: Any particular reason?

Spike: Just curious.
I try to smile and hope it doesn't look cheesy.
R: While I cannot say I understand what it could possibly be like to lose one's entire memory, you do seem rather... less distraught than I would imagine.
//Oh, hey, this looks interesting.
T: And also gathering very specific things. The Healing Power of Calm Meditation? What's with you, Spike?
//I shrug.
Spike: I dunno, it looked interesting.
R: Spike, as a rule Twilight and I never lie to our friends, and we would appreciate it if you would return the favor.
//...Do all of Twilight's friends have supernatural lie detection?
T: Spike, you're not asking for and picking up books at random, this is a pattern. What's with you?
//Do I tell them? About the vision? I don't know if I can lie well enough to get them to believe something else, and maybe the fact it's the truth will convince them...
Spike: A vision. Right before I woke up, I saw a vision.
T: Uh oh.
R: A vision of what, dear?
Spike: The creator of the universe herself appeared to me. She said the oppressed were her kind, and I am to be her champion.
T: 'Creator of the universe'? You can't mean--
Spike: Celestia told me to lead Equestria to glory, and that's what I'm going to do. I will learn what it means to be a true Hero!
T: ...the hell?
R: Dear, when a deity is talking to you, you don't _listen_. It's bad form.
Spike: I want to be a beacon of justice and light for those who go without at the hooves of others, and for Celestia.
T: Spike, Princess Celestia disappeared a year and a half ago! No one has seen her since!
R: And there's doubt the Princess was even Celestia herself, instead of a con mare taking advantage of the gullible. I mean, she was defeated several times, you do know?
Spike: My mission was revealed to me in my dream: I cannot stop until I am powerful enough to defeat the current, false Princess, and bring harmony back to Equestria!
R: ...Best of luck with this one, dear.
T: Spike, is this really what you want to do? There's nothing else that will satisfy you?
Spike: I don't know who I was or who I am, and even going on this journey to find out I may never succeed. But I know who I must be, and this is it.
R: You're certain? This wasn't, say, one of those _other_ occurrences that happen while a person is sleeping? _Dreams_?
Spike: I want to see the world. I want to do my part. What else is there for me to do? Watch the sadness of distant friends who once barely knew me, as I struggle to rebuild someone else's version of my life?
//Rarity bites her lip. After a moment, Twilight bows her head and sighs.
T: ...Okay. I'll help you pack.
R: Twilight! Are you sure?
T: If this is what he wants, yes, I'm sure.
//Rarity, in a disagreeing mood, shakes her head. Her mane falls in front of one eye.
R: This must be simply a drakeling fantasy, gone to his young head. The poor boy has too many chemicals in his system. I'm sure we could find a way to help with that.
//I keep looking for books.
Spike: I don't need any help of that kind, thanks.
R: Really? Come here; I'm sure I can make you feel differently...
T: In the library, Rarity. Really.
Spike: Hey, what are -- get away from me!
The Drakeling breathes fire!

R: Aaaughhaa!!
T: Watch the flames!
R: My emerald! He scorched my emerald!
Spike: Huh, I was expecting that to do more damage.
R: Damage? I'll show you some damage, you ungrateful little--
T: Rarity, I think it's time for you to leave.
R: ...Ungrateful little...
T: Do I have to say it again?
R: ...Fine. Tell the whelp next time he touches _me_ I intend to spread his bodily fluids all over the next continent! Good day!
//Rarity slams the door on her way out.
Spike: Celestia's wings, what was her problem?
T: ...Just keep packing.
//Crazy pale bint.

//Finally, I'm on the road. Dragons are predators by nature, so I didn't take any food since I could find it as I go. Not sure how I know dragons are predators; probably an innate feeling.
//...If dragons are predators by nature, does that make ponies prey?
Spike: You know, when I said I was going on a journey to find myself, I thought the phrase implied 'alone'.
T: You know what implying does, Spike. It makes an imp out of ly and... I think I messed that up.
Spike: How am I supposed to be a champion of my people with a possessive purple pony over my shoulder like my mother the entire time?
T: I'll be far, far away before you start to fight, so don't worry about that. Do you like the cloak, though?
Spike: Silver, purple, and red. You must be the world's most studious clown.
T: It's a special cloak; no one can recognize me wearing the hood up.
Spike: Right. It's good to know you're so prepared to follow me against my will.
T: I'll be frank with you: you won't be strong enough to beat me off for a long time.
Spike: ...Twilight?
T: What? Do I have something in my teeth?
Spike: ...Nevermind.
T: Besides, I need a break. It'll help me catch up on my reading, and I've always wanted to travel more.
Spike: As long as you leave the Hero stuff to me. After all, what kind of champion would I be if someone helped me every step of the way?
T: While I would never want to get in the way of your stark lack of knowledge about sidekick appropriativity, do you know where the current Princess lives? Or who she is? What bodyguards, if any, she has? Where any of your dragon brethren live?
Spike: ...It's in these books somewhere, I know it.
T: On that note, I don't know why I'm carrying these. Here you go.
Spike: Oof!
T: The current Princess, false or not, is called Princess Hazel. She is a master of magic, and possibly the most intelligent pony in the land. From the havoc of the absence of Princess Celestia she calmed Equestria and restored order. Legends of her prowess tell that no trick will work more than once against her because of her studious nature, and her vast array of knowledge means no defense can be mounted against her.
Spike: ...I have a lot training to do.
T: Yes, you do. Oh! Do you smell that?
Spike: Uh, no?
T: It looks like you'll have an opportunity to get on that training right away. Later!
Spike: Wait!
//How does she just disappear like that?
//A small green pegasus swoops down from the sky, and lands in front of me!
Pegasus: Oh, hey there. What's a dragon doing in these parts?
Spike: Uh, hi. I'm going to Forlegsandria. This is the Clove road, right?
//There's a large dragon population in Forlegsandria, so I want to go there. Maybe there will be someone who recognizes me.
Pegasus: Aw, what a shame! I'm coming from there, going to Ponyville. Wouldn't it have been cool if we could be travel buddies?
Spike: I... guess?
//She seems... nice? A bit more odd than nice.
Pegasus: I really think you should come with me to Ponyville.
T: (Celestia, pushy much?)
Spike: (I thought you said you were going to stay hidden!)
T: (She can't hear me; peanut gallery comments are fair game.)
Pegasus: Well?
Spike: Sorry, Forlegsandria is a big city so I'm hoping to find some other dragons there.
Pegasus: Hmm...
Spike: (What's with the sniffing; why do ponies do that?)
T: (Shrug.)
Pegasus: Oh, I know why you're going to Forlegsandria...
//That smile is not less weird than the sniffing.
Pegasus: Yeah... you look like you're at that age for a dragon, too... I understand. I was at that age not too long ago, too, and I know how it is.
Spike: Excepting the, you know, pony/dragon thing...
Pegasus: It's hard to get someone to sympathize at that age... but if you want to know the truth, I've been having a bit of the same exact troubles myself recently.
Spike: That's great. What's with the wings?
Pegasus: I know I'm not a dragon, but I'm feeling generous if you are, so let's call it a thing, eh?
Spike: A thing? What do you -- aaaaughh!!
//The Pegasus attacks!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

The Pegasus nuzzles The Drakeling in the lower body with her fuzzy snout!

Pegasus: Just lie on your back; it'll be easier this way.
Spike: No, get away from me!

The Drakeling punches The Pegasus in the right front leg with his left hand, bruising the skin!

Pegasus: What are you, crazy?!
Spike: I was about to ask the same thing!
Pegasus: I'm trying to help you!
Spike: This is no kind of help!

The Pegasus charges at the Drakeling! The Pegasus attacks The Drakeling but he jumps away! The Pegasus rushes by The Drakeling!
The Drakeling counterattacks! The Drakeling kicks The Pegasus in the left back hoof with his left foot, bruising the bone!

Pegasus: Ow! Hey, you can't hurt me! Not unless I tell you to hurt me!
The Pegasus buffets The Drakeling in the face with her wings but The Drakeling covers his eyes! The Pegasus charges at The Drakeling! The Pegasus collides with The Drakeling! The Drakeling is knocked over and tumbles backward! The Pegasus grabs The Drakeling by the left upper arm with her left front hoof! The Pegasus grabs The Drakeling by the right upper arm with her right front hoof! The Drakeling is pinned!

Pegasus: Calm down! I don't want to hurt you! I want to make you feel good. Just let me do that, okay?
Spike: Get off!
Pegasus: I will, at the end!

The Drakeling breathes fire! The Pegasus is caught in the dragonfire! Her mane has been singed and an eyelid has been burnt!

Pegasus: To hell with this! I'm out of here! You're crazy, kid, with a capital K!

The Pegasus was chased away!
Spike earned 10 experience points!
Spike is now level 2!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

Spike: Wha... hoo... what the hell was that?!
//What a crazy green bint!
T: You mean, besides pathetic? That was barely adequate for even a schoolyard fight. Claw out her eyes next time; little tip from the playground.
//Defeating evildoers' somehow doesn't carry with it 'being attacked by absolute strangers with no provocation", maybe the wording should be changed...
T: That fight took too long, it's getting dark out. We should probably set up camp for the night.

//The middle of nowhere on the side of the road. Well, the middle of nowhere on the side of the road with a fire and two bedrolls and a large chunk of meat in my claws. My companion, Twilight Sparkle (?) is nibbling at the grass, reading a book.
Spike: Sorry I couldn't find anything for you to eat.
T: Don't worry about me; I'm not part of your journey.
Spike: Do ponies eat chicken? We might be able to find some chicken along the way.
T: Ponies are vegetarian, Spike.
Spike: Ah, okay, got it. As soon as we pass by a river I'll scoop you out some fish, then.
//Twilight sighs and flips the page. After a while I finish eating, and lie down to sleep for the night.
T: Going to sleep already?
Spike: A strong body's maintenance is rest.
T: The first part you need to work on is a strong body. Here, maybe with my help we can find a way for you not to look so pathetic in a fight.
Spike: Wha?
T: Put up your hands; we're training.

T: I'm not your ally, but it would be pretty boring if you get beaten too quickly.

//For a few hours after dark, I spend some time training with Twilight.

T: Right there, you need to use your feet and lean. That's how you got pushed over today.
Spike: Like this?
T: Almost. If you learn how to use your legs and arms independent of each other, you can bounce around the battlefield easier. It's probably useful at your size.
[Dashing Rogue Punch] was mastered!
Spike: Dashing Rogue Punch, eh? Sounds just right for me!
T: It's said that the werewolf fighter Tyler was able to snap any pony's spine in an instant with this technique. Use it well.
Spike: ...Slightly less enthused...

//In my sleep I see again a vision.
C: Spike... Oh, Spike...
Spike: Yes, Celestia! I hear you!
C: Spike, you must be careful on your journey into the vast unknown. There are many who would corrupt and waylay you, some not as obvious as others.
Spike: I understand, Celestia! I will be true!
C: A young boy meant to be a hero, with a powerful purple sorceress as his companion... I have seen something like this before, and you must be wary of both those who call themselves your allies, and your enemies.
//Before? What happened then?
Spike: I will keep my eyes open for all dangers!
C: Before you leave, Hero Spike, I have a few words of wisdom to impart to you.
//Then what were the words beforehand?
Spike: I'm all ears. Well, not literally, because that would likely not be a competitive organism with a niche to fill and--
C: When I created the world, young drakeling, I tried to make a people of grace and power, magnificent in their way to match the world I created for them, a people great enough to call my own. But I am not perfect, and it took many attempts.
Spike: But your power shone through in the end! It must have!
C: Hah... yes, my Spike, it did. It was only when I hewed the first dragon, the first of your people, from the metaphorical stone did I see a creature worthy of my glory, and I placed it in the world without hesitation. In my haste I neglected the residents already placed there.
Spike: What happened next?
C: As you said, competition. It turns out the niche of fire-breathing flying death lizards is a particularly small one, and a population bottleneck coupled with increasing aggression from the more organized species led to ruination. But all was not lost, for in my wisdom I prepared dragonkind with a tool set to overcome any challenge.
//I think fire-breathing flying death lizard is enough of a tool set, myself.
C: Dragons have, or as you will soon learn, had, the ability to create descendants in more diversity than other creatures; in fact, dragons could mate with any sort of creature at all. Through circumstance and coincidence, after many great and terrible conflicts across the world, the only blood of the dragon left in the world today is inseparable from the blood of a phoenix, and different from dragons as they once were.
Spike: Phoenix? Does that mean, I can burst others into flame with my breath, and they're reborn?
//Celestia smiles, amused.
C: No. It is more in line with what mortals know as Gregor Ponydel's Three-Stage Theory, discussing the contemporary phoenician drake: 'in the beginning, "dragons" are hatchlings, who will one day grow to be full dragons, but between them is the time of the drakeling'.
Spike: And I'm a drakeling.
C: Yes. Due to various intermingling of dragon and phoenix traits, drakelinghood is a special time for two reasons. Firstly, like a phoenix, you may only successfully mate at this stage in your life, and like a phoenix only with members of your species.
Spike: Uh, okay, not sure how that's going to affect my journey, but go on.
//Wait, did I have a girlfriend? Uh oh, that could be bad...
C: Secondly, on the condition of either fruitful or fruitless mating, dragonblood magic tries to express the biology of the alternate partner, but the first non-dragon blood it encounters--
Spike: --is the phoenix's.
C: Yes. Carried by a dragon's design, phoenix-like qualities are delivered to both the alternate partner and the host, the most important of which is a phoenix's immortality.
//Holy crap!
Spike: Really?
C: I would not lie to you. This is a warning of danger.
Spike: Danger? That sounds useful!
C: Exceedingly so, but not for you. Think about this: immortality is almost nonexistent; it cannot be bought or crafted or designed or machined or pleaded or begged or stolen or made with magic, or anything else a pony could do...
//Oh. Shit.
Spike: Except me.
C: For immortality, some would find the freedom of a drakeling a meaningless cost.
Spike: I've finally become a sex god and I can't even enjoy it.
//I don't really mean it, but I just don't know how to respond to all this.
C: Humor might be the correct response. There may be no other way to respond to the patently absurd. Absurd, after all, does mean what should not be.
//The vision fades away, and I continue sleeping.
C: Defeat the false Princess, Spike... See through her lies...

//In the morning, we pack up camp without a worry, and make our way towards Forlegsandria. Two ponies circle overhead for a while and then fly off, though I am surprised to see a gargantuan dragon fly overhead towards Ponyville.
T: I can't wait to get to Forlegsandria, I've heard their library is one of the most extensive in the world, even rivaling Canterlot! Could you imagine, a library that matches that of the City on the Hill, and it's open to the public? I can't wait to be inside!
Spike: Cool.
T: And the scrolls, they have a series of scrolls written long before 1000 years ago, sent between nobles of rivaling tribes! I already know what they say, of course, but to see them in person? How could I not be excited!?
Spike: Awesome.
T: Not to mention the Rosesetta Stone itself, carved into marble in the earliest days of pony history that lets us uncover the meaning of artifacts written in long forgotten and dead languages. Can you imagine carving into something ten feet high and eight feet wide and knowing it'll be a part of history some day? Can you?
Spike: Wow.
T: I know! And...
//Twilight's nose twists in an odd way. She spends a second to think, then pulls the hood up around her head.
T: Were you planning on visiting the dragon district in Forlegsandria, Spike?
//Quickly taken out of autopilot mode, I shake my head and regain awareness of my surroundings. We're only a few feet from the gates.
Spike: I was planning on it, yeah.
T: ...I have to go. I'll catch up with you at some point. Be careful.
Spike: Wait, what's--
//Without a flash or a hustle, Twilight Sparkle simply disappears.
Spike: --happening?... I should get to the dragon district.

//The dragon district is lifeless for the first few blocks. Deeper in, bruised bodies start to pile up. Young full dragons and even a few elders are piled on the sides of the streets, trying to breathe past broken ribs and nursing small but not threatening wounds. In the center square, an immense silver dragon lies curled around a broken fountain pouring water over his head, unconscious. Above in
the sky, a speedy blue pegasus circles around.
Rainbow Dash: Well? Anyone else want to take on the great Rainbow Dash? Or are you all just weaklings?
//I very much want this to be just a misunderstanding.
RBD: You dragons are criminals. Every single one of you are disgusting. I don't know why Princess Hazel keeps you alive!
//...Crap. I very, very much want nothing other than to go away and come back tomorrow. But what kind of Hero would I be if I ran away at the first sign of trouble?
\I don't know, an intelligent one?
//You would be surprised at how often intelligence and heroism are at odds with one another. But I must be a champion of my people, no matter the cost.
Spike: *Gulp* Hey, you!
RBD: Who said that?
//She whips around, tossing a rainbow mane through the sky as I hide behind a pillar. I eventually step out and speak again, fists raised.
Spike: Do you... have a problem with dragons?
RBD: Depends on who's askin'! You some kind of tough... heh, nevermind.
//She plummets to the ground a few feet in front of me, smashing into the cobblestone and sending debris flying all about. I cover my head as a stone strikes my leg, and the dust cloud blocks out the sun for a moment.
Spike: I'm a Hero, and that's all you need to know!
RBD: Heh-heh, listen, kid. You should probably know, your friends are jerks.
Spike: ...?
RBD: Sent you out here, probably said something like, 'Only you can defeat the Avatar of Speed, 'cause you're the Hero we're looking for' or whatever, right? Eeeeeehhh, wrong. Turns out you're the sacrifice they sent out to appease me.
Spike: Sacrifice?
RBD: I'm not going to spell it two ways to you, kid; you're a drakeling, I'm a mare, put it together. But today's your lucky day, maybe Pinkie's smiling on you or something, 'cause I'm not really in the mood right now. So do yourself a favor on your lucky day and get the hell out of here.
//I desperately want nothing other than to turn around and leave. But I can't leave. Hero, not Hero, champion or no champion, the first sight I see is a bunch of people broken at the hooves of an arrogant pony, and for that I will not stand!
Spike: You... did you do this? Answer me!
RBD: What, these losers? They did this to themselves, mostly. I just helped them along a little.
Spike: Why?
RBD: Eh... seemed like fun. Nothing better to do. Dragons are criminals. Are you gonna scram, or what?
Spike: I won't accept any gift from such a monster, not even mercy! Fight me!
//Rainbow Dash stretches her wings and clears her throat.
RBD: I don't like playing rough with my new toys, but kid, you brought it on yourself...
Yo-Ho-Ho and a Bottle of Water Spirit

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

//This was a terrible idea.

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

RBD: See, kid, there's a difference between being brave and being stupid.

Rainbow Dash throws the -cobblestone stone- at The Drakeling! The spinning -cobblestone stone- strikes The Drakeling in the left elbow, but the attack glances away!

Spike: Is that all you--

Rainbow Dash charges at The Drakeling!
Rainbow Dash strikes The Drakeling in the upper body with her left wing, bruising the muscle, bruising the right false rib and bruising the right lung!
Rainbow Dash collides with The Drakeling! Rainbow Dash bounces backwards!

Spike: --ooof...
RBD: The difference is power. I have it. And you don't. Rather sturdy, though, you been working on that?
Spike: Hooo...
RBD: Tell you what, if you stand up again, I'll let you try to hit me. Not that it'll work, but that way you can tell all your dragon friends it was actually a fight, when you go back. If.
//Stand up, stand up, are you going to collapse off of one hit? What kind of dragon are you?
RBD: Means you'll get hit again, though, so I won't blame you for staying down.
Spike: Ahhh...
RBD: Heh-heh, we've got ourselves a trooper! Good on you, kid, don't let your vast inferiority get you down. Here, hit me.

//Use your legs and arms independent of each other... bounce around the battlefield... just one good strike at the spine... STRIKE!

The Drakeling strikes at Rainbow Dash in the upper body with his Dashing Rogue Punch, but the attack is batted away by Rainbow Dash's right wing!

RBD: Okay, stop.

Rainbow Dash nuzzles The Drakeling in the nose with her fuzzy snout!

RBD: That punch. Who taught you that punch?
Spike: Aaaahh!

Spike scrambles away!

RBD: Oh, it's okay. It can only be one of two people, but I'm sure I can get you to scream her name before I'm done...

Rainbow Dash kicks The Drakeling in the lower body with her left front leg, bruising the scale and bruising the guts! The Drakeling gives into pain! The Drakeling collapses!
RBD: I'll tell you what. If you give me her name, I'm not saying it won't happen, but I might consider you at some point in it.

//Oh, well isn't that nice.

RBD: To the victor go the spoils...

//Rainbow Dash steps over me and grins like a hyena.

//A loud cough comes from down the street, beyond my head. Rainbow Dash looks up, and then leaps into the air.

RBD: Twilight Sparkle! What are you doing here, heh-heh...

T: To tell the truth, Dash, I was planning on visiting the Forlegsandria library, but imagine my surprise when my path is blocked by several thousand pounds of bruised dragon_.

RBD: Oh, heh-heh, was that me? That was me, sorry. Let me get right on that for you...

T: Are you sure you haven't done enough for the day?

RBD: It's no problem, Twi. You don't come by that often anyway. Sorry for the mess, I am working on cleaning it up--

T: Don't. And while you're at it, say hi to Spike.

//After a moment, Rainbow Dash's head appears upside down above me, curiously looking.

RBD: Spike! Hey, man, didn't even recognize you there! Wow, that could have been awkward. What are you up to these days? Sorry about all this, then. Just a crazy misunderstanding, eh? Heh-heh...

Rainbow Dash was defeated! (?)

Spike earned 25 experience points!

Spike is now level 3!

//Crazy rainbow bint!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//The tour of the Forlegsandria library is as dry as the scrolls and books themselves. Twilight Sparkle follows along eagerly, taking in every word. I have no idea what I'm looking at with most of the exhibits, but my mind is on other things.

Spike: (No, I think 'what the hell was that' is a perfectly good question to sum up what I want to know right now.)

T: (Well _that_ was the Rosesetta stone, but I couldn't hear what they were saying because a certain dragon kept on talking about unimportant stuff while I was trying to listen.)

Spike: (Not that, I mean what happened in the dragon district today.)

T: (Are you still going on about that? Let the past be the past, Spike; let it go.)

Spike: (It was twenty minutes ago.)

T: (Ancient history!)

Tour Guide: Here we see the Qyorum Scrolls, written long before 1000 years ago, sent between nobles of the rivaling Yorum tribes as belligerent positioning before the outbreak of inter-tribe warfare. The first scroll reads: 'Though you may have defeated...

T: ('...my tribe savior through your cunning and guile and speed of hand, I challenge you again for the title of...')

Tour Guide: '...my tribe savior through your cunning and guile and speed of hand, I challenge you again for the title of...'

Spike: (Cool, really. How did you know something was going on in the dragon district?)

T: (Magic.)

Spike: (You were sniffing about before you said something.)

T: (Magic nose.)

Spike: (...)t

T: (People who have to deal with Rainbow Dash make a habit of knowing where she is at all times, and a magic nose is one of the ways I do it.)
Tour Guide: And to your left, you'll see the famous picture 'Equestrian Progress', showing the establishment of the City on the Hill Canterlot by the ex-Princess Celestia slightly over a thousand years ago.

T: (Uh, seven hundred years ago. Kind of disappointing a tour guide of all people would get that wrong.)

Tour Guide: The inscription reads: 'On the world is cast a shadow by the mare in front of the sun'.

//FEAR NOT WHAT HIDES IN THE DARKNESS. FEAR THAT WHICH HIDES IN THE LIGHT.

//What? Who said that? What is that in my head?

//...

Spike: (Another question: she called herself 'the Avatar of Speed', but her name is Rainbow Dash. What's with that?)

T: (Hmm... which part first?)

Spike: (Avatar of Speed, I guess.)

T: (There are five Avatars under the employ of Princess Hazel that serve as both bodyguards and field knights. They are the Avatar of Speed, the Avatar of Strength, the Avatar of Luck, the Avatar of Temptation, and the Avatar of Avarice.)

Spike: (Are they all like Rainbow Dash? I don't think I could handle that.)

T: (You've met the Avatar of Avarice already, Spike, she's your old friend Rarity.)

Spike: (Oh. Great.)

Tour Guide: Here we see a treasure map from sixth era Trottingham, detailing the last known location of the greatsword wielded by Bucket James. The greatsword, which Bucket James named 'Reality', was said to be impervious to any magical effect cast at it, no matter how strong.

T: (That leaves the Avatar of Strength, Applejack, the Avatar of Luck, Pinkie Pie, and the Avatar of Temptation, Fluttershy. Who you've also met.)

Spike: (Rainbow Dash said something about Pinkie and luck, so that makes sense.)

T: (Really? I'm surprised Dash still knows who Pinkie Pie is with how long she's been away. She didn't even recognize you.)

Spike: (On to the second question: how do you know all these people by name?)

T: (...I was friends with all of them before they got their power.)

Spike: (Rainbow Dash didn't react like she was seeing an old friend.)

T: (...And I'm fairly powerful myself?)

Spike: ('Threaten the Princess's bodyguards' powerful?)

T: (Well... Oh, it's the end of the tour, want a gift bag?)

Tour Guide: Thank you for accompanying me on the tour of the Forlegsandria library, I hope you had a nice time. Please exit through the gift shop to the left, and we hope to see you again soon.

Spike: What I want to understand is why Dash said all dragons are criminals.

T: She said that? Blind prejudice isn't like... well... ah, blind prejudice is completely like her. But it still seems odd.

Vendor: It's more than odd, my mare, it's a travesty! An evil, hateful system designed to keep the scaled man down and subservient!

Spike: What? Who are you?

Vendor: A friend to all scalekind, my brother. I stand here today in protest of the backwards, racist system of city government that requires all its citizens to pay taxes and makes illegal the possibility of the dragon working man!

//It's illegal for dragons to work? How dumb is that!

Spike: But you're not a dragon; you're a pony.

Vendor: My brother, I am offended! Deep down inside in our hearts we are all people of the same type. Get an 'I support Dragon/Pony equality' carriage bumper sticker, only one bit, and support the cause! Dragon plushies five bits, fridge magnets and pins ten to the bit.

Spike: Wow. I never knew a noble cause could be so cheaply commercialized like that.

T: That'll teach you. Come on!
//Back in the dragon district, the immense silver dragon once wrapped around the fountain is sitting on his haunches next to it, speaking with a younger full dragon with a jade bracelet around her wrist.

Immense Silver Dragon: I truly am sorry about this. I'm sure I could have fell a different way and missed the fountain.

Jade Bracelet Dragon: No, no, that's... it's okay, really.

//I can't find anyone else walking around, and I don't want to go knocking door to door, but those are some big freaking dragons...

ISD: It's not. I take full responsibility for its destruction. Have you figured out the extent of the damage yet?

JBD: It's cracked three different ways, all the way to the base. We'll also need to replace the statue, reconstruct almost the whole plaza, redo at least sixty feet of burst piping if we're lucky... it might be easier to take it all out and not have a fountain.

ISD: Because I couldn't take a blow to the head? Nonsense, Jebed. Take the damages and whatever other costs you need from my hoard, I insist. I can have the greater half of it down within the week.

JBD: That's quite alright, Quine, I'm sure there's a place in the city budget for maintenance and repairs.

QN: How much of that maintenance and repair budget do you think is allocated to the dragon district?

//Jebed hangs her head and sighs.

Spike: Uh, excuse me?

//The silver dragon, Quine, turns his great head to me and raises an eyebrow the size of my arm.

QN: Hello, drakeling. I apologize about your fountain and all the disturbance. Are you hurt?

Spike: No, I'm fine. I couldn't help but overhearing, but if you're not from here, where are you from?

QN: I, my child, am from the Aquinatic Mountain Range twenty days' flight to the northwest. My name is Quine.

JBD: I don't believe I've seen you around the district, young one, so maybe you could answer us the same question.

Spike: I'm Spike, from Ponyville. Nice to meet you!

//They're big, but they seem friendly. I wonder when I'll be as large and strong as them? What kind of Hero will I be then?

//Jebed turns her back, inspecting the fountain.

JBD: I am Jebed, unofficial matron of this dragon district. Welcome, Spike, to the dragon's place in Forlegsandria.

QN: Ponyville... that is not a name I have heard in quite a while.

JBD: Maybe you hit your head too hard, Quine, because we were discussing it just before you left.

QN: Possibly, possibly. Please let me apologize for all the trouble, Jebed. I've grown used to combating the Avatar of Strength, not Speed.

JBD: Quine, don't apologize. None of this was your fault, you weren't the one who decided to start a midair fight over a crowded city.

QN: Nevertheless, I feel my approach pattern was too aggressive. It could have looked like an attack. Force of habit, I'm afraid.

JBD: Quine, I refuse to allow you to apologize for being assaulted.

Spike: Wait, Rain-- the Avatar of Speed started all this? For what?

JBD: Nothing, as far as we know. And excuse me for asking, but was yours the voice yelling at her just a minute before she flew away?

//Does she mean the pony voice or the dragon voice? Wait, do I sound like Twilight?

Spike: Yeah, that was me. Poor decision on my part.
Bravery is never a poor decision as long as you see it not fruitless.

//Instantly, my heart swells.
T: (No, you're still stupid.)

//So Twilight pokes the balloon with a pin. Of course.
//A skinny hatchling dashes through the empty streets with an arm raised, running towards the broken fountain. (S)he (?) is yelling:
Skinny Hatchling: Missus Jebed! Missus Jebed!

Jebed: Yes, hatchling, what is it?
SH: In the, in the, *hoo*, commo... commotinin, in the co--
Jebed: Commotion.
SH: In the commotion, one of Yiha's eggs is missing!

//Jebed recoils as if physically struck.
JBD: What! Oh, my poor daughter!

//Jebed runs and launches into the air immediately, as a flying pegasus in a blue uniform gets Quine's attention.

FP: Sir, we're going to have to ask you a few questions.

Quine: Of course.

FP: Have you, at any time before or after this incident, seen a bright orange filly around the dragon district?

Quine: Could you give me a few more details?
FP: She should look familiar, sir, she's the mayor's daughter.

Quine: The only orange pony I would recognize is one I would turn into an ashen stain on the cobblestone, if I could. Sorry.

FP: Right... sir, we're going to have to ask you to leave the city.

Quine: Certainly, I was planning on going home anyhow.

//Quine bends his long neck, starting to take flight, and speaks to me.

Quine: If you ever get the chance to go to the Aquinatic Mountains, drakeling, I suggest you avoid it. Dragons are not safe there.

I shout at him as he's rising:
Spike: Wait! There are dragons there?! Why's it so dangerous?! What could threaten us?!

I want to know more!

There's no response. The immense silver dragon extends his wings, and flies out of the city.

Spike: Looks like things are bad all over.

T: The world is a harsh place, and it has to get worse before it gets better.

Spike: But the disappearances don't seem normal, happening to the leaders of ponies and dragons separately in the same day. I think someone used the brawl started by Rainbow Dash to abduct both the mayor's daughter and Jebed's grandegg.

T: We don't know they were abducted, Spike, someone could just be lost. Besides, grandegg isn't a word.

Spike: Yeah, but if it's true, I'll be rescuing someone important to both ponies and dragons in this region. I want to get better acquainted with dragons here, because I'm one of them. Then maybe I'll find someone who knows who I am.

T: Uh, Spike? Why don't you just _ask_--
//Not caring what Twilight has to say, I yell to the hatchling:

Spike: Hey, you!

SH: I have a name, y'know!

Spike: What is it?
SH: Shumbert Humbert.

T: ...You poor, poor thing.

Spike: Have there been any strange happenings around here, besides this? Spooky noises at night telling you to stay away from a place, people or ponies disappearing, anything like that?

T: ('People or ponies?')
Spike: (Whoops.)
SH: Everybody just stays inside these days, a-less they got wings -- hey, you don't got wings. What are you doin'?
Spike: Any attacks on dragons recently? Uh, besides this one?
SH: I'm... I'm-a thinkin'...
//A scoundrel willing to resort to these tactics to get her way likely isn't powerful enough to deal with a full dragon, someone like Quine...
Spike: What about a place a full dragon couldn't fit in?
SH: Oh! Oh oh oh oh, like the caves! The caves off the west side of town!
T: This is not working.
SH: We heard a bunch of odd noises coming from the Westside Caves we used to play in, 'cause the tunnels are cramped and all and the adults couldn't find us there, but when we went to go check it out there was a ghost there and it said it'd eat us nasty dragons if we came back!
Spike: Good enough for me.
SH: Are you gonna defeat the ghost? Yay!
T: No. I refuse to believe this is possible.
Spike: Come on, Twilight! It's the first quest, no Hero takes it too seriously unless it's part of their backstory. Besides, no one's going to hand me a quest if I haven't already done some Hero-ing.
T: There's no 'quest'; you're not a Hero; and you're going to get yourself killed running about like one on a child's rumors.
Spike: I thought sidekicks were supposed to be comic relief.
Twilight Sparkle kicks The Drakeling in the side with her right rear hoof!

//Westside Caves. The tunnel entrance is barely tall enough for a pony to fit through, and it leads down into the earth, growing dark and muggy.
Spike: What's the atlas say about the water table in this region?
T: Forlegsandria is known for its granite, which can't hold an aquifer. It should be dry.
Spike: And if it's not?
T: You'll drown in a dark, deep hole where nobody will find your body.
Spike: Thanks for the vote of confidence, Twilight.
T: There's always, oh, not going into the cave?
//I step into the dark and wait for my eyes to adjust. Before I can see my claws in front of my face, I hear sniffing to my left.
Spike: Magic nose.
T: Not this time, but do you smell that?
//I breathe in, deeply. The tunnel is empty but for me, the voice to my left, echoes of nothingness fading into noise, and the smell of wet earth.
T: When you do, remember: it's the smell of falsehood.
Spike: Hoped it wouldn't turn out like this. I was afraid you were my mentor, and the ominous riddle just seals it.
T: ...An illusion spell, burning rubber is the scent of an illusion spell.
Spike: I'll be sure to remember that.

//I climb through the twisting maze of passages, moving deeper into the earth. As I keep going, the air becomes more and more stale, and the dirt starts to come off in large wet chunks as I try to grasp it. Eventually, I start to hear voices ahead, in a higher pitch than I was expecting.
Voice One: Ey Vit.
Voice Two: Ye, Vo?
VO: Whatchya think she's 'onna do wit' the egg?
//They must know what happened to Jebed's grandegg!
VT: I-'unno, scramble it or somethin'? What'm I, a chef?
//Of all the horrible things!
//The two fall silent. I climb closer to the source of the voices, steeling myself for combat.
VO: Ya think it'd be good, scrambled? A big ol' egg like that?
VT: 'Ow'm I supposed to know?
VO: I-'unno, mebbe ya et a dragon egg sometime.
VT: I never et no dragon egg, ya bilgelicker! Shut ep!
//Oh, pirates, that's what that accent is.
//The two fall silent again, voices replaced by the sound of shovels digging into earth.
//Suddenly, the dirt crumbles beneath my feet, and I fall into the chamber!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

The Drakeling slams into the ground!
The Drakeling's left leg takes the full force of the impact, bruising the muscle and tearing the scale!
The Drakeling bounces off the empty chest!

VO: Oh, wossis?
VT: Wosswhot? Oh, that?
VO: Wot are ya doin' here?
//Vo and Vit pose menacingly with their shovels. The mares are dirty and their clothes torn, but they were digging greedily a moment ago.
Spike: I should ask you the same thing, but I know! You two took Yiha's egg!
VT: Ya know? Vo, he knows, tha's bad.
VO: Ya're here to... get it back, mebbe?
Spike: Yes! Where is it?!
VO: And ya, wha', the brovva of the egg or somethin'?
Spike: No, I'm a Hero!
VO: I figgad out wotwos he's doin' here, Vit, he's a Hero an'--
VT: Shut ep, Vo.
Spike: Tell me where the egg is!
VT: We don' got it no more.
VO: She gave us--ooof!--
VT: Quit wit' it, foo!
Spike: She? Who is 'she'?
VT: N'one ya need to know. Tell ya wot. Ya get lost and we won' have t' bury ya as well as diggin' up this treasure.
//I can't just let egg stealers go!
Spike: Never! Prepare to...
//...die? That seems a little harsh, even for egg stealers. I don't know if I can do that.
Spike: ...be defeated!
VT: Ey, Vo.
VO: Ye, Vit?
VT: Don' he look like one-a them, wossit called, drakescales? The ones wit' the immortality if ya ride 'em?
VO: Issat wot them books're about then, Vit?
VT: Sh-- Shut ep, Vo! Ya don't know nothin' abouts them!
VO: Okay, Vit.
VT: They gots plenty of litserary qualitities!
//Qualitities aside, it's time to start this battle.

The Drakeling throws the muddy stone at The Mare (Vo)! The spinning muddy stone strikes The Mare (Vo) in the lower body, bruising the skin!

VO: Ey! Watch it!
The Mare throws the iron shovel at The Drakeling! The spinning iron shovel strikes The Drakeling in the left foot, but the attack glances away!

VT: Vo, why'd ya throw the shovel at 'im.
VO: Sorry, Vit.
VT: We talked abou' this, Vo! Throwin' a weapon's not a viable means of comba'!

The Drakeling charges at The Mare (Vit)! The Drakeling punches The Mare (Vit) in the upper body with his right hand, bruising the muscle and bruising the left lung!
The Mare (Vit) is having trouble breathing!

The Mare (Vit) bites at The Drakeling! The Mare (Vit) misses!
The Mare (Vo) charges at The Drakeling! The Mare (Vo) kicks The Drakeling in the right lower arm with her left front hoof, bruising the fat!
The Mare (Vo) collides with The Drakeling!
The Drakeling is knocked over and tumbles backwards!

The Drakeling kicks The Mare (Vo) in the lower body with his right leg, bruising the muscle and bruising the guts!
The Mare (Vo) looks sick!

The Mare (Vo) attacks The Drakeling but The Drakeling rolls away!
The Drakeling stands up!

T: (Hey, what did you mean by, 'hoped it wouldn't turn out like this' when you said I was your mentor?)
Spike: (Not the time, Twilight!)

The Mare (Vit) bashes The Drakeling in the right hand with her iron shovel, bruising the muscle and bruising the bone!
The Mare (Vo) bites The Drakeling in the left upper arm, tearing the scale! The Mare (Vo) latches on firmly!
The Drakeling punches The Mare (Vit) in the upper front teeth with his left hand and the severed parts fly off in an arc!

VT: Vho! Geth 'im!

The Mare (Vo) grabs The Drakeling by the lower body with her right front leg!
The Mare (Vit) charges at The Drakeling! The Mare (Vit) attacks The Drakeling but The Drakeling dodges backwards!
The Drakeling slams into The Mare (Vo) and is rebuffed! The Mare (Vit) grabs The Drakeling by the upper body with her upper body!
The Drakeling is pinned!

They're pinning me between them! I can't move my arms, or get any leverage with my legs! I have to get away! If only I could open my mouth...
VT: Ya're no' escaping from us, ya jerk!
VO: Now tha' he's in our capture, Vit... wha' do we do wit' him?
VT: Ya do wot ya do wit' any captured drakescale!
VO: Like wot?
VT: Ya know... viola' him! Use 'im as we wants to use 'im! Make 'im do stuffs to us, ya know!
VO: Like wot, braidin' our hair?
//Vit groans.
VT: Vo, no, I'll show ya. Hold 'im tigh'.

The Mare (Vit) releases the grip of The Mare (Vit)'s upper body on The Drakeling!

//An opening!

VT: 'Mean, use ya head for a secon', girl, ya jus' do this...

The Drakeling headbutts The Mare (Vit) in the head, bruising the muscle, bruising the skull and bruising the brain! The Mare (Vit) gives into pain! The Mare (Vit) has been knocked unconscious! The Mare (Vit) collapses!

VO: Vit? Wot did ya do to Vit?!

The Mare (Vo) places a chokehold on The Drakeling's throat with her right front leg!
The Drakeling breathes fire! The Mare (Vo) is caught in the dragonfire! Her right front hoof has been burnt to a crisp!

VO: Aaughyaaa!!!

The Mare (Vo) releases the grip of The Mare (Vo)'s right front leg on The Drakeling!
The Drakeling kicks The Mare (Vo) in the left front leg with his right foot from the side, shattering the bone, jamming the bone through the left front knee's muscle and shattering the left front knee's bone!
The Mare (Vo) collapses! The Mare (Vo) gives into pain!

The Mares were defeated!
Spike earned 50 experience points!
Spike is now level 4!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//Did... did I win?
VO: Oohhh... oh, m'knee, oh, ow, ah...
//Vit is still unconscious.
Spike: (What am I supposed to do here?)
//They never mention what Heroes do with defeated enemies. I don't want to kill them, but that knee looks nasty and crumpling to the ground like the other one did probably means her head needs to be looked at. If I leave them here, though, that amounts to beating up two ponies in a cave because I thought they were criminals (even if they are)...
Spike: Do you have any rope?
//She keeps moaning, stretching out both wounded legs out in front of her. I search through sparse digging supplies and find a few dozen feet of rope.
//Vo's back legs are tied together, and the rope is attached to her neck and then to the empty treasure chest, in which I put all the digging supplies. All of Vit's legs are tied together, and I throw the last hoop of rope over a stalagmite high on the wall.
Spike: That ought to keep you two for a while.
//I sit down and try to get an angle on my cuts, to close them with dragonfire.
VO: Do ya... do ya wan' the treasure? Issat why ya're here?
Spike: Treasure?
VO: Ya! She tol' us treasure's in tha' side of the room!
//It must be a treasure chest filled with gold gullibles.
Spike: Who is 'she'?
//Vo shrugs.
VO: I-unno, some unicorn. Vit knows 'er name. Ey, Vit!
//...I'm going to leave before I lose my mind watching Vo try to wake up Vit with both of them bound.

//Climbing through the tunnel again, it starts to get wetter than normal, and the torch I acquired (stole) from the pirates is burning out.
T: So, what did you mean by that, then?
Spike: Do you think I did the right thing? I didn't want them to escape, but if I don't come back quick enough, they could be here a long time.
T: Was it 'I don't want a pony to be my mentor'? You've been focusing a lot on being a dragon lately... is that the reason?
Spike: And they need medical attention, odds are as soon as possible. Who do I tell for that? Do you think the city guard sends a nurse with them?
T: I would understand, 'I don't want someone who knew the old Spike to be my mentor'. That's an immense informational advantage and could really mess up a teacher-student bondage if not handled correctly.
Spike: ...Twilight, I think it's 'bond'.
T: Nonsense; he wouldn't be in a cave.
//The next section of the tunnel drops down about ten feet, opening into a wider part of the cave holding a long pool of water.
Spike: Can't hold an aquifer.
T: It shouldn't! Look at the walls; they're rough granite!
Spike: It only looks waist high, and this is the only way to go.
//I take a deep breath, steady myself for the cold, and jump in.
//I WAS NOT READY FOR THE COLD.
Spike: Aggg, wow that is unpleasant.
//The water comes up to my neck and is crystal clear, which likely means it's poisonous given not even muck is living in it. It's so cold my muscles are working harder just to move, as if the water is thicker. I raise my torch arm higher, and relight it.
T: Spike, this water is disgusting! You could get scale rot!
Spike: Urban myth; scales are actually hardened feathers. Will be dry as a bone in minutes. Was in one of the... oh.
//The books hang off my shoulder into the water, bouncing against my back as I wade. A waterproof bag would have been a wise investment.
Spike: I'm sorry, I'll replace those... Twilight?
//She simply disappeared from the tunnel above, and isn't anywhere near the water... is she mad at me?
Spike: ...Sorry anyway, Twilight.
//I continue wading through the water, towards a dry ledge at the end of the long pool. Beyond where the ledge ends, the bottom of the pool seems to drop off, and I can't see yet if it has a bottom.
//I look down and half an inch away is a smiling face made out of water!
[[SAVE LOCATION]]

Spike: Bwaa!
//I leap out of the water and scramble up one of the rough granite walls, tail and books hanging down and dripping behind me.
Water Face: No! Don't be scared!
Spike: Then plan your approach better! What the hell are you?!
Water Face: I'm a Kelpie!
//Water rises out of the... water, and flows into the shape of a pony, completing the body to the face.

WF: My name is Wafa! Well, really, my name is Niogi-Solki-Wafa-!!!....!....!....!....!, but everyone calls me Wafa!
Spike: That's great, Wafa, but you need to learn how to say hello to people.
//I wag my tail back and forth, spraying water droplets everywhere. The bag is still soaked.
WF: Oh~? Will you teach me~?
Spike: I... have something to get to.
//Wafa spouts.
Spike: I'm not sure if you can get out of the way, but if you could, that'd be great...
WF: What are you getting to? Is it ~a girlfriend~?
Spike: No! I mean, no. I'm a Hero, and I'm on a quest.
//Wafa swells.
WF: A _Heeerooo_? Hehehehe!
Spike: And I'd like to get back to that.
WF: Well, are you waiting for an invitation? The ledge is over there, silly!
//It is. With a sigh, I take a breath again and drop back in the water.
//STILL COLD.
Spike: Have you -- brrr, sorry -- have you seen an egg somewhere around here? A dragon egg?
WF: Nope!
Spike: Then I need to get going.
//I wade through the water again, holding the torch, as Wafa asks me questions.
WF: Are you a good Hero? What's your name?
Spike: Spike. Not yet, but I will be.
Spike: Uh, can't you tell?
WF: I have no eyes, silly!
//Wafa runs over my shoulders, sending a chill down my spine, and reforms on the other side.
Spike: I'm a dragon.
Wafa: Ooooooo, what kind of dragon? You can't be a black or a bronze dragon, 'cause I'd know, but what kind of dragon are you?
//Don't tell the truth, don't tell the truth, don't tell the truth...
Spike: Just a regular old drakeling.
//Damnit!
//In a wobbly voice as she claps her water hooves together, Wafa gasps:
WF: A drakeling? Oh my goodness!
//Ten feet to the ledge. You can make it, Spike...
WF: This is just like I -- hehehehe!
//Wafa flows between my legs and up my chest to reform right in front of me!
Spike: Woah, watch where you're swimming!
WF: Okay, Spike, _I_ -- have a proposal for you.
Spike: I'm not interested in your Fish Celestia.
//Eight feet...
WF: ...I... I, uh... what?
Spike: It's a joke, see. Celestia's an important god on the surface, and some people go around door to door asking if you'd like to talk with them about oh nevermind.
WF: Hear this, Spike. I just know you're going to ~love~ it.
Spike: I'm a fighter, not a lover.
//Six feet....
WF: My Dad is the King of the Kelpies. What, if, I got him to give you the power to breathe underwater? Wouldn't that be awesome?!
Spike: How would the sea creatures react, though?
WF: I'm sure they would love you! You'd get to meet and be friends with all of them!
Spike: Knowing how my adventure's going, I'd only get to meet the dolphins.
//Just four more feet... come on, Spike, you're almost there...
WF: And then you could be our Hero and go on quests for us and be knighted and ask for my hand in marriage and my Dad would say yes! Just like I've always dreamed! Doesn't that sound great, Spike?
Spike: You know, I had a dream, once.
WF: Huh?
Spike: It was about a terrible monster made of marshmallow that meandered menacingly amidst multicolored macaroni, and I don't have enough words to complete the alliteration but give me a second and I might.
//Wafa looks very confused.
//Two feet... reach for it... reeeaaaaaaaach for it...
//Success!
WF: Where are you going?
//I pull myself out of the water onto the ledge, keeping the torch high, and hop a few steps out before turning around.
Spike: Basically, I learned to fly in order to get away from the monster. And Wafa, you're cool and all... but I've gotta fly.
WF: WHAT?!
//A pony-sized glob of water leaps out of the pool and onto the dry land, ready to attack!
[[SAVE LOCATION]]
//Okay, where's the way out, tell me it's not into more water... hey, a ladder.
WF: You can't say no to me! I'm a Princess!
Spike: If it makes you feel better I plan on saying no to more than one Princess.
//She can't see you, and you can see her. Besides, she's made of water. Just back away from the pool.

The Kelpie throws water at The Drakeling! The Drakeling's torch is covered in water!
The Drakeling's torch goes out!
//Oh, crap.

The Drakeling leaps backwards! The Drakeling slams into an obstacle! The Drakeling's upper body takes the full force of the impact, bruising the scale!
//Oof, thought that would be the ladder, not a wall. Still, I have a wall, she has just water. She can't even give me scale rot.

The Kelpie throws water at The Drakeling! The spinning ball of water strikes The Drakeling in the first finger, left hand, shattering the bone!
//SHIT
//RUN BOY RUN

The Drakeling leaps to the left! The Drakeling slams into an obstacle! The Drakeling's left foot takes the full force of the impact, bruising the muscle!

The Kelpie throws water at The Drakeling! The spinning ball of water strikes the wall, fracturing the stone!
The severed pieces fly off in separate arcs!
The Drakeling leaps to the right! The Drakeling misses!

The Kelpie throws water at The Drakeling! The spinning ball of water strikes The Drakeling in the left upper leg, bruising the muscle!

//Please, let this be it...

The Drakeling leaps to the right! The Drakeling connects, grabbing The Ladder!

The Kelpie throws water at The Drakeling! The spinning ball of water misses!

//Climb, you silly dragon, climb!

//After a few rungs, I start to slow down. Every bit of me is soaked in water, but I'll be dry by the time I reach the top of the ladder. Especially because... wow. That is tall. At least there's some light at the end of it.

Spike: So Twi, do you --
WF: Wait!
Spike: Gaahh that's weird!

//Wafa is speaking to me using the water still clinging to my scales. She's currently talking from where the second ball of water hit, my upper leg.
WF: If you come down the hole with me, I can make you feel really good!
Spike: I don't want to!
WF: W-Wait, I can do better! I can make you feel really good here, and then you can come down the hole with me!

Water spreads across The Drakeling's lower body! Water spreads across The Drakeling's right upper leg!

Spike: Leave me alone!
WF: No!

The Kelpie assaults The Drakeling! The Drakeling's resistance is lowered!

//I can't climb the ladder like this, I'll drop off halfway through! But Wafa won't just dry off; she's a water spirit!

WF: You know, I've been doing a lot of research about drakelings, in my spare time.
Spike: Stop talking! That feels weird!
WF: When a drakeling mates, he releases a series of chemicals that flood his head! He's one hundred percent enamored with whoever he just mated with! A complete and total slave!
//What? Is this true?

The Kelpie assaults The Drakeling! The Drakeling's resistance is lowered further!

//Oh, Celestia, I need to get rid of this girl! But I can't get the angle with dragonfire, and even if I could, I think she'd get me off before I got her off of me!
WF: And do you know what the best part is?
//I climb another few rungs of the ladder, hoping for something to happen.

The Keplie tightens her grip!

Spike: Gahauagh!
WF: I SAID, do you know what the best part is? It lasts forever!! For ever and ever we're going to be Princess and Prince and I just know you'll love it! Are you ready to love me forever, Spike?
T: (Spike! Conglomerate! It's porous stone!)
//The stone in front of me is yellowed and patchy, completely unlike the granite earlier. 
Spike: If it's my only chance!

The Drakeling slams his waist into the wall! 
The Kelpie is absorbed into the stone!

WF: What? Spike, I thought we were--
Spike: No, Wafa, you're selfish and maniacal. Also a fish.

The Drakeling slams his waist into the wall! 
The Kelpie is absorbed into the stone!

WF: Wha?! Spike, no!

The Drakeling slams his waist into the wall! 
The Kelpie is absorbed into the stone! 
The Kelpie has been absorbed completely!

The Kelpie Princess was defeated! 
Spike earned 100 experience points! 
Spike is now level 5! 
//Crazy watery bint!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//I look above me again. There's still a lot of ladder to climb. 
T: You know she wasn't a fish, right? 
Spike: It felt right to say. 
T: Hey, whatever floats your boat, Hero. 
Spike: Is what she said true? About the chemicals, and the obsession? 
T: ...Yes. It's all true. 
//...
T: Which, coincidentally, you would have found out if you read a bit further in that anatomy textbook you _had_. 
Spike: Oh, er... I'll replace those. 
T: Yes, you will.

//An few (?) minutes of nothing but ladder climbing passes. Twilight disappears again, probably due to boredom. I drop the bag of books at some point, given that I'll be replacing them anyway. Maybe it'll give Water Face something to do besides assault travelers. When I'm most of the way up the ladder (and totally dry), a vision comes to me. 
C: Spike... Spike, it is Celestia. 
Spike: Celestia! It's you! 
C: Yes. 
Spike: Oh honored Celestia, I feel like I'm a target for the world to throw anything and everything at! Not only am I weak of arm, but weak of... weak to assault as well! How can I deal with the fact if someone successfully assault me, I'm forced to be their slave forever? 
C: You are weak of arm and weak of will only right now, but you will be strong, and you must be strong. Have faith, in me and yourself, that through your power and mine things will change. You will always be a target, my Spike, but you will be a target at which the world throws everything, and in the end you will stay standing. 
Spike: Celestia! I believe! 
C: You may have noticed, in some of your moments of weakness or distress, a certain voice entering your head... it is a rather unique voice, if only for its abrasiveness and cruelness.
Spike: The angry guy that sounds like he's speaking with caps lock on?
C: He is your dragon instinct, Spike, a legacy of the rage your race once held for anything and everything. Though... unpleasant at times, he may be a great source of strength for you when your mind is not clear, due to enchantment effects or... temptation.
Spike: Yes, Celestia! I understand!
C: Go now, Spike, and complete your quest to defeat the pony Princess, and bring back hope to dragonkind.
Spike: I will, Celestia, I will!

//Refreshed by my vision, I reach the top of the ladder in no time at all. I climb up into a cramped room with nothing but a door, under which small cracks of light peek through.
//I open the door to the scene of a minotaur arguing with a pony with an egg in a sling.

Chapter End Notes

With apologies to Tarn Adams.
Nobody Bleeds for the 'Mancer

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

//The stench of burning rubber hits like a tidal wave as soon as I open the door.
Spike: *cough* Gack, ugh, *cough*, ugh!
Minotaur: Give me the egg!
Pony With Egg: No! It's not yours!

//The minotaur stands on the cavern floor, surrounded by few streaks of charred stone. The filly, sling around her neck, balances on a ledge high above, trying to advance past a towering drop into a pool of water below. At the other end of the ledge is a hole covered by roots.
MT: And it's yours? You couldn't lay an egg like that!
PWE: At least I'm not a big dumb stupid minotaur!

//Something in this room is illusory. Could it be everything?
Spike: (I think I should intercede, but I have to figure out the illusion or I could be running right into a trap. Any leads?)

//Silence.

//Hold on, the pony with the egg is bright orange. She must be the mayor's daughter. Did she steal the egg? Would she have any reason to steal the egg?
//A minotaur is a dangerous opponent for anyone, especially an unproven Hero like me. If the minotaur stole the egg, I might not be able to defeat her.
Spike: If everyone could calm down and stop shouting, I'm sure we can work this out.

PWE: I won't let a dirty evil egg-stealer get Yiha's egg!
MT: You think you can stop me?
Spike: Not to agree with the obvious villain, but you really can't stop her. You're... about the size of her hoof.

PWE: I don't care how big or strong I am! That bully doesn't deserve a single thing!
MT: Girl, save yourself some trouble. Give me the egg, and I'll let you go meet some nice pirates.
PWE: No! I'm leaving!

//I step out of the doorway, close the door behind me, and stretch my arms. How do you ready yourself to fight a minotaur? Or, more likely, get ripped limb from limb by a minotaur?
MT: You cannot run! There is nowhere to run! You cannot pass through the roots!
PWE: Watch me!

//I think I've figured out in the room what is illusory; it's my patience.
//I pick up a stone. Well, if I'm right, a surprise attack is a great way to start a battle. If I'm wrong... I can always apologize, right?

The Drakeling throws the conglomerate stone at The Minotaur! The spinning conglomerate stone strikes the Minotaur in the head! The spinning conglomerate stone passes through!

//That's a relief.
PWE: Gh-gh-ghost minotaur! Ghost m-minotaur!
MT: Who dares to throw a stone at the visage of the esteemed Marquise Tourniquette?!
Spike: Visage? It's an illusion! Can't you smell the burning rubber?
PWE: An illusion?

Spike: Quiet; adults are talking.
MT: I quite agree.

The Minotaur points at The Filly and starts to cast a spell! The Minotaur casts Stupefy!
The Filly is hit by the beam! The Filly is knocked unconscious!
//The mayor's daughter slumps forward on the ledge, towards the murky pool far below! The sling slides up and hangs around her neck!

Spike: The egg!
MT: The egg? And why would you be worrying about... oh, my.

The Minotaur speaks a word of power, forming symbols in the air! The illusion is dispelled!

//In the minotaur's place stands a blood red unicorn, smiling wide enough to rip her face in half. Pouches and vials hang off her, dangling from her mane and tail and tied across her back.
MT: Greetings, little drakeling. My name is Marquise Tourniquette. I usually don't give invaders the luxury of a full introduction, but you'll be screaming my name for some time to come, so I want to make sure you get it right.
Spike: Did you choose two words that sounded vaguely French and mash them together?
//Marquise Tourniquette glares at me.
MT: Tourniquette is a perfectly valid family name!
Spike: For what? A Kelpie's fanfiction character?
MT: Quiet! I'm still speaking!
Spike: A tourniquet is a rope or string used to restrict bloodflow to a limb, and you're pronouncing it 'tourniquette', which is either a little tourniquet or a female one. The word marquise means the wife of a marquis, a noblestallion at some rank no one really cares about.
MT: I know all this! Don't patronize me!
Spike: Then why did you choose a name that means, 'Noblewife Bloodflow Restrictor'? I mean, if you were an upper-class murderous vampire or some such thing, it'd be cool if a little obvious, but you're not! You're just a ratty old sorceress in a smelly cave!
MT: 'Ratty'?!
Spike: Tying fish oil and herbal supplements to your hair? I'll try to understand because you have literally been living under rocks for a while, but girl? Do you even own a mirror?
MT: SILENCE!
//I'd like to comment on yelling the word 'silence' but I'm all out of burns for now.
MT: As soon as I heard the Avatar of Speed was coming to Forlegsandria, I had a sudden urge to get my flank out of there -- which isn't an unreasonable response to the Avatar of Speed, let me tell you. There was a little voice inside my head telling me to stay, however; another one of the Avatars must have been smiling on me, because that great silver oaf managed to get the whole of the dragon district riled up with his defeat. In the confusion--
Spike: Man, I never knew ugly unicorns came with all this free exposition!
MT: Cease! In the confusion, I was able to make an illusion to disguise my two cronies stealing a dragon egg from its mother. So, yes. I admit it. I stole the dragon egg. I was going to sell it, to an anonymous buyer, who wanted to raise it for their own purposes. Likely an immortality ticket, had I to guess.
Spike: I just fought a creature made out of thick water that wanted to molest me in order to make me its slave forever, so I feel justified in saying this: you're a monster!!
//I put my fists up, ready to do battle.
MT: But... I think I'll be returning the dragon egg.
Spike: What?
//I sincerely doubt I am intimidating enough to cause that change of heart.
MT: I'll return the dragon egg. And I'll return the mayor's precious little daughter, too. And you're going to help me.
Spike: Why does everypony I meet seem to have plans for me?
MT: Because _I_ didn't steal the egg. The two pirates, who we'll defeat on our way out --
Spike: Already did it.
MT: Did you? That shortens my plans considerably...
Spike: Glad to be of service, lady, but my plan is just to beat the crap out of you and get the egg back. Fire may make an appearance at some point.
MT: It was the two pirates you defeated that stole the egg, at the behest of the minotaur, who knocked the mayor's little daughter here out. Then, when the fight was turning against you, I swooped in and delivered the fatal blow!
Spike: I've already been written into one crazy bint's fanfiction today, and I don't particularly care for another.
MT: Ah, but you will! You will have been the big Hero, little drakeling, and no one will be the wiser!
Spike: Fine, I'll bite. What's my reward at the end for lying through my teeth about what happened here and letting the villain go?
MT: Reward? Hrmhrmhrm...
//Marquise waves her mane, objects clinking about and half of it hanging straight in front of her face. If she's trying to be seductive, it failed.
MT: Why, you get... _me_!
Spike: I get a dumpy old sorceress? No thanks!
MT: 'Dumpy'??
Spike: Yeah, I thought about it, and I decided you're more dumpy than ratty. Ratty is more of a coincidence that you look like you haven't seen a bath in a few full moons, but dumpy is when you make a conscious effort to look that bad.
//A wordless scream. I suppose the battle has started.

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

The Unicorn charges at The Drakeling!
The Unicorn kicks The Drakeling in the tail with her left front hoof, but the attack glances away!
The Unicorn collides with The Drakeling! The Unicorn bounces backwards!

//She doesn't seem too physically powerful. I need to stay close and make sure she isn't able to cast a spell.

The Drakeling bites The Unicorn in the upper body, tearing the muscle and tearing the fat! The Drakeling latches on firmly!

//Ugh, this is disgusting!

The Unicorn kicks The Drakeling in the right lower leg with her right front hoof, tearing the scale and bruising the muscle!

The Drakeling punches The Unicorn in the head with his left hand, bruising the jaw and shattering the +crystal glass flask+!
A noxious fume begins to fill the room!

MT: My Iron Man gas! That's valuable!

The Unicorn kicks The Drakeling in the head with her left front hoof, bruising the muscle and bruising the skull!

//sOrRy MoMmY i HaVe To DrOp OuT nOw ByE bYe

The Drakeling releases the grip of The Drakeling's lower third tooth on The Unicorn's upper body. The Drakeling falls to the ground!
The Unicorn leaps backwards! The Unicorn points at The Drakeling and starts to cast a spell!

//Get up and use dragonfire before she casts a spell!
The Drakeling stands up! The Drakeling breathes in, readying dragonfire!
The Drakeling breathes in the noxious fumes! The Drakeling coughs up blood!

The Unicorn casts Charm!

//OKAY, I KNOW I'VE HAD A BIT OF A PROMISING INTRODUCTION, BUT I WANT TO CLEAR THE AIR ON SOMETHING IMPORTANT: YOU ARE A COMPLETE FUCKING WASTE OF WEAK FLESH AND FAKE SCALE. WHY IN FUCK'S FLYING WINGS DID YOU DECIDE BREATHING IN POISONOUS FUMES WOULD BE EXACTLY WHAT YOUR EMPTY-LIGHTER-OF-SOME-ASSHOLE-WHO-THINKS-THE-TREES-GANGBANGED-HIS-DESTITUTE-LEGLESS-GRANDMOTHER'S EQUIVALENT OF AN ATTEMPT AT DRAGONFIRE NEEDED? DID YOU THINK ABOUT THE CORROSIVE FUCKING ACID THAT WOULD BE IN YOUR LUNGS WHEN YOU WERE HANGING OFF OF THE WORLD'S FILTHIEST HIPPIE LIKE A SHIT BABY OFF OF A SHIT TEAT OR DID YOU SAY TO YOURSELF 'NO! THAT'LL BE FUTURE SPIKE'S PROBLEM, AND I HOPE THAT GUY GETS HIS ASSHOLE JACKHAMMERED BY THIS WHORE'S MAGIC HEADPENIS'!? I HONESTLY THINK THIS BITCH BATHES BY ROLLING IN PIG EXCREMENT, OH WHOOPS I MEAN DRAGON EXCREMENT, WAIT WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE WHEN WE HAVE A FINE FUCKING SPECIMEN SUCH AS YOU REPRESENTING US? AND YOU DECIDED THE BEST COURSE OF ACTION WAS 'FUCK YEAH, TIME TO PUT THAT SHIT IN MY MOUTH! THAT'S EXACTLY WHERE THAT GOES!! YOU'RE THE ONE WITH MULTIPLE INJURIES, COUGHING UP BLOOD AND PUTTING THE WORLD'S MOST DISGUSTING FORM OF LIFE -- SORRY, SECOND MOST -- IN YOUR MOUTH, AND SOMEHOW I'M THE ONE THAT'S SICK! IF YOU GOT DOWN AND YOUR HANDS AND KNEES, CRIED LIKE A BABY AND SHIT YOURSELF, IT WOULD HONESTLY BE EASIER FOR ME TO SEE YOU LIKE THAT THAN THIS. I FUCKING HATE MYSELF FOR HAVING TO CALL YOU A DRAGON AT ALL, SO YOU KNOW WHAT? JUST BREATHE IN, TRY NOT TO SHIT YOURSELF, AND GET FUCKING DISMANTLED BY THE UNIVERSE'S MOST REEKING STAIN OF A HORSE SO I CAN LEAVE. JUST FUCKING BREATHE IN--

The Drakeling coughs up blood on The Unicorn's face!

MT: Waaaaaaaaagh!

The Unicorn releases the grip of The Unicorn's left front leg on The Drakeling's lower body! The Unicorn releases the grip of The Unicorn's right front leg on The Drakeling's upper body! The Unicorn falls backwards!

//I didn't even notice her, and she was almost on top of me! It feels like my senses were filled for a minute straight with nothing but anger and yelling... Is this what happens when I've been charmed? Celestia, do I have a headache...

The Unicorn stands up!

MT: What?! No one can resist my charms!
Spike: I have the help of someone who is far, far less charming than you could ever be.
//...I'm still trying to decide if that's a good thing.

The Drakeling kicks The Unicorn in the left front hoof with his right foot, shattering the bone! An artery has been opened by the attack! A motor nerve has been severed and a ligament has been torn!
The Unicorn points at The Drakeling and starts to cast a spell! The Unicorn casts Stupefy!

The Drakeling jumps away from the beam!

//Woah! Better avoid that one; looks like even with a broken hoof this mare is ready to fight. MT: You won't defeat this illusion! Spike: What? That you're a credible opponent?

The Minotaur speaks a word of power, forming symbols in the air! An illusion is created! //Radiating from her, three copies of Marquise hop out, splitting off to stand by the side of the original (?). They sneer and laugh in unison, none of them giving off signals of illusion. From all comes the voice: MT: Dodge this!

//Okay, Spike, keep your feet moving, and attack with your hands!

The Unicorn (?) kicks at The Drakeling in the upper body with her left front hoof, but he jumps away! The Drakeling strikes at The Unicorn (?) in the head with his Dashing Rogue Punch! The hand passes through!

The Unicorn (?) kicks at The Drakeling in the left upper arm with her right rear hoof, but he jumps away! The Drakeling strikes at The Unicorn (?) in the head with his Dashing Rogue Punch! The hand passes through!

The Unicorn (?) kicks at The Drakeling in the tail with her left rear hoof! But the illusion does no damage! The Drakeling strikes at The Unicorn (?) in the head with his Dashing Rogue Punch! The hand passes through!

The Unicorn (?) bites at The Drakeling in the right lower arm, but he jumps away! The Drakeling strikes at The Unicorn (?) in the head with his Dashing Rogue Punch, shattering the horn! An artery has been opened by the attack! //That was the one!

//Blood pours down Marquise Tourniquette's face as she starts screaming. MT: Waaaaaaaggh! My horn! Spike: Listen to me! If you surrender, I'm sure the city guard have a way to patch you up. You'll be given a fair trial. I don't want to hurt you! MT: You did a damn good job of it!

The Unicorn kicks The Drakeling in the upper body with her right back hoof, bruising the muscle and bruising the left false rib!

Spike: If that's the way you want it!

The Drakeling punches The Unicorn in the upper body with his left hand, bruising the muscle, jamming the right true ribs through the right false ribs, jamming the right false ribs through the right lung and tearing apart the right lung! The Unicorn is propelled away by the force of the blow! The Unicorn's right rear leg skids along the ground, bruising the muscle! The Unicorn falls into the pit!
Spike: Hoo, hoo, hoo... what was that punch?
//I look at my left hand. Oh yeah, I completely forgot that my first finger was broken. Not broken, but 'shattered', and it looks it. I did that punch with a broken finger?
PWE: Uuuurgh, my head...
Spike: Don't move! You've got the sling around your neck, and you're dangerously close to falling in!
//The bright orange filly steadies herself against the ledge with a hoof, but otherwise stays in position.
PWE: There's someone down there!
Spike: Don't worry; she's evil.
PWE: I think she might drown!
Spike: It's a good possibility.
PWE: Wait, no, she's pulling herself to the edge of the pool. She looks hurt! That's a lot of blood...
Spike: It's too bad there's nothing we can do for her.
PWE: She's waving! She wants us to help!
Spike: _Nothing we can do_...
PWE: A pony jumped out of the water! Wait, no, that's not a pony. Wait, it is; it's a pony made out of water!
Spike: That's probably Wafa.
PWE: A pony made of water jumped out of the water! And she's attacking the other pony!
Spike: ...I suppose it's good Wafa gets her aggression out.
//Echoing up from the pit come terrible screams.
MT: Heeelp! Heeeeeeelp meeeeeeeee!
//The bright orange pony holds a hoof over her mouth. Eventually, the screams stop.
Spike: What a shame.

Marquise Tourniquette has been defeated!
Spike earned 250 experience points!
Spike is now level 6!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

Spike: So, uh, hi. My name's Spike, I'm a Hero, and I'm here to return you and the egg to Forlegsandria.
PWE: Palla-Walla Ellis. Nice to meet you, Spike, and I figured as much.
Spike: Do you know where that hole blocked by the roots goes?
PWE: Probably to the surface! It's where we used to get into the Westside Caves before the roots grew and blocked it off. Can we go back the way we came in?
//Thoughts of the terrifying screams from below shoot down that idea.
Spike: I... kind of pissed off Wafa in the first place and don't know how long that Marquise pony is going to hold her attention. Besides, I can breathe fire.
PWE: You can breathe fire?! That's awesome!!
Spike: Now that I think about it, yeah, it is kind of awesome. Come down off the ledge so I can pass; we'll just climb right out.
//The roots burn off without any trouble and we're on our way.

//I climb to the top of the short tunnel first, Palla-Walla following some ways behind (lack of hands and the sling). The tunnel emerges next to a great oak tree, overlooking the farms and villages cut out of the forest by the people of Forlegsandria. As I haul myself up, I realize somepony is standing behind the tunnel exit, not saying a word.
Spike: Listen, if you're planning on fighting with the intent of enslaving me, I'm not really in the...
mood right now, so if you wanna just--
T: Wasn't planning on it.
Spike: Oh, hey, Twilight, didn't see you there.
T: Of course not. Mind telling me why you decided to spend a nice long while chatting with the evil sorceress, instead of, I don't know, defeating her and taking her into custody?
Spike: It was just a little ribbing.
T: You've done quite a lot of _ribbing_ today, it seems.
Spike: ...See, like that!
T: Why did you decide to insult someone you were going to fight in the first place? It just gets them angry!
//I look down at my finger. It's been aching pretty badly since it was broken, but this is the first time I've thought about that.
Spike: Huh, I dunno. Maybe I was aggravated from the pain?
T: Uh-huh.
Spike: Or, maybe I'm finally figuring out who I am. And that person insults people a lot.
T: I don't think that's who you are, Spike.
Spike: Why can't I be a jerk? There are plenty of Heroes who are jerks, it can happen.
T: You weren't like that.
//Twilight disappears suddenly as Palla-Walla grunts, trying to climb out of the hole.
Spike: Oh, let me help you with that.
//I take the sling off and gingerly set it aside, then grab Palla-Walla by the front legs and yank her out of the tunnel.
PWE: Ahhhah, are we out yet?
Spike: Look around.
//It's starting to get dark, and Forlegsandria is quite clearly a few hours away, but it is Forlegsandria and we are out.
PWE: Woah, I forgot how far away this entrance was from Forlegsandria...
Spike: May as well get walking.
PWE: You're a dragon, can't you fly us there?
Spike: Does it look like I have wings?
//Palla-Walla lifts each of my arms up, inspecting closely the part of my side below them where wings would sprout from. She then takes a few steps back, rubs her chin, and inspects me as a whole.
PWE: Can't you grow some wings?
Spike: Sure, if you're willing to wait... uh... an unspecified amount of time.
//I should find that out.
PWE: Unspecified sounds long.
Spike: It is.
//I pick up the sling and put it around my shoulder, securing it tightly. It feels better to me, Palla-Walla not carrying the egg, knowing that the breakables I'm returning to their respective owners aren't together in the same place. Is there an expression for that?
Spike: So, Palla-Walla, tell me: what were you doing in that cave anyway?
PWE: It's... kind of a long story.
Spike: It's kind of a long walk.
//I crack a small branch off of one of the trees nearby, and set it alight. Palla-Walla smiles; she is genuinely delighted just to see me breathe fire. She's a good kid.
PWE: Well, y'see...

//Some time later. We're on the road, it's completely dark out save for the crescent moon and the makeshift torch which is about halfway burnt through, and I have no idea what I've been listening to this entire time.
PWE: So I told them, 'So, I told him, "You can't tell me who I can and can't be friends with! I want
to visit my friends in the dragon district!" And then he grounded me, but I escaped! That's how I'm here with you little guys! I hope I don't get in too much trouble when I get home.' And then--

Spike: Pardon me for interrupting, but why were you talking to the eggs again?

PWE: You have to talk to eggs before they're hatched! That way, they grow up happy and healthy and used to activity always being around them.

Spike: Uh-huh.

//Crazy egg-talking bint!

PWE: If you don't, then they grow up lonely and quiet, and spend all their time in their room playing computer games. And who wants that?

Spike: The story, you were saying?

PWE: And then I heard a big boom, and the ground rumbled! And a CRACKCRACK, and a FP-HIIIIIII and a FOOOOSHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH, like water!

Spike: That must have been Quine, crashing into the fountain.

PWE: Yiha went out to check what was going on, but I stayed with the eggs because I thought they needed someone to look after them. That's when I started to smell something weird!

Spike: Like burning rubber?

PWE: Exactly like burning rubber! And I heard hooves in the kitchen, which I thought was really weird, and a huge dragon roar!

Spike: The hooves were probably the pirates, and the dragon roar... was probably just a dragon roar.

PWE: When I went into the kitchen, I heard two ponies go into the living room, but I didn't see anything! And when I went into the living room, I heard two ponies go into the nursery, but I still didn't see anything! And when I went into the nursery, I saw that an egg was missing!

Spike: Ruh roh.

PWE: So I ran outside, and I did see two ponies galloping away with Yiha's egg! So I followed them, all the way back to Westside Cave!

Spike: And they didn't notice you?

PWE: Nope! And when they handed the minotaur the egg, I followed the minotaur deeper into the caves, even past some slimy water!

Spike: It was more than slimy.

PWE: Hey, what happened to that minotaur, anyway?

Spike: Oh, uh, turns out the minotaur was the pony you saw in the pool. She was using another illusion.

PWE: Oh. Well, when the minotaur got to that part of the cave and put the egg down, I tried to take it back and get away. But you saw how that worked out. And then you showed up!

Spike: Hold on a minute, you followed the egg all the way from Yiha's house, into Westside Caves, through tunnels, through _water_, up a ladder, and Marquise only saw you when you tried to take it back?

PWE: Yep! I'm sneaky!

Spike: I have to hand it to you, Palla-Walla, that's pretty darn sneaky.

PWE: I know! I love sneaking about. I'm just like a cat, you know? I stalk things!

Spike: Er, yeah. That's great.

PWE: I'm such a stalker! I love stalking things. I think stalking is my special talent, I really do!

Spike: ...That would be some cutie mark.

PWE: Think about it: Palla-Walla Ellis, stalker and sneak extraordinaire! I'll be the world's best stalker! No one will ever see me!

Spike: If I get any money from this rescue I'm using some of it to buy you a dictionary.

//A spear points at my face.

Pony Who Says Halt: You, halt! After that little incident, I'm not letting even one of you scalescum out of my sight for a moment.

//WOW. WHAT AN ABSOLUTE PRICK. KILL HIM.

//...This city always seems to sneak up on me.
PWSH: What is your business here? Speak quickly!
//I guess the best response is to be calm.
Spike: Spike, returning Hero. In tow, missing egg, mayor's daughter.
//The guardstallion's mood changes considerably.
PWSH: The mayor's daughter! Miss Ellis, is that you?
PWE: Yep!
PWSH: Come right this way! Your father has been waiting in city hall all night, he's very worried about you, Miss Ellis.
PWE: Oh, great.

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//City hall, hewn from granite and placed in the center of Forlegsandria. It's rather far from the dragon district; I hope we can get this over with quickly because I have an egg to return.
Spike: ...Do you guys really have to stand that close to me?
Other Pony: It's not by choice, trust us.
PWSH: You're a suspicious character.
Spike: I rescued the mayor's daughter and a stolen egg!
Other Pony: Right. And why would a _dragon_ of all people want to do those things?
//What, a dragon can't have a sense of morality?
PWE: Ugh, old people are so dumb about these things!
//Hearing his daughter, the mayor looks up. He leaps from the place he was sitting and embraces the young filly.
Mayor: Palla-Walla! Oh, my Palla-Walla!
PWE: Dad, you're embarrassing me.
//She hugs him back anyways.
//I tug my arm out of the grip of the guardstallions.
Spike: Uh, can anyone point me to the dragon district? I want to meet someone there.
Other Pony: (Someone who likes omelets?)
PWSH: (No, must be a bad parent.)
OP: (Figures. Who could expect a predator animal to care for their young?)
//Ignoring the idiots behind me, I speak a little louder:
Spike: I'm trying to find a dragon named Jebed. Does anyone know where she lives? Scratch that, I'll settle; anyone heard of a dragon named Jebed? Or Yiha?
//At the mention of Yiha's name, Jebed raises her head and looks at me.
//...Why are there two empty barrels of wine on the city hall reception desk?
//Jebed rushes over to me immediately, inspecting the egg quickly, and me with a curious eye. The guardstallions grip their spears a little bit closer.
Mayor: Where were you this whole time? What happened?
PWE: It's okay, Dad! I got into an adventure at Westside Cave but Spike rescued me!
Mayor: That dragon over there saved you?
JBD: So it was Spike, that was your name?
Spike: Yeah! Have you heard of me?
JBD: ...Excuse my memory, lack of sleep has not helped its function. But you were the one who rescued the little filly?
//...I suppose it's nothing to be disappointed about. A leader of a bunch of people can't be expected to know everyone.
Spike: Yeah, so you can also call me 'Hero'. Was this the egg you were looking for?
//Jebed inspects me instead of the egg.
JBD: Spike, hand me the egg, you're about to collapse.
Spike: What?
JBD: Your knees are wobbling, and you're in a terrible condition, so give me the egg, quickly.
Spike: Nonsense, I feel fine!
JBD: Egg!
//I sigh and take the sling off, holding it out for Jebed.
Spike: I don't know what the fuss is all about, but if you really--

The Drakeling gives into pain! The Drakeling collapses!

PWE: Spike!
Mayor: Whoa! Is he okay?
JBD: I doubt it.
//Huh... usually when people collapse they also faint. Why couldn't I have done that?
//Jebed hangs the sling around her neck, cradling the egg with a front leg.
JBD: It looks like he's fainted.
Spike: Hhhhhhhhrnrngghhh.
//My mouth is pressed up against the floor, so I can't make any intelligible sound. Even moving the
tiniest muscle right now would require the world's greatest effort.
JBD: Oh, I suppose not. You should call a paramedic anyway, Mayor Ellis, one who knows dragon
anatomy.
Mayor: Do we have one of those? In the city guard?
PWSH: I sincerely doubt it, sir. For the purposes you're intending at least.
Mayor: Then get me the next closest thing, as fast as you can. It's an emergency!
PWSH: Yes, Mr. Mayor. I'll fetch the veterinarian.
//The guard pony runs off. If the mayor takes Jebed's word into consideration so highly, why is it
illegal for dragons to work in Forlegsandria? Because of the prevalence of ponies like the guards?
Mayor: Can you see what's wrong with him?
JBD: Besides his decision-making skills?
Spike: Hng!
JBD: His finger is smashed beyond use; he has maybe six cuts or so that have been sealed off with
dragonfire, which isn't sanitary at all; he's been struck in the head rather badly from the looks of it;
there are glass shards wedged between the scales of his hand; from the sound of his breathing I'd
say something got at his lungs and overall he is just a bruised, beaten mess.
//Jebed turns my head during her inspection and I manage to wiggle my mouth free of the floor.
Spike: If someone could turn me over, I think I'd breathe better.
JBD: Certainly.
//Jebed turns me over. The jade bracelet around her claw dangles in my face, grey ankh swinging
from side to side.
//Mayor Ellis, Palla-Walla, Jebed and another two guardsponies are all standing about; it's too late
at night and the day's been too long to do much of anything. Twilight is at the other end of the
room, inspecting an engraving with her hood up.
Mayor: What about you, Palla-Walla? Are you hurt?
PWE: No, Dad, I'm fine. Kinda tired from the walking, though.
Mayor: Walking? From where?
PWE: Dad, I'm really alright! You can stop hugging me now.
Mayor: Never! Not if it means losing you again.
//Palla-Walla sighs.
PWE: We walked here from Westside Cave, the faraway entrance! There was a big bad minotaur
Spike defeated in there, and I guess a bunch of pirates?
//Oh, right, the pirates!
Spike: If you get about twenty minutes into Westside Cave from the entrance nearest town you'll
come across two ponies who are tied up, one of them has a broken knee and a bad burn. They...
likely won't be happy to see you. They stole Yiha's egg.
//I hope nothing's happened to them... nothing like Wafa, at least.
Mayor: Send a detachment into the caves and find them, I want those thieves arrested.
Pony Who Gets One Line: Yes, sir!
//PWGOL leaves.

JBD: And, Miss Ellis, you said something about a minotaur?
PWE: Yeah, but the minotaur turned out just to be a pony, I guess?
Spike: Illusionist. You're, uh, not going to find much of her. Water spirit got to her, ever heard of a Kelpie?
//Jebed narrows her eyes and snorts.
JBD: Was it Wafa?
Spike: Yeah. You know her by _name_?
//I haven't paid much attention to it before but Jebed is a bronze dragon. Are bronze dragons the ones who love to swim?
JBD: That girl has been causing trouble for decades now, saying she'll give travelers the ability to breathe underwater. She just drowns them.
Spike: Delightful.

Mayor: No matter what kind of troubles you've struggled through, Yiha's egg is back here safe, and so is my Palla-Walla. You're exactly the sort of dragon this city needs more of. Such bravery in these troubled times deserves some sort of reward.
//I try to wave my hand but my muscles are out to lunch.
Spike: No reward necessary, Mr. Mayor, I'm a Hero. It's my duty.
//What I really want is to find someone who knows me, and I've already worked towards that by impressing Jebed and the mayor. There's bound to be some way to track the old me down...
//Twilight coughs from the other side of the room, shaking an empty bookbag.
Spike: Oh, er, yeah, I'll take cash or credit.
Mayor: Of course, I'll have it delivered to... are you staying anywhere?
//...You know, I hadn't thought of that.
JBD: He'll be staying with me, until he recovers.
//Sweet!
Spike: I wouldn't want to impose.
JBD: (I'm going somewhere with this.)
Spike: (I wanted to talk to you after this anyway, so okay. Go ahead.)
JBD: But I believe the recovering Hero has a more substantial request for you, Mayor Ellis.
Spike: (I do?)
//Jebed unnoticeably taps me with a claw in a bruised spot. I twitch for a moment and then realign my eyes. So bright...
Mayor: He does? I'm willing to hear anything from the one who brought my Palla-Walla back to me.
Spike: Oh, uh... this whole incident wouldn't have happened today if R-- the Avatar of Speed hadn't attacked the greater half of the dragon district, right?
JBD: Spike, you can't ask him to hold the Avatar of Speed responsible for the fight in the dragon district. She is, but she's above the law.
//Darn, I guess she really is one of the Princess's knights... if I can't get justice for my dragon brethren, is there really anything else?
Spike: So, a new fountain would be nice...
JBD: (I was thinking some sort of phrase including the word, 'employment'.)
Spike: (Oh, yeah!)
//MORON THINK ABOUT A DRAGON BESIDES YOURSELF ONCE IN A WHILE
Spike: What if there weren't as many dragons hanging about in the dragon district in the middle of the day? Because they were working?
//Jebed smiles. Yay, I'm not getting poked again!
Mayor: Yes, the law preventing employers from hiring non-pony labor. I know it well.
JBD: And yet you've done nothing about it, Ellis.
Mayor: The law was put in place years ago, by one of my predecessors. He was worried about the population explosion and the availability of jobs for unskilled pony labor.

JBD: No, he was a demagogue who established tyranny of the majority in order to get re-elected. I heard the rhetoric. Frankly, it's better now that he's dead, because you can fix this.

PWE: I never knew heroic rewards came with all this free exposition!

//Where did she learn that?

Mayor: Pony population growth hasn't slowed in the time since he governed. If I introduce legislation reversing the ban, every pony this side of Canterlot who works a blue horsecollar job will be furious with me!

JBD: You're saying dragons should suffer for the betterment of ponies?

Mayor: Jebed, you know how they'll react. Like it or not, most Forlegsandrians _are_ ponies. I can see the attack ads now: 'Mayor Ellis puts the needs of a small minority ahead of the needs of the majority of Forlegsandria citizens'. How am I supposed to respond to that?!

JBD: 'I did what was _right_'.

PWE: Dad! You can't do something just because it's easy! You have to be like a Hero, and do what you know is right even if sometimes it hurts!

//Still, probably a good idea to avoid water spirits.

//The Mayor sighs. His own daughter joining the discussion must have swayed him.

Mayor: You're right. Both of you. I'll start drafting a bill the first thing tomorrow. Even if it'll lose me the election, I have to do what's right.

//Most Forlegsandrians are ponies? There must be fewer dragons here than I thought. Or maybe there are more ponies.

Spike: Won't the sudden competition for jobs cause tension between ponies and dragons?

JBD: True peace is not merely the absence of tension, Spike; it is the presence of justice. Besides, if ponies and dragons can make an attempt to understand each other better, as we have, harmony is possible.

Mayor: Heh, a few lonely hours spent between two old, terrified parents worrying about their progeny can get anybody closer together.

Spike: (Also, two entire barrels of wine.)

JBD: (That was mostly me.)

PWE: Oh, come on! A romantic pairing is such a cheesy way to end a tale of discrimination and hatred!

Mayor: What?!

JBD: No!

Mayor: You don't know what you're talking about!

JBD: That's not what's happening here!

Mayor: Palla-Walla, be quiet!

JBD: That's disgusting!

Mayor: I most agree!

//Prudes!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]
//The roof of Jebed's house in Forlegsandria, turned bright orange and gold by the setting sun. Flat sheets of wood lie broken all around me.
Spike: I'm sorry, Twilight, I'm not getting this new technique. I think it's a dud.
T: Take a minute, then, and calm yourself down.
Spike: No, I want to keep trying. I can get it. I know it.
T: Remember when I said you had to learn how to keep your composure?
Spike: I'm trying, I'm trying!
T: It's not because I'm trying to get you to be more pleasant -- comments aside -- but because the punch relies on having a clear head. You have to be mentally untroubled for the technique to work.
Spike: Great, so I'm never going to get it.
T: Don't say that, Spike. After all, you've already done it once before.
Spike: I have?
T: The sorceress? You were wondering what that punch was that defeated her; this technique is that punch given a name and consistency.
Spike: Celestia's wings, I'd love to do that type of damage with every punch...
T: Steady yourself again, on the ground and in your head. Spread your legs a little more, and move your torso back. Hold the pose, and... punch!
//The wood splinters into hundreds of little pieces, scattering off into the wind and onto the rooftop!
[Fist of Justice] was mastered!
//The first thing that's gone right this week...
Spike: Fist of Justice, I can shorten that. Taste my Justfist!
T: I've created a monster.
//Twilight picks small bits of wood out of her mane.
Spike: Drink deep from the cup of my Justfists, fiend! Hyaa!
T: Poetic recounts of the tale of the Sixteenth Disciple of Discord, Josh, say he destroyed an entire castle from the base with this one punch, killing everyone inside.
Spike: Justice... yay...
PWE: Spike! Spike!
//Palla-Walla comes trotting up the stairs, hauling a great sack of bits on her back.
PWE: It came, it came, it came!
Spike: Hey, the reward! Oh, there are smaller bags inside, that's a relief.
T: Cough, cough.
Spike: Palla-Walla, can you do me a favor? Take one of the smaller bags, go to a bookstore, pick up a dictionary, and, what else, uh... I'll give you a list.
T: Made one already.
//Palla-Walla Ellis grabs the list and holds it against her forehead, like a salute.
PWE: On it, Sir Spike!
//Sir?
//Palla-Walla dashes off.
Spike: So, at least something good came out of my stay here.
T: Give yourself some more credit, Spike. You saved two people's flanks, remember? And Mayor Ellis _is_ drafting a bill to enforce non-discriminatory hiring practices, no matter what his spokesponies say.
Spike: And where has that got me? Right back where I was in the first place! Forty percent of all
dragons in Equestria, and not even one of them has heard of me!
//Twilight looks up, eye on the sky.
T: Cirrus, darn it. There's a storm coming.
Spike: Huh?
//She shakes her head, dismissing that thought. Little bits of wood fall out of her hair.
T: Spike... if there were someone, who knew you very well before any of this happened... would you be interested in that person?
//Why is she being obtuse?
Spike: Uh, I know we were friends, Twilight. But I have to find more than one person who knew me. Part of being objective is getting information from multiple sources, so it's not like I don't trust you or anything. I just have to find someone else, because... I don't want to ask you about the old me, because whatever small part of me you knew would become all of who I am now.
//If that makes sense.
//Twilight bites down on her lip, hard, trying not to say something. 'Swings, I should probably continue before she starts to bleed...
Spike: Besides, you're an important pony! I would never dream to waste your time! Even this week, there must be plenty of friends who are worried about not hearing back from you in so long.
T: Uh...
Spike: Students who haven't had a lesson in a while?
T: Well...
Spike: Romantic partner wondering where you've gone?
T: Y'see, that...
Spike: Important work you've left untouched for your job?
T: ...Spike, it's really no problem! I've had fun coming here to Forlegsandria and --
Spike: Watching me get the snot kicked out of me?
T: -- basically, yeah, but I've also managed to scrounge up some new macroeconomics textbooks, and I'm helping the mayor plan the bill and its following incentives to make sure it sticks. Even if he'll lose the upcoming election.
Spike: Won't whoever is mayor next just repeal the law anyway?
T: ...Don't worry about me, Spike, I'm keeping busy. We'll be on the road soon enough, I'm sure.
//Twilight puts up her hood as Jebed approaches from the sky. She lands on the splintered wood, folding her wings and nodding.
JBD: Hello, Spike. Hello, road scholar who for her own reasons has yet to tell me her name.
T: I'll get back to you on that.
JBD: Mmm. What is all this broken wood for, Spike, are practicing your technique?
Spike: Nope, mastered it. Hyaa!
JBD: Looks dangerous. Mind if we talk inside?

//Jebed, Yiha and I sit around a basic table with a few shelves of spices and crude utensils hanging by the window; this is the kitchen. After Yiha and I finish eating she goes to rest on her eggs; the meat necessary to sustain Jebed wouldn't fit through the doorway and barely does she. Twilight Sparkle is in the living room, reading a book.
JBD: Why are phoenix never lonely?
Spike: Uh... if you said 'always', the answer would be 'because they can never spend the rest of their life with someone'...
JBD: Because they're never without a date!
//From the other room, Twilight laughs.
Spike: ...I don't get it.
JBD: Botany joke. The palms that give the date fruit are of the genus Phoenix.
Spike: Oh, that's clever. The most terrifying beast in the world is one that no one has ever seen, or ever heard, has no odor, and as soon as it touches you, you die. It can jump over thousands of miles in an instant, get through any locked door or barricade, and can destroy entire empires with just one
strike. So great is its terror that some people get very rich telling others that they know someone who will not defeat the beast, but can make you survive the beast’s attack. What is its name?

JBD: I’m thinking of an intangible, maybe ‘War’...

Spike: Is that your guess?

JBD: No. Death?

Spike: Ah, yep. I'm out of riddles.

JBD: Three riddles? That's all? I understand Hero and 'dragon sitting atop a mound of priceless treasure asking riddles of an entering Hero' are likely mutually exclusive roles, but three is not many riddles for even a Hero to know. Two good ones, maybe; the riddle of the sphinx hardly counts as a riddle anymore and I doubt any keeper will be asking it.

Spike: Should I tell Palla-Walla to get a book of riddles as well?

JBD: Couldn't hurt.

Spike: How did you get so good with riddles, Jebed? You don't seem the type to lie around reading books.

//Jebed shrugs, and her eyes wander.

JBD: I've sat atop a few treasures in my day.

//Twilight stifles a laugh. Jebed calls to her:

JBD: Oh, ha ha ha, no, you silly mare. Well, _yes_, but no. That's not what I meant.

Spike: What?

T: Don't worry about it.

//I have no idea what happened here.

JBD: I hope you've enjoyed your stay here so far, Spike. At the very least I hope it wasn't dreadfully boring.

Spike: No! It wasn't at all, I... I'm just a little disappointed we couldn't find anyone who knows me. That's all.

JBD: (Spike, you already know someone who knows you.)

Spike: (Oh, Twi? Sure, she knows me, but I don't know her.)

//Jebed gives me one eye, oddly.

JBD: (I don't follow.)

Spike: (I hit my head and lost my memory. I'm trying to find someone who met me before that.)

JBD: (Lost your...?)

//Jebed waves her neck back and forth as she ponders. She glances once at the stairs that lead to Yiha's nursery room.

JBD: (I had imagined a... different situation than that for you, young drakeling. But you did arrive here with this mare -- Twi, was it? Maybe she knew you?)

Spike: (She says so. But what kind of idiot would I be to trust the first person I meet after waking up?)

//She smiles, still keeping her teeth in. It's a very patronizing (matronizing?) effect.

JBD: (You are cleverer than you first present, little Hero.)

//Thanks, really.

JBD: (But are you truly sure it was a blow to the head that happened to you? It seems exceedingly rare that blunt force trauma, nevermind the world's most precise surgical tools, could leave you with everything but memory. As far as I can tell, besides the odd desire to be a Hero, you are a functioning dragon.)

//It's not that odd...

Spike: (Yeah, that's what happened. Celestia told me.)

//A quick pause.

JBD: (I'm sorry, come again?)

Spike: (Celestia appeared to me in a vision, said I lost my memory, and then told me to be a Hero.)

//NO SHE TOLD YOU TO KILL SHIT, YOU TACKED THAT ON.

//I force the hot buzzing down in my head.

//THAT'S NOT ME, THAT'S THE COGNITIVE DISSONANCE.
Jebed pauses for a long while, looking at me from the corner of her eye.

JBD: (...Seeing a vision of Celestia does sound more like a blow to the head.)

Well, if there aren't any dragons in this area who could know me, where else do dragons live?

Spike: (Uh, Jebed? Can I ask you a question?)

Jebed moves her head in, raising an eyebrow.

JBD: (Go ahead.)

Spike: (You know that huge silver dragon who was in the district the other day, Quine?)

JBD: (Hm, yes, I know him.)

Spike: (Do you think he accepts apprentices?)

Jebed leans back, tapping a claw against her chin. I look over to the living room; Twilight is still quietly reading.

JBD: (Go ahead.)

Spike: (Uh, Jebed?

JBD: (Hm, yes, I know him.)

Spike: (Can I ask you a question?)

Jebed moves her head in, raising an eyebrow.

JBD: (Go ahead.)

Spike: (You know that huge silver dragon who was in the district the other day, Quine?)

JBD: (Hm, yes, I know him.)

Spike: (Do you think he accepts apprentices?)

Jebed leans back, tapping a claw against her chin. I look over to the living room; Twilight is still quietly reading.

JBD: (Well, I've never heard of it, and I don't remember Quine mentioning such an idea when I've spoken with him, considering that he is a rather busy dragon.)

Spike: (That's why I was asking. He was saying something earlier about fighting against the Avatar of Strength, and a dragon who can fight toe to toe with an Avatar is a dragon I want to know.)

If I'm going to challenge Princess Hazel to get my memories back, I need someone who can get me to that level...

JBD: (...But I don't see why he wouldn't, if a person showed promise and willingness to learn. The Aquinatic Mountains are a dangerous place for a dragon to be, though, so visiting him would be no easy task.)

Spike: I think I can find it on my map, here...

JBD: (Those you'll find there are true dragon's dragons. They're traditionalists and fierce, through and through.)

If I'm more than a little glad the Aquinatic Mountains are far away.

JBD: And he would likely set forth some sort of task to prove your... ah, that's perfect, and it's on the way.

Spike: Do you already know what he's going to say to me? Are you two, uh, that close?

JBD: ...No, if you're asking what I think; Quine was a full dragon when I was a hatchling, he was a full dragon when my grandmother was a hatchling, and from what I understand he was a full dragon when my twelfth ancestor was a hatchling.

But he is an old fashioned dragon, and there is only one thing an old fashioned dragon likes more than obtaining a new item for his hoard.

Spike: (I'm guessing 'training an aspiring whelp' isn't it.)

JBD: Recovering an item stolen from him. If you look on your map, two thirds of the way to the Aquinatics from here, a valley should be marked.

Spike: 'The Valley of Death'. Ironic nickname for a spa center and resort, I'm hoping?

JBD: A necklace was stolen from Quine as he was visiting the graveyards and mausoleums there.

Are we talking a Quine-sized necklace, or a me-sized necklace?

JBD: It is a simple grey ankh on a string, like this one on my wrist without the jade. Return it to him, and that should be a more than satisfactory test of your abilities.

Spike: Okay. What does the ankh represent? Is it magical?

JBD: Not magic, no. As for what it represents, Quine can tell you more about it than I can.

Spike: Cool, I get to join the 'powerful dragon club', when's membership due?

JBD: 'Powerful dragon club'? Sure, membership dues are an early grave and a chapter in the biography of Princess Hazel.

What?

Spike: The Princess has killed dragons?

JBD: Dozens. You don't know? That is how she gained her power after the disappearance of Princess Celestia, by hunting dragons who had a sizable territory and collected enough tribute from ponies to be notable. Then she did the same thing, except territory was 'protectorate of Equestria' and tribute was 'taxes'. She personally put over a hundred dragons underground, a few thousands
out of a home or land, and got famous doing it. (Of course, that's not to say some of them didn't
deserve it, but still...)//I clench my fists.
Spike: Hazel...
JBD: Now, some people say revenge is unhealthy, inefficient, and breeds a cycle of hate that never
stops. Me? I believe criminals need to be brought to justice to prevent crime from spreading. It
might just be a difference of opinion.

//On the road. A small bag of bits bounces against my leg, as does a larger satchel of books. The
atlas is in my hands.
T: So, any idea?
Spike: Half of these roads don't exist anymore! What kind of atlas is this?
T: 'Martholemew's Historical Atlas, Thirde Centurie', apparently.
Spike: Dangit, Palla-Walla!
//I left the greater sack of bits with Palla-Walla, mostly because Jebed refused it. Told her to buy a
statue for the fountain with the reward instead of waiting on city officials; said a statue of a dragon
and a pony dancing would be best. Palla-Walla's a good kid, but I hope she doesn't screw that up
too.
slashesAnd I didn't even get my book of riddles!
T: We're a few days out from anywhere.
Spike: It's getting greener, we must be coming up on a river.
T: Which one?
Spike: Uh, depends on how many we passed. Do you remember?
//The scenery around here is plains, plains, plains, and plains. Imagine someone who hasn't had
water in two days creaking the word 'shrubbery' and you have a pretty good sense of the place. It's
not a desert of any sort, but you start to miss the color green after a while.
T: We're lost. Wait, don't dragons have magnetoception? Like birds, you can tell where the planet's
magnetic field is pointing?
Spike: That's at full dragon stage, and only when the moon is waxing. You'd know that if you read
the anatomy textbook.
T: Uh, what anatomy textbook is that, again?
Spike: 'The Truth About Dragons', by Terry Fick.
T: Well-known humor writer. Is there one book in that entire bag that isn't useless?
Spike: I don't know, 'The Real Princess Hazel' is kind of interesting.
T: Ugh, not that crap. There is some truth in there, but it's nearly impossible to pick out between
the propaganda, vile distaste of ponykind, and outright slander.
Spike: The bias is rather noticeable. But I don't think it's all that bad.
T: At some point, she has sex with a cat.
Spike: I have not yet read to that point, so thank you, now I don't have to.
T: Let's see what else there is.
//Twilight levitates a book out of the satchel, and frowns at it for a moment.
T: Wow, I can't believe it. They were selling this?
Spike: Let me guess: more crap?
T: No, actually. It's a PhD thesis on the movement of dragon populations during and after the
disappearance event, extremely well thought out and researched. So well, in fact, that it was
declared 'expository of military information' and recalled a week before it was about to hit shelves.
Spike: That sounds... very useful, actually.
T: You're lucky to have it. You know that big bag of money the mayor gave you as a reward? This
is worth at least three of those, and that's just what the government would give you to take it off the
market. Dragon hunters would give you at least twice that.
Spike: Dragon hunters...?
T: Yeah, illegal. Do you still have the telescope on you?
I take out the telescope and inspect it.
Spike: A little damage from the water, but yeah. Why?
T: I think the river is coming up.
I put the telescope to my eye.
Spike: Celestia's wings! Someone is getting attacked by three odd, blurry monsters on the other side of the river!
As she disappears, Twilight says:
T: Rotate the telescope, Spike.
Spike: Celestia's wings! A few blurs are getting attacked by three ponies on the other side of the river!

I dash towards the scene of the assault, but a pony with a knife in her mouth and a green bandana leaps up from under the bridge!
Spike: What do you want?! Get out of the way!
Knifeholder: Gotta pay th' toll t' pass, scalescum.
Scalescum?!
Spike: Toll? For what?!
KN: Th' bridge.
Spike: This isn't a toll bridge.
KN: It's m'bridge. I own it.
Spike: This bridge was built six hundred years ago for a settlement that wasted away four years after the bridge was built; no one owns this crap now.
Spike: I'll tell you what you can do with your stupid ancestors...
As I curse out the pony I reach into my coinbag, pulling out a handful of bits. I throw it at the crook, uncaring.
Spike: Fine! Take this; I have to go!
KN: Toll's more.
Spike: How much?!
KN: How much y'got?
Spike: I don't have time for this!
KN: You a drakelin'?
Spike: Ugh, great, this again.
KN: Toll's more f'you.
Spike: Oh, do go on, I wonder what it could be.
KN: Toll's love. Twice or mebbe three times, depen' how I feel.
Spike: I'm glad you called it 'love' and not 'violation', that really changes my opinion on the whole 'mating against my will' deal. What do you do to people who don't pay the toll?
KN: Stab 'em.
Spike: Well, you're welcome to try.

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

The pony attacks!
The Pony charges at The Drakeling!
The Pony slashes at The Drakeling in the upper right arm with her -iron knife-, but he jumps away!
The Pony rushes by The Drakeling!
The Drakeling strikes at The Pony in the lower body with his Dashing Rogue Punch, bruising the muscle and bruising the guts!
The Pony looks sick!
The Pony slashes at The Drakeling in the upper body with her -iron knife-, tearing apart the muscle through the scale!

//Kyaah! That hurt! I can't last long against that kind of weaponry, so let's end this quickly!

The Drakeling breathes fire! The Pony dodges away from the flames!

//Uh oh.

The Pony kicks The Drakeling in the left lower leg, bruising the muscle and bruising the scale!
The Drakeling breathes fire! The Pony dodges away from the flames!

//This mare is solidly built, and quick on her feet. It's a tough fight, but stay calm... staying calm is the way...

The Pony charges at The Drakeling!
The Pony kicks at The Drakeling in the right upper leg, bruising the scale!
The two tangle together and fall over!
The Pony comes out on top!

The Drakeling grabs The Pony by the neck with his left hand!
The Pony grabs The Drakeling by the upper body with her right front hoof!
The Drakeling is pinned!

//Calm, maintain composure... the right timing is necessary to destroy evil and bring virtue.

KN: The toll'll be taken.

The Pony lowers her lower body onto The Drakeling's lower body, pinning it!

//Strike.

The Drakeling strikes at The Pony in the mouth with his Fist of Justice, shattering the upper front teeth and jamming the -iron knife- down the throat!
The Pony swallows the -iron knife-!

Spike: Justice tastes like iron; who knew?

The Pony looks sick!
The Pony is having trouble breathing!

KN: Ahhck... Heeeehck, ck, heeee...
Spike: Uh, if I could ask you a favor, could you, say, get off me while you're slowly dying?

The Pony coughs up blood on The Drakeling's face!

Spike: Guess it was too much to ask.

The -iron knife- stabs The Pony from the inside, tearing the muscle and tearing apart the right lung!
The Pony is having more trouble breathing!

Spike: Uh, hey, bad idea, bad idea! No!

The Pony collapses! The Pony's upper body pins The Drakeling by the upper body!
The Drakeling grabs The Pony by the right front leg with his right hand!
The Drakeling tries to stand up but The Pony is in the way!
Spike: Get! Off of me! Please!

The Pony vomits up blood on The Drakeling's face!
//In my mouth!! Oh Celestia, why?!
The -iron knife- stabs The Pony from the inside, tearing apart the stomach and tearing apart the right kidney!
The Pony gives into pain! The Pony faints!
//Pinned... by the body...

The Pony has been defeated!
Spike earned 300 experience points!
Spike is now level 7!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//In the middle of the road just before the bridge across a river from where innocent people are being attacked, my face is covered in the blood of the pony whose corpse is currently pinning me to the ground and making it hard to breathe.
T: Well, this is certainly something to come back to.
Spike: Crushing... everything...
//I dance my body about underneath the pony, even my legs, but can't manage to get the body off of me. Did I underestimate how much pony a pony was, overestimate how much dragon I was, or did I ever know either?
T: If you wanted _that_, there were plenty of opportunities before now to get it.
Spike: Less sarcasm... more help?
T: But it looks like you're having so much fun!
Spike: Twilight.
//Twilight puts a hoof on the corpse and shoves it off me with ease.
T: Celestia's wings, are you sure you really won that fight?
Spike: A pony vomited blood in my mouth. I'm not sure of anything right now.
//I lean over the side of the road and try to spit the blood out of my mouth. Then, I seal the large gash on my torso with dragonfire.
T: Didn't Jebed mention that was unsanitary?
Spike: So's bleeding to death. I've got to go!
//I scramble over the bridge, running to where the fight across the river is happening.

//A drakeling is cowering behind the broken body of a sizable full dragon, as two ponies and a unicorn all with green bandanas advance, leaving two other ponies in armor bleeding on the ground behind them. One of the ponies has a knife in his mouth.
Spike: What's going on here? Tell me!
Cowering Drakeling: Help! They attacked us from nowhere and killed Mr. Mortani!
Spike: Is this true?
Strange Unicorn: Of course not! We're tax collectors.
Spike: You look nothing like tax collectors.
SU: Tithes of 100% income are to be paid to Alipheese the Magnificent under penalty of death, standing order of Saccr-Ulkip effective to any passerby in the region.
Spike: Actual tax collectors don't kill people or impose 100% payments. You're just bandits!
SU: Word definitions belong to Alipheese the Magnificent just as all goods belong to Alipheese the Magnificent. For She is Great and will bring about End Times.
//A cult. Exactly what I needed today.
Spike: Ugh, you're probably going to have to help me with the three of them.
CD: I don't know if I can help you all that much.
Spike: Can you breathe fire?
CD: No.
Spike: What do you mean, 'no'?!
CD: I'm carrying a clutch; I can't breathe fire.
Spike: Can you fight?
CD: I'm a nurse, this isn't my element!
Spike: So no help at all?
CD: What do you expect from me?!
Spike: At some point during the battle, I don't know, throw rocks or something? Anything?
SU: Throw rocks... that sounds like a good idea.

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

Sacrr-Ulkip speaks a word of power, forming symbols in the air! A massive chunk of stone rises from the ground, forming a boulder!

Sacrr-Ulkip throws a boulder at The Drakeling (Spike)! The Drakeling (Spike) leaps away from the flying boulder! The Drakeling (????) leaps away from the flying boulder! The spinning boulder strikes the body of Mr. Mortani in the upper body, bruising the muscle, jamming the left true ribs through the heart and tearing apart the heart!

//HERE'S A TIP: AVOID THAT.

The Drakeling (Spike) charges at The Pony (1)!
The Drakeling (Spike) punches The Pony (1) in the right front leg with his left hand, bruising the muscle and bruising the bone!
The Drakeling (Spike) collides with The Pony (1)!
The Drakeling (Spike) bounces backwards!

//If I stay near her allies, that unicorn can't keep throwing boulders at me.

The Pony (2) stabs at The Drakeling (Spike) with his +iron knife+, but the attack misses!
The Drakeling (Spike) counterattacks!
The Drakeling (Spike) kicks The Pony (2) in the upper body with his right foot, bruising the muscle and bruising the heart!

The Pony (1) kicks The Drakeling (Spike) with his left front hoof in the right hand, bruising the muscle and tearing the scale!

//Two versus one. I need to take as little damage as possible. Keep your feet moving...

The Drakeling (Spike) strikes at The Pony (2) with his Dashing Rogue Punch, but the attack misses!
The Pony (2) counterstrikes!
The Pony (2) slashes at The Drakeling (Spike) with his +iron knife+, but The Drakeling (Spike) dodges away!

The Pony (1) kicks at The Drakeling (Spike) with his left front hoof, but The Drakeling (Spike) dodges away!
The Drakeling (Spike) counterstrikes!
The Drakeling (Spike) strikes The Pony (1) in the right front leg with his Dashing Rogue Punch, shattering the bone!
An artery has been opened by the attack, a ligament has been torn, and a sensory nerve has been severed!

//Okay, one almost down, you can put this away.
The Pony (2) stabs The Drakeling (Spike) in the left foot with his +iron knife+, tearing the muscle and chipping the bone!

///FUCK SHIT GET OFF THAT FOOT I DON'T CARE WHAT ELSE IS HAPPENING GET OFF THAT FOOT
///Yow, that hurt! I have to take that knife out of the fight!

The Drakeling (Spike) breathes fire! The Pony (2) is caught in the dragonfire! The +iron knife+ heats up, burning The Pony (2)'s mouth to a crisp!

The Pony (2) drops the +iron knife+!
The Drakeling (Spike) kicks the +iron knife+ with his left foot, and the item flies off in an arc!

Saccr-Ulkip speaks a word of power, forming symbols in the air! A massive chunk of stone rises from the ground, forming a boulder! Saccr-Ulkip throws a boulder at The Drakeling (Spike)!

The Drakeling (Spike) leaps away from the flying boulder!
The spinning boulder strikes The Pony (1) in the upper body! It collapses into a lump of gore!
The Pony (1) has been struck down!

///Woah! Not afraid of a little friendly fire, then. I can't keep dodging around with my bad foot, but if I get this punch just right...

The Drakeling (Spike) strikes The Pony (2) in the head with his Dashing Rogue Punch, bruising the muscle and tearing apart the upper spine's nervous tissue!
The Pony (2) collapses!

///Not the punch I was expecting, but hey, if it-- waa-ah!

The Drakeling (Spike) collapses!

///Calm down, it was just your foot. Get back on your knees, at least. It's all fine.
\Except for the unicorn who's about to turn you into a red smear on the road with easy target practice.

Saccr-Ulkip speaks a word of power, forming symbols in the air! A massive chunk of stone rises from the ground, forming a boulder!

///Nah, I'm not worried.

CD: What are you doing?! Get up! She's throwing another boulder at you!
///The drakeling runs over to me and hauls me to my feet.
Spike: You know, us being in the same boulder-sized area is probably not the best idea.

Saccr-Ulkip throws a boulder at The Drakeling (Spike)!

CD: Aaaaaaaaaah!
Spike: But I refuse to submit to evil.

The Drakeling (Spike) strikes at the boulder in the stone with his Fist of Justice!
The spinning boulder strikes The Drakeling in the right hand, bruising the muscle and bruising the bone!
The Drakeling (Spike) punches the boulder in the stone with his right hand, shattering the stone into a pile of rubble! The severed parts fly off in arcs!
The Drakeling (Spike) is knocked over and tumbles backwards!
The Drakeling (Spike) slams into The Drakeling (???)! The Drakeling (???) is knocked over and tumbles backwards!

/Saccr-Ulkip smiles, eying me. Celestia, why do all of my enemies have the most deranged smiles? Doesn't evil come with dental? Or mental?

Saccr-Ulkip speaks a word of power, forming symbols in the air! Saccr-Ulkip disappears!

Spike: What?! Invisibility?! CD: No, I don't... smell that? Lavender. Spike: Is all this smell/magic stuff common knowledge, or am I running continuously into the world's olfactomancers? CD: Lavender is the smell of teleportation. She's gone. Spike: You're sure? CD: Sure as my name is Celel Dracos, yes.

The Bandits were defeated! Spike earned 500 experience points! Spike is now level 8!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

Spike: Celel Dracos. CD: It's an old name. Spike: Must be; you don't meet many people nowadays who can say 'hi, my name means: dragon'. You're sure she's gone for good? CD: Yes. Give me your foot.

Spike: Huh?

CD: I have to know what supplies to get from the cart.
//I lie back and let Celel inspect my foot, stab wound still leaking blood. She then rushes over to the overturned cart and gathers up gauze, disinfectant, and a small wooden slat.
CD: I'm going to have to pry off a scale in order to get at the wound correctly; it's going to be exposed until you regrow the scale.

Spike: Okay.
//Celel pulls out the scale from the base and puts it aside; I pick it up and inspect it. It only looks very slightly like a feather, but I see the resemblance.
CD: You haven't lost too much blood, which is good, but I'm disinfecting the area and that's going to cause some discomfort.

Spike: Okay-yaagh!
//I force myself not to kick as the disinfectant goes in the wound.
CD: Now the bone fragments need to be removed, hold as still as you can.

Spike: Bone fragments? Was it that bad?

CD: Only a small chip; they are nearly invisible shards but they must be removed... there, I think that's the last one.

Spike: I didn't even feel that. You were doing something?

CD: The disinfectant's also a local anesthetic; all that's left is to wrap the injury.
//Celel puts the slat where the scale used to be and wraps gauze around it tightly.
CD: Normally my advice would be to stay off this foot for as long as possible, but I have to ask for your help with the ponies.
//She writes the date on the slat with a small bit of charcoal.

Spike: You mean the red mush splattered all over the boulder and the guy paralyzed from the neck down? I'm sure you're a great nurse, Celel, but I don't think you can help them.

CD: I meant the others, further up the road in the armor. They were Mr. Mortani's guards.
Spike: Oh.
//I stand up, carefully putting pressure on my left foot. It aches dully and feels tight, but I can walk and probably bounce on it.
//We walk over to the ponies in the middle of the road. They are unresponsive, but I get to work on cracking their armor open.
CD: I'm sorry, but I didn't get your name.
Spike: I'm Spike.
CD: Spike, that's not necessary.
Spike: How else are you going to get at their injuries?
CD: There's nothing I can do for them. Their throats are slit.
//I lean over. How did I not notice that?
//Together we push all the ponies, and the boulder, to the side of the road in silence. I'm still carrying the armor I removed from the first pony, a helmet and shinguards, for some reason. It might just be to hold something.
Spike: Celel, are you hurt? You've been silent for a while.
CD: No, Spike, it's... it's all right.
//Celel walks over to the overturned cart and sits down, looking at her knees.
Spike: Where were you going? Is there anything else I can do?
Celel: No, it's...
//Staring at her knees, Celel forces the palms of her hands into her eyes, trying to force back tears and failing. I start thinking, finally.
Spike: Celel, you said you were carrying a clutch. I don't have much life experience, so I didn't get it, but: are you pregnant?
//Celel nods her head sadly.
Spike: Celel, I'm a Hero. This is what I do. You can ask anything of me. Where is your husband?
CD: They took him. Two pegasi with bandanas, they took him that way, during the fight.
//I put on the helmet and shinguards. A little gruesome, I know, but maybe the spirits of the dead ponies will protect me. Or maybe I'm just a vulture.
Spike: Then I'm going that way. Celel, I want to be optimistic about my chances, but you shouldn't wait up. Scavengers will start smelling the blood soon and not all of them will pass up fresh meat.
Which way were you headed?
CD: Forlegsandria way, Mr. Mortani was headed. We were following along.
Spike: Then here, take this.
//I untie the small bag of bits from my belt.
CD: No, this is--
Spike: Would you rather them have it?
CD: ...
//Reluctantly, Celel takes the bag.
Spike: When you get to Forlegsandria, look for a dragon named Jebed. Tell her Spike sent you. I'm not sure what the status of dragon employment is in Forlegsandria, but Jebed will know more. The city guard should be looking for someone who knows dragon anatomy. If I manage to get your husband out, I'll send him along the same way.
CD: Spike... thank you. I don't think I can ever thank you enough. I may never be able to repay this debt to you.
Spike: Don't thank me yet.

//The entrance to an underground lair. Strangely, there's no one guarding the entrance, and no one
just inside the door.

Why is it that every adventure takes place in a dank, dark hole in the ground filled with people who want to tear my head off? Why can't I have a 'Casino and Resort' adventure?

T: So, if I were a statistician looking at your adventure, I'd find a few interesting things to talk about.

Spike: (Quiet! I'm trying to sneak in.)

T: (For example, one hundred percent of weapons used against you have been ferrous and edged. I'm not sure two for two is a significant sample size, but I find it interesting that a large neodymium magnet at the right angle would have solved twenty-five percent of your confrontations.)

Spike: (Amazing. How loudly do you think this door creaks?)

T: (Considering the oil tin right next to it, very.)

Spike: (Oh, would you look at that.)

T: (Additionally, over ninety-seven percent of your spoils of war have gone to underage female, pro-dragon, upper to upper-middle class near strangers who you have given instruction to. If I wrote attack ads, I would have a field day with that one.)

Spike: (...Who?)

T: (Palla-Walla and Celel. I'm including everything but the armor as given away.)

Spike: (Let me see if I can squeeze through this passage without too much noise...)

T: (Another interesting statistic is that one hundred percent of opponents in combat have been pony or pony-shaped. Admittedly the last fight broke the streak of solely female combatants, but its existence was strange.)

Spike: (You know, maybe dragons do have magnet powers. Mine is for crazy bints.)

T: (So what does that make me?)

Spike: (The strongest crazy bint of them all. Hold on, I think the one at the end of the hallway saw me.)

T: (This one isn't so much of a statistic as an observation, but: you have a tendency to go on quests at the behest of dragon females. What's with that?)

Spike: (Okay, he's turning around; I don't think he saw me. Did you say something?)

T: (Any time a dragon girl has had some sort of problem you've always been there to be the Hero that saves the day.)

Spike: (I'm not sure what else you're counting, but by my count, that's been about twice. Hand me the oil tin.)

T: (You were much more enthused about saving Yiha's egg than you were concerned about the mayor's daughter.)

Spike: (...That's true, right. Maybe that was a little bit prejudiced of me.)

T: (Or you were worrying about a defenseless 'thing' before a person in trouble. Or you were thinking about the bystanders caught in the crossfire: a family with power and money versus a family with neither. It's possible that any combination could be true.)

Spike: (Uh, okay.)

T: (Which is why you've got to keep in mind the possibility you're so motivated for these quests because they benefit named dragon females. All possibilities must be considered if you want to understand your own thinking.)

Spike: (I'm sure I helped the drakeling get her husband back and the full dragon who is almost a century older than me due to latent sexual desires. Hush, I think he's coming around the corner.)

T: (That's the thing, Spike: sex doesn't have to be explicit in your thoughts or actions, but its influence can still be there subdued, subconsciously. These are all just things to keep in mind.)

Spike: (Hush!)

[[SAVE LOCATION]]
Guard Pony: Hey! Who spilled this oil here?!

The Drakeling charges at The Pony!
The Drakeling kicks The Pony in the lower body with his right foot, bruising the muscle, bruising the guts and bruising the left kidney!
The Pony looks sick!
The Drakeling collides with The Pony!
The Pony is knocked over and tumbles backwards!

The Pony kicks The Drakeling in the left lower leg with his right rear hoof, but the attack is deflected by The Drakeling's steel shinguard!

The Drakeling punches The Pony in the head with his left hand, bruising the muscle, bruising the skull and bruising the brain! The Pony gives into pain! The Pony has been knocked unconscious!
The Pony collapses!

Spike: (That was louder than I was expecting, run!)

The Guard was defeated!
Spike earned 100 experience points!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//A long way away and a little time later, I think I've lost them. A tunnel has led me to a small dungeon in the cave complex, if the bars on the other side of the room holding a male drakeling are anything to go by. A green-robed mare is speaking with another mare in armor.
Robed Mare: The preparations should be finalized within the hour. I've already discussed the matter with the Saccr.
Mare in Armor: I take it she was agreeable?
RM: It's the sixteenth of the month. She didn't really have a choice.
MA: Has the capture been drained already?
RM: Oh yes, most certainly. When I mentioned to the membership his fluid was to be extracted, they were so willing it was almost pathetic.
//Fluid? Extracted? This is some crazy cult crap, what's going on?
MA: Aw, dang. I missed it!
RM: Fear not, young acolyte. In our Greater World there will be more than enough toys for every worthy mare to play with.
//'Drained'... oh.
//_Oh_.
MA: How soon is the ceremony starting? Should I retrieve the capture?
RM: He is tied up, yes?
//The drakeling is tied to a stake, arms and torso wrapped tight and feet loosely bound.
RM: Then bring him along to the central chamber now. No reason not to that I can see.
MA: Yes, Royal Mistress.
RM: His blood and corpse will be an appetizer to Alipheese the Magnificent, to invite her to feast on our world.
//They're turning around, wait for it... wait for it... now!

The Royal Mistress points at The Drakeling and starts to cast a spell! The Royal Mistress casts Stupefy!
The Drakeling is hit by the beam! The Drakeling collapses!

RM: I see you, a thief in my caves, panting and sweating as you run through my corridors. I see your heart beating. I see you are afraid.
MA: Woah! How'd you do that?
RM: Dragons are a pathetic creature of warm blood and fake scale. And Alipheese has granted me a snake's infrared vision.
MA: Should we drain him as well? Another part of the appetizer for Lord Alipheese?
RM: No, not enough time. Drakeling fluid must be extracted conscious, and this one looks like a fighter. Just tie this one up and add him to the ceremony as is.
MA: Yes, Royal Mistress!
//The robed mare advances, readying another spell.
RM: Welcome to the Greater World, insect.

The Royal Mistress casts Stupefy!
The Drakeling is hit by the beam! The Drakeling is knocked unconscious!

Chapter End Notes

With apologies to Tarn Adams.
//HEY. HEY, ARE YOU THERE? YES? WELL MAYBE YOU SHOULD WORK ON FINDING A FUCKING WAY OUT OF THIS FANTASTIC SITUATION YOU'VE MANAGED TO PUT YOUR RANK ASS IN INSTEAD OF RESPONDING TO ME! AND WHAT WAS THAT FESTERING EXCREMENT ABOUT JUMPING FROM NOWHERE PRETENDING YOU'RE A HERO INSTEAD OF THE WORLD'S NASTIEST STAIN? I'LL TRY TO UNDERSTAND YOUR SELF-SERVING AND COWARDLY IDEA THAT HEROISM AND INTELLIGENCE ARE DIRECTLY OPPOSED, FIRSTLY BECAUSE IN YOUR CASE THEY ARE, AND SECONDLY BECAUSE WE BOTH KNOW DEEP DOWN YOU REALLY JUST WANT TO BE RIDDEN AND CROTCH-PULVERIZED BY WHATEVER FAIRY FLOWER PONY IS IN FRONT OF YOU AT THE MOMENT BECAUSE YOU ARE PATHETIC AND WEAK, BUT CAN YOU AT LEAST FUCKING ACT COMPETENT? SOMETIME, MAYBE? //Uurgh, my head. I can't tell what's making it hurt worse: the double Stupefy spell, the dragon instinct, or the constant movement. //I crack open one eye. In front of me, a drakeling with dull gold scales is bound to a stake by layers of rope around his torso and two coils around his feet, arms behind his back. The stake is carried on the backs of two ponies with green bandanas over their manes, exactly like the rest of the ponies surrounding us in the ceremony chamber except a few mares in armor and one in green robes. I am in the same predicament as my kin, trapped. Kin Trapped: Hey! Hey, are you awake? Mare in Armor: No talking! KT: Or what, you'll kill me? //Before us, on a raised stage accessed by wide stone stairs, is a tall statue of a creature I can only assume is a snake demon. The drakeling and I are placed on the front of the stage, stakes at our backs planted into holes carved into the rock. MA: I don't have to. Keep your mouth up and you'll find punishment in the Greater World. Cult Announcer: Step away! Let the offerings be gazed upon by her Lordship! //The mares retreat away from us down the steps, staring us down. KT: When I imagined my own funeral, I never thought its cause would be 'offered up by cultists to a freaky snake thing'. Spike: Ah, my head... KT: You're awake? Good, just in time for your dismemberment. Spike: Do you know what they're planning to do? KT: Kill us. Spike: Really, I had no idea. CA: As it was when Alipheese created our world, flesh must be given, in order to repay the debts we have incurred, and right the wrongs we have-- KT: (You're listening to this? I could never pay attention in Sunday school.) Spike: (They taught you about a monstrous snake demon in Sunday school?) KT: (No, Celestia. Same thing, really.) Spike: (Celestia is not a colossal snake demon.) KT: (Neither of them are going to have any effect on the near future. To the disappointment of pretty much everyone.) Spike: (Trust me, it'll only be through the power of Celestia we're getting out of here.) KT: (That will be quite a trick.) //I look around. My kinsman and I are bound to stakes in front of an audience of maybe a dozen...
cultsmares, including two armored mares, and the announcer, who I think is the Royal Mistress. To
our back is the statue and the cavern wall; far out in front is Saccr-Ulkip, observing from an
isolated entrance to the chamber. I test the restraints covertly.
Spike: (Hmm, I think they gave me too much room because of the cast. I can slip my foot out
here.)
KT: (Cast?)
//Wide-eyed, the drakeling sneaks a look at the gauze and slat on my foot. He makes a little sound
as if choking while I motion him to look away.
KT: (The date! That's my rebirth-mate's writing!)
//Wouldn't it have been easier to say 'wife'?
Spike: (Yes, she did the dressing.)
KT: (You've seen her? Where?! Tell me!)
Spike: (Celel Dracos, right? She was on the road being attacked by cultists; I managed to fight
them off but Mr. Mortani and his guards were already dead.)
KT: (Was she hurt? What happened to her?!) 
Spike: (If you'd let me get to it! She was fine so I told her to keep going towards Forlegsandria, and
I came here to rescue you!)
KT: (You're doing a damn fine job of it.)
Spike: (We're not finished yet!)
CA: --and as Alipheese has caused our cups to overflow with the beauty of life and the richness of
our world, the duty is ours to offer back in kind to fill up her goblet--
Spike: (You need to be a part in your own rescue. Can you fight?)
KT: (Not really. I'm a doctor. Was part of the Dragon Scouts as a hatchling, though, so if you have
a bow and arrow on you somewhere...)
Spike: (I'd be more interested in working with rope.)
KT: (Yeah, me too.)
Spike: (Can you breathe fire?)
KT: (No, sorry.)
Spike: (What do you mean, 'no'?!)
KT: (I can't breathe fire. I have none of it left right now. They took it all, stole it out from my
waist.)
Spike: (...What? That's how that works?)
//The doctor looks at me oddly.
KT: (Are you a free drakeling? Not bound to anyone?)
Spike: (Thought committed relationships would put a damper on the whole Hero thing.)
KT: (...I'm sorry you have to die this way.)
Spike: (I'm not dying today.)
//I breathe a little bit of fire on the back of the drakeling's ropes, disguising it as a sneeze.
KT: Aaah!
//The entire room, previously paying attention to the Speaker about to wrap up her speech, swivels
their heads to look at us.
//I raise my eyebrows, urging him to say something more.
KT: He sneezed all over me! Disgusting! Aaugh! Can I get a towel up here?
//The room swivels back to the Speaker.
KT: (No respect for hygiene...)
Spike: (What I need you to do--)
KT: (Why did you do that?! How do you know I'm not just going to burn at the stake like a witch
here?!)
Spike: ('Oh no! I might die twenty seconds earlier than I normally would!!?)
KT: (Well, you don't have to be pissy about it.)
Spike: (...Sorry. What I need you to do is -- can you move your hands?)
KT: (Hhhrk... barely.)
Spike: (Dig at the rope and try to get it to burn away. When you can break free, uh... do whatever you think would be best, I guess. Untying me would be much appreciated.)
KT: (Understood. But to warn you, I might also scream and run away from a towering snake demon if it's here.)
Spike: (Hey, it's okay. She's going to destroy the world anyway.)
CA: It is time, neonatescales, for us to enter our Lord's Greater World. Go, Goblet Keeper, and fill Her Chalice one final time with her drink, the seed of life and fire.
//A mare in a green kilt advances up the steps, green bandana around her neck like a bib.
Spike: What? Is it starting?
KT: Er... kind of, it depends what you mean.
//The Goblet Keeper stops at the top of the steps and looks back and forth between us, smiling with a great amount of teeth and little humor.
KT: You already spent two hours taking the skin off the fucking thing and now you want more? Leave me the hell alone!
//The Goblet Keeper glares at him, smile rapidly fading.
KT: Are you all personally inclined to jump on anything cylindrical that spits venom, or do you just worship an obviously fictional demon because she lets you abuse people however you want without feeling guilty? Answer me!
Spike: (What are you doing?)
KT: (I'm going to die anyway.)
CA: Goblet Keeper...
//The Keeper stands tall, ready to perform her duty.
CA: Silence him.

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

The Goblet Keeper grabs The Drakeling (???) by the left upper leg with her right front hoof! The Goblet Keeper grabs The Drakeling (???) by the right upper leg with her left front hoof! The Goblet Keeper nuzzles The Drakeling (???) in the lower body with her fuzzy snout!
Spike: Celestia's wings!
KT: Get off me, you freak!
Spike: (Try to give the flames as much time as possible.)
KT: (I'm working on it.)

The Goblet Keeper grabs The Drakeling (???) by the waist with her mouth!
KT: Gaauh!
Spike: Talking, keep talking to me. What's your name?
KT: Kezno. My name is Kezno Telekom.
Spike: 'Telekom'? As in, 'telecommunications' Telekom?
KT: It's a newer name.
Spike: Must be; you don't meet many people nowadays who can say 'hi, my name means: phone line'. You said you were a doctor?
KT: As much as you can call it that; right now I think I'm lunch.

The Goblet Keeper assaults The Drakeling (Kezno) with her mouth! The Drakeling (Kezno)'s resistance is lowered!
KT: Hooph, stop...
Spike: Don't focus on that! Where are you from, Kezno? Where's Celel from?
KT: Celel... I'm so sorry...
Spike: Talking! Keep talking!
KT: We're both from the Aquinatic Mountains. Mr. Mortani was a trader who said he'd be willing to take us to Forlegsandria, so we saved up everything we had to go.
Spike: The Aquinatic Mountains? I heard it wasn't safe for a dragon there.
KT: You have no idea.

The Goblet Keeper assaults The Drakeling (Kezno) with her tongue! The Drakeling (Kezno)'s resistance is lowered further!

//Kezno jerks his knees from side to side, trying to escape, but the Goblet Keeper's skill is unmatchable.

KT: Kya! As if I wasn't sore enough, you bite me!
//The Goblet Keeper says something in response, but her voice is muffled because her head is buried in Kezno's lower body.
KT: 'Swings, when he said keep talking, he didn't mean you...
//The Goblet Keeper starts to hum, obviously enjoying herself.

Spike: You said you're from the Aquinatics, right? Do you know a dragon named Quine?
KT: Quine? Everyone knows Quine!
Spike: (Oh, cool!)
KT: Quine is the reason ponies and dragons can't settle down and live peacefully together! He's wanted for razing at least a dozen villages by the Equestrian Cavalry!
//Really? Wow. I'm sure he has a good reason for it, but still...
Spike: Is the Equestrian Cavalry ponies riding on something or just an army?
KT: Whatever they are, they hate dragons.

The Goblet Keeper assaults The Drakeling (Kezno) with her mouth! The Drakeling (Kezno)'s resistance is at a minimum!

KT: (The humming, stop humming, Celestia...)
Spike: (Is that some sort of technique?)
KT: (No! It just makes it weird!)
Spike: (What's the progress on the rope? How far are you?)
KT: (I think I'm making some; I can't really tell.)
Spike: When the cultists ambushed you, was it an ambush? Was there anyone who could have known where you were going, and when?
KT: It wasn't an ambush, and no. We went around the Valley of Death, and besides, the six of them were just laying about on the bridge; we noticed them long before they -- aah, aaagh!

The Drakeling (Kezno) struggles in vain against the grip of The Goblet Keeper's right front hoof on his left upper leg! The Drakeling (Kezno) struggles in vain against the grip of The Goblet Keeper's left front hoof on his right upper leg!
The Drakeling (Kezno) bucks back and forth, trying to escape the grip of The Goblet Keeper's head on his lower body, but is unable!

The Goblet Keeper assaults The Drakeling (Kezno) with her tongue! The Drakeling (Kezno)'s resistance is finished!

The Drakeling (Kezno) is defeated!
//Kezno shudders and curls inwards.
//The Goblet Keeper buries her head into Kezno's waist, greedily taking everything Kezno has.
KT: Celel... forgive me...
//Seconds pass as Kezno twitches in his binds, forcing back tears, Goblet Keeper still at his waist.
The Goblet Keeper releases the grip of The Goblet Keeper's right front hoof on The Drakeling (Kezno)'s left upper leg. The Goblet Keeper releases the grip of The Goblet Keeper's left front hoof on The Drakeling (Kezno)'s right upper leg. The Goblet Keeper releases the grip of The Goblet Keeper's mouth on The Drakeling (Kezno)'s waist.

CA: Has this one been made docile?

The Goblet Keeper stands up.

//The Goblet Keeper smiles, again with only teeth. //Why is it the smiles of all my enemies could cause monstrous jesters to cry and run scared?
CA: The Goblet is only half full.
//The Goblet Keeper advances in front of me, eyes full of lust and hate.
CA: Make it overflow.

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

KT: Hero. What was your name, Hero?
Spike: _Is_, Kezno; my name is Spike.
KT: (Spike, give me as much time as you can.)
Spike: (I'll try.)

The Goblet Keeper grabs The Drakeling (Spike) by the left upper leg with her right front hoof! The Goblet Keeper grabs The Drakeling (Spike) by the right upper leg with her left front hoof! The Goblet Keeper nuzzles The Drakeling (Spike) in the waist with her fuzzy snout!

KT: It was an honor knowing you, Spike.

//Celestia is this horrible, please, don't let this happen to me...

The Goblet Keeper prepares to assault The Drakeling (Spike)! The Goblet Keeper...

Spike: ...
KT: ...
CA: ...

The Goblet Keeper releases the grip of The Goblet Keeper's right front hoof on The Drakeling (Spike)'s left upper leg. The Goblet Keeper releases the grip of The Goblet Keeper's left front hoof on The Drakeling (Spike)'s right upper leg.

Goblet Keeper: What is that smoke coming from the first sacrifice?

//WHELP, FUCK THIS

The Drakeling (Spike) kicks The Goblet Keeper in the head with his right knee, bruising the muscle and shattering the jaw!
Spike: Crazy cultist bint!
CA: His legs! Who failed to secure his legs?!
Spike: How far are you?!
KT: Not far!
Spike: Be further!!

The Drakeling (Spike) kicks The Goblet Keeper in the upper body with his right foot, bruising the muscle and shattering the left false ribs!
The Goblet Keeper is propelled away by the force of the blow!
The Goblet Keeper's lower body skids along the ground, bruising the muscle and tearing apart the middle spine's nervous tissue! The Goblet Keeper falls off the stage and slams into the ground! The Goblet Keeper's left front leg takes the full force of the impact, shattering the bone, jamming the bone through the left front knee's muscle and shattering the left front knee's bone! The Goblet Keeper gives into pain!

//Breathlessly, bent over and clawing at the restraints, Kezno mutters:
KT: Huh, we might have a chance.

The Drakeling (Spike) breathes fire! The rope is caught in the dragonfire! The rope's fibers are cracked and burnt!

KT: Watch the flames!
Spike: Work faster!
CA: What?! Who forgot to drain the second sacrifice?! _Why can he breathe fire_?!
Spike: Stuff it, you--
KT: Uh, Spike, you might want to save your breath for other things.
//The rest of the cultists all snort and paw at the ground, lowering their heads.
Spike: Uh oh.
CA: Members! Make him docile!

The Cult Members attack!

The Cult Member (1) leaps forward, climbing the stairs to the stage!
The Drakeling (Spike) breathes fire! But The Cult Member (1) dodges away, off the stairs!

The Cult Member (4) leaps forward, climbing the stairs to the stage!

Spike: I can't hold them all off like this!
KT: You're going to have to try!

The Cult Member (6) leaps forward, climbing the stairs to the stage!
The Drakeling (Spike) breathes fire! The Cult Member (6) is caught in the dragonfire! Her right front leg has been burnt to a crisp!

The Mare in Armor (1) leaps forward, climbing the stairs to the stage!

The Cult Member (4) leaps forward, reaching the top of the stage!
The Drakeling (Spike) kicks The Cult Member (4) in the left front leg with his right foot, shattering the bone!
An artery has been opened by the attack, a ligament has been torn, and a motor nerve has been severed!
The Cult Member (4) falls off the stage!

The Drakeling (Spike) breathes fire! The Cult Member (6) is caught in the dragonfire! Her right back leg has been burnt to a crisp!
The Cult Member (6) collapses!

Spike: Come on with that binding, Kezno!
KT: Working on it, working on it!

The Cult Member (7) leaps forward, climbing the stairs to the stage!

The Cult Member (8) leaps forward, climbing the stairs to the stage!
The Cult Member (5) leaps forward, climbing the stairs to the stage!
The Drakeling (Spike) breathes fire! But The Cult Member (5) dodges away, off the stairs!

The Drakeling (Spike) breathes fire! But The Cult Member (7) dodges away, off the stairs!
The Cult Member (7) slams into the ground!
The Cult Member (7)'s lower body takes the full force of the impact, bruising the muscle and bruising the guts!
The Cult Member (7) looks sick!

The Mare in Armor (1) leaps forward, reaching the top of the stage!

Spike: Hey! That's my helmet!
The Drakeling (Spike) kicks The Mare in Armor (1) in the head with his left foot, but the attack is deflected by The Mare in Armor (1)'s steel helmet!
Spike: Give it back!
The Drakeling (Spike) kicks at The Mare in Armor (1) with his right foot, but The Mare in Armor (1) dodges away!
The Mare in Armor (1) falls off the stage! The Mare in Armor (1) slams into the ground!

KT: Spike! There's one coming up from behind the stage!
Spike: I need your help; I can't turn my head that way!
KT: Need more time!
Spike: We don't have any!

The Mare in Armor (2) climbs up the back of the stage!

The Cult Member (8) leaps forward, reaching the top of the stage!
The Drakeling (Spike) breathes fire! The Cult Member (8) is caught in the dragonfire! Her head has been burnt to a crisp! Her mane is set alight!

The Cult Member (5) leaps forward, climbing the stairs to the stage!
The Cult Member (1) leaps forward, climbing the stairs to the stage!
The Mare in Armor (2) leaps forward, reaching the top of the stage from behind!
The rope splits and burns away! The Drakeling (Kezno) is no longer pinned!

KT: That's it, I'm free!
Spike: I'll give you a congratulations later, but for now: help me!

The Mare in Armor (2) grabs The Drakeling (Spike) from behind by the left upper leg with her left front hoof!

The Drakeling (Kezno) leaps into the fray! The Drakeling (Kezno) grabs The Drakeling (Spike), wrenching him sideways! The Drakeling (Spike) swivels around!

//Hey, those are my shinguards!
Spike: Quit stealing my things!
The Drakeling (Spike) kicks The Mare in Armor (2) in the lower body with his right foot, bruising the muscle and bruising the right kidney!
The Drakeling (Spike) headbutts The Mare in Armor (2) in the head, bruising the muscle, jamming the skull through the brain and tearing apart the brain!
The Mare in Armor (2) has been knocked unconscious! The Mare in Armor (2) has been struck down!
T: (I knew you had a hard head.)
Spike: Gack! There's blood and gore all over my face, I can't see!
KT: I'll direct you!

The Drakeling (Spike) swivels around!

//Hold on, did Twilight just say something?
KT: Straight ahead, forty-five degrees down!

The Drakeling (Spike) breathes fire! The Cult Member (5) is caught in the dragonfire! Her upper body has been burnt to a crisp!

KT: Again, she's still there!

The Drakeling (Spike) breathes fire! The Cult Member (5) is caught in the dragonfire! Her lower body has been burnt to a crisp!
The Cult Member (5) gives into pain! The Cult Member (5) collapses!

The Cult Member (8) assaults The Drakeling (Spike) to no effect!

Spike: Your lips are burnt off, what are you trying to do?
KT: Her hair's on fire! Get away!

The Drakeling (Kezno) kicks The Cult Member (8) in the lower body with his left foot, bruising the muscle and bruising the left kidney!
The Drakeling (Spike) kicks The Cult Member (8) in the upper body with his right foot, bruising the muscle, shattering the left true ribs, jamming the left true ribs through the left lung and tearing apart the left lung!
The Cult Member (8) gives into pain! The Cult Member (8) collapses!

The Cult Member (1) leaps forward, reaching the top of the stage!

The Cult Member (7) leaps forward, climbing the stairs to the stage!

The Drakeling (Spike) swivels around!
KT: To the right, same level!

The Drakeling (Spike) breathes fire! The Cult Member (1) is caught in the dragonfire! Her right rear hoof has been burnt to a crisp! Her right rear leg has been burnt to a crisp!

KT: Get! Away!

The Drakeling (Kezno) grabs The Cult Member (1) by the head with his left hand! The Drakeling (Kezno) throws The Cult Member (1) by the head with his left hand!
The Cult Member (1) falls off the stage! The Cult Member (1) slams into the ground!
The Cult Member (1)'s upper body takes the full force of the impact, bruising the muscle and shattering the right floating ribs!
The Cult Member (1) gives into pain!

KT: Almost through the ropes, just a little bit more...
Spike: Is there another one? I hear someone else.
KT: Gaaagh!
Spike: On it!
The Drakeling (Spike) breathes fire! But The Drakeling (Kezno) dodges away from the flames!

KT: Wrong way, try again!

The Drakeling (Spike) swivels around!
The Drakeling (Spike) breathes fire! But The Cult Member (7) dodges away from the flames!

Spike: Did I hit her? I can't see!
KT: You're free! Gyaa, help me!

The rope splits and falls away! The Drakeling (Spike) is no longer pinned!

The Cult Member (7) grabs The Drakeling (Kezno) by the left upper arm with her right front hoof!
The Cult Member (7) grabs The Drakeling (Kezno) by the throat with her left front hoof! The Drakeling (Kezno) is pinned!

//She looks like she wants to take him, pinning him to the ground by his neck. Did the cult member confuse us?

KT: Not... again...
Spike: Hold still.

The Drakeling (Spike) strikes at The Cult Member (7) in the lower body with his Fist of Justice, and it collapses into a lump of gore!
The Cult Member (7) has been struck down!

KT: Ho----... holy crap, it's all over the place...
Spike: Are you okay?
KT: Yeah, fine, covered in blood and intestines, but fine.
Spike: I know how that feels.

The Cult Members have been defeated!
Spike earned 1500 experience points!
Spike is now level 10!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//I help Kezno to his feet, a second after brushing the blood away from my eyes. The mess on his stomach slops off, and he wipes the rest away on the tail of the statue.
KT: That can't have been all of them.
Spike: Considering there are four more of them waiting at the end of the chamber? I doubt it.
KT: And where did that one strange unicorn go? The one overseeing the ceremony, by which I mean our abuse and murder?
Spike: I think she must have run away.
KT: Good for her. Hell, I'd run away from a performance like that.
//Performance? I'm sorry, did he see a lute and a lyre somewhere around here?
KT: When you said you were a Hero here to rescue me, I was a bit skeptical, but, crap, man, you turned two ponies into red jelly and fought off eight at the same time.
Spike: Oh, that. Uh... I probably just got lucky.
KT: If that's the type of luck you have I'm taking you straight to Mountainville as soon as this is over.
//What is that, some kind of casino and resort?
KT: (What's the plan of attack for the rest of the ponies at the end of the chamber?)
Spike: (Hmm... looks like two pegasi, an armored earth pony, and the Royal Mistress, a unicorn.)
The pegasi look thin, they shouldn't be much of a problem...

//Kezno picks up one of the shinguards, turning it over in his hand.

KT: (If it helps, I used to train Spawn Scouts at disc throwing.)

Spike: (The main problem is the spellcaster. See if you can throw something at the Royal Mistress when she's trying to cast a spell, try to distract her.)

KT: (Be a lot easier if one of these ponies had a knife or something on them.)

Spike: (You think they'll give us time to search them? They haven't attacked now because the stage is a great defensive position, as soon as we step off they might jump us. I'm going to try something.)

KT: (_Try_ something? You're going to _try_ something?!) 

//I walk off the stage, down the stairs, and point at the Royal Mistress in green robes. She is hiding behind the Mare in Armor.

Spike: ...

//Crap, what was I going to say?

RM: It's rude to point, you know.

KT: It's also rude to abduct people for sacrifices, so you can stuff it!

Spike: He does have a point.

MA: No, you have a point.

Cult Pegasus: No, he's point-ing, there's a difference.

MA: Excuse my grammar; I haven't studied it on account of the expected end of the world happening today that _he_ ruined!

KT: You're blaming him for stopping what was never going to happen anyway? I do understand you may not be in possession of the most straightforward mental faculties, because, well, _doomsday cult_, but don't blame others for your own failures.

CP: That's a misconception; we're less a doomsday cult than a rebirth cult. We don't believe the world needs to be 'destroyed to be rebuilt' as much as just reorganized!

MA: Under a banner of unquestioning and strict loyalty to our leaders.

CP: Exactly!

KT: That sure makes me feel better about being abducted and killed.

CP: Hey, _someone_ has to die for Alipheese to enter the world and it isn't going to be us.

MA: Well, it wasn't supposed to be us, at least. You kind of turned the death tables on us.

CP: But they're going to do a full three-sixty and flip back on you!

MA: So... the table of death is doing a backflip, I guess?

KT: That is honestly the worst smacktalk I have ever heard.

CP: I'll smack your talk, right out of your mouth!

//Kezno groans.

RM: Why are you pointing again?

Spike: I finally remembered what I was going to say!

RM: Thank Celestia.

//I clear my throat.

Spike: Behind you is the way out. In front of you I stand. I won't begrudge you your choice, but I will oblige you: flee or be killed.

MA: ...So, Royal Mistress? What do we do?

RM: Easy. The purple one is the real power. I will use my abilities to subdue him, and we will get two drakelings to share between us for the cost of one. Attack.

MA: As you wish.

Spike: As you wish.

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

The Cult Pegasus (1) charges at The Drakeling (Spike)!

//Keep your feet moving. Not energetically or excitedly, but... calmly? Is that a thing you can do? I
think so. Don't attack just yet, be patient.
The Cult Pegasus (1) attacks The Drakeling (Spike) but The Drakeling (Spike) dodges away!

The Cult Pegasus (2) charges at The Drakeling (Spike)!
The Cult Pegasus (2) attacks The Drakeling (Spike) but The Drakeling (Spike) dodges away!

The Royal Mistress points at The Drakeling (Spike) and starts to cast a spell!
The Drakeling (Kezno) throws a steel shinguard at The Royal Mistress!
The spinning steel shinguard strikes The Royal Mistress in the head, bruising the horn!
The Royal Mistress loses her spell!

KT: You've done enough magic for the day!
RM: Insolent fool!

The Mare in Armor charges at The Drakeling (Spike)!
The Mare in Armor attacks The Drakeling (Spike) but The Drakeling (Spike) dodges away!
The Drakeling (Spike) counterattacks!
The Drakeling (Spike) strikes The Mare in Armor in the lower body from the side with his Fist of Justice, shattering the spine, tearing apart the lower spine's nervous tissue, jamming the bone through the right kidney and tearing apart the right kidney!
The Mare in Armor is propelled away by the force of the blow!

The Mare in Armor slams into The Royal Mistress!
The Royal Mistress's left front leg takes the full force of the impact, bruising the muscle!
The Royal Mistress's right front hoof takes the full force of the impact, bruising the muscle and bruising the bone!
The Mare in Armor's head takes the full force of the impact, bruising the muscle and bruising the skull!
The Royal Mistress falls over!
The Mare in Armor gives into pain!

KT: Taste justice!
Spike: I don't have any iron on me.

The Cult Pegasus (1) kicks The Drakeling (Spike) in the head with her right rear hoof, bruising the muscle!

//Woah, almost took my head off!
Spike: See, this is why I need a helmet, so this sort of thing doesn't happen.

The Cult Pegasus (2) kicks at The Drakeling (Spike) with her left rear hoof, but The Drakeling (Spike) dodges away!
The Drakeling (Spike) counterattacks!
The Drakeling (Spike) punches at The Cult Pegasus (2) with his right hand, but The Cult Pegasus (2) flies away!

Spike: Come back here!
CP: Not a problem!

The Royal Mistress stands up.

The Cult Pegasus (1) grabs The Drakeling (Spike) by the left upper arm from behind with her left front leg! The Cult Pegasus (1) grabs The Drakeling (Spike) by the right upper arm from behind with her right front leg!
The Cult Pegasus (1) drags The Drakeling (Spike) into the air!

Spike: Wyaaugh, let go of me!
CP1: At this height? Are you sure?
Spike: Yes!
CP1: Nah, I think you'll have more fun up here.

The Cult Pegasus (2) grabs The Drakeling (Spike) by the right lower leg with her left front leg!
The Cult Pegasus (2) grabs The Drakeling (Spike) by the left upper leg with her right front leg!
The Drakeling (Spike) is pinned!

The Drakeling (Spike) struggles in vain against the grip of The Cult Pegasus (1)'s left front leg on
The Drakeling (Spike)'s left upper arm!
The Royal Mistress points at The Drakeling (Spike) and starts to cast a spell!

Spike: Get off of me!
CP1: That's not how it's pronounced! It's 'get me off'!
Spike: _No it isn't_!
CP2: I didn't get as many chances to drain the other captive as I would have liked, so do me a favor
and give me all you've got! I want a lot!
CP1: No fair, I want some too!
CP2: Yeah, so be a good boy, and don't wear out too quickly! You've got a lot of apologizing to do!
Spike: The only sorry person in this room is you lot!

The Drakeling (Kezno) throws a steel shinguard at The Cult Pegasus (1)!
The spinning steel shinguard strikes The Cult Pegasus (1) in the left wing, bruising the muscle and
shattering the bone!

CP1: Kyaaa!

The Cult Pegasus (1) releases the grip of The Cult Pegasus (1)'s left front leg on The Drakeling
(Spike)'s left upper arm. The Cult Pegasus (1) releases the grip of The Cult Pegasus (1)'s right
front leg on The Drakeling (Spike)'s right upper arm.
The Drakeling (Spike) slumps backwards, no longer pinned!

The Royal Mistress casts Stupefy!
The flying beam strikes The Cult Pegasus (2) in the head! The Cult Pegasus (2) is knocked
unconscious!

The Cult Pegasus (1) slams into the ground!
The Cult Pegasus (1)'s right wing takes the full force of the impact, bruising the muscle and
shattering the bone! The Cult Pegasus (1)'s upper body takes the full force of the impact, bruising
the muscle and bruising the right lung!
The Cult Pegasus (1) gives into pain!

The Drakeling (Spike) slams into the ground!
The Drakeling (Spike)'s right lower leg takes the full force of the impact, bruising the muscle and
tearing the scale!

The Cult Pegasus (2) slams into the ground!
The Cult Pegasus (2)'s left rear hoof takes the full force of the impact, shattering the bone!

The Drakeling (Spike) stands up.
Spike: Nice shot.
KT: One more left to make!

The Drakeling (Spike) charges at The Royal Mistress!
The Royal Mistress kicks The Drakeling (Spike) in the left lower leg with her right front hoof,
tearing the scale, bruising the muscle and bruising the bone!
//See, this is why I need shinguards, so this sort of thing doesn't happen.
The Drakeling (Spike) strikes at The Royal Mistress in the upper body with his Fist of Justice,
bruising the muscle, shattering the left true ribs, jamming the left true ribs through the heart and
tearing apart the heart!
The Drakeling (Spike)'s right hand has lodged firmly in the wound!

Spike: Aaah! Let go of me!
RM: You're... the one... decided... cave in my chest...

The Royal Mistress speaks a word of power, forming symbols in the air!

Spike: No! You should be dead! Stop it!

The Drakeling (Spike) struggles in vain against the grip of The Royal Mistress's left true ribs on
The Drakeling (Spike)'s right hand!
//I can't get away from her!
The Drakeling (Kezno) throws a small gneiss rock at The Royal Mistress! The spinning small
gneiss rock strikes The Royal Mistress in the lower back molar, and the severed part flies off in an
arc!

RM: May you rot...

The Royal Mistress casts the spell! A terrible sense of dread fills the room!

The Royal Mistress gives into pain! The Royal Mistress faints! The Royal Mistress collapses!

The Cult Elite have been defeated!
Spike earned 1000 experience points!
Spike is now level 11!
[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//I dart my eyes back and forth, checking the chamber for any happenings. Behind me, Kezno turns
around, taking a step away from the statue, and then reassures all the parts of his body are still
there, and functional.
KT: Uh... did that, uh, feel really weird to you?
//I take my hand out of the mare's chest cavity before snakes or maggots or roaches start crawling
out of it, or some crazy crap like that.
//Hold on, what if...
Spike: Is that... is that how the rebirth thing works? Is she being reborn?
//Kezno looks me over once, trying to determine if I'm being serious.
KT: ...No. Drakelings are bound to one person at a time only. The rebirth only works for them (and
only once, unless it's re-established). Infatuation stays, though.
//...I should probably know more about this stuff, even if it's not going to effect me.
Spike: ...Okay. Must be the feel of a fizzled spell.
KT: I sure hope so.
Spike: Did you see where those shinguards and helmet went to?
KT: What? You're considering looting these lunatics? Let's get out of here, the way's open right
Spike: The helmet and shinguards were mine in the first place.

//That's not true.

Spike: Uh, well, basically mine. Vultures keepers.

KT: They stole your things from you? That's rather low. Anything worth worrying about, or can we leave?

Spike: Nah, I didn't have any gold on me. Just a telescope that was kind of nice, a few useless books...

//--T: You know that big bag of money the mayor gave you as a reward? This is worth at least three of those, and that's just what the government would give you to take it off the market. Dragon hunters would give you at least twice that.'

KT: ...There's something else, isn't there.

Spike: If that falls into the wrong hands, it can do a lot of damage.

//Kezno walks over to me, holding out the helmet and shinguards.

KT: Then suit up, Hero. We've got a job to do.

Spike: You don't have to do anything; get out of here while you still can.

KT: If it wasn't for you, neither I nor my rebirth-mate would be alive. You rescued me for no money, no vengeance, and you didn't even know who I was, but out of the strength of your own heart risked your life for mine. I owe you at least this.

Spike: You don't owe me anything. I'm a Hero, this is what I do.

KT: Besides, if it gives me a chance at some more of those cult suckers, you'll have to pin me down to get me to stay away.

//--Kezno cracks his knuckles, looking nasty.

Spike: I get it. Do you think you can make a bow and arrows from sinew and bone, from one of these ponies? The Royal Mistress maybe?

KT: Maybe, but A: I'm planning on going as far around her as possible when I leave, and B: I want to get out of here before some of the ponies start waking up or realizing their injuries aren't that bad.

Spike: Right.

//--I run out, avoiding the Royal Mistress by a wide berth, Kezno hot on my heels.

//--We sneak around the cave for an hour or so, exploring the various natural caverns. There's nothing at all to be found except some moldy bread and a few ragged sheets in the communal sleeping room. Eventually we return to a locked door that was skipped earlier, on account of there being no key anywhere in the cave.

Spike: (Saccr-Ulkip has to be here.)

KT: (Who?)

Spike: (Their leader. It'd make sense for her to keep everything.)

KT: (Cults are often very hierarchical, after all.)

Spike: (How are we going to break down the door?)

KT: (It's made of wood, can't you burn it down?)

Spike: (The door's probably an inch or so thick, damp around the edges because of the dirt, and we're in an unventilated area. No, I don't think I'll burn it down.)

KT: (Is this important thing something you need to have, or is it more important other people don't have it?)

Spike: (Uh, what were you planning?)

KT: (There's a river nearby, right? An underground cave with unsealed walls like this means they have to use some sort of pump or magic to keep out the water. If we block off the entrance to the cave, eventually that system will fail, and the caves will flood.)

Spike: (...I've seen Saccr-Ulkip throw huge boulders with her magic; I don't think we can block this cave off.)

KT: (Phooey.)
Spike: (If the hinges were on this side, we could unscrew them...)  
KT: (What about the handle? How strong is it?)  
//Kezno reaches out his hand, pulling the handle normally. He then tries the other direction.  
//The door opens by a crack.  
KT: ...  
Spike: Don't look at me!  
KT: We just spent an hour running around this damp mudhole because you couldn't be bothered to check if they installed the handle wrong.  
Spike: Ponies don't have hands! Why would they have a door with a handle in the first place?!  
KT: If these cultists do have a door, it's probably picked up from the reject pile, or damaged trash. And what would qualify for the reject pile? A door with the handle installed backwards!  
Spike: Don't be mad because you didn't think of it earlier either.  
KT: This entire day has been the most excruciating waste of time and effort.  
Spike: You shouldn't forget about being abducted by the ponies.  
KT: Yeah, they're wastes too.  
Spike: (So, jump in on three sound good?)  
KT: (Sure. One... two...)  
//Three!  
//Kezno kicks the door open and we leap in, ready to do battle!  

[[SAVE LOCATION]]  
The ☼ magic mechanism ☼ attached to the wooden door is triggered! Two beams shoot out from the wall!  
The flying beam strikes The Drakeling (Kezno) in the upper body from behind! The Drakeling (Kezno) is Charmed!  
The flying beam strikes The Drakeling (Spike) in the head from the side, but the attack is deflected by The Drakeling (Spike)'s steel helmet!  
Spike: Kezno! Kezno, talk to me!  
//Silence, as he stands there, staring a thousand yards ahead.  
Saccr-Ulkip: Hmm. It seems metal armor reflects beams of magic. Good to know.  
Spike: What did you do to him?!  
SU: Not important.  
//Saccr-Ulkip stands in front of a desk covered in fine cloth, surrounded by a number of statues and baubles and shining trinkets. On the desk are two books, one of which is Dragon Movements in the Era of Abandonment and the other, not one of the books from my bag. The rest of them are tossed into a wastebin.  
Spike: You know, not all of those books are completely useless.  
SU: Are you kidding me? 'The Real Princess Hazel'? I'll just say, the words 'turgid penis' and 'tiny little barbs' belong nowhere in the biography of a political figure.  
//Glad I didn't read to that part.  
Spike: I mostly meant the atlas.  
SU: That thing is almost as old as Canterlot itself.  
Spike: (How old is the City on the Hill, anyway?)  
T: (Nearly seven hundred years old by now. I think its heptcentennial is coming up in a few weeks.)  
SU: But are we going to keep wasting time and words, or are you willing to listen to what I have to say?  
Spike: Knowing me, probably wasting time and words.  
SU: My offer is generous, as a powerful Hero with such a frightening display deserves. You--  
Spike: Surrender and be your rebirth-mate, I know. Here's my counteroffer: you bleed out and I get
my stuff back.
SU: I am not naive enough to offer the glory of immortality to those who refuse it categorically in
my search for followers, and I am not that naive here. You will leave, never to come back, and in
return I can offer to forget this great injustice you have caused me. Else, I will best you.
Spike: Your cult is broken and ceremony interrupted; you have no leveraging power and I’m not
leaving without that book.
SU: Ceremony? Who cares about that silly little thing! Do you know how easy it is to convince
another group of desperate suckers there’s an eternal reward for them and all the world they envied
will be destroyed, if they just follow me? One charm spell and a little research about dragon
endocrinology and I would have finished watching them _volunteer_ themselves to pass up a
chance at immortality to give it to me!
Spike: ’A little research about dragon endocrinology’?
SU: Admittedly, drakeling bonding doesn’t work as I expected; it seems there were some residual
effects of previous copulations on the first sacrifice that allowed him to resist total mental
dominance. But, if my ears didn’t fail me, you said you were a free drakeling...
//That book of migration patterns would lead her right to another drakeling if I don’t defeat her
now.
Spike: I won’t let you rebuild your schemes and hurt more people! Prepare to be destroyed!
SU: If destroyed is what you want to call it, believe me, I am most certainly prepared...

Chapter End Notes

With apologies to Tarn Adams, and people with taste.
SU: Puppet! Hold him!

The Drakeling (Kezno) grabs The Drakeling (Spike) by the left upper arm with his right hand!

Spike: Kezno, what are you doing?! //His eyes are still a thousand yards away. I can't get through to him.

SU: Hah-hah, are you scared, little drakeling? Come here, I will make it all better...

Saccr-Ulkip speaks a word of power, forming symbols in the air! A book rises in the air out of the wastebasket!
Saccr-Ulkip throws the book at The Drakeling (Spike)!
The spinning book strikes The Drakeling (Spike) in the lower body, bruising the muscle!

Spike: That was a perfectly good atlas!

The Drakeling (Spike) breaks the grip of The Drakeling (Kezno)'s right hand on The Drakeling (Spike)'s left upper arm!
The Drakeling (Kezno) punches The Drakeling (Spike) in the upper body with his left hand, bruising the muscle!

Spike: Kezno! Stop! I'm on your side!

Saccr-Ulkip charges at The Drakeling (Spike)!
Saccr-Ulkip kicks The Drakeling (Spike) in the right upper leg with her left front hoof, bruising the muscle and tearing the scale!
Saccr-Ulkip collides with The Drakeling (Spike)! Saccr-Ulkip bounces backwards!

The Drakeling (Spike) punches Saccr-Ulkip in the left front hoof with his left hand, bruising the muscle and bruising the bone!

The Drakeling (Kezno) grabs The Drakeling (Spike) by the right upper arm with his right hand!
The Drakeling (Spike) struggles in vain against the grip of The Drakeling (Kezno)'s right hand on The Drakeling (Spike)'s right upper arm!

Saccr-Ulkip speaks a word of power, forming symbols in the air! A marble statue of ponies rises into the air!

Spike: Kezno! Move! //No response.

Spike: Now!

The Drakeling (Spike) grabs The Drakeling (Kezno) by the upper body with his left foot!
The Drakeling (Spike) throws The Drakeling (Kezno) by the upper body with his left foot!
The Drakeling (Kezno) releases the grip of The Drakeling (Kezno)'s right hand on The Drakeling (Spike)'s right upper arm.
Saccr-Ulkip throws the marble statue of ponies at The Drakeling (Spike)! The Drakeling (Spike) leaps away from the spinning marble statue of ponies! The spinning marble statue of ponies strikes the wall, crumbling into pieces! The severed parts fly off in arcs!

SU: And here I thought you two were so close.

Saccr-Ulkip grabs The Drakeling (Spike) by the upper body from behind with her right rear hoof! Saccr-Ulkip throws The Drakeling (Spike) by the upper body with her right rear hoof!

The Drakeling (Spike) slams into The Drakeling (Kezno)!

SU: It'd be a shame if you didn't stay that way.
Spike: Kezno, you should listen to your dragon instinct! I know he's kind of a jerk, but it usually helps!

//WELL FUCK YOU TOO SPIKE.

The Drakeling (Kezno) grabs The Drakeling (Spike) by the left upper arm with his right hand! The Drakeling (Kezno) grabs The Drakeling (Spike) by the right hand with his left hand! The Drakeling (Spike) grabs The Drakeling (Kezno) by the left hand with his right hand!

Spike: You want to be slaves to this crazy manipulative bint?! Is that why you're fighting?!
SU: He wants what I want for him, because he is weak. And the weak singularly want to be freed from the terror of choice, the heavy burden of responsibility. It is what all pathetic ponies or dragons want. I know this well, for I have offered it to many.
Spike: I choose to think you're a monster!
SU: You think you are strong. I will show you how weak a dragon can be.

The Drakeling (Kezno) charges at The Drakeling (Spike)!
The Drakeling (Kezno) takes The Drakeling (Spike) down by the left upper arm with his right hand!
The Drakeling (Kezno) grabs The Drakeling (Spike) by the upper body with his left lower leg! The Drakeling (Spike) is pinned!

Spike: Gah! Kezno, wait! What is this power?
SU: He is filled with the power of a dragon who finally knows what he wants. Soon, this power will fill you, too. Isn't it fitting that we should fill each other with our most valuable assets?
Spike: This isn't what you want! This is exactly what happened to you! An affront to dignity and our people everywhere!

Saccr-Ulkip grabs The Drakeling (Spike) by the left upper leg with her right rear leg! Saccr-Ulkip grabs The Drakeling (Spike) by the right upper leg with her left rear leg!

The Drakeling (Spike) breathes fire! The Drakeling (Kezno) is caught in the dragonfire! The Drakeling (Kezno)'s scales are unharmed!

//can't get an angle; he's in the way!

Spike: Kezno! Celel! She tried to kill Celel and enslave you, to take you away from her! Look at what you're doing! What would Celel see?!
SU: Are you ready, 'Hero'? I think you should scream. I think I would like it if you screamed. Only I can hear you.

//His eyes... for the first time, I think he's looking at me.
The Drakeling (Kezno) releases the grip of The Drakeling (Kezno)'s left hand on The Drakeling (Spike)'s right hand. The Drakeling (Kezno) punches Saccr-Ulkip in the head with his left hand, bruising the muscle, tearing the skin and shattering the fuzzy snout!

SU: Bluh!

Saccr-Ulkip releases the grip of Saccr-Ulkip's right rear leg on The Drakeling (Spike)'s left upper leg. Saccr-Ulkip releases the grip of Saccr-Ulkip's left rear leg on The Drakeling (Spike)'s right upper leg.

The Drakeling (Kezno) releases the grip of The Drakeling (Kezno)'s left lower leg on The Drakeling (Spike)'s upper body. The Drakeling (Kezno) releases the grip of The Drakeling (Kezno)'s right hand on The Drakeling (Spike)'s left upper arm.

Saccr-Ulkip speaks a word of power, forming symbols in the air! Saccr-Ulkip disappears! Saccr-Ulkip appears at the other end of the room!

SU: What?! How?!

The Drakeling (Spike) stands up.

KT: Dragons are united by their common hatred.
SU: Of me?
KT: Of the dragon instinct.
Spike: Truth.

The Drakeling (Kezno) leaps to the side! The Drakeling (Kezno) grabs the +iron bow+ from the *statue of a snake demon* with his right hand! The Drakeling (Kezno) grabs the +iron arrows [33]+ from the *statue of a snake demon* with his left hand!

Spike: That won't work if she starts casting spells.
KT: Can you keep her from it, but still give me a shot?
Spike: On it!

Saccr-Ulkip speaks a word of power, forming symbols in the air! The desk rises into the air, books spilling off!

The Drakeling (Spike) charges at Saccr-Ulkip! The Drakeling (Spike) punches Saccr-Ulkip in the right front leg with his left hand, bruising the muscle and bruising the bone! The Drakeling (Spike) collides with Saccr-Ulkip! Saccr-Ulkip is knocked over and tumbles backwards!

Saccr-Ulkip loses her spell! The desk falls to the ground, cracking in half! Saccr-Ulkip stands up.

The Drakeling (Spike) kicks Saccr-Ulkip in the lower body from the side with his left foot, bruising the muscle and bruising the guts!

Saccr-Ulkip kicks The Drakeling (Spike) in the lower body with her right rear leg, bruising the muscle and bruising the pancreas! Saccr-Ulkip bites at The Drakeling (Spike) in the right hand, but The Drakeling (Spike) dodges away!
The Drakeling (Kezno) lets loose an arrow from the +iron bow+! The flying +iron arrow+ strikes Saccr-Ulkip in the right rear leg, chipping the bone!
A tendon has been torn!

The Drakeling (Spike) kicks at Saccr-Ulkip in the upper body with his right foot, but the attack misses!
Saccr-Ulkip counterattacks!
Saccr-Ulkip points at The Drakeling (Spike) and starts to cast a spell! Saccr-Ulkip casts Confuse!
The beam strikes The Drakeling (Spike) in the right lower arm!

//RANDOM ENEMY USED CONFUSION! SPIKE IS CONFUSED, SCARED OF HIS SEXUAL IDENTITY! SPIKE PISSED HIMSELF IN THE CONFUSION!
//WOULD IT BE POSSIBLE ONCE FOR YOU TO TAKE ON A SPELLCASTING ENEMA -- I MEAN ENEMY, MUST BE VERBAL CONTAMINATION FROM ALL THE SHIT RUNNING THROUGH YOUR MIND -- AND NOT REQUIRE ME TO BAIL YOUR ASS OUT FROM YOUR OWN MISTAKES? IT SHOULD BE FAIRLY OBVIOUS TO YOU THAT SINCE THE FUCKING BEGINNING YOU HAVEN'T BEEN ON SOME MAGNANIMOUS HEROIC JOURNEY AS MUCH AS PASSIVELY ADMITTING YOU'D LIKE NOTHING MORE THAN A CHAIN AROUND YOUR NECK AND A PRETTY PERFECT PONY TO CROTCH-EXPLODE YOU DAILY LIKE LIVESTOCK; BUT NO, YOU AREN'T BRAVE ENOUGH TO ADMIT THAT TO YOURSELF AND YOU AREN'T BRAVE ENOUGH TO BE A HERO, EITHER. THAT'S WHY YOU DROPPED OUT AS SOON AS YOU NOTICED SOMEONE ELSE IN THE ROOM HAPPENED TO BE HALFWAY DECENT AT SOMETHING, AND DON'T GIVE ME ANY FUCKING SHIT FROM YOUR STUPID UGLY MOUTH ABOUT YOUR 'BROKEN FOOT'; YOU COULD HAVE DODGED THAT SPELL EASILY BUT NO, EVER SINCE TWO SECONDS AFTER SEEING THAT THIS BITCH WAS A) A PONY AND B) FEMALE YOU'VE WANTED TO GARGLE HER ESTROUS WATER LIKE A GOOD BOYTOY. HERE'S A SUGGESTION FOR THE GREAT COWARD OF OUR GENERATION: ENJOY YOUR BROKEN FUCKING ARM JUST LIKE YOUR BROKEN FUCKING HEAD AND DRAG YOUR PATHETIC TAIL BACK HOME UNTIL YOU DECIDE TO BE A REAL HERO. ENJOY LEARNING TO DO THINGS WITH YOUR LEFT HAND, TOO. NOT THAT, YOU CUNTBRAIN, IF YOU HAD LEARNED THAT IN THE FIRST PLACE WE WOULDN'T BE ON THIS SHITSTREAM OF AN ADVENTURE--

The spinning wooden desk strikes The Drakeling (Spike) in the right lower arm, bruising the muscle and shattering the bone!

Spike: Gaah!
KT: _Watch out_!

The Drakeling (Kezno) lets loose an arrow from the +iron bow+! The flying +iron arrow+ strikes Saccr-Ulkip in the lower body, tearing the muscle and tearing apart the intestines!
The +iron arrow+ has lodged firmly in the wound!

The Drakeling (Spike) kicks Saccr-Ulkip in the left front leg with his right foot, bruising the muscle, shattering the bone, jamming the bone through the left front knee's muscle and shattering the left front knee's bone!
Saccr-Ulkip gives into pain! Saccr-Ulkip collapses!

//Waaugh, my arm! Why does it hurt now?!
The Drakeling (Spike) collapses! The Drakeling (Spike) gives into pain!

Saccr-Ulkip points at The Drakeling (Spike) and starts to cast a spell!
Spike: Don't. You're going to die anyway; save your energy.
SU: I will take you with m--hrrk!

The Drakeling (Kezno) grabs Saccr-Ulkip by the throat with his left hand! The Drakeling (Kezno) grabs Saccr-Ulkip by the throat with his right hand!
The Drakeling (Kezno) places a chokehold on Saccr-Ulkip's throat!

KT: Shut up, you lying, thieving, disgusting, murderous con mare!

The Drakeling (Kezno) strangles Saccr-Ulkip's throat!
Saccr-Ulkip loses her spell!
The Drakeling (Kezno) strangles Saccr-Ulkip's throat!

SU: I--ggnnmkk--
KT: Just! Die!

The Drakeling (Kezno) strangles Saccr-Ulkip's throat!
The Drakeling (Kezno) strangles Saccr-Ulkip's throat!

Spike: Can't this be done later?
KT: Later, later, after what?! She survives and hunts down another drakeling to do this to?!

The Drakeling (Kezno) strangles Saccr-Ulkip's throat!
The Drakeling (Kezno) strangles Saccr-Ulkip's throat!

Spike: Kezno, there's more important things right now!
KT: She's a rabid beast and needs to be put down!

The Drakeling (Kezno) strangles Saccr-Ulkip's throat!
The Drakeling (Kezno) strangles Saccr-Ulkip's throat!

Spike: You shouldn't be that quick to deal out death in defense.
KT: Some people have to die for the good of the world.
//He presses in deeper.

The Drakeling (Kezno) strangles Saccr-Ulkip's throat!
The Drakeling (Kezno) strangles Saccr-Ulkip's throat!

Spike: Kezno.
KT: Stop trying to stop me, Spike! This needs to happen!
Spike: I think she's already dead.

The Drakeling (Kezno) strangles Saccr-Ulkip's throat!
Saccr-Ulkip has suffocated.
The Drakeling (Kezno) strangles Saccr-Ulkip's throat!

KT: ...Yeah.

Saccr-Ulkip was defeated!
Spike earned 1500 experience points!
Spike is now level 12!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//Kezno takes his hands off of Saccr-Ulkip's throat. I grunt weakly.
Spike: Uh, Kezno? Broken arm over here.
KT: Okay, right.
//Kezno steps over and crouches down, gingerly leaning back and forth to look at my broken arm. He pokes a few places gently and I yell at him each time.
KT: Humm, a simple fracture, but... it's a good thing you're on your stomach.
Spike: Really? Why's that?
//Kezno looks around a bit, takes one of the books off the floor and lays it in front of me.
KT: Because I'm going to need more supplies than this to set it correctly.
Spike: Wait, you can't just leave me here.
KT: Why not? Got a hot date?
//Hey! Why was that sarcastic?!
Spike: ...How long will it take?
KT: A few minutes, nothing more.
//I suppose I can spare that for proper medical treatment.
Spike: If you hear a loud scream, it's because the body has turned into a flock of bats or something.
KT: Hah! I'll be sure to remember that.
//Kezno leaves. I open the book in front of me; it's not one I recognize. Really, it's more of a booklet... 'The Staying Power of A Focused Mind'? Probably trash.
//...Saccr-Ulkip's body is lying about two feet from me. It's kind of creeping me out. I try to scoot away from it, but warnings of pain in my arm shoot down that idea.
\Why would it be creepy? It's not like you're sitting next to a rotted corpse. She's freshly dead, you can still see the blood pooling.
//It doesn't sound any better when you put it like that!
\Uh, hello Mr. Dragon, predator animal? This is what you'd do in your normal habitat, remember? The only thing you should be feeling right now is hungry.
//Three minutes ago that was a person who spoke and did things. Now, it's a hunk of meat that doesn't. Transitioning so quickly like that... it makes my stomach churn.
\Three minutes ago that was a pony who tried to enslave you. Now, it's a pony that isn't. Sickness is something that happens to everybody the first few times, you'll get over it.
//I'm not sure I want to.
\Yeah, that'll help combat; just start throwing up everywhere.
//I don't know if I want to get used to killing people left and right. How I am right now, killing Saccr-Ulkip might have been the only way. But that's because I'm not strong enough, not a powerful enough Hero to win battles without giving it everything I've got. If only I were stronger, I could...
\Do what? You couldn't have changed anything here if she was going to fight to the death, no matter how strong you are. Some people have to die for the good of the world.
//As soon as you start thinking like that, any killing becomes permissible. A Hero--
//SHUT UP BOTH OF YOU JUST SHUT THE FUCK UP
Spike: And I thought my arm was annoying...
//Twilight sighs.
T: Nobody has respect for books anymore.
//She picks up the atlas, folds it shut, and puts it on her back.
T: It's not the most useful atlas, no, but using it as a weapon at the expense of your other offensive options out of spite?
Spike: Twilight! Celestia, am I glad to see you.
T: You too. But she's not the only offender, that doctor thought 'hey, a book! That's a good time waster!' The anti-intellectual strain running through the contemporary populace really bothers me, you know. Don't people read books for fun anymore?
Spike: I'm not sure they ever did.
//Twilight Sparkle sighs again and sits down, fishing the books out of the wastebasket.
T: So, what's the damage? Broken arm?
Spike: Yep. Frankly, for a whole cult of ponies, a broken arm isn't too bad...
//She rolls her eyes as she takes The Real Princess Hazel out of the trash.
T: You'll be facing people who can have this cave crushed with a spell or a stomp or an order. (Or, in one particular case, kinda hoping for it.) Your standards need to be higher.
Spike: Hey, one step at a time. If I save the world at the beginning of my adventure, what do I do for the rest?
T: So, where'd your companion go?
Spike: 'Get supplies', he said. Have you heard of this book before? 'The Staying Power of A Focused Mind'?
T: Nope. Your friend must really not be an adventurer, everyone knows you loot the place before treating to non-life-threatening injuries.
Spike: It must be some little thing like 'healthy concern of a medical professional' getting to his head.
T: I mean, look at this!
//Twilight tugs a bronze chainmail vest-skirt off of an armless statue with her teeth, and piles it at my feet.
T: This could be a 'bronze chainmail of cure wounds', or whatever, and you'd have wasted all this time and effort. It's not, but it could be!
Spike: What is it then?
T: A normal chainmail vest-skirt.
Spike: How would I know, assuming I wasn't graced with your presence, that it's not a 'cursed bronze chainmail vest-skirt of constricting'?
T: Easy, get someone else to put it on. Like a sidekick.
Spike: _That's_ a Heroic solution.
T: No one likes sidekicks anyway; they always take away from the appeal of the Hero.
Spike: Hey, I don't disagree.
T: ...Read your darn book.

//The Staying Power of A Focused Mind is filled with incomprehensible flowcharts, complex body diagrams, directions written in what sounds like Middle Equestrian, and references to some other text not included with the... 'The Healing Power of Calm Meditation'? Damnit!
Spike: 'The Rock-Hard Body of an Implacable Mare, addit. kenned by Terrae Corpus, drawws strength fromme T wwide Earth itselfe...' I don't think I'm reading words anymore.
T: Terrae Corpus? I know that one; toss the book and pay attention.
Spike: I don't think I'll be able to do much with a broken arm.
T: It's not a fighter's strike, it's a meditative effect. Now, follow after me: imagine you are taking up the entire planet on your shoulders...

[Terrae Corpus] was mastered!
Spike: I feel like my scales themselves are harder!
T: This was the main technique of the jester Tim, a few hundred years into Princess Celestia's reign. He crumbled the entire capital city to the ground with it, prompting the construction of Canterlot.
Spike: Good to know... the City on the Hill has such rich history...
//Twilight fades into thin air as Kezno rounds the corner, supplies in hand.
KT: Uh, the bandanas are kind of bloody because I had to use them to get the sinews out, but there was really no other cloth to find.
Spike: I'm sure it'll be fine.
KT: We can always hope so.
//Kezno spends a few minutes using wood slats chiseled from the stakes to immobilize my arm, sinews to tighten the slats, and three green bloody bandanas to make a sling around my neck.
//I stand up and cough, probably from getting some of the blood in my mouth, poking at the
chainmail with a foot.
Spike: You mind helping me try this on?
KT: How'd you get that over here? Did you crawl?
Spike: ...Yeah, sure.
//The bronze vest-skirt fits perfectly with Kezno's help.
KT: Wow, that's longer than I expected. It's not just a vest, it's a... skirtvest?
Spike: The splits in the front and back are kind of unfortunate.
KT: The back, I can understand for your tail, but the front...
Spike: ...Kind of unfortunate.
KT: So, you're all patched up. Ready to get out of here?
Spike: Uh, yeah, I've been meaning to ask you a quick question.
//Kezno licks his lips and says:
KT: Okay, what is it?
Spike: You're a doctor, right? Do you know anything about amnesia?
//He wipes his bloody hands on Sacr-Ulkip's fur and makes a thinking sound.
KT: ...Not all that much, honestly. Sorry.
Spike: Nah, it's fine. Nevermind. Let's go.
KT: Was it a friend of yours?
Spike: No. Me.
KT: ...Sorry. In the Aquinatics, you get used to just treating broken bones and flesh wounds.
Anyone else is left on the battlefield to die.
//...Wow. A place like this exists in Equestria?
Spike: That's horrible.
KT: Besides, everyone's brain is abnormal up there. Else they'd find a way to leave!
//He starts up a great, sad laughter, and walks out of the room.
Spike: ...Doctors sure are weird folk.
T: Okay, Hero.
//I stagger after him, holding my broken arm still.

//We exit the caves, talking and bantering about whatever, laughing all the way into the
encroaching darkness of the plains, clouds on the horizon blocking the setting sun. Our laughter
stops by the time we reach Mr. Mortani's corpse.
KT: ...Didn't make it, huh.
Spike: Did you know him?
KT: Not too well, but he didn't deserve this.
Spike: The ponies with him are up the road. Did you know them?
KT: I should have known them better; they gave their lives to defend us.
//Kezno hangs his head, staring at his fists.
Spike: Don't be too sad. Think about it like this: the cult doesn't have the power to hurt anyone
ever again.
KT: Yeah...
//He interweaves his fingers, still staring.
Spike: You said Mr. Mortani was a trader, right? If you don't mind me asking, what was he
trading?
KT: I have no idea; he was rather secretive about it. Isn't that the wagon behind him?
//We walk over to the overturned wagon a few feet behind Mr. Mortani and Kezno unravels one of
the small sacks.
//Diamonds, gemstones, rubies and sapphires of all persuasions.
Spike: H...holy crap...
KT: I never knew...
Spike: Are these...
KT: Those are red grossulars. Go ahead, have one; he won't miss it.
I pop the red grossular in my mouth and bite down
HO MY FUCK, WHAT IS THIS? IF THIS IS THE RESULT OF YOUR MORONIC
ESCAPADES THEN SHIT, _TOTA--LY_ _FU--KING_ _FORGI--VEN_, MAN. IT'S LIKE I'M
DRINKING STRAIGHT FROM CELESTIA'S --
Okay, that guy can stop talking now.
KT: Whoa! I didn't mean it like that, are you okay?
Why am I on the ground?
I stand up.
Spike: Yeah, fine, it wasn't what I was expecting.
KT: Crap, I guess not! I meant, you know, take it and probably sell it off to someone later, but if it
makes you that happy do whatever suits you!
Kezno takes the biggest bag of gemstones and hands it to me, then takes the second biggest and
ties it around his waist.
Spike: Isn't this stealing?
KT: Nope; vultures keepers. I need a source of income in case I can't find any work where I'm
going and you -- you're a Hero, enjoy the spoils of victory. May it be full of grossulars.
Spike: Uh, okay, I suppose.
I stow the bag next to the books, fitting it in neatly on top of Dragon Movements in the Era of
Abandonment.
KT: Well, Spike, this is the time I take my leave of you.
He holds out his hand. I give him a hug.
KT: Uh, okay.
Spike: What I told Celel was -- condensed version -- 'go to Forlegsandria, find a dragon named
Jebed because she might help you find work, which might be as a dragon medic for the city guard'.
I guess the same applies to you, and I told her I'd send you the same way.
KT: Thank you. Thank you, so much.
Spike: You don't ever need to repay me for this, as long as I can ask one thing of you: when Celel
has her clutch, raise them to love and laugh and explore the world around them, and to be friends
with whoever they can. Tell them not to miss out on some of the world's most interesting and
amazing people simply because they're pony or dragon.
KT: What about snake demons?
I laugh.
Spike: Can probably tell them to avoid those. Kelpies too, while you're at it.
KT: Of course, I will do that for you. But before I leave, I have a few things I'd like to say as well.
Oh?
KT: First off: never stop believing in yourself, and don't always listen to what your dragon instinct
tells you. He can be wrong, and I think he is; you got into the Hero business for the right reasons
and you're much stronger, inside or out, than I could ever be. You're a good kid, and you're going to
help a lot of people. Ignore his crap about 'gargling estrous water' or whatever, that sounds like it's
out of The Real Princess Hazel anyway.
Spike: Excuse me?
KT: Uh, the spell. When she hit you with the confuse spell, you started shouting out. It was pretty
obviously the dragon instinct.
T: (Awk-ward...)
Spike: Celestia's wings, please don't judge me because of that ass...
KT: Don't worry, I have him too, I understand. Secondly...
Kezno takes a slip of paper from the wagon and writes something on it with charcoal, folds it in
half, and hands it to me.
KT: I want you to read that, when I'm far away. It's nothing bad, just something I thought you
should know.
Spike: O...kay?
KT: And thirdly -- you said I never need to pay you back, but if you're ever in the Forlegsandria
area in the future, Celel and I would love to see you. I'll let Jebed know if we go anywhere. And if you ever need help on something -- anything, no matter what it is -- I'm there. That's a promise.

Spike: I appreciate it, Kezno; it's good to know I have friends like you.

KT: It's good to know there are people like you in this world, Spike. I'll never forget what you've done for me today. Goodbye to you, Spike, a real true Hero! May the weather be kind in your travels!

Spike: May the cultists be kind in yours!

//Kezno laughs as he is running off. I watch him for a little while, then something clicks. I yell:

Spike: Why are you still carrying the bow?!

//He yells back:

KT: This world isn't safe for a drakeling! You know that! Good luck!

//He fades into the distance, nothing more than a speck.

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//I turn around and keep walking on the road. A lot of time has been lost, but a Heroic deed has been Done, and Justice delivered. I wonder if the bag has any more red grossulars...

//Twilight pops into existence next to me in a burst of scentless air, carrying two drinks by a handle in her mouth.

T: Sho? Wossit shay, wossit shay, wossit shay?

//She starts levitating the drinks alongside her, spitting out the handle.

Spike: Isn't that littering?

T: Biodegradable. What's the paper say?

//I unfold it and try to read the smudged charcoal. Twilight provides some light with her horn.

Spike: ...'You don't have to worry about the cultists getting revenge'. Good to know, but what's that mean?

T: It means he killed them all.

Spike: What?!

//I turn around, looking at the horizon. Kezno Telekom can't be seen at all.

T: When he left the room with the bow and arrow, and was gone for about half an hour. You really bought the line about the bandanas?

Spike: Why would he not tell me?

T: Because you're a Hero, and your entire job is to face hardship and difficulty and people who want to kill you, so having a crazed ex-cultist hunting you down because you kept your strict moral code is acceptable to you. Kezno is a doctor, with a wife and soon to be kids. He's not going to risk their lives or his over a moral code he may not even abide by, and he doesn't need for you to make him feel guilty over it.

Spike: Still... it doesn't feel right to me.

T: It shouldn't. People are willing to kill and maim others blindly in order to protect themselves and their kin. You're a Hero because you're different.

Spike: If two groups think their kin's lives are in danger from the other, when does the violence stop?

T: When a certain dragon comes in and punches someone's lower body into mush. You killed ponies today as well.

Spike: ...Yeah. But I killed ponies in combat, where it's hard to control how much damage you do if you still want to win the fight. Killing someone after the fight's over, when they're laying there, and defenseless, is...

T: You don't have to like it, but you should understand why people do it.

//Twilight floats a drink in front of her and sucks from the straw.

Spike: What's that?

T: Hay smoothie.

Spike: Where'd you get a hay smoothie?
Her eyes look at whatever happens to be the opposite direction from me.

T: Canterlot.
Spike: Canterlot?!
T: Evil cult bosses aren't the only ponies with teleport spells.

//My mind reels.

Spike: You teleport to Canterlot for a hay smoothie... and I'm _walking_, to the Aquinatics...

T: Your quest, your problems. But if it makes you feel any better, I got you this.

//The second drink floats out in front of me, a vial of golden liquid. I grab it with my left hand.

Spike: What is it?

T: This is the reason you loot. Not looting until you've been restored to some semblance of health, understandable, but not looting at all? Unforgivable, for any adventurer! You should be thankful I looked over the baubles and trinkets for you; it was in there.

Spike: So... what is it?

T: Potion of heal wounds.
Spike: Do I like, rub it in, or...?

T: No, just drink it.

//I hesitate, then drink the potion. It tastes like wood. The various cuts, sealed by dragonfire or open, and every bruise on my body all fade away into health. My arm and foot feel funny...

//I take my right arm out of the sling and move my hand. It feels just like normal, and the ache is gone from my foot.

Spike: This is amazing!

T: It's not bad.

//I shed both dressings and leave them on the side of the road.

T: Only a couple a years ago you would see adventurers carrying it by the gallons. (One person, if I remember right, made an IV for it.) But the alchemists who knew the recipe, and the adventurer demand for it, aren't around anymore.

Spike: What happened to them?

T: Princess Celestia disappeared.

//On the road, passing over another few rivers and finally getting our bearings when I trade a traveling merchant (fence) for a brown hooded cloak and a more recent map. He scrambles off quickly, hiding the gem (quartz; tastes like grass) in one of the many folds of his baggy robes. I pull my cloak tighter around my shoulders; it's whipping about madly up here.

Spike: I wonder if I can tie the cloak to my legs or something...

T: This is the Hill of the Wind Giant. There's not actually a Wind Giant, people just call it that because it was named before geographic wind patterns were mapped out.

Spike: Good to know the omnidirectional wind isn't magical.

T: It's a common ambush point for those entering the Valley of Death because scents can't be followed and noises are drowned out. Be on your guard.

//Twilight's image wisps away, torn to dust by the wind.

Spike: Good to know.

//I continue walking on, wind swirling in every direction, eyes open for danger. Munching on an amethyst (wheat, but not bad), I hear something on a lazy wind coming from the east.

Female Voice: Hoho, it looks like today we are in luck. That Avatar must be smiling upon us. Your eyes are keen, Domariv, and you have done well.

Deep Male Voice: Thank you, milady.

FV: It looks bipedal, and not terribly large. Are you able to estimate its body mass, Domariv?

DMV: Wiry, milady, with no traces of baby fat on the face. If Domariv were to estimate its racial attributes and age, Domariv would wager drakeling, milady.

//I pull the hood a little tighter around my head. Though the voices are coming from the east wind, that's no reason they must be from the east...

FV: Drakeling? Hoho, Domariv, you have done well indeed...
//Pretending I don't hear, I take a gemstone from the bag and nibble at it. Hey, not bad!
DMV: Milady, it has appeared the subject has pulled a stone from his bag.
FV: Stone? Nonsense, Domariv, I know a gem when I see one. You have done very well, Domariv; you are well on your way towards gaining your freedom. Today will be a profitable day indeed...
//The voices fade away into the wind, and for a minute I trudge along, spotting nothing.
Remembering the gem in my hand, I pop it in my mouth
//CELESTIA'S FUCKWINGS BOY LOOK WHAT YOU'RE EATING BEFORE YOU PUT IT IN YOUR MOUTH; YOU NEED TO _PREPARE_ FOR THE DROOLING DEMENTIA CAUSED BY RED GROSSULARS INSTEAD OF PRESENT IN YOUR DAILY MENTAL STATE!

The Drakeling falls to the ground!
The flying -copper trident- strikes the brown cloak, tearing through the cloth!
The flying -copper trident- strikes the earth! The -copper trident- has lodged firmly in the earth!
//The trident flashes, discharging into the ground! The holes it tore through the cloak are set aflame!
Spike: Yaah!
//I tear the cloak away, ripping three gashes in the cloth. The wind puts the flame out quickly.

The Drakeling stands up.

//Following the chain attached to the trident into the air, I spot a large musclebound pegasus, holding in his hooves a small earth pony with a contraption on her back!
[[SAVE LOCATION]]

FV: It appears I have missed.
DMV: Good luck is impermanent, milady.
Spike: What the hell are you doing, are you crazy?!

//The earth pony reels in the trident with her contraption.

FV: I am the famous Forever Valiant, dragon hunter extraordinaire.
Spike: I've never heard of you, and you kind of look like a loon.
FV: Prey should be quiet.
Spike: It's never stopped any pony I met.
FV: Silence! Domariv, set us down.

//Forever Valiant is thrown a few yards behind me, and Domariv slams into the road just a few feet ahead.
//Celestia, is that a big pony.

FV: I don't want to waste time or energy, so you should surrender. Everything will be easier that way.
Spike: Strange, I was going to offer you the same deal. I mean, you know why 'dragon hunter' is a meaningful title at all? Because it's the opposite of the way things normally are.
FV: Domariv, crush him. I will teach him better than to speak that way to me.

The Pegasus charges at The Drakeling!
The Pegasus attacks The Drakeling, but The Drakeling dodges away!
The Drakeling counterstrikes!
The Drakeling strikes The Pegasus in the upper body with his Dashing Rogue Punch, bruising the muscle!
The Pegasus rushes by The Drakeling!
//This pegasus is solid, but there's no spellcaster, so as long as I can work on him for a while it
should be straightforward...

The Drakeling kicks The Pegasus in the right rear leg from behind with his left leg, bruising the muscle and bruising the skin!
//Darn, the wind is making it hard to get a good strike in. It might not be as easy as I thought.

The Pegasus kicks The Drakeling in the lower body with his left rear leg, bruising the muscle through the bronze vestskirt!

The Mare charges her -copper trident-, readying for another throw!

The Pegasus bites The Drakeling in the left lower leg, but the attack is deflected by The Drakelings steel shinguard!
The Drakeling punches The Pegasus in the head with his left hand, bruising the muscle!

The Drakeling strikes at The Pegasus with his Dashing Rogue Punch but The Pegasus dodges away!

The Mare throws her -copper trident- at The Drakeling! The Drakeling leaps away from the flying -copper trident-! The flying -copper trident- strikes the earth! The -copper trident- has lodged firmly in the earth!
//SNAP!
The -copper trident- discharges into the earth!
//Wearing metal armor might not have been the best idea.

The Pegasus kicks The Drakeling in the left lower arm with his right rear hoof, bruising the muscle and bruising the bone!
The Drakeling punches The Pegasus in the lower body with his right hand, bruising the muscle and bruising the guts!

The contraption reel's in the -copper trident-! The Mare charges her -copper trident-, readying for another throw!

The Pegasus grabs The Drakeling by the right lower leg with his left front leg!
The Pegasus takes down The Drakeling by the right lower leg!
//Being thrown down takes the wind out of me. The armor certainly didn't make falling less painful...

FV: Keep him there, Domariv.
DMV: Yes, milady.

//Crap! Metal armor, electric trident, ground next to my head! Bad news for an unfried brain.
The Drakeling struggles in vain against the grip of The Pegasus's left front leg on The Drakelings right lower leg!
The Drakeling tries to stand up, but The Pegasus is in the way!
//Maybe that technique I just learned? 'Take up the earth on your shoulders'? Will that even do anything?

The Drakeling breathes in and focuses, casting Terrae Corpus! The Drakeling's scales become as hard as rock!

The Mare throws her -copper trident- at The Drakeling! The -copper trident- strikes The Drakeling in the right upper arm, but the attack glances away!
//SNAP!
The -copper trident- discharges into The Drakeling's scale! The Drakeling's scale discharges into the earth!  
//Hey, I didn't feel a thing!

FV: He should be subdued now. You have done well, Domariv, and with today's profitable venture you are well on your way towards buying back your freedom from me.
DMV: Should Domariv fetch the restraints, milady? This one is strong and will sell well on the market.
FV: ...No, he is a healthy young specimen. I will keep him for my own. Prepare him for mounting.
DMV: Yes, milady.

The Drakeling grabs The Pegasus by the left front leg with his left hand! The Drakeling grabs The Pegasus by the left front leg with his right hand!

DMV: Stop resisting.

The Pegasus kicks The Drakeling in the left upper arm with his right front leg, shattering the scale!  
//Woah, this Terrae Corpus stuff is powerful; that would have broken my arm!

The Drakeling throws The Pegasus by the left front leg!
The Pegasus's right front leg skids along the ground, bruising the muscle and tearing the skin!
The Pegasus's head skids along the ground, bruising the muscle and tearing the skin!
An artery has been opened by the blow!
The Pegasus's lower body skids along the ground, bruising the muscle and bruising the left kidney!
The Pegasus's left wing skids along the ground, bruising the muscle and bruising the bone!
The Pegasus slams into the ground!

Spike: He says stop resisting, but I'm the one playing police. Go figure.
FV: Don't make me hit you again!
Spike: See, I'd point out how much your dialogue sounds like a rapist, but there's a funny thing about that...

The Drakeling grabs the -copper trident- by the middle prong with his left hand!
The Drakeling grabs the -copper trident- by the handle with his right hand!

The contraption reels in the -copper trident-!
//I'm pulled to my feet and stumble forward, then stick in the ground, stopping the trident.
The contraption charges the -copper trident-! The -copper trident- discharges into The Drakeling's scale! The Drakeling's scale discharges into the earth!

FV: Why are you not dead yet?!
Spike: Healthy eating habits and exercise?
T: (Says the dragon who ate twenty gemstones in one day.)
Spike: (Hey, I had to try one of each.)
T: (And destroy several lifetimes of wealth in the process.)
FV: This charge should fry you!
Spike: That's what I'm talking about; fried food is unhealthy.
FV: Shut up! Give me the trident back!

//I flip the trident backwards to tie the chain around the middle prong.

Spike: Sure.
//The trident flies back at Forever Valiant, but halfway the contraption stops pulling and the trident clatters to the ground.
FV: You honestly thought that would work?
Spike: You know, I really did.
FV: Hohohoho, lapses of intelligence like that are the reason ponies are the dominant species in Equestria, and not dragons.
Spike: It must be that, and not the fact that ponies want to mount every single thing with a pulse they stumble across.
FV: Ah... dragons are so dim; they never see it coming.
Spike: Oh, and here I say 'See what coming?' like a stooge, setting me up for a clever--

The Pegasus charges at The Drakeling!
The Pegasus headbutts The Drakeling in the upper body from behind, denting the scale through the bronze vestskirt!
The Pegasus collides with The Drakeling! The Drakeling is knocked over and tumbles forwards! The Pegasus rushes by The Drakeling!

//New downside to being hard as rock: slamming into the ground facefirst, while a good way to avoid damage, makes you pick the shattered cobblestone out of your teeth.

The Drakeling stands up.

Spike: Okay, _rude_, I was talking. Setting me up for a clever quip where at the end of my impending defeat you say, 'that'.
FV: What... what power is this, Domariv?
DMV: Domariv does not know, milady.
Spike: (All my enemies keep asking me to get rock hard and when I finally do they're disappointed.)
DMV: But Domariv does know no power in this natural world can be his defeat.

The Pegasus kicks The Drakeling in the head with his right front hoof, but the attack is deflected by The Drakeling's steel helmet!

Spike: Ooo, I've got one: 'tell that to the wind'!

The Drakeling grabs The Pegasus by the left wing with his right hand! The Drakeling throws The Pegasus in the air by the left wing!
The wind grabs The Pegasus by the left wing! The wind throws The Pegasus by the left wing!

The Pegasus slams into The Mare!
The Pegasus's upper body takes the full force of the impact, bruising the muscle!
The Mare's head takes the full force of the impact, bruising the muscle and tearing apart the upper spine's nervous tissue!
The Mare falls over!
The Pegasus slams into the ground!

Spike: (Come on, that was pretty slick.)
T: (Hero, not comedian. How'd you do that?)
Spike: (Uh, luck, I guess.)
T: (Yes, I have noticed more of it recently.)
FV: My... my neck! My neck is broken!
Spike: Couldn't have the decency to tear your larynx as well?
T: (Hey, you've been reading that pony anatomy book I gave you!)
Spike: (What were my other choices? Cat sex?)
FV: You, you fool! Look at what you've done to me! I'll have you killed!
Spike: There are five thousand drakelings in the Greater Aquinatic Region, and my only
distinguishing characteristic is that I'm purple. Best of luck with that.
FV: ...You're right. I have been defeated. Please, if you would spare me, at least give me this: what is the name of the dragon who has finally defeated me?
Spike: Oh, my name's Twilight Sparkle. Nice to meet you!
T: (Spike!)
Spike: (Shh! She might hear!)
FV: Hohohoho, do you think me a fool?! What dragon would name their child that?! Answer me truthfully!
T: (You _jerk_!)
Spike: I swear, I'm telling the truth!
//Domariv approaches. He looks at me, blood pouring down his face from the gash in his head, and glances briefly at where Twilight's voice is coming from.
DMV: Hello, my new master. I am Domariv.
Spike: What?
FV: What?
T: (Huh?)
DMV: Hero, Domariv is bound to this mare by a life debt. It is his duty to do anything she wills until Domariv has served her to her satisfaction or saved her life.
Spike: Yeah, she did seem the slaver type.
DMV: On behalf of Forever Valiant's life and his own, Domariv surrenders and asks you for mercy. Such a gift, of both her life and his, could only place Domariv fully in life debt to you.
//Domariv bows his head.
FV: What?! You can't be in life debt twice! You owe me!
Spike: So... by asking me for mercy for the both of you--
DMV: --I would be saving her life.
Spike: And be freed from her?
FV: No!
DMV: Yes.
Spike: Sure; why the hell not?
DMV: Forever Valiant, by saving your life, I declare my life debt to you paid in full.
FV: I knew, I knew, I knew never to trust someone like you; they always trick and trap people in the stories and I knew...
Spike: Uh... is she being racist?
DMV: Unimportant. As of now, I am in life debt to you, Hero. What do you will?
Spike: Hmm...
T: (Choose wisely, Spike. This is someone's life you're thinking about.)
Spike: Got any gems on you?
DMV: None.
//I shrug.
Spike: I dunno, I guess you're free, then.
DMV: You would have me do nothing? Not even -
//He gestures to Forever Valiant
DMV: - bring her sequentially in front of every worldly possession she ever owned, every tool of power she ever wielded and every ear whose attention she ever held and see them all lost to her?
Spike: ...
DMV: Because I can do that.
FV: No! Please, Celestia, no!
Spike: Yeah, sounds good, just donate it all to charity or something. That way she can't use it to hurt anyone in the future.
DMV: Your will be done.
//Forever Valiant screams. The wind streaks at their visages, drawing out long tails of color before they both fade away.
Spike: ...What kind of magic was that?
T: None of this world.

The Dragon Hunters were defeated!
Spike gained 2000 experience points!
Spike is now level 13!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

Chapter End Notes

With apologies to Tarn Adams.
With Your Stupid Careless Mouth

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

//Nighttime falls early on the Valley of Death. I approach a wooden gate that closes the road through the small village, noting that there is no wall around the village otherwise and the gate is ten feet wide. I could walk right around it; who were they trying to stop, the world's dumbest bandits?

T: (Hey, Spike, I have an appointment with a, good... friend, and it's important because I, you know, it's one of those... ah, hell, I don't need an excuse. I'll be gone for a while, you should find somewhere to spend the night. See you later.)

Spike: (Kay?)

Gatekeeper: Evenin', young master. It's not often we see a dragon roun' these parts. What's your business in Longbridge?

I guess I'll stay until the morning. It'll be nice to sleep in an actual bed for once.

Spike: Evening, gatekeeper. I'm looking for a place to pass the night, can you tell me which inns have the pillows with the least lumps in them?

//The gatekeeper chuckles.

Gatekeeper: There be only one inn 'ere in Longbridge, trav'lah, and I'll point you right to it. Let me get this rusty thing 'ere...

//The rusted gate swings open on squeaky hinges, revealing a wrinkled old gatekeeper with more legs than teeth.

Gatekeeper: There you are, it's down and to the left, only building that's lit. Farmers are comin' in for the night, them others are just leavin', so you might still see a few. Don't mind them.

Spike: 'Others'?

Gatekeeper: Oh, yah. Big ponies with dark suits and far away eyes. Arrived a few months ago, now. But their coin's good and they do us no harm, so we don' mind. Off you go!

//The inn, Longbridge Nights (someone has scrawled 'if you know what I mean' under the sign), is the only building in the village that doesn't look torn out of a shanty town; the carpenter must have learned about right angles fairly late into his career. But it's warm and it's loud and it's a place to sleep.

//There are quite a few ponies here. I pull my hood up.

Pony Playing With His Mouth: Bood, bood, bobobo...

Other Pony At Table: Shut up, Pepwhem, you're drunk.

Barkeep: 'Lo, little master. Place is made o' wood, I'd like t' remind ya.

//What's that supposed to mean?

Spike: So?

Barkeep: Just 'opin' you'll be careful an' leave an ol' stallion his house and home. We don' happen' to have any meat around, so, what's your poison?

//I spill a few coins (fence) on the counter, and mutter:

Spike: Whatever's cheapest.

Barkeep: Comin' up.

//The barkeep puts a drink in front of me. Dragons are omnivorous, but he's not worth correcting.

Agitated Yuppie: I cannot believe you won that hand.

Barkeep: 'Hehehaha *snort* hehehaha, sorry! Looks like you'll have to buy in again!

AY: Why would you raise on a flop of king-king-ace with two-seven offsuit?

HW: I wanted to confuse you into defeat?
AY: _That's not how you play the game_!
HW: Sorry, Rarity, I'm not very good at poker. Should I lose more?
Rarity: You have a very odd knack for succeeding at tasks for which you have no training, no experience and exceedingly small reason to succeed. Let's see, what was that called again?
//The pink one gasps.
Pinkie Pie: I swear, as my name is Pinkie Pie, in the name of Her Royal Hazeliness, that I would never use my kooky-spooky luck powers in a friendly competition!
//The dealer, an aging bar maid, collects the cards and deals again.
OPAT: Pepwhem. Don't eat the cards.
PPWHM: Hihihihissss... hihihihisss...
//The dealer throws out three cards, and Pepwhem continues hissing.
Third Pony At Table: Celestia, can't you get him to shut up?
TPAT: Your 'sweet, loving' Celestia was nothing more than a successful con and a tool to keep savages in line!
OPAT: Wanna bet on it?! All in!
TPAT: Call!
Pinkie Pie: (How do you bet on the divinity of Princess Celestia?)
Rarity: (With a deitometer?)
//The dealer turns over the last two cards, one of the ponies shouts out in joy. They settle back down.
//I take a sip of the drink, and put it back down.
Spike: Hey, Barkeep. Try again; this time hold the turpentine.
//My glass is taken away and a new hand is dealt.
R: (Although I'd imagine a deitometer would give a lot of false readings.)
PP: (Ooh, a double entendre!)
TPAT: So, you really believe that a big white horse with a cheap crown and fancy shoes could be the earthy manifestation of Celestia?
OPAT: You don't? That alicorn lived for more'n a thousand years. Explain _that_.
TPAT: Magic.
OPAT: Magic can't do that. I got a cousin, distant relative, lives in Canterlot, says he hears unicorns talkin' about it all the time. Magic and death is two different things, separate. Y'ain't supposed to be muckin' about combining them.
TPAT: 'Course y'ain't, it'd cut in on the con mare's business.
OPAT: Play your cards, Lou.
PP: I'm proud of you, Rarity. You haven't complained once about all the grime and dirt in here!
R: When you invited me to play poker I had imagined it would be in Mountainville, not... er, wherever we are. It's cleaner, in one sense of the word, and the refreshments are certainly more appetizing.
PP: (We try and get our maids before the three kids and wrinkles, too!)
R: (Hohoho, that's mean, stop it!)
//Another hand is dealt out in relative silence.
OPAT: An', an', I mean, look at what happen' when she ain't here, see? That new Princess, you know, uh, wossername--
PP: Hazel?
OPAT: No, the one before that, the uh, wossit, the short one--
//The dealer points her hoof at him and says:
Dealmiad: Sparkle!
OPAT: Yeah, thassit! Princess Twilight Sparkle!
//What?! Princess Twilight Sparkle?!
//SHE WAS A HUGE FAILURE. BITCH STILL IS.
//Man, I'm glad she's not here now...
Rarity rolls her eyes.

R: Oh, yes, _her_. What about her?

Pinkie Pie shrinks away from the conversation, eying Rarity.

R: I suppose you're going to say, 'If Celestia were not a goddess, it would be possible for another pony to rule Equestria'. And cite as your counterexample Twilight Sparkle, most notably how she went and got herself _rent in twain_ by a dragon only several days after she ascended to the throne.

R: What you must realize is that Princess Celestia had hundreds of years of experience under her belt that allowed her to rule effectively. The disappearance of Celestia happened, what? Less than two months after Princess Sparkle's--

She spits those words--

R: --Coronation ceremony? At the time of her untimely death, the poor Princess barely understood the use of her wings, nevermind the political machinations of a territory the size of Equestria! Her death is no counterexample.

So, either there's a Twilight Sparkle out there who was a Princess of Equestria, died a year and a half ago, had wings, and the Twilight Sparkle I know is a completely different one... or something fishy is up. And I smell scales.

TPAT: There's a pony who knows what she's talkin' 'bout!

Real scales this time, not feathers.

R: I will say, though, that Hazel is a far better ruler than Twilight could ever be.

PP: (That was... different than I was expecting?)

Another hand is dealt out, again in relative silence. Everyone seems to be digesting Rarity's words.

\They kind of make me feel sick.

R: (I have disagreements with Twilight for the right reasons, Pinkie Pie. We're still friends.)

PP: (Are you sure?)

Rarity takes winnings for her hand, won with a pair of twos.

PP: So... do you ever wonder....--

R: Not really, no. Information that will influence the future can always be determined and information that will not is not worth the mental effort. One learns, Pinkie Pie, not idly wonders.

PP: Rarity, it was a leading question? I was going to ask you about--

R: Hmm, Pinkie Pie, what creature would you consider my recent behavior?

PP: Uh... 'wailing banshee'?

R: My _poker_ behavior, my play. I feel like a whale right now.

PP: Nonsense; your figure is as stunning as ever, Rarity!

R: Hoho, stop.

These are the Avatar of Luck and the Avatar of Avarice? Why are they normal people, and Rainbow Dash a crazy thug?

Wait, nevermind; the Avatar of Avarice also tried to assault me. I guess it's inevitable the Avatar of Luck will, too. Honestly, I'm still thinking about what they said about Twilight...

PPWHM: Yuan-ti, yuan-ti, yuan-ti...

TPAT: What'd you say about my auntie?! Pepwhem I'll kill you!!

The pony shatters a dirty glass against the side of the table as two others try to restrain him.

PP: Maybe we can talk about this some other time.

R: It does seem like a good time to leave.

The two Avatars touch a gem (bismuth crystal) sewn into the Avatar of Avarice's dress, and disappear. I pull my hood up as a sudden gust of wind streams out the door.

Spike: Barkeep, got any open rooms?

Barkeep: Just one, an' don' expect much out of it.

Spike: I really wasn't.
He really meant it when he said not to expect much. One small bed, a broken window, a door that gets stuck shut, and standing room only. I sigh, put down the bookbag, and start taking off armor.

I'MMA STOP TIME FOR HALF A MOMENT TO GIVE YOU SOME ACTUAL FUCKING ADVICE. AND NO, NOT ACTUAL FUCKING ADVICE, FUCKING ACTUAL ADVICE. SHIT, WHAT DOES IT MATTER.

Huh? You're actually being helpful for once? Why am I a little bit skeptical?

HAH FUCKING HAH NOW LISTEN. EVERYTHING YOU'VE HEARD UP TO THIS POINT YOU NEED TO KEEP IN YOUR LITTLE FUCKING HEAD AND PUCKER YOUR ASS SO TIGHT NONE OF THAT SHIT COMES OUT, HEAR? RULE ONE OF NOT BEING 'MANGLED IN THE MACHINE LIKE A GEAR THAT TWISTS AWAY', YOU IGNORE EVERYTHING YOU'VE HEARD ABOUT TWILIGHT SPARKLE TODAY UNTIL I TELL YOU TO. OR YOU FUCKING DIE. UNDERSTAND?

...Why are you telling me this? Is what I heard today really true? Twilight's my friend, she--

FRIENDS ARE HONEST WITH EACH OTHER. RULE TWO OF NOT DYING: IF I TELL YOU TO SAY SOMETHING TO HER, SAY IT. SHE'S DANGEROUS ENOUGH YOU NEED MY HELP, SO DON'T FUCK THIS UP. NOW OR IN THE FUTURE.

I'm not sure I really trust you.

Wow, you're really doing well for yourself.

Twilight is standing in the hallway, holding the door open with a hoof.

Uh, mind if I... come in?

Who are you asking, me or the laws of physics?

I left my cloak in Canterlot, but I won't be staying long anyway.

She closes the door and steps in. My back presses up against the window and one of my legs is up on the cot; there's hardly breathing room.

The one that magically disguises who you are? Who are you hiding from?

Hiding? I'm not hiding! Who says I'm hiding from someone?

Well, I just did. And your overreaction. So, two people of the both of us.

...It's not heinous to ask for a little privacy. I compartmentalize different aspects of my life, and you -- everything we do together is one of them. Which is why I was so mad you told a random encounter my full name!

To be fair, if I'm allowed to choose which random encounters become recurring enemies, the one with the broken spine isn't a terrible choice...

That isn't something you do to a friend! We learned better than this.

Yeah, and I lost my memory. In case you forgot.

You lost your memory, not your empathy. Or your friends.

Apparently I did, because I can't find them anywhere. I have a feeling no dragon in the Aquanatics is going to know me.

Twilight pushes her head forward, bangs bobbing.

Because you've been looking for them in the wrong places! The people who knew you best are right in front of you!

Does Twilight have a multiple personality disorder, or is there someone invisible behind her?

I practically _raised_ you. And Fluttershy, Rarity, even Rainbow Dash -- they were our closest friends for years!

Raised me? Were we really that close? What happened to my parents?

Rainbow Dash? Somehow I doubt she felt as close as you're saying.

Okay, she's changed a little since then. We all have. But whether or not you consider us your friends, we've all been closer to you than any dragon in the world.

Uh... Twilight?

Not literally, I hope.

Ignoring me, Twilight continues:

And you don't just up and abandon friends and ponies who are close to you like that!

CELESTIA DID IT
What I want to say is 'Twilight, if you could intimidate Rainbow Dash, an unknown dragon hunter nobody is never going to challenge you', but what I say is:

Spike: Sorry.
T: I accept your apology, Spike. But you need to learn how to be a better friend, and you're not going to do that unless you want to. Is that clear?
Spike: Clear as crystal.

In a somber tone, she mutters downwards:

T: Crystals scratch, Spike.

They melt to dragonfire, too.

Twilight snaps her head up and stares at me. Is she forcing back tears?

T: ...I'm... disappointed that you would say that, Spike...

//Damnit, why do I listen to the dragon instinct?

//YEAH HOW'S THAT FEEL YOU CUNT, HOW DO YOUR OWN FAILURES FEEL

//Celestia, this guy's just a bully.

//YOU HAVE NO IDEA HOW MUCH MORE I AM THAN THAT.

//...Maybe I have been a bad friend. I mean, Twilight's gone all this way and taught me so much, and I haven't done anything at all to repay her, or even show that I appreciate it...

Spike: I'm really sorry, Twilight. I shouldn't say things like that. I've probably been a terrible travel partner.

//She sniffs, once.

T: Hey, don't say that.

Spike: But it's true! I can't possibly begin to repay you for all the times you bailed my ass out.

//I COULD COUNT YOUR INDEPENDENT SUCCESSES ON ONE FUCKING BIT

Spike: I mean, I still want to go to the Aquinatics. I want to see what kind of hardships my people have been through. If I can take some suffering off them myself, I have to do that as a Hero.

T: What kind of hardships, eh...?

//Twilight looks off somewhere, gears turning.

Spike: But I'd be no sort of Hero if I just took advantage of your generosity without even a thanks or repayment. So, thank you, Twilight. I really do owe you one.

//Twilight holds a hoof to her chin, thinking for a moment. A wide, warm smile appears.

T: Hah, you know, maybe you _do_ owe me something, Spike!

//Never indebt yourself to the genie, come on. What are you, an idiot?

T: Hmm, that might be a problem, though.

Spike: What? What might be a problem?

T: I just don't really know what you would owe me. Nothing's coming out recently for books, gems aren't really my thing, and I'm not desperately in need of a Hero right now.

Spike: Right now, but when the evil lich is massing his army to invade Equestria...

T: Undead aren't real; be quiet. You, a little drakeling with a sack of books and a few shiny stones, don't have much in the way of offering me. And I'm not sure what I even need...

//I scratch my leg; quarters are close enough that Twilight's fur on her leg is tickling it.

Spike: Can we save it for later?

T: ...Oh, I have _just_ the thing.

Spike: Is it something that can be saved?

T: No, I think it's best if we did it right away.

//Great, middle of the night and I have to run errands instead of sleeping.

\Silver less than Spike less than Lead.

//What is that?

\Density rating.

Spike: 'We'?

T: Yeah, it's a request. And since you owe me something, I'll just have you say yes.
Spike: Woo.
T: Be more excited; it'll be fun for you too!
Spike: I really want to get to sleep. It's past midnight.
T: Then it's a great time to get started on this.
//If you'd get on with it!
T: You wanted to experience some of the things that happen to dragons, right?
//Uh... yeah?
T: I've noticed, on your quests and in fights, some enemies will try to use pleasure attacks in order to weaken your resistance. It's a powerful tactic against a free drakeling, a drakeling not bound to anyone yet.
Spike: ...Yeah?
T: Against the Kelpie, you were almost a goner after three attacks. Not to mention, the Charm and Confusion spells can take advantage of your weakness of, uh, 'spirit', and though it hasn't happened yet, there may be a time in the future where you'll have to endure for a while before finding the right opening to attack.
Spike: Thanks, for the... uh, whatever this is.
//If it's possible to keep punching enemies into submission I think I'll stay with that.
T: Not to mention, your encounter a few days ago with the cultists, and getting hit with the Confusion spell--
Spike: Ugh, I knew the dragon instinct would come back to bite me--
T: --Showed me that a new problem has arisen. You don't know who you are, you know, sexually! You don't know what you like, what you dislike, what you're looking for, and I think the pent up feelings and frustrations are leaking over into other parts of your mind when you should be releasing them. And that's no way to be.
Spike: I'm fairly certain that, sexually, I'm not.
T: Spike, sex is a normal and healthy part of existence, and I want to get you to realize it. I've been thinking about this for a while, now, and, I want you... //She hides her face behind a wave of her mane for a few seconds, still smiling. I try to move my leg, but it doesn't respond.
Spike: I'm sorry, Twilight, but are--
T: There! I know a book's probably not as exciting as you were expecting, but I want you to read it. I'll be quizzing you in a few days, so you'd better!
Spike: ...
T: It's 'Sexuality and Romance in a Multicultural Equestria', anonymously written. It's a great read, really. I'll leave you to it!
//In a puff of scentless air, Twilight disappears.
Spike: ...Crazy misleading bint...
T: 'Sexuality and Romance in a Multicultural Equestria', huh? Pretty thick tome. Hum, ho... back cover says it's about a group of travelers, going around the world -- okay, 'learning the love secrets of the centaur' has got to be fictional. Let's try to find that chapter--
//TWILIGHT PUT POST IT NOTES ON HER FAVORITE SECTIONS
HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA
C: Spike... Spike, are you listening?
Spike: No, I'm asleep. I can't wait for the part where you turn into my mother and call me a disappointment for not being a golfer who breathes fire at the caddies.
C: You may be asleep, but dream you do not. I am Celestia.
Spike: Celestia!
C: Would you please--
Spike: In the presence of Celestia herself!
C: It's not long before you wake; if we could--
Spike: Ask of me anything, Celestia; I am your servant!

//Like thunder, from everywhere booms:

C: CEASE! I am Celestia, and you are silence itself!

Spike: Okay.

C: In the time since we have last spoken, much has occurred. You have saved the life of not one but two of your kin, a feat I smile greatly upon. You have defeated enemies numerous and powerful, and for your deeds been rewarded greatly. Little pleases me more than your progress.

Spike: Honored Celestia, while my fights are Heroic and just, I feel there must be more to Heroism than happenstance opportunities if I am to become a famous champion of my people! How can I increase my reputation and become a beacon for your light?

C: Dearest drakeling, your fame and fortune will come in due time. They are fickle things, but you will find them through hard work, persistence and devotion to me.

Spike: Celestia! I understand!

C: And, quickly: given to you by your... in your possession is now a tome of worrying content. I suggest you read as little of it as is necessary. You must remain a free drakeling to forge a new future for dragonkind, and the allure of its depictions can cloud your mind. Abandon it at your earliest convenience.

//Don't read something because it can confuse me? Isn't it patronizing to suggest my convictions can be shaken by merely the existence of alternative viewpoints?

Spike: I am true and my heart is strong. It was a gift given to me by a friend, but if I must abandon it, I will.

C: If your closest gives you a poisoned apple, do you bite from it nonetheless?

//What does that have to do with anything?

C: You wake soon, I must tell you before our time is over: distrust completely the mare with--

//WHAT THE SHIT IS THAT TAPPING

//A branch tapping on the window wakes me from sleep.

Spike: Ugh, great.

//Out of simple spite I wrench open the window and burn the end of the branch off with dragonfire. A strong gust blows back in, bringing cold air all about the room and under the rough bedsheet. I pull my body closer in and try to get warm/comfortable.

Spike: Stupid stupid wind.

//It's no use. The cold wind, effort of dragonfire, and visit from Celestia have rendered me totally awake. I sit up in bed, pulling a book out.

Book: In this document are provided several differing viewpoints on circumstances, deliberate or coincidental, leading to the population concentration of dragons below the age of one and a half centuries in the two regions of Forlegsandria and the Aquinatic Mountain Range. Included in this thesis are not only possible explanations for the existence of 95% of total estimated dragon population in these two geographic locations but the existence of only 15% of estimated full dragon population over the age of 150 years in these same regions.

//I'm sure this is great but I don't want to read this right now. What's next...

Book: His thorned, flaccid--

//Nope; next book.

//Huh, this must be a gallery page. A group of people out of place, background a tribe of dark blue ponies in an unforgiving tundra. Two young full dragons and two middle-aged ponies, one of each male and one female. The picture on the opposite page is an indigenous bonding ceremony, the pair of dragons and ponies being recognized by a religious official of some sort. Next page... a dark blue stallion performs a deviant sex act on the female dragon. Charming.

//The wind picks up, whistling past the window. A full moon is out, shining on houses (hovels) and farms stretching away from the road. I put the books away, and try to get back to sleep.

Spike: ...Why does that wind sound a little too much like screaming?

//I open the window fully and stick my head out. It's no easier to hear, but something is audible on
the wind, too persistent to attribute to random noise.
Spike: I swear, making me get up this time of night, it better be just a lost cat...
//I put on the cloak and walk out of the inn. A gust slams the door shut behind me.
//The gatekeeper leans with his head against the gate, drooling quietly in the chilling wind. Shacks
line the street in front of me, moonlight bouncing off of pottery lined up for sale. The wind skims
the rims of the pots, are they the sound I heard? The gatekeeper?
Spike: Screw your lost cat, it's cold out here.
//I open the door to the inn and walk right back to my it's locked. Damnit.
Spike: What kind of stupid, stupid dumb unintelligent door locks by default...
//I pound on the door, hoping to wake the innkeeper. Standing around for a few seconds, some
simple instinct tells me to look behind me, and I do. I pound on the door again, harder.
Spike: Come on! Let me in!
//...Nothing. Stupid stupid dumb unintelligent innkeeper.
//Oh well, maybe I can ask the gatekeeper if someone has the key. I turn back to the gate.
Spike: See, no. That's not how ponies work. There is no switch you flip to make it so ponies
_aren't_ anymore, I know, I've seen your anatomy.
//I swear, he was there a second ago.
Spike: Lousy innkeeper and gatekeeper and door and cold...
//The cloak protects from the worst of the wind, but the cold night air is impossible to block. I
breathe on my hands to warm them up.
//The dragonfire lights up the street; a dark low something skitters past the pottery and out of sight.
It looks nothing like a cat.
Spike: ...Screw this, I hope you people all get eaten by a spider clown. I'm out of here.
//I straighten my helmet and start walking briskly down the road, eyes peeled for danger. A sudden
stop in the wind lets me hear a brief shout up the road, very clearly.
Spike: Hold on, I'm coming!

//Two tall, burly mares in dark suits stare up into the trees.
First Mare: Can you see her?
Second Mare: No, but she can't have gone--
FM: There she is!
Pony In Tree: Ah, crap!
//The pony in the tree has a flask filled with golden liquid around her neck, unsteadily hanging on
to a small branch.
SM: Give that back! I spent a dozen days making that!
FM: You thief!
//Something tickles in my lungs and I cough, inadvertently.
//All three ponies turn their heads. The pony stuck in the tree opens her eyes wider and motions her
head towards the two on the ground.
SM: A dragon?!
FM: That crook up there tried to take something from us!
Spike: Is that true?
PIT: ...I have my reasons!
Spike: Having a magpie as an otherkin does not count as reasons.
SM: Come down from there. We won't hurt you if you give it back.
PIT: Liars! Do you think me a fool?
Spike: Doesn't this town have a sheriff? Can't you call for him?
SM: ...It's a trade secret, we don't want people to know we have it.
//Am I missing something here?
Spike: It's just a potion of heal wounds...
PIT: You fools! You can't keep your infernal recipe a secret forever, just as you can't keep it a
secret that you're digging up old bodies from the Valley's military graveyards!
Spike: What?!
I take a fighting stance immediately. Petty theft and graverobbing are two different levels of evil.
SM: Ach, she knows?
FM: We can't let anyone find out. Keep her in the trees; I'll deal with the dragon.
//The First Mare stomps the ground and snorts, ready to fight!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

FM: Oh-hoh, what is this? You look like a drakeling.
SM: A drakeling?
FM: Most certainly.
Spike: Nope, sorry; I'm actually a snake demon.
FM: Such a poor little thing, out here in the cold night. Your frail body looks freezing. Let me see if I can warm you up a little...
//The pony in the tree takes a stone from her saddlebag and puts it in a sling while the second mare is distracted.
FM: I'm good friends with many powerful people, young drakeling. I assure you there are very many positions you could find yourself in...
SM: Fumeh.
FM: I'm certain you're interested by my outfit. The suit is silk, it's amazing. What do you think would feel best gliding up against you: it? Or me? How about both?
SM: Fumeh!!
//Fumeh whips around, staring at the other pony.
FM: What, Sma'?
SM: You're supposed to choose one line before the battle starts and say it! You can't use three! It ruins the impact!

The Drakeling charges at The First Mare!
The Drakeling punches The First Mare in the right rear leg with his left hand, bruising the muscle and tearing the skin!
The Drakeling collides with The First Mare! The Drakeling bounces backwards!
//One leg on this pony is almost as big as me... maybe I should have noticed that before the fight.

FM: Hey, watch it!
The First Mare kicks at The Drakeling in the head with her left rear hoof, but The Drakeling dodges away!
//That would have clear taken my head off! Time for Atlas mode, I think... take the world up on my shoulders.

The Drakeling breathes in and focuses, casting Terrae Corpus! The Drakeling's scales become as hard as rock!

FM: Just standing there? Afraid of my muscles?

The Pony throws a basalt stone at The Second Mare with her *bat leather sling*! The spinning basalt stone strikes The Second Mare in the upper body, bruising the muscle and bruising the left true rib!

SM: Gah, my back!
FM: Help me with this one; he can burn down the damn tree when we defeat him!
SM: Right!

The Second Mare charges at The Drakeling!
The Second Mare kicks The Drakeling in the lower body with her left front hoof, chipping the scale through the bronze vestskirt!
The Second Mare collides with The Drakeling! The Drakeling is knocked over and tumbles backwards!

The Drakeling stands up.

The First Mare kicks The Drakeling in the head with her right front hoof, but the attack is deflected by The Drakeling's steel helmet!
The Drakeling counterattacks!
The Drakeling kicks The First Mare in the lower body with his right foot, bruising the muscle, bruising the guts and bruising the left kidney!

The Second Mare bites The Drakeling in the left upper arm, chipping the scale!
The Second Mare latches on firmly!
The Drakeling punches The Second Mare in the right rear leg with his right hand, bruising the muscle and bruising the bone!

The Drakeling breathes fire! But The First Mare dodges away from the flames!

The Second Mare takes The Drakeling down by the left upper arm with her teeth!
The Second Mare shakes The Drakeling around by the left upper arm and the scale tears away in her mouth!
The Drakeling breaks the grip of The Second Mare's teeth on The Drakeling's left upper arm.
SM: Ugh, it tastes like dirt! What have you been rolling around in?

The Drakeling stands up.
The Drakeling strikes The Second Mare in the head with his Dashing Rogue Punch, bruising the muscle and bruising the left eye!

The First Mare kicks at The Drakeling with her left front hoof, but The Drakeling dodges away!
The Second Mare grabs The Drakeling by the right lower leg with her right front hoof!
The Second Mare takes The Drakeling down by the right lower leg with her right front hoof!
Spike: Oof!
SM: Now stay there!
//She tripped me on my back, and my armor knocked the wind out of me. Roll away!

The Second Mare kicks The Drakeling in the left foot with her right front hoof, shattering the scale and bruising the muscle!
The Drakeling punches at The First Mare with his right hand, but The First Mare dodges away!
The First Mare grabs The Drakeling by the steel helmet with her left front hoof!
The First Mare struggles for the steel helmet! The First Mare gains possession of the steel helmet!
The First Mare drops the steel helmet.

PIT: And you call me a thief!

The Drakeling stands up.
The Second Mare charges at The Drakeling!
The Second Mare headbutts The Drakeling in the upper body, but the attack is deflected by The Drakeling's bronze vestskirt!
The Second Mare collides with The Drakeling! The Drakeling is knocked over and tumbles backwards!

//Oof, not again!
FM: You aren't going anywhere.
The First Mare grabs The Drakeling by the head with her left rear leg!
The First Mare grabs The Drakeling by the head with her right rear leg!
The Drakeling struggles in vain against the grip of The First Mare's rear legs on The Drakeling's head.

Spike: Get off of me!
FM: Ah-ah, quiet now, stay still. Wouldn't want me to have to pop your head like a ripe melon.

The Drakeling punches The First Mare in the lower body with his left hand, bruising the muscle and bruising the guts!
The First Mare squeezes The Drakeling in the head with her rear legs!
Spike: Grrrr...
//I can't escape her grip. She's not lying about the ripe melon, either.
FM: That's right. See these thighs, little dude? You'll get to know them well real soon. I've crushed a few stallion heads between these sweet things in my time, and freaky earth powers or not, a skull is a skull. Yours belongs to _me_ now.
SM: Fumeh.
FM: Oh, and shut your mouth too, drakeling. No dragonfire from you. I don't want to see it open unless you beg for mercy, or until I cover it with my--
SM: Fumeh!
FM: What, mare?!
//The Second Mare steps over my waist, licking her lips.
SM: Let me do my job, eh?

The Pony throws a basalt stone at The First Mare with her *bat leather sling*! The spinning basalt stone strikes The First Mare in the head, bruising the muscle, shattering the skull, jamming the skull through the brain and tearing apart the brain!
The First Mare has been shot and killed!
Spike: Celestia's wings!
SM: Fumeh!

The Drakeling kicks The Second Mare in the left front leg with his left knee, shattering the bone, jamming the bone through the left front knee's muscle and shattering the left front knee's bone!
The Drakeling scratches The Second Mare in the right eye with his right hand, tearing it apart!
The Second Mare collapses! The Second Mare gives into pain!
The Drakeling is pinned!
The Unknown Mares were defeated!
Spike gained 2250 experience points!
Spike is now level 14!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

SM: My leg, I can't feel my leg...
Spike: A sensory nerve might be severed. Probably for the best.
SM: And my eye, I can't see out of it, it hurts so much...
Spike: Torn apart. Look at it like this: cool eyepatch. Eh? ...Eh?
//Blood pouring down her face, the second mare named Sma doesn't laugh.
SM: But, Fumeh, dead. Completely dead...
Spike: ...Yeah. Maybe she'll be given a burial here in the Valley, so you can go and dig her up
sometime. //Take your legs out from underneath the pony-shaped pile of muscle before insulting it, please. Spike: Uh, would you mind? //I gesture to my legs. Out of her one good eye, Sma stares at me. //She tries to prop herself up with her unbroken front leg, but halfway through it gives way and she slams back down, falling further forward. Spike: Woah woah hey wrong direction! //The blood from her eye drips through the vestskirt onto my waist. SM: Sorry. Spike: Here, let me just... //I wedge my shoulder under the second mare's broken leg and lift up with my torso. She tries to stand again. SM: I'm sorry. About everything. About the fight, about the potions, about the bodies, about the whole damn... //We both stand up. Sma is on three legs, trying to figure out how to balance herself in front while one leg dangles there aimlessly. Spike: That's nice. But it shouldn't take a broken leg, a damaged eye and a dead friend to get you to realize what you're doing is wrong. SM: I... //Sma hangs her head. SM: Celestia, I should have listened to Mother. She knew this shady crap wouldn't work out for me. Why is she always right? Spike: Hindsight, 20/20. But you can make up for some of it, by telling me everything you know about your friends and whatever organization you work for. SM: Okay. That's the deal. I'll tell you everything I know, and then, I promise, I'll disappear forever. Spike: Er, no. You tell me everything you know, and then you go to jail for a long, long-- The Pony throws a basalt stone at The Second Mare with her *bat leather sling*! The spinning basalt stone strikes The Second Mare in the head from behind, bruising the muscle, shattering the skull, jamming the skull through the brain and tearing apart the brain! //CELESTIA'S FUCKING WINGS! The Second Mare has been shot and killed! //I spit the blood out of my mouth as the pony who was in the tree jumps down. Spike: The hell!? PIT: Excellent, you're not wounded. Spike: You killed her for no reason! PIT: Nonsense. She was an evil pony, an associate of those who rob graves and abduct innocents for experimentation. Spike: Maybe, but she wasn't dangerous! You didn't need to kill her like that! PIT: There were no alternatives. Would you take her to the village owned by the same organization that ordered her crimes? The one with no jail to speak of, where any judge and jury would consist of her coworkers, and you expect justice? //It's true that it would have been difficult to punish Sma if the village is really as this pony says. And a broken leg for a pony that size may as well be a death sentence... but I won't say I like her methods. Spike: If you're going to kill someone out of convenience, at least wait until they give me the information I'm looking for. PIT: So I should've let her fill your head with lies? Spike: Compared to nothing at all? At least lies would give me a few leads to go on! PIT: Thankfully, we don't have to deal with sorting through that. I've been doing research on these
goons recently and I know enough about them to make my approach.
//Her approach?
Spike: That's good to know, Miss...
PIT: Pitaya Mendax. I'm a Hero.
//Oh, hey, another Hero!
Spike: Hey, me too! Spike, nice to meet you.
PIT: Charmed, Spike. We'll make a great team.
Spike: So what's our approach?
PIT: Their weird experiments are centered around the easternmost graveyard, guarded by goons like these and varied abominations.
Spike: Fight our way in, smash the setup and destroy whatever monsters they've created. Got it.
PIT: I would prefer to move northward, skirting around the edge of their patrols, taking whatever fights we could win. At some point we should be able to determine whether or not we _can_ fight our way in.
Spike: Hrm... nah.
PIT: What?
Spike: The 'can' fight our way in. If it's an option to fight evil at risk to ourselves instead of an obligation, we're not Heroes at all. I say we just go for it.
PIT: Don't be so willing to throw your life away, Hero. You need to do good deeds tomorrow as well as today.
Spike: We'll make it.
PIT: Doubtful.
Spike: If you want to stay here and get comfortable with the corpses, be my guest, but I'm leaving.
//I start walking northeast, towards the Valley's cemeteries.
PIT: Wait, this isn't going to work!
Spike: Trust me.

//The forest grows thicker as we move deeper inwards, leaves and limbs blocking moonlight from above. There is a dirt path through the trees, but the occasional dark goon on it prevents its use.
Spike: I think there's a twig stuck in your tail.
PIT: That's my sling.
Spike: No, I'm carrying your sling. Why am I carrying your sling?
//I toss the sling over her back. She grabs it with her teeth.
PIT: It must be my wand of Stupefy.
Spike: Uh, okay. I guess that's a place to hold it.
PIT: Is it red for the first seven inches with a purple tip?
Spike: The eight inches of stiffening wood hovering behind your legs?
PIT: Ah, someone finally got the joke. I had to repaint it and everything.
Spike: Nah, that's the one keeping your hair up.
PIT: Then what's the one in my tail?
//Pitaya stops walking and sits down, trying to grab her tail and drag it into the moonlight. I look around on a chill; the ground seems to vibrate at stepping intervals.
PIT: Darn, this stick is wrapped tight, it has those odd spiny balls on it.
Spike: 'Odd spiny balls'?
PIT: The ones that stick -- they're seeds, I think? I'm not a botanist. This is really in there...
//The faintest tremor leads me to look left.
//A pony, a pony-like thing shaped like a pony, stands mostly hidden by an oak. Half of its face is rotted off, teeth and skull visibly crumbling away. The edges of the missing half are covered in yellow moss, and indigo mushrooms grow out of the absence. A single vine, jutting out of the flesh next to the spine, moves back and forth above the one remaining eye, rolled back into its head.
Spike: (...So, uh, Pitaya, would you happen to know if cinnamon sticks are the primary foodstuff of
plant/pony hybrid abominations?)
//Golden liquid drips from its broken mouth as it mumbles:
Grotesque Creature: Seed...
//Pitaya lifts her head and looks at the creature.
PIT: (That. It. What.)
Spike: (When you were stealing that vial of heal wounds from the strange goons, did you happen to notice anything, say, odd?)
PIT: (Not like that! I would have noticed something like that!)
Spike: (Didn't you say there were abominations protecting the cemeteries?)
PIT: (I saw moving corpses with paintings on them, nothing like this!)
//The grotesque creature steps out from behind the tree and hisses, raising vines out of its back!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

The Grotesque Creature raises several vines from its back!
The Grotesque Creature slashes at The Drakeling in the right upper arm with a vine, denting the scale!
//The vines aren't thick enough to slam with, it's just the little prickers on them that hurt. There may be a lot of them but nothing I can't deal with!

The Grotesque Creature slashes at The Pony in the upper body with a vine, tearing apart the skin!
The Grotesque Creature slashes at The Pony in the lower body with a vine, tearing apart the skin!
PIT: Kyii! That hurt!
Spike: Get back and start using the sling!

The Pony leaps backwards, away from The Grotesque Creature!
The Grotesque Creature slashes at The Drakeling in the lower body with a vine, but The Drakeling dodges away!
//Harder scales will only slow me down here, I need to stay mobile.

The Drakeling strikes The Grotesque creature in the vine with his Dashing Rogue Punch, tearing apart the dermal tissue and bruising the xylem!
The Drakeling strikes The Grotesque Creature in the vine with his Dashing Rogue Punch, tearing apart the dermal tissue, tearing apart the xylem and tearing apart the pith!
The broken part dangles uselessly!

Spike: I'm not doing much damage here! Aim for the body!
PIT: On it!

The Pony throws a basalt stone at The Grotesque Creature with her *bat leather sling*! The spinning basalt stone strikes The Grotesque Creature in the right front leg, bruising the muscle, tearing apart the roots and bruising the bone!
An artery has been opened by the attack!
//Golden liquid spills out of the open root, washing over the creature's leg. After only a moment, the root closes up on its own, and all signs of injury are gone.
PIT: That's worrisome.
Spike: Aim for the important parts, I'll try to deal with the vines!

The Drakeling bites The Grotesque Creature in the vine, and the severed part is torn away!
Spike: Gack, ptbth!
Two pumps of thin gold drain out of the vine, some of it in my mouth; it tastes like rotting wood. The end of the vine heals over.

The Grotesque Creature grabs The Drakeling by the right upper arm with a vine!
The Grotesque Creature grabs The Drakeling by the left lower leg with a vine!

The Drakeling kicks The Grotesque Creature in the vine with his right foot, tearing apart the dermal tissue, tearing apart the xylem and bruising the pith!
The Grotesque Creature releases the grip of The Grotesque Creature's vine on The Drakeling's left lower leg.

Spike: Only four vines left!

The Grotesque Creature raises several vines from its back!
The Grotesque Creature grabs The Drakeling by the left hand with a vine!

PIT: Time to die!

The Pony throws a basalt stone at The Grotesque Creature with her *bat leather sling*! The spinning basalt stone strikes The Grotesque Creature in the upper body, bruising the muscle, shattering the right scapula, jamming the scapula through the right true ribs, shattering the right true ribs, jamming the right true ribs through the right lung and tearing apart the right lung! The basalt stone has lodged firmly in the wound!
//That stone tore a hole into the creature's chest! Its upper body is collapsing!

GC: Seed...
//More healing liquid bleeds from the cavity in the creature's chest, and it stands upright again after only a few moments!
Spike: Even its voice is monstrous!
PIT: No! Stop being alive! You should be dead!

The Grotesque Creature grabs The Drakeling by the right foot with a vine!
The Grotesque Creature grabs The Drakeling by the left lower leg with a vine!

The Drakeling struggles for possession of The Drakeling's left hand, tearing apart the vine's dermal tissue, tearing apart the xylem and bruising the pith!
The broken part dangles uselessly!
The Drakeling gains possession of The Drakeling's left hand!

The Grotesque Creature drags The Drakeling closer with its vines!
//An oversized, white flower bulb protrudes from the creature's underside, perfectly smooth. The tips of the petals dance slightly, as if giggling. Is that what I'm being drawn to?

Spike: Aim for the vines!
PIT: Hold on!

The Grotesque Creature grabs The Drakeling by the lower body with a vine!
The Grotesque Creature grabs The Drakeling by the head with a vine!

The Drakeling bites The Grotesque Creature in the vine, and the severed part is torn away! The Grotesque Creature releases the grip of The Grotesque Creature's vine on The Drakeling's head.
The Drakeling punches The Grotesque Creature in the vine with his left hand, bruising the dermal tissue and bruising the xylem!

The Grotesque Creature drags The Drakeling closer with its vines!
The flower bulb opens its petals, revealing a dark fleshy hole into the pony's lower body where dark fleshy holes usually aren't located. The opening drools, forming puddles of gold on the dry leaves below.

The Pony throws a basalt stone at The Grotesque Creature with her *bat leather sling*! The spinning basalt stone strikes The Grotesque Creature in the vine, and the severed part flies off in an arc!
The Grotesque Creature releases the grip of The Grotesque Creature's vine on The Drakeling's right foot.

The Grotesque Creature raises several vines from its back!
PIT: Celestia, it's like a hydra!

The Grotesque Creature drags The Drakeling closer with its vines!
The Drakeling punches The Grotesque Creature in the head with his left hand, bruising the muscle and tearing apart the indigo mushrooms!
//More gold blood covers the mushrooms and my fist, healing both of them in a matter of seconds.

//The Grotesque Creature shakes its hind legs in a rhythmic motion, muttering:
GC: Seed...
Spike: The hydra, how'd they kill the hydra?
PIT: Oh! Uh, let me think--
Spike: Kind of urgent!
PIT: Fire! Use fire!

The Drakeling breathes fire!
The Grotesque Creature releases the grip of The Grotesque Creature's vine on The Drakeling's lower body. The Grotesque Creature releases the grip of The Grotesque Creature's vine on The Drakeling's right upper arm. The Grotesque Creature releases the grip of The Grotesque Creature's vine on The Drakeling's left lower leg.
//It shields itself with the vines.
The Grotesque Creature's vines are caught in the dragonfire! The Grotesque Creature's vines are burnt down to the dermal tissue!
//The vines begin to heal in spots and patches, gold film covering the burnt plantflesh. Barely any damage...

Spike: How do I kill this thing?!
PIT: Kill it?! Who cares?! Run!!

The Pony leaps backwards, away from The Grotesque Creature! The Pony begins to gallop!

Spike: Hey, wait!
The Drakeling leaps backwards, away from The Grotesque Creature! The Drakeling begins to run!

//I have to get away from this thing!

The Grotesque Creature grabs The Tree by the trunk with a vine! The Grotesque Creature catapults itself forwards!
The Grotesque Creature charges at The Drakeling! The Grotesque Creature kicks at The Drakeling with its left rear hoof, but The Drakeling dodges away!
The Grotesque Creature rushes by The Drakeling!

//With speed like that, what am I going to do?!
Spike: Pitaya? Pitaya!
//Did she leave me to die!?

The Drakeling breathes fire!
The Grotesque Creature releases the grip of The Grotesque Creature's vine on The Tree.
The Grotesque Creature's vines are caught in the dragonfire! The Grotesque Creature's vines are burnt down to the xylem!
//The vines still look patchy, but they're healing quickly. Is fire really the answer?

The Grotesque Creature releases the grip on the Vine. The Grotesque Creature's vines are caught in the dragonfire!
The Grotesque Creature's vines are burnt to a crisp!
The severed parts fall off!

The Drakeling breathes fire!
The Grotesque Creature's vines are caught in the dragonfire! The Grotesque Creature's vines are burnt down to the pith!
The Grotesque Creature's vines have been set aflame!
//Holy crap! Did I boil off that much water? Is there not enough healing liquid left?

The Grotesque Creature lifts The Drakeling in the air with its vines!
The Drakeling falls over!
//Upside down, can I even breathe fire?
The Drakeling loses the grip of The Drakeling's head on the steel helmet. The Drakeling drops the steel helmet.

The Grotesque Creature grabs The Drakeling by the throat with a vine!
The Grotesque Creature places a chokehold on The Drakeling!
//The underside bulb opens again, this time much more aggressively, looking to devour my corpse.

The Drakeling struggles in vain against the grip of The Grotesque Creature's vine on The Drakeling's throat!

The Drakeling breathes fire!
The Grotesque Creature's vines are caught in the dragonfire! The Grotesque Creature's vines are burnt to a crisp! The severed parts fall off!

The Drakeling slams into the ground!
//Koof, not again! Stupid dumb armor!
//The flaming vines snap off and fall all around, crashing into the dead leaves.

The leaves have been set aflame!
The Drakeling stands up.

The Grotesque Creature charges at The Drakeling!
The Grotesque Creature kicks The Drakeling in the upper body with its right front hoof, bruising the muscle and bruising the left floating rib through the bronze vestskirt!
The Grotesque Creature collides with The Drakeling! The Grotesque Creature bounces backwards!

//It opens its half-mouth to speak, but I decide it has nothing I want to hear.
The Drakeling breathes fire! The Grotesque Creature is caught in the dragonfire! The Grotesque Creature's mouth has been burnt to a crisp! The Grotesque Creature's indigo mushrooms have been
burnt to a crisp!

//Gold dribbles over its lips but its supply is almost dry; its mouth stays burnt.

The Grotesque Creature leaps backwards, away from The Drakeling!
Spike: I won't let you run away to hurt someone else!
The Drakeling breathes fire! The Grotesque Creature is caught in the dragonfire! The Grotesque Creature's upper body is burnt to a crisp!
The Grotesque Creature has been set aflame!

The shrubbery has been set aflame!
//Didn't notice that...
//A delta of fire, spreading out from where the creature dropped its vines, has spread from the dried leaves to shrubbery and grass around the area. The flames almost rise as high as tree branches, and the heat is intense.
//...Okay, I don't feel heat. But if I did, it would be intense.

The Drakeling picks up the steel helmet.

//The creature croaks from a burnt trachea, flames licking around its body. It almost looks pitiful.
Spike: No. You attacked two people for no reason and tried to kill both of them. Ordered to or not, whether you knew better or not, you're a danger to society and I can't in good conscience let you live.
The Drakeling breathes fire! The Grotesque Creature is caught in the dragonfire! The Grotesque Creature's lower body is burnt to a crisp!
The Grotesque Creature collapses!

The Grotesque Creature was defeated!
Spike gained 2500 experience points!
Spike is now level 15!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//CRACK!
The small tree has been set aflame!

Spike: Oh. Damn. Uh...
//WAY TO GO, ASSHOLE, YOU STARTED A FOREST FIRE.
Spike: So, Pitaya? Any, you know, suggestions? If you're there?
//...
Spike: ...Guess not.
//The fire rages around me, and though I can't feel the flames, my cheeks feel hot. A thin branch cracks off a tree and falls to the ground on the grotesque creature's corpse. This is not a Heroic situation.
Spike: ...Twilight? Are you back yet? Please?
//Silence.
Spike: Oh man, I started a forest fire. I don't have water or magic or anything, Celestia's wings, what do I do?

The Drakeling dodges away from the falling !!small tree!!
The !!small tree!! slams into the ground!

//RUN THE HELL AWAY BEFORE ANYONE FINDS OUT.
Spike: ...Yeah, I'll do that.
Chapter End Notes

With apologies to Tarn Adams.
//I leap over a twisting root in my way and continue running. The smoke rising behind me, from the forest fire I accidentally started, is illuminated by the full moon.
Spike: Dangit dangit dangit dangit dangit I'm a bad person.
//Even with magic it might be weeks before they get the fires under control. Loggers, farmers, hunters, trappers, hermits and many others are going to lose their homes and livelihoods; ponies throughout the valley are going to have respiratory problems and maybe even lose their lives; waterways for miles around are going to be poisoned by ash...
Spike: Someone needs to be told; where's Twilight?
//Not to mention the exodus of refugees will put pressure for employment and land on the surrounding areas, creating more tension and worsening dragon/pony relations... what kind of Hero does a thing like this?
//A voice floats out, a strained whisper from a tree just ahead:
Strained Whisper: Help! Is someone there?!
//I stop in my tracks. Is someone trapped just beyond that tree?
Spike: ...
Strained Whisper: I'm trapped! Please!
//Trap or not, I have a responsibility to help in case someone is really in trouble!
\Otherwise they would be trapped in the forest fire you started.
//Don't remind me.
//A large pegasus in a dark suit is pinned to the opposite side of this tree. As I step on a twig, she strains to turn her head, but can't see me.
SW: Who's there? Get me down from here! That's an order!
//It might be best to make sure this mare is working for strange goons spotted in Longbridge...
Spike: But, commander, I've seen terrible things that should not be! Painted corpses walking around like people, and an abomination half pony, half plant!
SW: The painted corpses are our fakes, you moron! Think! We're digging up the remains of ponies and dragons centuries old; why would they be anything but bones and teeth?!
Spike: And the plant monstrosity?
SW: That got loose? Osto is really going to have my head for this one...
//I step out in front of the tree. The pegasus is stuck to the tree with clear sticky fiber ropes, clinging all over one wing and both back legs. She is facing into the tree and sees me.
Spike: In the interest of full disclosure, I don't work for you.
SW: If we had a drakeling I highly doubt we'd be in the flank end of nowhere digging up dry bones. A little help?
Spike: I'm a bit disinclined to help you out, considering you are digging up entire graveyards and creating monstrosities that try to kill people.
SW: Okay, full disclosure? The monstrosities are Osto's pet project. We have nothing to do with them.
//If some accursed pony keeps making things that could bring terror to the whole Valley, it's my duty as a Hero to stop her!
Spike: Who is this Osto you keep talking about?
SW: My boss. My ex-boss, that is; when I get stuck in one of her monstrosity's traps is the point where continued employment is not in my best interest; I'm out of here as soon as you cut me loose. So, you know, if you don't mind.
Spike: Sorry, but I don't have any assurance you would tell me what I need to know after I cut you
Then ask away. Quickly, I don't plan on being some freak's lunch.

Spike: What are you trying to do in the Valley?

SW: Me? Leave it. Them? The plan was to slip in the Valley, keep the dumb folk from asking questions with coin, and take back all the coin as soon as our army had risen. Then, you know, take over the world.

Spike: Your army?

SW: Along the way, Osto was supposed to learn how to raise the dead to walk Equestria again. That's our current stumbling block. She hasn't yet. The Valley is filled with military graveyards; all of the buried ponies and other creatures were legendary in combat prowess and bravery. If this Osto can really raise such an army of the dead... no one could stop her.

Spike: What's Osto's full name? Where is she now?

SW: Osto Bacchus. She should be in the Top Hill Cemetery. It's--

Spike: I think I can figure out where it is.

Osto Bacchus. Is she going to be introduced as 'Ornery Bint'? 'Old Babbler'? 'Orange Biscuit'? I can't think of anything.

Spike: How does Osto get enough coin to pay you, and pay off the people in the Valley?

SW: A tall pony with dark fur appears every few days, and gives her a big sack of bits. Says it's for 'uncovering the secrets of death'. That's all I know, now cut me down!

Uh... with what?

I look at my claws. They are not nearly sharp enough to cut something.

Spike: Do you have a sword on you, or a knife, something...?

SW: Tell me you're not an adventurer without a sharp object.

Spike: I suppose I could bite a gem into a sharp edge, but I'm not sure if I want to use a gem like that...

I have left are red grossulars.

SW: Celestia's wings, I'm not about to be stuck here because the world's least competent adventurer arrived on my doorstep instead of anyone else.

Spike: This fiber, do you know if it's flammable?

At my words, she struggles harder.

SW: This isn't fiber, it's webbing.

Spike: Webbing?!

The strands are about as thick as my index finger, and deceptively sticky. I don't want to think about the spider that spun this...

SW: Yeah, and I plan on being more than lunch. Could you find, I don't know, __anything__?

I look around my feet for a few seconds, not stepping on any of the strands hidden underneath leaves, and find a small sharp rock.

Spike: I might have to pull a few feathers out to free the wing.

SW: Before you arrived I was preparing to bite my own wings off, so I've already come to terms with the idea.

Spike: Well, here goes--

SW: Yow!

Spike: Quiet, the spider might hear us.

SW: Spiders don't hear, they sense things on their web using vibrations.

I fall silent for a while, not wanting to attract the spider's attention.

SW: Is my wing free yet?

Spike: Why would it be? I haven't started yet.

SW: What?!

The pegasus struggles in the webbing -- or would, if all of it weren't cut and removed by now. She falls backwards.
The Pegasus stands up.

SW: ‘Swings, what did I do to deserve that?
Spike: Graverobbing.
//He says bluntly, being a total badass.
\Childish pranks are not the domain of badasses.
SW: That period of my life is over now.
//Does this mean I helped reform an evildoer? Or is this more due to dangerous work conditions and a hostile environment?
SW: Because right now, I'm going to get my own little drakeling to do as I please with.
//Celestia's wings, just one time?! Please?!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

SW: I will be forever known as The Immortal--

The flying thick strand of webbing strikes The Pegasus in the snout, adhering to it firmly!
The flying thick strand of webbing strikes The Pegasus in the mouth, adhering to it firmly!
The Pegasus is propelled away by the force of the blow!
The Pegasus's right rear leg skids along the ground, bruising the muscle!
The Pegasus slams into The Tree!

//SHITTING SHIT WHAT
The Drakeling leaps backwards!
//That came out of left nowhere!

SW: Mmmhh, mmhmmhm.. mmhmmhm! MMMMM-MMMM-MM MMMMM!!!
//The mare tears at the webbing covering her mouth desperately. She can't breathe.
//I look around, holding my breath, and see nothing.
//She continues to screech, trying to scrape her head against a root, facing me. Her eyes are wide open, and the webbing is still there. The mare tries to dig her front hooves at it, but can't get an angle to pierce the suffocating web. Then, for a moment, our eyes meet.

The flying thick strand of webbing strikes The Pegasus in the right rear leg, adhering to it firmly!
The webbing adheres to the ground!
The flying thick strand of webbing strikes The Pegasus in the left rear leg, adhering to it firmly!
The webbing adheres to the ground!
The Pegasus is caught up in the web!
The Pegasus falls over!

//Those came from a completely different angle! What sort of spider has that speed and accuracy?
//The pegasus starts to beat her wings and dig at the ground with her front hooves, but her back legs are completely covered in sticky silk.

//Only by moonlit smoke in the distance can I make out a blurry shape in the trees, is that--
The Mess of Limbs drops out of the trees!
The Mess of Limbs slams into The Pegasus! The Mess of Limbs grabs The Pegasus by the neck with her left first leg!
//The Pegasus screams as loud as she can through the web and struggles.

//THAT IS MORE LEGS THAN I WANT TO FUCK WITH RIGHT NOW; ACTIVATE PISS-SELF COWARD MODE
The Drakeling leaps backwards, away from The Mess of Limbs! The Drakeling begins to run!
The Mess of Limbs bites The Pegasus in the upper body, tearing the muscle!
Strange venom is injected into The Pegasus's blood!
The Mess of Limbs latches on firmly!
The Pegasus struggles in vain against the grip of the sticky silk on The Pegasus's left rear leg! The Pegasus struggles in vain against the grip of the sticky silk on The Pegasus's right rear leg!

The Drakeling continues to run!

The Mess of Limbs shakes The Pegasus around by the upper body, tearing apart the upper body's muscle!
Strange venom is injected into The Pegasus's blood!

The Drakeling continues to run!

The Mess of Limbs retains the grip of The Mess of Limbs's mouth on The Pegasus's upper body.
Strange venom is injected into The Pegasus's blood!

The Drakeling continues to run!

The Mess of Limbs retains the grip of The Mess of Limbs's mouth on The Pegasus's upper body.
Strange venom is injected into The Pegasus's blood!

The Drakeling continues to run!

The Mess of Limbs retains the grip of The Mess of Limbs's mouth on The Pegasus's upper body.
Soupy liquid is extracted from The Pegasus's blood!

The Drakeling continues to run!

The Mess of Limbs retains the grip of The Mess of Limbs's mouth on The Pegasus's upper body.
Soupy liquid is extracted from The Pegasus's blood!

The Drakeling continues to run!

The Mess of Limbs retains the grip of The Mess of Limbs's mouth on The Pegasus's upper body.
Soupy liquid is extracted from The Pegasus's blood!

The Drakeling continues to run!

The Mess of Limbs releases the grip of The Mess of Limbs's mouth on The Pegasus's upper body.

The Drakeling continues to run!

The Mess of Limbs climbs back into the trees.

The Drakeling continues to run!

The Drakeling continues to run!

The Drakeling continues to run!

The Drakeling continues to run!

The Drakeling stops running.
The Pegasus was defeated!
Spike gained 250 experience points!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//I lean against a tree in this small clearing. There have been no sounds or sights for a while but the silent nighttime of the forest -- but that thing came out of nowhere without any warning, so I'm not taking any chances.
//I turn over a few leaves. None of them are stuck to strands of webbing on the ground.
Spike: (...Twilight?)
//Silence.
Spike: (Great. I can't tell if you're still gone or if you're just hiding because I'm still in danger.)
//Looking up past the trees into the night sky... hey, wasn't the moon supposed to be over there?
Spike: (Crap. Well, if you are listening, it looks like I got turned around and mixed up.)
//I walk out into the middle of the clearing. Smoke rises from that way, obscuring the stars, and the moon's that way, but it might have been some time and how far does a moon move every hour? I wish I knew the constellations.
Spike: (I might have done a not-so-Heroic thing, by the way. There was a pony who needed my help and I ran away for my own life. Does it count less if the pony who needed help was evil, and going to violate me anyway? I'm not sure how I feel about the argument that evil should be done unto evil, but I'm also not sure if saving an evil pony's life at the cost of my own is what's best for everyone... no matter what, that spider thing was horrific, and a terrible way to die.)
//There, that's east. It was towards that peak that looked like a witch's nose. I start walking.
Spike: (Heh, maybe I shouldn't be so judgmental. Maybe that thing was doing a good deed, saving a helpless innocent from a dangerous criminal. Just like a jerk, then, to run away from a truer Hero because it looked ugly and odd. Who knows; we could have teamed up.)
//Probably would have been a better partner than Pitaya.
Spike: (I should stop talking so much; you're likely not there and I should stay on my--)

The Drakeling jumps away from the flying thick strand of webbing!
The Drakeling jumps away from the flying thick strand of webbing!
The Drakeling strikes The Tree with his Dashing Rogue Punch, shattering the bark!
//Oh, whoops, sorry Mr. Tree.

Mess of Limbs: If it makes your conscience feel any better, I am not a good person.

//The voice comes opposite the direction of the webs. A ventriloquist of some sort?
Spike: We'll just have to agree to disagree on morality, then, and I'll go on my merry way...
ML: No. You tried to steal my food.

The Drakeling jumps away from the flying thick strand of webbing!
The Drakeling jumps away from the flying thick strand of webbing!

//I spin around a few times, not spotting the Mess of Limbs, and speak back into the woods:
Spike: It just wouldn't be life if I weren't punished for doing the right thing.
ML: Slippery. Try this.

The Drakeling jumps away from the flying thin line of webbing!
The flying thin line of webbing strikes The Drakeling in the left upper arm, adhering to it firmly!
The webbing adheres to the ground!

//My entire arm is glued to a root by this silk!
Spike: How much of this stuff do you have?!
ML: Enough to drown you.
Spike: That's a pleasant image; do you have any other function in life other than being horrifying?

The Drakeling strikes The Root with his Fist of Justice, and the severed part flies off in an arc!
The Drakeling breaks the grip of the sticky silk on The Drakeling's left upper arm!

Spike: I'm so sorry, Mr. Tree, today is not your day for me not destroying you. Will you take an I.O.U., or do you have insurance?
ML: Strong. But that will not happen if we remove the leverage.

The flying thick strand of webbing strikes The Drakeling in the right upper leg, adhering to it firmly! The webbing adheres to The Tree!
The flying thick strand of webbing strikes The Drakeling in the lower body, adhering to it firmly!
The webbing adheres to The Tree!
The flying thick strand of webbing strikes The Drakeling in the upper body, adhering to it firmly!
The webbing adheres to The Tree!

Spike: Everyone takes the 'other means of payment' option nowadays, it's such a hassle...
ML: Your defeat is coming.
Spike: But not imminent.

The Drakeling breathes fire! The sticky silk is caught in the dragonfire! The sticky silk has been set aflame!

ML: Rrrrrm... drakeling. Has many talents and abilities.
Spike: You know, you're the first person to notice, everyone else keeps on focusing on one certain thing...
ML: Need to discover how to defeat.
//I pick at the silk as it shrinks away in the heat.
Spike: I have many talents and abilities, which means your single trick with the webbing is never going to work.
ML: Better to know one tactic well than many nominally. As demonstrated.

The flying thick strand of webbing strikes The Drakeling in the head, adhering to it firmly! The webbing adheres to The Tree!
//Gah, my face! I use that to be pretty with!

Spike: Great, I think you ruined my helmet. After I break out of this web and defeat you I can't even get it off the tree without burning it down.
//Which might happen anyway.
ML: Sorry. Will try to be more considerate with these.

The flying thick strand of webbing strikes The Drakeling in the neck, adhering to it firmly! The webbing adheres to The Tree!
The flying thick strand of webbing strikes The Drakeling in the right hand, adhering to it firmly!
The webbing adheres to The Tree!
The flying thick strand of webbing strikes The Drakeling in the left hand, adhering to it firmly! The webbing adheres to The Tree!
The flying thick strand of webbing strikes The Drakeling in the right foot, adhering to it firmly!
The webbing adheres to The Tree!
The flying thick strand of webbing strikes The Drakeling in the left foot, adhering to it firmly! The webbing adheres to The Tree!

//I'm completely stuck to the tree, from head to toe! I can't move anything important!
ML: Can't use dragonfire. Can't use strong hands. Can't use quick legs. Cannot in any way defeat me as I stand here, unhidden. One trick.
Spike: 'Swings, brag more, please.
//The Mess of Limbs stands in front of Mr. Tree, away from where my head is pointing, looking at me with an unfriendly smile. Out of the corner of my eye, she looks like a pony...
Spike: I'm sorry, but are those extra limbs _sewn on_?
//She looks at the four legs sewn symmetrically onto her torso, placed between her normal legs. She raises them, like a spider would raise its front legs.
ML: Working. The most surprising part.
Spike: I think the most surprising part is that they found a spinneret that big to attach.
//A black spinneret with white markings sticks out from behind the augmented pony where a tail would normally be. It hangs behind the Mess of Limbs as she slowly walks towards me.
Spike: And I suppose this is the part where you gloat over your victory, I break free at the last moment and defeat you, so on so forth. How about we call a mulligan, you release me and we both go our merry ways? You'd be better off that way.
ML: No. Securing my victory.
//With her spinneret, she exudes thick, warm sheets of sticky silk all over my torso, legs, and arms, completely trapping me. It smells like wood, in a good way.
//WHY WOULD YOU SAY THAT YOU MORON
Spike: Do I at least get to know the name of the fell creature who's going to kill me, or is this an anonymous imprisonment-murder?
ML: Kill? Molly would not kill a drakeling. You are more valuable as trade goods; besides, already ate.
Spike: That pegasus? Celestia, that was fast.
//I wish I could be more frightened or angry here, but... I'm kind of just screwed. Honestly, hearing that I'll be traded to another creature for whatever use is good news right now.
ML: Yes. One fang's poison turns internal organs to mush, other paralyzes. Must remember to use the correct one.
Spike: Oh hah hah! Yes that would be most appreciated, thank you!
ML: That sarcasm will be easily fixed by a little spiderbite.
//I wonder if Mr. Tree counts as part of the earth. He is damaged, so I really should be taking him up on my shoulders...

The Drakeling breathes in and focuses, casting Terrae Corpus! The Drakeling's scales become as hard as rock!
The Mess of Limbs bites The Drakeling in the neck, denting the scale!
Strange poison leaks out of The Mess of Limbs's fang!

//I can feel her hot breath on the back of my neck, under the scales. I desperately wish I could scratch the itch.
ML: Should be working now.
Spike: Oh, yes, if I weren't already completely immobilized I certainly would be now.
ML: Rrrrrrm... you sure?
//The poison runs down my back over the scales, sinking into the treebark.
Spike: Yes.

The Mess of Limbs bites The Drakeling in the upper body, denting the scale!
Strange poison leaks out of The Mess of Limbs's fang!

Spike: What, you don't trust me?
ML: Your scales are hard.
Spike: I swear, it's just a physical reaction.
ML: Another... You have very many tricks, drakeling.

The Mess of Limbs bites The Drakeling in the right hand, denting the scale!
Strange poison leaks out of The Mess of Limbs's fang!

Spike: You know, if you pry off the scales, they would probably go well with some cheese dip at my funeral.
ML: Not going to eat you.
Spike: You're trying your damnedest. And failing, mind youthbth--

The Mess of Limbs bites The Drakeling in the lower lip, tearing apart the skin!
Nothing dribbles out of The Mess of Limbs's fang!

Spike: In my mouth, blach!
//I try to spit out any poison that shot in my mouth. Of all the indignities...
ML: Empty. Rrrrm.
Spike: Would you stop making that sound?!
ML: Meaningless. More than one way to defeat a drakeling.
//What happened? Are there no longer cats with skin?
Spike: Great, this again.

The Mess of Limbs grabs The Drakeling by the neck with her left first leg!
The Mess of Limbs grabs The Drakeling by the right upper arm with her left second leg!
The Mess of Limbs grabs The Drakeling by the upper body with her left third leg!
The Mess of Limbs grabs The Drakeling by the right lower leg with her left fourth leg!
The Mess of Limbs grabs The Drakeling by the left upper arm with her right first leg!
The Mess of Limbs grabs The Drakeling by the upper body with her right second leg!
The Mess of Limbs grabs The Drakeling by the lower body with her right third leg!

The Mess of Limbs grabs The Drakeling by the waist with her spinneret!

Spike: Trust me, I'm not attracted to freaks.
ML: You cannot deny mechanical nature. Chemistry changes thought, instinct triggers chemistry, muscle action arouses instinct...

The Mess of Limbs assaults The Drakeling with her spinneret! The Mess of Limbs prepares to lower The Drakeling's resistance!

Spike: Hwoo--
ML: Aha. Not what you were expecting?
Spike: I wasn't expecting you to use my stomach as a hoof repository...

The Mess of Limbs releases the grip of The Mess of Limbs's right third leg on The Drakeling's lower body.
The Mess of Limbs grabs The Drakeling by the left upper leg with her right third leg!
//The pressure on my leg causes me to shudder and squirm.
Spike: Gah! What was that?!
ML: Mechanical nature. Poking the brain causes creatures to think differently. Why should anywhere else not be the same?

The Mess of Limbs assaults The Drakeling with her spinneret! The Drakeling's resistance is lowered!
Spike: Ugh...
//Is this what Celestia and Twilight warned me about? I've no love for the mess of limbs in front of me, yet it's impossible to hold on forever...
ML: Surrendering?
Spike: Hey, assuming I make it out of here--
ML: Not going to happen.
Spike: What was your name again?
ML: Molly.
Spike: Humor me, Molly. Assuming I make it out of here, the graveyard furthest east is Top Hill Cemetery, right?
ML: Yes.
Spike: And I'll find Osto Bacchus there?
ML: Possibly; Top Hill is the center of operations.
Spike: So, my attempted Heroic plan should have been: find my way to Top Hill Cemetery, smash the operations and defeat Osto Bacchus?
ML: Your Heroic plan should have been to volunteer at a soup kitchen, not hang out around graveyards at night looking for trouble.

The Mess of Limbs assaults The Drakeling with her spinneret! The Drakeling's resistance is lowered further!

Spike: Gnnckh... what is the difference between a graveyard and a cemetery, anyway?
ML: Why ask me?
Spike: I don't know, maybe the _body parts sewn on_ indicate you might have spent some time in one.
ML: Cemeteries are attached to a building of some significance, lending more meaning to the burial.
Spike: Top Hill is attached to a temple of some kind?
ML: There are catacombs underneath it. Served as haven for snake demon worshipers until third century in Celestia's rule.
Spike: Not that I'm complaining about the absence of snake demon worshipers, but what happened to them?
ML: Equestrian official declared worship of any deity but Celestia illegal, had them all slaughtered.

The Mess of Limbs assaults The Drakeling with her spinneret! The Drakeling's resistance is at a minimum!

Spike: Ho, please, no, don't...
ML: Can't believe it. You're going to ejaculate listening to me describe historical atrocities. Have you no shame?
Spike: Just tell me that the organization there now aren't snake demon worshipers; I've had enough of those guys...
ML: Nope. A bootstrap team, less than two dozen actually. Osto the only competent among them. Created me; has to have some skill.
Spike: Oh, yes, I'll be sure to thank her when I see her by shoving my foot up--
//I go into a coughing fit, spewing mucus on the mess of limbs's back. She pauses for half a moment, and looks at me.
//...Does the air taste like smoke?
ML: You. You seem warm.
Spike: I'm sure it has nothing to do with being bound tightly and assaulted by a massive freak.
//She stops moving her spinneret completely.
ML: No... something is wrong.
The Mess of Limbs releases the grip of The Mess of Limbs's spinneret on The Drakeling's waist.

//She looks up into the sky, squeezing her eyes tight.
Spike: Yeah, uh, full disclosure... you, _might_ want to move any flammable objects you own to another biome.

The Mess of Limbs releases the grip of The Mess of Limbs's left first leg on The Drakeling's neck. The Mess of Limbs releases the grip of The Mess of Limbs's left second leg on The Drakeling's right upper arm. The Mess of Limbs releases the grip of The Mess of Limbs's left third leg on The Drakeling's upper body. The Mess of Limbs releases the grip of The Mess of Limbs's left fourth leg on The Drakeling's right lower leg. The Mess of Limbs releases the grip of The Mess of Limbs's right first leg on The Drakeling's left upper arm. The Mess of Limbs releases the grip of The Mess of Limbs's right second leg on The Drakeling's upper body. The Mess of Limbs releases the grip of The Mess of Limbs's right third leg on The Drakeling's left upper leg.

The Mess of Limbs leaps backwards, away from The Drakeling!

ML: You started a _forest fire_?!
Spike: It was an accident!
ML: You stupid, stupid -- stupid!!

The Mess of Limbs begins to run! The Mess of Limbs climbs back into the trees!

Spike: Hey!
//No response.
Spike: Hey, you crazy eight legged bint! At least have the courtesy to get me down from here!
//Molly is too far away to hear me now.
Spike: I understand the abomination violating me, but _this_ is just plain _rude_.

The Mess of Limbs was defeated!
Spike gained 3000 experience points!
Spike is now level 16!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

Spike: Great. Twilight?
//Silence.
Spike: Still not there.
//I look around, hoping desperately.
Spike: Anyone? Is anyone there?
//HI SPIKE
Spike: No, screw you! Is anyone who can help me there?
//MOST OF THE TIME YOUR HIDEOUS HIDE IS SO FAR BEYOND HELP YOU MAY AS WELL HAVE DUG A HOLE AS DEEP AS MY HATRED FOR YOU AND THROWN HELP IN.
Spike: You're not swearing as much, is something wrong?
//FUCK FUCK FUCK FUCK YOU YOU YOU YOU YOU
Spike: Point taken. How am I going to get out of this one?
//WAIT FOR THE TREE TO BURN TO THE GROUND; WERE YOU SO EXCITED AT THE
PROSPECT OF FINALLY NOT HAVING TO DEAL WITH THE Crippling burden of individual thought and freedom that you forgot your pukestained scales are immune to fire?

Spike: Pukestained scales.

//YOU tried to eat a fistful of grossulars all at once; I mean, what the fuck. why did you think that would work out any other way.

Spike: You should try new things sometimes, I guess?

//YOU should try being intelligent.

Spike: Oh, I'm sorry, did you want to play Hero for a while? Try defeating enemies leagues more powerful than you and get absolutely no reward for it?

//FUCK yes let's do this put me at the reins!

Spike: No. I know you think I'm a moron but I'm not that much of one.

//I'M not the one who was shitting myself relieved at the prospect of being sold into fuck-slaavery. At least real heroes help granny across the street every damned once in a while; you leave the old cunt stranded in the middle of oncoming traffic. Which is a metaphor for how you constantly disappoint everyone around you and everyone you ever knew, and who ever knew you. are you ever not a failure?

Spike: Can I at least hope that Mr. Tree burns down in such a way that it falls on me and I don't have to listen to you in peace, please?

//then that will make two of us.

//The forest fire catches up to me in about a minute, and the silk melts away long before the tree comes crashing down. I put my helmet back on, adjust my armor, and continue east through the flames.

Chapter End Notes

With apologies to Tarn Adams.
Two ideas underlie everything we know, and I've proven they're both more worthless than horseshit.

//A pony in a full black robe stands at the bottom of Top Hill. Stacks of gravestones, moved from their original positions, lay sprinkled around the area; great holes are dug six feet into the ground often enough to make walking a hazard. Several ponies in suits disassemble machinery, infernal and smoking and filled with various acids, around the one whose face is hidden in shadow.

The discovery of agriculture is civilization's catalyst, because it gives us time to think. And what does the average asshole think is the most important thing in the world? Herself, of course. So the first social ideas were barbarically simplistic: You look like me. Or you are enemy.

//Is she talking to herself?

As our thoughts progressed, theory of mind emerged. Its basic tenets are bred into all intelligent creatures: I have a consciousness. You look like me. Therefore, it is a good guess you have a consciousness. Physical symmetry leads to mental symmetry, and in general people can be grouped. This leads to the masturbation which we call 'society'.

//I really should be moving on. It's obvious Osto Bacchus isn't here, just a bad philosopher.

Empathy is a biological effect. The ability to think about the minds of others is a successful evolutionary tool. And when cracked open and examined, brains look damn similar -- pony brain or dragon brain or any other brain, standard species brain leads to standard species behavior. Therefore, consciousness had a purely physical base. If you didn't listen to Hecate.

//Why did she switch to past tense?

//Two ponies carry a long, slender box forward. They leave it beside the speaker on the ground.

A soul was stupid shit. Garbage of the highest caliber. I am a _scientist_ above all else, and anything which is not inherently testable -- that which can not be proven wrong or right -- is nonexistent. This idea, that flesh is as a vessel for ethereal water, was poison on the minds of the wise...

//A grinding of teeth comes from under the dark hood.

And because the universe delights in stupid bullshit, it's also absolutely true.

//No one's paying attention to this, why am I?

The mark on her end... I thought it was the Rod of Asclopius, the healing staff. When she gave it to me, I thought this was the oddest kind of remedy the world had ever seen. Instead, it was an empowerment, a movement in a dimension wherein earlier I had been still... Like avoiding the oncoming brick wall by unfolding wings.

//Or, you know, slowing down. That's an option.

The soul can be summoned. Impossibility is true. By principle of explosion, all rigorous thought crumbles. The electrochemical structure of the brain gives rise to behavioral patterns, behavioral patterns which we use to imply the presence of a mind, and when the electrochemical structure is impresent so should be the mind. But it is not. The soul is related to the mind, yet survives beyond death. ...In the end, I am still a scientist. I cannot deny what I have seen with my very own eyes.

//One of the movers pipes up after breaking down a gear assembly:

Tired Mover: Oh, Boss? Which coffin did you want us to bring back out?

//The robed pony hangs her (his? its?) head. The tired mover speaks again:

TM: Boss?

Oh Boss: The coffin of Sizmig Gloric. It should have an axe on it.
//The mover shuffles off, up the hill.
OB: And, of course, death as a logical consequence falls apart once a soul is extant. That's barely worth any thought at all; throw fucking magic at it until you bring people back to life. Had Domariv not been stolen from me, the progress towards this point would have been quicker... but this was an inevitability. I will succeed.
//Domariv? What does any of this have to do with Domariv? None of what she's saying makes any sense at all!

//The coffin of Sizmig Gloric, a red axe in velvet sewn onto the front, is placed in front of the speaking Boss, on a slab of stone.

OB: The ubiquity of death is the other idea which underlies civilization. I will disprove that today. TM: Osto Bacchus, all the machinery and important coffins are inside. We're ready to begin.
Osto Bacchus: A soul is magic. And magic follows rules. The greatest rule of magic is that it must obey its master.

//Osto Bacchus kicks open the thin box, and levitates out of it a thin staff, the length of a pony. A dead snake is nailed into the top and...
\Oh, _Celestia_, is that thing still _alive_?!

Osto Bacchus waves her staff, evoking a spell!
A blue miasma begins to rise from the coffin, into the sky!
//A strange wave radiates out on the air, not moving the air itself but riding on top of it... it smells like mint.

OB: After countless attempts, after miserable failure and the gloom of ignorance, I know I've finally succeeded. This _has_ to be it, it has to...

//Osto Bacchus, covered in a black robe completely, leans forward towards the coffin, straining to listen. She falls silent.
Slate Hauler: Er, Bo--

OB: Shut up!
Osto Bacchus strikes The Slate Hauler in the throat with her +wooden staff+, bruising the skin!
Slate Hauler: Tchkk--hhhhcccch--ghh...

//Osto Bacchus stares intently at the coffin as the peon clutches at his throat and slowly collapses. She pays him no mind.
OB: Tapping, I was expecting a tapping...
Voice(?): Mmm.
//Surprised by the voice, Osto Bacchus stumbles backwards!
//In the next moment, she regains her composure, and with her horn shines bright light through the mist!
\Wow, her face is really pale--
//A figure forms in the mist!

Sizable Gentlestallion: Nnn-mmrg-gmmm.
OB: ...Damnit. Damnit damnit damnit.
//The figure is a sizable stallion, with an old army coat on and the handle of a greataxe clenched in his teeth. The blue mist that constitutes him stops rising from the coffin and swirls in place.
SG: Rrrr-mmmgmn?
OB: No, I don't want to hear it from you; shut the hell up.
SG: Bmmmm-gnn-nnn--
OB: For fuck's sake, take that fucking axe out of your fucking mouth before I shove it up your ass and twist it, Gloric!
//With no small amount of disdain, the mist pony puts the axe on his back and upturns his nose.
SG: It seems as though whatever you were trying to do has failed. Given your manners and
demeanor, I say 'for the best'.

OB: Stick your head in a beehive, Gloric.

//The misty shadow of Sizmig Gloric rolls his eyes, stepping down from the coffin, and wanders off into the woods wordlessly.

OB: Wh-- hey! _Get back here you fuck, I have experiments to run on you_!

//A few moments pass as Osto Bacchus stares into the woods. A careful peon tiptoes his way up to Bacchus's side and asks:

Tired Mover: Uh, Boss? Did it work?

//For some time, Bacchus stays silent. The only sounds that can be heard in the forest night, since the birds have fled from the oncoming fire, are the grunts of goons moving more equipment into the catacombs.

OB: ...Yes. It worked exactly as I expected.

TM: But you can't control him, so--

OB: _Wrong_, Tim. I can control him. I suspect right now he's finding a wasp's nest to stick over his head.

TM: ...Orders, ma'am?

OB: Start distributing the scrolls. Let this valley know how fare the dead.

TM: Yes, ma'am.

OB: Success...

//Osto Bacchus turns back around, snake/staff by her side. I'm not surprised it's still trying to bite her... even a snake knows evil when it sees it.

OB: We shall show them the terror that is their end, and show them where the journey leads... none can stop us, for we are death. My army will prevail by its very nature. This Valley, this country, this world... I'll see every living thing in it be mine, dead, or both!

//OKAY I'M NOT SURE IF YOU'RE WAITING FOR A FUCKING INVITATION OR WHAT BUT IT SEEMS PRETTY CLEAR THAT YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO JUMP IN AND SMASH NOW.

//Well, I suppose there's no better time than the present!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

The Drakeling leaps forward, towards Osto Bacchus!

Spike: Osto Bacchus!

Osto Bacchus points at The Drakeling and casts Spell Blast!

The Drakeling dodges away from the flying Spell Blast!

The flying Spell Blast strikes the tree in the trunk, and the severed part flies off in an arc!

//The snake struggles against the nail through its neck and hisses.

Osto Bacchus: Yeah?! What?!

//Is this how she starts all her conversations?

Spike: You're trying to revive ponies long dead, so you can enslave them!

OB: Really? I had no idea, I'll stop right away. Can someone kill this moron?!

TM: Boss, we're still moving stuff into the underground, I don't know if anyone's free right--

Osto Bacchus strikes The Tired Mover in the throat with her +wooden staff+, tearing the skin!

TM: Kkkkykch--

OB: Surrounded by assholes... I'll take care of you myself!

The Snake bites The Tired Mover in the left cheek, tearing the skin and tearing the muscle!

OB: Why -- let go, you moron!
The Drakeling breathes fire!
Osto Bacchus drops the +wooden staff+.
OB: Aaah!

Osto Bacchus dodges away from the flames!

OB: A dragon?! What the fucking fuck is a _dragon_ doing here?!
Spike: Bringing justice to the likes of you!
//AND BURNING DOWN FORESTS BECAUSE HE'S SCARED OF HIS OWN SEXUALITY--
The Drakeling breathes fire! Osto Bacchus is caught in the dragonfire! Her robe is set aflame!

OB: Ow ow aaaaaah hot hot hot!
Osto Bacchus throws off the black robe!

//What the...
In Osto Bacchus's place is a standing skeleton of a unicorn. Its bones are picked clean, patchy yellow and white. The eyeholes are enormous, and the back of the skull can be seen through them even in the dim light of a couple torches. Stray ligaments hang from bones here and there, rotted and frayed, but they seem to serve no purpose.
Spike: Who the hell are you?!
Osto Bacchus: Osto Bacchus! What should I write on _your_ gravestone?!

The Skeleton points at The Drakeling and casts Spell Blast!
The Drakeling dodges away from the flying Spell Blast!
//Those things would turn me into paste! I have to avoid them!

//Dead?! How can a pony who is moving around and speaking be dead?! Or how can a pony who has the flesh _stripped_ from her bones_ be not dead?!
Spike: What is going on here?!
OB: What does this fucking look like, a baker's?
//SHE'S GOT YOU THERE.
Spike: You're... you're a monster, raising the dead to make an army of them like yourself!
OB: If you knew that, why'd you ask?!
//HE LIKES THE SOUND OF HIS OWN VOICE.
OB: Dipshit!

Osto Bacchus points at The Drakeling and casts Spell Blast!
The Drakeling dodges away from the flying Spell Blast!

Spike: Stop that!
OB: You don't understand how fighting someone works, do you?!
Spike: If that's the way it has to be, I'll stop you myself!

The Drakeling charges at Osto Bacchus!
The Drakeling punches Osto Bacchus in the right front leg with his left hand, bruising the bone!
A ligament has been torn!
Osto Bacchus counterattacks!
Osto Bacchus kicks The Drakeling in the head with her right front hoof, tearing the scale and bruising the muscle!
The Drakeling collides with Osto Bacchus! The Drakeling bounces backwards!

//Swings, I forgot to cast Terrae Corpus! I'm done if I don't do that!

TM: G-g-geth offh miy!
//The Tired Mover takes the snake's fangs out of his cheek and throws the staff on the ground. Osto Bacchus turns to look at it for a second.
OB: You moron! Be careful with that!

The Drakeling breathes in and focuses, casting Terrae Corpus! The Drakeling's scales become as hard as rock!

Osto Bacchus kicks at The Drakeling, but The Drakeling dodges away!
The Drakeling counterattacks!
The Drakeling strikes Osto Bacchus in the lower body with his Dashing Rogue Punch, shattering the lower spine's bone!

//Osto Bacchus slumps forward as her hind legs collapse, kicking at the dirt with her front.
OB: No! No!!
Spike: Er...
//Skeleton or not, a being has a body. If you pulverize that, what's there left to do?
OB: I have died already once. I will not again!
Spike: You should have thought about that before you said you were going to kill and then enslave everybody.
//...When this is over, I'm going some _serious_ thinking.
OB: Sizmig, kill him!
//I hear a sudden buzzing sound behind me.

Sizmig Gloric strikes The Drakeling in the lower body with his left rear leg, bruising the muscle, and bruising the right kidney!
The Drakeling is propelled away from the force of the blow!
//I faceplant in the dirt a few yards away.

//THE ONLY THING HEAVIER THAN THAT HIT WAS YOUR MOTHER. YOU KNOW, BEFORE SHE ABANDONED YOU.
//What the hell?!
//Standing over Osto Bacchus is the cloud of blue mist, shaped like a pony with an old war coat and a greataxe on his back. A non-mist beehive is stuck over his head, angry bees swarming about. Is that what kicked me?
OB: Help me!
Sizmig Gloric: Mmmhm-hmmh-mmm--
OB: Seriously?!! Take the fucking beehive off, you shithead!!
//The ghost(?) takes the beehive off his head and tosses it into the woods.
SG: I have standing orders to kill him. Which would you like me to do first?
OB: Kill him! Then help me!
//She digs her bony hooves at the ground, trying to pull herself over to where the snake and staff lie.

The Drakeling stands up.
SG: Shame, really.
Sizmig Gloric hacks at The Drakeling with his ☽ethereal greataxe☾, but The Drakeling dodges away!
The Drakeling counterattacks!
The Drakeling strikes Sizmig Gloric in the upper body with his Dashing Rogue Punch, but the attack passes through!
//What?! I can't hit him?!

SG: If circumstances were different, I'd imagine we could have become friends.
Spike: Why's that?
SG: You're trying to stop an evildoer.

Sizmig Gloric hacks at The Drakeling with his ☽ ethereal greataxe ☽ in the left upper arm, tearing the scale and tearing the muscle!
Spike: Yaaaah!
//I leap backwards, away from the ghost!

Spike: How are you able to hit me?!
//Gloric shrugs. I guess he doesn't know either.
Spike: If you know how evil Osto Bacchus is, then why are you still trying to hurt me?!
Stop! We can work together!
SG: I don't have any choice in the matter.

Sizmig Gloric hacks at The Drakeling with his ☽ ethereal greataxe ☽, but The Drakeling dodges away!

//Osto Bacchus drags herself forward, to just within reach of the staff.
Osto Bacchus picks up the +wooden staff+.

Osto Bacchus's ligaments twist and wrap around her bones!
The lower spine's bone has been regenerated! The right front leg's bone has been regenerated!
Osto Bacchus stands up.

Spike: _What_?!
//This is some crazy bullshit!
OB: Rod of Asclopius. Mechanical realization of an abstract concept. 'A staff that makes you better.'

The Drakeling breathes fire! The flames pass through Sizmig Gloric!
Sizmig Gloric counterattacks!
Sizmig Gloric kicks The Drakeling in the head with his left front hoof, denting the scale!

Osto Bacchus points at The Drakeling and casts Spell Blast!
The flying Spell Blast strikes The Drakeling in the upper body, tearing the scale, bruising the muscle and bruising the right true ribs!
The flying Spell Blast strikes The Drakeling in the lower body, tearing the scale, bruising the muscle and bruising the guts!
The flying Spell Blast strikes The Drakeling in the left upper leg, tearing the scale, bruising the muscle and bruising the bone!
The flying Spell Blast strikes The Drakeling in the right upper leg, tearing the scale, bruising the muscle and bruising the bone!

//HOLY SHIT YOU'RE GONNA BE PASTE BOY
SG: Watch where you're aiming that!
OB: Quit being a bitch!

Sizmig Gloric hacks at The Drakeling with his ☽ ethereal greataxe ☽, but The Drakeling dodges away!
//He's slow, and I could dodge him, but I can't keep dodging that axe and the Spell Blast forever!
Did he yell at Osto Bacchus because he's vulnerable to magic?

OB: Not fighting back? Good, just give in.
Osto Bacchus points at The Drakeling and casts Spell Blast!
//Get him in the way!
The Drakeling leaps backwards, away from Sizmig Gloric!
Sizmig Gloric charges at The Drakeling!
The flying Spell Blast strikes Sizmig Gloric in the gas, and the severed part flies off in an arc!
Sizmig Gloric has been struck down!
//The blue mist dissipates, sinking back into the earth!

OB: You think you're clever?
Spike: Well, my day to day activities don't include hanging out in graveyards hitting people in the throat and evoking abominable spells. So I'd just call it intelligence.
OB: This is a _graveyard_. I summon spirits from dead bodies that you can't possibly fight. How do you possibly expect to defeat me?

Osto Bacchus waves her staff, evoking a spell!
A blue miasma begins to rise from the coffin, into the sky!
//The smell of mint returns for a second.

//A sigh is heard from the coffin.
//Celestia, how do I defeat this crazy skeleton bint?!
//From far away, as if coming from nowhere at all, a whisper drifts to me on the air, and I feel the presence of the sun:
C: (You cannot here. Use the Element of Surprise.)
Spike: (The Element of Surprise? Where is that?)
C: (In the catacombs.)
//The whispers fade, and the sun is put out.
//Damnit, I don't want to run... but what is it Heroes do more? Run or lose battles?
SG: Must we?
OB: Kill him!
//I'm no use to anyone if I'm just a corpse, or worse!

Spike: Don't think you've won!
The Drakeling leaps backwards, towards the top of the hill!
The Drakeling begins to run!

OB: Run, coward! Death will find you!
The Drakeling has ran away!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//Osto Bacchus winds her way through brick tunnels underneath Top Hill Cemetery, ligaments hanging in the still air. A snarl is present on her face (skull?) as she drags the Rod of Asclopius through the catacombs. It's trying to bite the torches on the wall.
Osto Bacchus: You stupid piece of shit snake, I'd kill you if I could!
//It flares out its fangs in response.
//To each side, holes are dug into the wall, bearing markings (presumably something meaningful seven centuries ago but just vague scribbles now) and coffins. Every so often, a broken picture frame with no painting, or a stone pony bust with golden teeth and headgear wrenched off appears. It's a good reminder of what this place once was, and what Osto Bacchus and her goons did to it.
Spike: (Literal graverobbing. Some people have no shame.)
//Although, since I haven't seen any jewelry here, I haven't found the Element of Surprise... when Celestia said that, I don't think she meant it was a necklace.
//YOU FUCKING THINK SO WELL STOP THE PRESSES
//Osto Bacchus stops, pausing for a second. She looks vaguely up for a moment, before continuing
to walk.

OB: Caduceus. That's what it was. The caduceus.

"Swings, she's a lot closer than I'd like, I should get moving. But to not make any noise in this armor I have to move slowly, and that means I can't get away quickly... why did I think this was a good idea?!

OB: It began with the mare with the caduceus. She was tall, dark, and had a funny way of speaking. It sounded like a recipe for trouble, but I saw the symbol on her flank. And I thought she was a practitioner of medicine, a mare who could give me what I needed.

"Is she... is this seriously the villainous dialogue where she lectures about her side of the story before losing? What is she, a Saturday morning cartoon?

OB: She was nothing of the sort. But she gave me exactly what I needed. That mysterious mare cured more ills than I'd ever known I had.

Spike: Including what, life and sanity?

OB: Shut up!

Osto Bacchus points at the tunnel and casts Spell Blast!

The flying spell blast strikes the +marble bust of a pony+ in the marble, and the severed part flies off in an arc!

"The acoustics here are weird, by talking the right way I can sound like my voice is coming from other places.

"IT ALWAYS SOUNDS LIKE THAT

OB: I have learned. I understand now. I see what she saw -- she who could somehow see what I only see now, even without experiencing it herself.

Spike: Oh, so this mare you fell in love with didn't have eyeballs either?

"Osto Bacchus grits her teeth.

OB: When I'm done with you, you won't think that joke was so funny!

Spike: Yeah, yeah; tell it to the last dozen people who threatened to kill me.

OB: Morons like you could never understand. This is not the Caduceus, it is different; the Caduceus is a symbol of trade and commerce. I was _traded_ the Rod, not given it.

Spike: I've heard of selling your body before, but this takes the cake!

OB: _Enough_!

"DO YOU THINK IF YOU MAKE HER ANGRY ENOUGH, SHE'LL BONE US? IS THAT WHAT YOU'RE DOING?

OB: I was granted reprieve from death itself! I, Osto Bacchus, who died twenty years ago at the hooves of a dozen Inquisitors, have returned... but not of my own power.

"There isn't anybody in the world powerful enough to reverse death like that. I don't believe it!

Spike: In this delusional fantasy of yours, some dark mare with a Caduceus as her cutie mark--

"Those are still the dumbest two words ever--

Spike: --revived you, for what? Couldn't have been your personality.

OB: It was a trade, you stupid fuckwit. My life regained for something from me in return. Let it never be said that deals with devils are unprofitable. Do you know what she asked?

"Devils? Does she mean demons? A snake-thing couldn't have dug her up and revived her; that's just way too crazy to be true...

"Enjoying the sound of her own voice, Osto Bacchus continues:

OB: It said only, 'bring this power to rule'. The difference, young scalescum, between the gods that which is extant is simple. The gods follow less rules. And, on this day...

Osto Bacchus waves her staff, evoking a spell!

A blue miasma begins to rise from a coffin on the wall, swirling in the air!

"Mint travels down the hallway, but I'm long gone from there.

\"Besides, I hate mint.
A pony of unidentifiable gender with a bow (the arrow kind) slithers out of the coffin, forming itself in blue mist in front of Osto Bacchus.

Pony Archer: Ug.
OB: Hunt down the drakeling in these passages. Kill him.
PA: Ug.
//The spirit floats in the opposite direction of where Osto Bacchus is walking. She continues.
OB: On this day that definition applies to me. And for it the world is mine.
Spike: Equestria will never bow to someone as evil as you!

Osto Bacchus leaps forward, towards The Drakeling!
//She jumps around the corner with frightening speed, pointing her bony horn!
Osto Bacchus points at the tunnel and casts Spell Blast!
The flying Spell Blast strikes the tunnel wall, chipping the stone!
//Whew, I almost didn't make it out of there in time...

//Disappointed with missing, Osto Bacchus slowly rises from attack position. She walks again.
OB: The world will be mine. The world must be mine. Power, you living sack of meat and filth, lies in difference. I am powerful because I have gone a journey others have not. This journey has brought me sight, so I can see beyond the petty ambitions of mortal mares.
Spike: Petty ambitions like, freedom and life and happiness.
OB: Yes!
Spike: You horrid bitch!

The Drakeling leaps away from the flying +ethereal arrow+!
//The hunter (huntress?) found me! I have to run!
//As I start running, the sound of my armor echoes through the tunnels. The Rod of Asclopius strains towards my footsteps, and Osto Bacchus runs to follow it, speaking as she gallops:
OB: I must rule because I am different. My journey has shown me the follies of normal perspective, of life-centric and greedy thought! I have visions none could but dream of; I see from angles once thought obscene. This is why my armies must envelop Equestria, and the world!
Spike: Because you died once? Big deal!
//I did that once! If total amnesia counts.
OB: I have seen what they cannot! This insight will usher in a new age, carried by the power granted me!
The Drakeling dodges away from the flying +ethereal arrow+!
PA: Ug.
OB: Shut up!

Osto Bacchus points at The Drakeling and casts Spell Blast!
The Pony Archer dodges away from the flying Spell Blast!
The flying Spell Blast strikes the tunnel wall, but the attack glances away!
PA: Ug!
OB: The reasons for, the axioms of civilized life are broken and shattered at my hooves. You cannot deny what you have seen!
Spike: What you're trying to kill me with!
OB: Exactly!
//I leap around a corner, then scramble the other way as the ghost archer appears in front of me!

The Drakeling leaps away from the flying +ethereal arrow+!
OB: Both the unwavering advance of death and the biological construction of the mind have been dispelled with a spell before me! There is no need for civilization to exist as it has! I will tear their fucking castles down and put ponykind's next step in their place!
Spike: You're no Prometheus; you're a loon!

I take a right turn, trying to get away, but suddenly a great underground chamber appears! About a dozen or so ponies are scattered about the great chamber. Machinery (weird stuff with odd gears and levers) is centered around the six huge pillars which hold the ceiling up. Piles of coffins, empty and full, lie everywhere. Two ponies are pushing a wide cart, covered with a few bottles of golden liquid and many more empty bottles.

Pushing Stallion: Is that the boss?
Pushing Mare: I don't know. Boss?
Pushing Stallion: Hey, boss? We need to milk the staff again, our supp--

The Drakeling dodges away from the flying +ethereal arrow+! The flying +ethereal arrow+ strikes the bottle in the glass, and the severed part flies off in an arc! The bottle has been shot and killed!

//FUCKDAMNIT PAY ATTENTION BOY
//Golden liquid pools on the cart, dripping onto the ground!

The ponies in the chamber all scramble away!

PS: Waaagh!
PM: Get down!

I run into the chamber and take cover behind the cart. I might just be hoping Osto Bacchus doesn't see me here.

//Osto Bacchus leaps into the chamber, side by side with the blue wisps that make up the pony archer!
OB: Where is he?!
PS: The cart!
PM: Behind the cart!

//Damnit!

//Osto Bacchus stares at the dripping gold for a small time, and then turns to her apparition.
OB: Did you do that?
PA: Ug.
OB: Then get the fuck out of here, you shitbrain! Do you know how much effort those things take to make?!

//With a last grunt, the pony archer fades down into the ground, leaving nothing behind.
//Osto Bacchus narrows her eyes at me through the cart, and starts to deliberately inch her way forward.
OB: Besides, I should be able to take care of this little--

//THROW THE CART AT HER IT'LL BE FUNNY
The Drakeling throws the cart by the steel!
//The cart tumbles end over end, bouncing off the ground once! Bottles fly off everywhere!
The tumbling cart strikes Osto Bacchus in the upper body, shattering the right false rib! A ligament has been severed!
The flying -empty bottle- strikes Osto Bacchus in the head, bruising the skull!
The flying -empty bottle- strikes Osto Bacchus in the left rear hoof, bruising the bone!
The flying -empty bottle- strikes Osto Bacchus in the right front leg, but the attack glances away!
//Just like before, the snake hisses, and Osto Bacchus's wounds begin to heal!

//I look at my hands, dumbfounded.
Spike: Why did I do that?!
//I have no cover now!
The Drakeling leaps backwards, away from Osto Bacchus!
Osto Bacchus points at The Drakeling and casts Spell Blast!
The Drakeling dodges away from the flying Spell Blast!
The Drakeling slams into the obstacle!
//I take cover behind the huge pillar!
The flying Spell Blast dissipates into the air!

//Celestia's wings, this is bad. This is so bad! I can't go out there and fight, she'll tear me apart with her Spell Blast before I get close!
\\You can fight her if you do get close, all you have to--
//But I can't!
\All you have to do is take the staff from her and your wounds will be healed. I think. But you can't defeat her without taking that staff.
//How am I going to take the staff?
\She was hurt by dragonfire earlier, right? Maybe try that?
//I peek my head out from behind the pillar, trying to see how close--

Osto Bacchus points at The Drakeling and casts Spell Blast!
The flying Spell Blast strikes the pillar in the basalt, chipping the stone!

//That idea won't work. She's too far away. Oh, Celestia; my enemy has strong HP regen and an overpowered ranged attack and I'm a melee fighter; who designed this bullcrap?
\The ponies in the chamber are taking cover now, but won't be for long. And Osto Bacchus might decide to summon that archer back to flush you out. Whatever you do, think quick!
OB: Come out, drakeling. I only want to play.
Spike: With my corpse!
OB: And?
//HEY REMEMBER WHEN YOU PROMISED YOU'D GIVE ME A CHANCE TO TAKE THE REINS
//I didn't say anything like that!
//YOU TOTALLY DID
//No, I wouldn't, because you're a crazy asshole!
//OKAY, TRUE, BUT YOU'RE GOING TO FUCKING DIE LIKE A BITCH ANYWAY AND I KIND OF WANT TO HAVE SOME FUN. PLEASE?
//No!
//ARE YOU SURE? WHAT DO YOU REALLY EXPECT TO DO HERE THAT'S BETTER THAN ME MESSING AROUND?
//Anything! Go away!
//COME ON, THINK ABOUT IT.
//...No, I won't even think about it!
//YOU'RE BEING UNREASONABLE.
OB: You idiots, what are you just standing there for?! Get a stick or something and attack him!
//...Ah, what the hell; I'm gonna die anyway.
//THAT'S THE SHITTY SPIRIT.

//I let the dragon instinct enter my mind and fill my consciousness. The inside of my head starts to get hotter, and hotter; it fills with a painful buzzing sensation...

The Drakeling booms out fell laughter!
OB: That sounds promising. Maybe after I kill you, you can teach me how to laugh like that.
Spike (Dragon Instinct): FUCK YOU AND FUCK EVERYTHING
The Drakeling strikes the pillar in the basalt with his Fist of Justice, shattering the stone! Severed parts fly off in arcs!
The Drakeling strikes the pillar in the basalt with his Fist of Justice, shattering the stone, and the
severed part flies off in an arc!
The pillar has been struck down! The ceiling starts to sag!

//Woah! Okay, get out of me! You're crazy!!
//YOU EXPECTED THE TOOTH FAIRY?
//The pillar has been completely punched through! Ow, my hands...
//Osto Bacchus stares at me, dumbfounded, from the section of the pillar I (the dragon instinct) completely destroyed. In a moment, she regains her senses.
Osto Bacchus points at The Drakeling and casts Spell Blast!
The flying Spell Blast strikes the pillar in the basalt, chipping the stone!
//Her aim was too high. More debris falls off the pillar, and it starts to drag the ceiling down even more --
//A rock falls from the ceiling, headed for right where Osto Bacchus is standing!

Osto Bacchus dodges away from the falling basalt!
The basalt slams into the ground, shattering into a million pieces!
//For a quick moment, all eyes in the chamber are focused on the roof next to the shattered pillar, as cracks start crawling along the underside of many thousand tons of stone. I look down at the ponies in the chamber, all the complex heavy machinery, the destroyed pillar, the remaining five pillars, the marked piles of coffins, and finally my own fists. \l I have an idea...
//DRAGON INSTINCT SAVES THE DAY ONCE A-FUCKING-GAIN.
//Let's do this!

OB: No!
Osto Bacchus points at The Drakeling and casts Spell Blast!
The Drakeling dodges away from the flying Spell Blast!
//I have to make it to the next pillar!

The Drakeling leaps away from Osto Bacchus! The Drakeling starts to run!

Spike: You're not fit to rule just because you're dead, you bony freak!
OB: Shut up!

Osto Bacchus points her horn at The Drakeling and starts to cast a spell!
//I leap preemptively, putting machinery between me and Osto Bacchus!
Osto Bacchus casts Stupefy!
The flying beam strikes the machinery in the gears!
//The gear spins with a whizzing sound, doing nothing!
Spike: Not everyone who's powerful deserves a shot at it, either!
OB: I'll kill you!

Osto Bacchus points at The Drakeling and casts Spell Blast!
The flying Spell Blast strikes the machinery, and the severed parts fly off in arcs!
The flying Spell Blast strikes The Drakeling in the lower body, tearing apart the scale and bruising the muscle!
//WHAT, YOU'RE GOING TO JUST DIE LIKE THAT AND WASTE EVERYTHING I'VE DONE FOR YOU?

//It's only a little ways to the next pillar!
The Drakeling leaps backwards, away from Osto Bacchus!
Osto Bacchus starts to run!
The Drakeling starts to run!
Osto Bacchus points at The Drakeling and casts Spell Blast!
The flying Spell Blast strikes the pillar in the basalt, chipping the stone!
Spike: Thanks for the help!
OB: _Fuck yourself_!

//I need to have a calm sense of justice about this, but... I really just wanna freaking kill her!
Spike: Alternative perspectives are different from the norm, not necessarily better. This means you are simply a slaver.
The Drakeling strikes the pillar in the basalt with his Fist of Justice, shattering the stone! Severed parts fly off in arcs!
OB: Stop! I can bring them what they never knew! What you could never know!
Spike: There may be wisdom in multiple perspectives, but if you must experience a perspective to empathize with it, you don't have the innate wisdom necessary to rule.
OB: 'Wisdom'? What kind of wisdom is it to fight against the dissolution of death itself?!
Spike: You would not be giving anyone absolution; simply killing them and placing in their stead the people who you want them to be. In this case, forcing obedience to you. You are powerful, but evil. Of all the things you deserve, to rule is least.
The Drakeling strikes the pillar in the basalt with his Fist of Justice, shattering the stone, and the severed part flies off in an arc!
The pillar has been struck down! The ceiling starts to sag even further!

//Osto Bacchus cries out in a shrill voice that echoes through the chamber:
OB: You idiots! He's bringing the chamber down! We'll lose everything! _Do something _!
//The ponies in the chamber scramble to grab whatever they can, and rush towards me!

The Drakeling leaps backwards, away from Osto Bacchus!
The Goon strikes The Drakeling in the head with his steel pipe, but the attack glances away!
The Drakeling breathes fire! The Goon is caught in the dragonfire! The Goon's right front leg has been burnt to a crisp!
Goon: Aaaaaaah!!
//Hopefully that should keep them away!

The Drakeling starts to run!
The Goon charges at The Drakeling!
The Goon kicks at The Drakeling with his right rear hoof, but The Drakeling dodges away!
The Drakeling counterattacks!
The Drakeling strikes The Goon in the lower body with his Dashing Rogue Punch, bruising the muscle, bruising the guts, shattering the bone and tearing apart the lower spine's nervous tissue!
The Goon falls over!

Osto Bacchus points at The Drakeling and casts Spell Blast!
The flying Spell Blast strikes The Goon in the upper body! It collapses into a lump of gore!
The Goon has been struck down!
OB: _Get out of the fucking way _!
Spike: Your aim is crap!

//Osto Bacchus rises herself up, reading one of the coffins next to her.
OB: Screw this! Time to die, drakeling!
Osto Bacchus waves her staff, evoking a spell!
A blue miasma begins to rise from the coffin, swirling in the air!
//A figure rises from the coffin!
\I am never going to like mint ever again Celestia damn it.
The Goon bites The Drakeling in the left upper arm, denting the scale!
The Goon latches on firmly!
Spike: Get off!
The Drakeling kicks The Goon in the upper body with his right foot, bruising the muscle, bruising the left true ribs and bruising the heart!
The Goon is propelled away by the force of the blow!
The Goon releases the grip of The Goon's upper front teeth on The Drakeling's left upper arm.
//Come on, come on, keep running!

//I try to get a glimpse of the spirit Osto Bacchus just summoned. It's a bipedal person, wearing a cape and holding a nasty-looking sword. Hold on, it almost looks like a drakel--
//OH FUCK OH FUCK OH FUCK FUCK FUCK
OB: Kill him!
Bothersome Jester: Kill who, my dear? I have not lain for five hundred years to be given vague orders from hysterical--
OB: The drakeling! Kill the fucking drakeling!
Bothersome Jester: As you wish, my dear.
//FUCK SHIT GET GOING SHIT
//What?! Who is that?!
//LET'S JUST FUCKING SAY OSTO BACCHUS IS NO LONGER THE DEADLIEST CUNT IN THE ROOM

//The blue mist of a drakeling floats towards me, raising his sword!
The Drakeling leaps backwards, away from The Ghost Drakeling!
Spike: Even raising one of my people for your purposes... as if enslaving us during life wasn't enough!
The Drakeling strikes the pillar in the basalt with his Fist of Justice, shattering the stone! Severed parts fly off in arcs!
OB: Kill him kill him kill him kill him--
BJ: The gods themselves found me a challenge. What do you expect to do, hmm?

The Ghost Drakeling slashes at The Drakeling with his ☾ ethereal greatsword ☾, but The Drakeling dodges away!
The Ghost Drakeling slashes at The Drakeling with his ☾ ethereal greatsword ☾, but The Drakeling dodges away!
The Ghost Drakeling slashes The Drakeling with his ☾ ethereal greatsword ☾ in the right hand, tearing apart the scale, tearing apart the muscle and shattering the bone!

//Damnit ow ow owowowowowowww why do ghosts hurt so much
\And how is anyone this fast with a sword?! He moves like lightning!
//Slightly disappointed, the spirit withdraws from combat for a moment, holding his sword up.
BJ: Cursed instinct... why do you malign me now?
//NO ONE EVER LIKED YOU, NOT EVEN WHEN YOU WERE ALIVE. YOU JUST RUINED THINGS FOR EVERYBODY, YOU PIECE OF SHIT! I'M GLAD YOUR STRIKES BARELY HIT!
//_Barely hit_?! You jackass!!
\Wow. Should I give you three a candle-light hate date alone somewhere? Or can I finish _tearing down this Celestia-damned cavern already_?!
Spike: Stay in hell where you all belong!
The Drakeling strikes the pillar in the basalt with his Fist of Justice, shattering the stone, and the severed part flies off in an arc!
The pillar has been struck down! The ceiling starts to crumble!
The Goon dodges away from the falling basalt!  
The basalt slams into the ground, shattering into a million pieces!

Osto Bacchus dodges away from the falling basalt!  
The basalt slams into the ground, shattering into a million pieces!

The falling basalt strikes The Goon in the head, bruising the muscle, shattering the skull, driving the skull through the brain and tearing apart the brain!  
The Goon has been struck down!

//For a terrified moment, everyone looks up. The cracks radiating from the two earlier broken pillars form a web together, worsening from the additional strain. The newest cracks nearly sprint across the ceiling, meeting up with the old.  
A section of the cavern has collapsed!  
//A gargantuan chunk of basalt loosens itself from the ceiling. There is only silence as it falls.

Osto Bacchus leaps away from the falling layer of stone!  
The Goon leaps away from the falling layer of stone!  
The Goon leaps away from the falling layer of stone!

//The gargantuan rock crushes two piles of coffins and six machines beneath it, sending flying bits of wood and gears everywhere, kicking up dust dozens of feet into the air, and shaking the entire chamber with its boom!

Spike: Sweet Celestia!  
OB: Fuck!  
BJ: Oh dear.

//A rumbling sound is heard through the entire chamber, echoing from all sides. It shakes the very floor beneath us.  
//Similar chunks start to loosen themselves from the ceiling.  
//SUCCESS  
//Shit!

A section of the cavern has collapsed!  
OB: Get me the hell out of here!  
//Osto Bacchus gallops towards the spirit (and me) as the goons start to scream and run, trying to escape any way they can.  
BJ: Your desire is my duty.  
//The ethereal drakeling floats over to Osto Bacchus, with an absent smile on his face.  
//WHY ARE YOU NOT MOVING YET YOU IDIOT  
//Because, crap! I completely forgot about the ankh Quine lost! And now the ceiling's collapsing!  
\Oh yeah. Are we a bad hero?

The Ghost Drakeling grabs Osto Bacchus by the head with his left hand!  
The Ghost Drakeling grabs Osto Bacchus by the head with his right hand!  
OB: What, what are you--  
The Ghost Drakeling throws Osto Bacchus by the head!  
//He threw her directly into a wooden chest!

A section of the cavern has collapsed!  
Osto Bacchus collides with the *mahogany chest*!  
Osto Bacchus's head takes the full force of the impact, shattering the skull!  
Osto Bacchus's head has lodged firmly in the wound!
The chest spills over with personal effects! Out come gems, gold, scrolls, books, potions of golden liquid, rings, and--
\There it is! There's the grey ankh! We have to get it!
//THE CEILING IS COMING DOWN, FUCK THE ANKH. I'LL PUT IN A GOOD WORD FOR YOU INSTEAD.

A section of the cavern has collapsed!
A section of the cavern has collapsed!

The Drakeling leaps forward, towards Osto Bacchus!
The Drakeling grabs the ankh! The Drakeling grabs the potion of golden liquid!
//Osto Bacchus extracts her head from the wooden chest, skull healed.
OB: _What the shit_?!
BJ: (Never entrust yourself to the genie.)
//Several slabs of basalt slam into the cavern floor, shaking the chamber violently!
BJ: (Now that it is too loud to hear orders, let it be known this mare's lack of clarity led to her demise. I wish you better luck, master drakeling.)
//The spirit fades into the ground, leaving. Who was that guy?
//A GUY WHO'S NOT GOING TO GET PANCaked
Osto Bacchus kicks The Drakeling in the head with her right front hoof, shattering the scale and bruising the muscle!
A section of the cavern has collapsed!
OB: You asshole!

The Drakeling leaps backwards, away from Osto Bacchus!
//I look around for a quick moment. There's not enough time for me to get to any exits! I have to hope the odd alcove behind me holds up!
The Drakeling starts to run!

OB: You ruined, you ruined everything! I hate you!
//Osto Bacchus extracts herself from the chest and starts to chase after me! How am I going to get her off my tail?
\She left the staff behind, just pulverize her.
//Oh, yeah.

//Still running, I drink the golden vial, and my wounds start to heal!

OB: I hate you, I hate you, I hate you, I hate you, I _hate you_!
Osto Bacchus points at The Drakeling and casts Spell Blast!
The flying Spell Blast strikes The Drakeling in the upper body, tearing the scale, bruising the muscle and bruising the right true ribs!
The flying Spell Blast strikes The Drakeling in the lower body, tearing the scale, bruising the muscle and bruising the guts!
The flying Spell Blast strikes The Drakeling in the left upper leg, tearing the scale, bruising the muscle and bruising the bone!
The flying Spell Blast strikes The Drakeling in the right upper leg, tearing the scale, bruising the muscle and bruising the bone!

//Doesn't matter, just keep running, the entire ceiling is starting to collapse, almost there...
The Drakeling collides with the obstacle!
\Okay, that looked less like a wall from over there!!
//I spin around.
OB: Die, you stupid idiot who ruined everything, I hate--
Spike: You should have stayed dead!
//Crazy undead bint!

A section of the cavern has collapsed! The ceiling falls! The Drakeling breathes fire! Osto Bacchus leaps backwards, away from the dragonfire! //I press myself against the wall and pray to Celestia. There's nothing more I can do! //Osto Bacchus stands up, cursing:
OB: Hate you hate you--

//The stone slams into the cavern floor!
Osto Bacchus has been crushed under the collapsing ceiling! The Drakeling has been caught in a burst of basalt! //No! I can't die yet! I've barely even lived!

//...
Osto Bacchus has been defeated! Spike earned 5000 experience points! Spike is now level 17!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

Chapter End Notes

With apologies to Tarn Adams.
//Clouds of dust spiral out of the mountain of settling rock and dirt. Ash floods into the hole torn in
the surface. That was the least pleasant experience I have had in my entire life.
\And seriously, who was that drakeling?
/I claw a handful of dust out of my eyes and try to read the scratchings on the ankh in my hand.
Spike: 'I live a strange aeon.' There wasn't enough room to scratch 'in'. Unless you drew an arrow
and wrote it on one of the sides, but that would make it look terrible... grammatical incorrectness,
terrible inscription design. Not sure which is worse, really.
//The bones of Osto Bacchus, several dead bodies in coffins dug up by her team and the machinery
of her whole operation lay below thousands of tons of stone. Nothing remains beside the ankh in
my hand.
//Out of the hole I can see the sun, starting to rise far away. It shines past where a forest once was,
and illuminates the cavern.
///Crap, I can't get out.
Spike: If I had a pick, or a rope of some sort...
//Technically, I can get out of here, I just have to wait an unspecified amount of time...
//Nope. There must be some cave or passage hidden in the shadows around here because I am not
waiting in a dirty hole to wait to grow wings.
//YES, I UNDERSTAND YOUR PERSONAL QUEST IS TO EXPERIENCE AS MANY DIRTY
HOLES AROUND EQUESTRIA AS POSSIBLE.
//I didn't think you were clever enough for puns.
//BACK AT YOU.
Spike: ...Twilight?
///Silence.
///WHY IS IT THAT YOU CALL HER NAME AS SOON AS YOU’RE IN TROUBLE? ARE
YOU WORRIED THE SEXUAL TENSION SHE CREATED ISN’T GOING TO RESULT IN
EVACUATION OF YOUR DICKS?
Spike: Screw you. Twilight is a good friend and I'm not going to let you weird up that situation.
///SHIP FUCKING SAILED, MORON. SHE HANDED YOU A BOOK OF DRAGONS AND
PONIES BANGING LIKE RABBITS AND ASKED YOU TO STUDY WHAT'S IN IT. AS
DEMONSTRATED BY CIRCUMSTANCE TIME AND TIME AGAIN, YOU HAVEN'T
FUCKING GOT A CLUE, SO LET ME SPELL IT FOR YOU: YOU, DRAGON; SHE, PONY.
SHE WANTS YOU BANG BANG.
Spike: Okay, one, her words were totally not that at all --
///YEAH, SHE JUST MADE IT _SEEM_ LIKE SHE WANTED TO MOUNT YOU.
Spike: _And two_, if I had taken her advice it would have really helped against the spiderpony I
was fighting earlier.
///SCREW THAT, JUST KEEP BURNING DOWN FORESTS AND COLLAPSING HILLS INTO
THE GROUND. I THINK AT THIS POINT WE COUNT AS AN ECOLOGICAL EVENT.
Spike: 'We'? You must be going soft on me, instinct.
///I KNEW YOU WANTED A PART OF YOURSELF HARD.
Spike: That was a stretch.
///SO'S THIS: UNSOLICITED ADVICE FROM UNCLE INSTINCT. GO FUCK YOURSELF.
Spike: If I could do that I wouldn't be suffering from whatever it is you think I'm suffering from.
///PART TWO OF ADVICE GO FUCK YOURSELF: DON'T TRUST YOUR MENTORS. I
DON'T LIKE HOW EITHER OF THEM ARE ACTING.
Spike: You don't like much, do you.
//I LIKE IT WHEN YOU SHUT UP.
Spike: Either of them? What do you mean?
//TWILIGHT, OBVIOUSLY, WANTS TO PIN YOU DOWN AND SLATHER YOU IN HER MAREGREASE, TOTALLY TRANSPARENT, BUT I'M HAVING A BIT OF TROUBLE FIGURING OUT WHAT CELESTIA WANTS.
Spike: Celestia?!
//YOU KNOW, THE PERSON WHO DECIDED YOU WERE IMPORTANT ENOUGH TO APPEAR TO IN DREAMS. LISTEN UP, LITTLE ONE, BECAUSE THE ASSCARRIAGE WITH THOUSANDS OF YEARS OF EXPERIENCE IS SPEAKING: ONE, YOU AREN'T IMPORTANT, SO SOMETHING'S UP; AND TWO, CELESTIA IS BAD NEWS. BAD, BAD, BAD.
Spike: You're totally wrong with this one. (Oh, and everything else, too, but especially this one.) Celestia is the reason civilization has persisted and flourished for the last thousand years; her philosophic, philanthropic, technological and thaumic contributions to Equestria are the major contributor to the high standard of living we enjoy.
//WHATEVER. WARNING DELIVERED. HAVE A SHITTY LIFE, STOOGE.
Spike: Wait, 'delivered'? Did someone tell you to say this? Why are you telling me to watch out for Celestia?
//NOPE. BYE.
Spike: 'Swings, you're such an ass.
//OH, I ALMOST FORGOT TO MENTION: IN SUPPORT OF THE QUEST TO GET AN ACTUAL DRAGON TO BE YOUR MENTOR, THERE'S A TUNNEL HIDDEN IN SHADOW AT THE NORTH END OF THE CAVERN, JUST A FOOT ABOVE NOW-GROUND-LEVEL. LATER.
//Cool, he was telling the truth. Guess that guy's only a jerk 99.9 percent of the time.
Spike: Time to get going. I, uh... I'll come back some day and fix this. I promise.

//The catacombs quickly give way to a simple dirt tunnel with no branches. I'd turn something into a torch to see better, but there may be enemies down here I'd like to avoid. If they weren't, say, caught in a hillside collapse.
//My foot strikes a stone as I'm walking. A sound comes from down the cave, like someone drawing in air.
Nameless Mutterer: No! Go away! Leave me alone!
//I freeze, leaning against the wall. Sound takes over for light, and I hear nothing but the dim echo of the cave.
Nameless Mutterer: Please! Just leave me be!
//Did that sound... tearful?
//I shift onto my other foot, as quietly as possible. This could be a trap, or even if not the voice could lash out at any moment.
Nameless Mutterer: Are you... are you still there?
//The voice sounds female, but with a rasp to it that I can't place. Certainly not a dragon; maybe a mare who enjoys a pipe?
//A mare who enjoys a pipe. Wow, I really just thought that.
Nameless Mutterer: ...I don't want to be a subject anymore.
//A subject? This voice was an unwilling participant in Osto Bacchus's experiments? It could still all be a ruse to trick me into speaking, but maybe I should know more...
NM: ...Hello?
Spike: Uh, hi?
//Immediately an outburst comes from the cave walls.
NM: No! Please, no more! I won't help you any more, so go away and be done with it!
Spike: Hold on, what--
NM: Please, just go! I'll -- I'll hurt you! I'm serious, I mean it! Don't make me, because I will! I really will!
//This response to my greeting is better than expected (if still odd).
Spike: I'm confused. Who do you think I am?
NM: ...
//I hear a silence, but the silence of a person who is there. It sounds different.
NM: ...Who are you?
Spike: Spike. I'm a Hero, I defeated Osto Bacchus and her crew.
NM: Was that the loud rumbling?
Spike: Oh, you heard that...
NM: I think the whole realm heard it.
Spike: So if you were a subject in the experiments Osto Bacchus was performing, or if her crew gave you trouble of any sort, you don't have to worry about that from now on.
NM: ...Who are you?
Spike: Uh, Spike.
NM: Spike?
Spike: Spike.
//Silence returns, but it is a different silence. It is the silence of someone thinking.
Spike: I didn't mean to bother you, miss -- missus -- or mister -- uh, friend, but I'm afraid I can't find a way to the surface except through your territory. So, um, if I could be so bold as to ask you a favor...
NM: What are you?
//The question derails my train of thought.
Spike: Um, what?
NM: What are you? I'm looking at you, but I can't seem to figure out what you are...
//It can see in the dark. Glad I decided to go the peaceful route, then.
Spike: I'm... a dragon.
NM: Hhh.
//I think that was a sound of thinking hard. Or sudden cardiac arrest; can't be too sure.
NM: You don't look like a dragon.
Spike: Imagine me on a big pile of gold and several times larger.
NM: Don't dragons have wings?
Spike: At a certain age.
NM: I thought dragons were born with wings.
Spike: And I thought people respected the bodily integrity of others, but here we are.
NM: Do you have a fever?
//...
Spike: No. Why do you ask?
NM: No reason.
//What a strange question to ask. Who is this odd person?
Spike: So, about that way to the surface...
NM: Oh! That's blocked off.
Spike: Darn! What's blocking it off?
NM: A tree root grew over the entrance. Which is strange; it wasn't anywhere near there last week.
//Good, that must have burnt off in the fire by now. Score one for ecological disasters.
NM: How fast do tree roots grow?
Spike: Dunno. Say, what's your name?
N-M: I'm Na-Mira. Who are you?
Spike: ...Spike.
N-M: Oh, right, you said that earlier. What are you doing here, anyway?
Spike: ...I said that earlier, too.
//This silly person can't remember two minutes ago.
N-M: Did you? You did... oh! Hihihihiihihi!

//That is most certainly the oddest laughter a creature of this world can produce.
N-M: You're a Hero! Isn't that right?
Spike: Yeah, and I was wondering--
N-M: What is it a Hero does?

//With all these questions, I can barely ask for directions to the surface!
Spike: Well, I help people--

Spike: --that are in dangerous situations they're not prepared to handle. For example, I defeated Osto Bacchus and her crew so the people of this region wouldn't have to see their dead dug up and experimented on.
N-M: You did?! What are we standing around here for, then?! Let's get out of here!
Spike: Back the way I came there's no exit. Could you take me to the exit that was blocked by the root?
N-M: Sure, follow me!
Spike: I can't see in the darkness.

//Another silence returns as Na-Mira contemplates.
N-M: Are you sure?
Spike: Am I sure -- of course I'm sure!

//Maybe a little rude, but this person is starting to wear at my patience.
//A long silence follows. Did I offend her/him/it?

The Lamiequus pokes The Drakeling in the upper body!

Spike: Hey!
N-M: Hhhck! Quit swinging your arms!
Spike: Don't do that to me! It's weird!
N-M: You're really hot.

//My train of angry thoughts comes to a screeching halt. What?
N-M: Are you sure you don't have a fever?
Spike: No! I mean, yes! Can you take me to the exit?!
N-M: Sure I can. It's blocked off by a root, but if you're really a dragon, you can breathe fire. Can you breathe fire?
Spike: Yes.

//Na-Mira breathes oddly again, thinking.
N-M: Then I'm going to stand behind you.

//A hoof-sized something, very cold, pushes me forward from behind. I walk along the wall, slowly.
N-M: So, you said you're a Hero, right?
Spike: Yeah. What did you say you were doing down here?
N-M: Hck... I didn't.

//Also, what's with the weird noises?
Spike: I know, I would have remembered.
N-M: It's a... it's not a long story, actually, now that I think about it. A few friends and I wanted to take the trail to Canterlot. Or, whereever--
Spike: A few friends? Are they around?
N-M: I haven't seen them in two weeks. One of them was a griffon named Teddy, the other -- hck, the other looked like a big snake demon? Illusionist Kelpie, she was.

//If there is one thing I would like to meet less than a Kelpie or a snake demon, it is the unholy union of the two.
Spike: Nope, haven't seen either. Maybe they escaped the area.
N-M: I hope they stayed in town or in the area. We should probably check with the Hillians; they
took us in as soon as they saw Wafa in disguise.

//Wafa. I sincerely hope that is not the same monster as I fought earlier.

Spike: The who?

N-M: Uh, the Hillians? They live here? Unless Bacchus drove them out within a week or so they've still got to be there.

//Within a week? Didn't the gatekeeper say: 'Oh, yah. Big ponies with dark suits and far away eyes. Arrived a few months ago, now.'?

Spike: Uh, Osto Bacchus has been here for months. Unless my source was unreliable, though he did disappear oddly...

N-M: Uh, no! It was very clearly ten nights ago my friends disappeared and those goons started dragging me off to take measurements.

//How rude!

//The room ahead is filled with thin light, peeking through the burnt tendrils of absence, where roots once were. I walk forward quickly, steadying myself against the wall.

Spike: Exit, coming right up. Where's the largest hole?

//I turn around to look up at the roots.

//In front of me in the pale light, also looking up, is a beast whose body and legs are that of a dark pink pony and whose head is that of a great snake, fangs one foot long and curved inwards.

Spike: Gaaah!

The Drakeling falls backwards, away from The Lamiequus!

//Na-Mira whirls around, searching desperately in the darkness.

N-M: What?! What is it?! Another goon?!

Spike: Snake!

//Na-Mira lifts a leg to kick.

N-M: Where?!

//I breathe, and think for a moment. Why is this surprising?

\The combat text did say 'Lamiequus' back there, after all.

//Hush we're not supposed to comment on the game's technical limitations!

Spike: Uh... sorry. I think I might have overreacted.

//She lowers her leg and stands less tense.

N-M: Oh. You meant me.

Spike: Sorry, it wasn't what I was expecting. Er, not 'it', you; or your body's, uh... lack of standard biological form.

N-M: You can't see in the dark?

Spike: I thought we established that. You had to lead me.

N-M: Hck, _duh_, I knew you can't see _things_ in the dark because they're the same as ambient temperature, but even cold-blooded I'm fairly thermal--

Spike: Dragons don't have infrared.

//Na-Mira holds a hoof to her chin (where her chin would be). A long time passes as she stares at the cavern floor.

N-M: You know, I always assumed they did, but I never thought to ask...

//Twilight pops into existence next to me in a burst of scentless air, rubbing sleep out of her eyes.

T: Hey Spike, sorry it took so long, I ran into my old infothaumics professor and we just -- WHAT THE CELESTIA IS THAT?!

The Unicorn leaps backwards, away from The Lamiequus!

The Unicorn points at The Lamiequus and casts a spell! The Unicorn casts Helium Flash!

//Na-Mira screams.

Spike: Twilight, no!
The Lamiequus jumps away from the beam!

The beam expands in the narrow hallway! The soil is caught in the spell! The soil has been burnt to a crisp! The Drakeling is caught in the spell! The Drakeling's right upper arm has been singed!

//DAMNIT OW I THOUGHT YOU COULDN'T FEEL FLAME
//I don't know! Twilight's crazy, she's not normal!
Spike: Stop! It's not an enemy!
T: _Then what the hell is it_?
Spike: A friend, who was showing me the way out to the surface!
T: Spike, there's a small list of people in the world who you can be friends with. _A snake-faced monstrosity is not among them_.
N-M: _Sorry_, then, if I don't look like another halfwit standing around turning grass into crap. How would it be most convenient for me to die?
T: Quietly!

The Unicorn points at The Lamiequus and starts to cast a spell!

The Drakeling grabs The Unicorn by the left ear with his right hand! The Drakeling grabs The Unicorn by the right ear with his left hand!

Spike: Stop! You're being unreasonable!

//Twilight stares at me from beneath her horn, head lowered. We both blink a few times and look around; I let go of her ears and feel a bit silly.

Spike: Na-Mira's not going to hurt either of us, Twilight.
T: It has a _name_?!
N-M: Also gender and feelings, so you can watch your tongue!
T: Oh, I will _so_ turn you into paste, girl, you don't _even_ know--
Spike: Twilight!
//She stops in mid-gesture and stands with her head high, glaring at Na-Mira.
Spike: I can't ask you to like everyone I get help from (and I doubt I'm going to like everyone who helps me) but I think it's fair to ask you _not_ to threaten to kill them_.
//Na-Mira takes a tentative step forward, pulling her fangs back.
N-M: I know we started off on the wrong hoof, and you probably think I'm as ugly as I definitely think you are, but if you're willing to look past the fact I'm part snake then I'm willing to look past the fact you just tried to kill me and maybe things will get better from there.
T: ...
Spike: Twilight.
T: Fine. Where are we going?
Spike: Aren't you going to apologize?
T: No. Where are we going?
N-M: We were trying to find the exit here that was blocked off by a root. Spike said he could burn it off with dragonfire.
Spike: It's probably burnt off already. Where was it?
T: 'Already', what do you mean, 'already'...
N-M: Just over there, by the far wall.
//We look over to the far wall. A mound of ash lies in the hole to the surface.
//In a little voice, Twilight says:
T: Oh no. No, no, no!
//Twilight rushes through the opening to the surface. I run after her and Na-Mira follows behind.
The sky above the forest is the color of a beautiful person, left out to dry for a week and cut up. Spike: Hmm, the way that cloud is shaped, it looks like decaying adipose tissue. Do you see it?
Smoke drifts up from the distant forest fire, building towering pillars up into the clouds that weave light into strong reds and yellows in the sunrise. Surrounding us is a forest like television tuned to a dead channel, charred and lifeless. There is nothing left above head level.
Spike: No? Just me? Okay.
N-M: This... this forest, there was a forest here. Right?
Twilight whips about and yells,
T: What did you do?!
ISN'T IT KIND OF OBVIOUS?
Spike: I didn't mean to, really...
T: _Didn't mean to_?!
N-M: You did this?
Spike: It was an accident!
T: And that makes it any better?!
Spike: ...It was a life or death situation.
N-M: The Hillians, they had groves for the animals to graze... the animals ran away before I could get close. But I wouldn't wish this on them. I wouldn't wish this on anybody.
I didn't see any groves.
T: Do you know how much damage this is going to do to the ecosystem, regional geopolitics, biodiversity -- do you have any idea?!
She's not going to listen to anything I say until she's done yelling, so there's no point in responding.
T: Seven rare species of tortoise found their home in this forest. Three unique species of skylark, that lived only here. At least a dozen famous flowers grew only in the Valley's soil, wide fields of them in the north tended for generations. Gone! Agriculture, lumber, tourism, ecological study, pilgrimage -- every single life that shapes this valley and is shaped by it in turn you have destroyed with your stupid careless mouth!
Na-Mira looks bewildered for a moment.
N-M: I had no idea this valley was settled.
Didn't she get here two weeks ago? How could she not know that?
T: What are you going to say when the death toll comes out? When you have the blood of X innocent people on your hands, where X is a number _significantly greater than zero_?
Spike: ...I don't know.
Twilight snorts and trots away furiously.
T: I can't deal with you right now. I'm going back to Canterlot.
In a puff of scentless air, Twilight disappears.
Na-Mira walks quietly to my side, stepping over ashen root holes.
N-M: Your friend was very angry.
Spike: She's right to be angry. People are going to lose their lives because of me. Even those who see the fire in time will lose everything they own, and have to flee. There's no way I can warn them.
Na-Mira: Spike.
Na-Mira puts a hoof on my shoulder. She looks at me with eyes that look more like a cat's than you would imagine.
N-M: A good friend once gave me advice when I made a horrible, terrible, absolutely awful--
Spike: Advice, get to the advice.
N-M: Never consider the past when making a decision. Only look at the world as it is now.
(Though you have to take into account the world is as it is now because of the past, and a lot of the time the past predicts the future -- you know, it's not the best advice and I never really understood
it.)
Spike: To be honest, that cheered me up.
N-M: It did? (Wow, I'm awesome!)
Spike: Yeah. It showed me no one else has this life stuff figured out either.
N-M: Hihiihiihihi!
//Maybe that's what I need to do. Laugh, no matter how many mistakes I make.
N-M: What was your friend's name again?
Spike: Twilight Sparkle.
N-M: Twilight said she was returning to the Canterlot expedition. There must be someone there who can contact the ponies of the Valley in time.
Spike: Even then, it might be too late.
//Stop, go back a second. Canterlot expedition?
N-M: And she may even get the ear of Princess Celestia herself, if she designates it important enough to hear. That would be a huge help. Now, if we could find Wafa, we could see about rounding up some of the Hillians...
//ML: No, but there are catacombs underneath it that served as a haven for snake demon worshipers until the third century in Celestia's rule.'
Spike: 'Canterlot expedition'? You mean, the group of pilgrims... who are going to found Canterlot?
N-M: Hck, yeah, what else would I mean?
//...Could it be?
Spike: Na-Mira? What year is it?
//Na-Mira flicks out her tongue in confusion. She looks at the ground.
N-M: Why...?
Spike: Princess Celestia disappeared a year and a half ago. Canterlot was built seven hundred years ago. And I think the 'Hillites" you were talking about, that took you and your friends in, were snake demon worshipers who lived here around that same time.
//Na-Mira takes a long time to process this.
N-M: ...The Hillians aren't here anymore?
Spike: Afraid not.
N-M: What happened to them?
//ML: An Equestrian official declared worship of any deity but Celestia illegal, and had them all slaughtered.'
Spike: ...Middle management.
//UH, NO, THEY ALL GOT FUCKING IMPALED.
Spike: Really, really violent middle management. They had quite the philosophy on heretics seven centuries ago.
N-M: Teddy and Wafa... if not by the spear, then, at least by old age, they must be...
Spike: I'm sorry, Na-Mira. Are you really from the past?
N-M: ...How could this happen?
//I shrug.
Spike: Dunno. Twilight's good with magic, not me. Jumping almost a millennium into the future without noticing isn't on my list of martial arts moves.
//Na-Mira sits down in the dirt and ash.
N-M: Everyone I ever knew is dead. How am I supposed to deal with that?
Spike: ...
N-M: Oh, what am I going to do?
//A wind blows in from the south, swirling up ash. I shield my face. Na-Mira closes her eyes, and then snaps them open.
N-M: You! Your name is Spike, right?
Spike: We've been over this. Yes.
N-M: And you're a Hero?
Spike: Again, yes, we've had this exact--
//Na-Mira stands up.
N-M: Are you a good person?
//Uh...
//HELL TO THE NO, FANGFACE, DRAKELING HERE JUST BURNT DOWN A FOREST
INSTEAD OF DEALING WITH HIS LUST IN A HEALTHY WAY--
Spike: I just burnt down a forest.
N-M: _Are you a good person_?  
//Her forcefulness is surprising.
//How should I know whether or not I'm a good person?! I have no idea who I am!
Spike: ...I want to be.
N-M: Then I'm going to help you. If you're going to make amends for this, you're going to need help.
Spike: I've put enough people in danger because of my lack of strength, I can't let that happen to anyone else.
N-M: Fair enough. I've never been in a fight but I'm certain I would end up just hurting myself.
//Never? Sometimes I forget most people go through their lives without using violence as their primary problem-solving tool.
N-M: Heroes need quests to go on, right? They need to know -- need to know what's going on in the world?
//I think I know where she's going with this.
Spike: The task of keeping track of everyone to help is too big for one person alone--
N-M: So I can help you help them, by finding out what's happening where and when. I'll be... an information gatherer, of sorts.
Spike: Do you really want to do this? The life of a Hero is tough and I can't say it will be any better for you.
N-M: What better way to see how the world has changed in seven hundred years?
//Na-Mira grins goofily, past her fangs. I'm forced to grin as well.
N-M: Sir Spike, Hero of the Future, what mysteries puzzle you on this day?
//I look at the ankh still in my hand.
Spike: There's an old silver dragon named Quine. I want to return something of his, but I don't know where he lives in the Aquinatics or how to contact him. Could you find out either of those for me?
//Na-Mira salutes and wiggles her fangs.
N-M: On it! Information Gatherer Na-Mira is on the case!  
//She runs away into the charred forest, kicking up grey dust.
Spike: Na-Mira! Wait!
//From far away, she calls:
N-M: What is it, Sir Hero?
Spike: North is that way!
//She sits down for half a second, then springs back up, running north into the distance.
N-M: I knew that!
//What a silly bint.

//I climb the hills of the Valley's north; it looks as lively as the name. Grey stone walls mark boundaries between fields of flowers not long gone; covered with soot, they divide empty space.
Further on and further on, there are signs of inhabitants and signs of flight. Little else remains.
//I have quite the time to think.
//The town of Horsens approaches. In the distance I can see only blackened beams, stretching on for at least a mile. The dirt road turns to cobblestone soon enough. It is the only change in landscape as far as the eye can see.
//Far in the distance I see a standing pony. Cloaked in black, it waits under the exit gate of Horsens,
the only part of the town left standing among the burnt wreckage. From underneath a shadowing hood I feel its stare, and I draw near. A breeze begins, forceful, that tries to push me backwards. The pony holds ground, and I draw nearer.

//STOP.
//NOTHING. JUST WANTED TO RUIN THE TENSION.
Spike: Ugh, you're such an asshole.
//It narrows its eyes below the hood.
Spike: Uh, sorry, not you, I just meant the voice in -- you know, just talking to myself, I'm so crazy, hah-hah...
//The wind continues.
//I brush the ash off of my cloak (it smudges) and pull it closer.
Spike: Excuse me.
//Its accusation cuts like a knife:
???: I can never excuse one such as you!
Spike: Oh. Hi, Pitaya.
//Pitaya Mendax throws off her hood, eyes smeared with congealed rage.
PIT: How casually you greet me. Is this how you feel towards your death, and the death of others?!
Spike: Straight to the point, then. I'm a horrible murderer and I need to die for the good of the world.
PIT: You speak so lightly of your end, as if it were a flight of fancy, or a dream. There will be no such mockery when demons are gnawing on your bones!
Spike: You know not of what you speak.
PIT: Do not insult me! I have seen it in a dream. You are the power of death itself, stripping flesh from mind, and for me to bring that on you would be too great an end! I will see you beg, eternity over eternity, imprisoned in a hell too comfortable for a malevolence of your proportions!
//Huh. My followup response of 'everyone knows you crack open the bones to get the marrow' is ruined now.
Spike: Let me get this straight. You waited here--
PIT: Days I have tracked you, and years on end I will extract your due.
Spike: Until I came walking through so you could throw some dramatic words at me and try to kill me. Is that right?
//Silence, but for a breeze.
Spike: And you did this instead of helping the refugees find food, water, new homes and work.
PIT: Do not attempt to chastise me!
Spike: Instead, you decided to hunt me down. Good job on that, by the way: I'm sure following the only set of footprints in the ash was difficult. Is the only tool you have to solve problems to hit it with something hard? Or is real work too difficult?
PIT: The evil of your make is not the only evil ponies must face; the apathy of good mares to evil deeds is a wrong that needs right. One I am righting.
Spike: That's why you want to torture me for a thousand years? 'Because no one else is brave enough to'?
PIT: I trusted you once, thought that dragons could not all be spirits of evil and destruction as they say. I was a fool. You are a leech to the souls of mares, but I will take from you your spirit instead of you from the good and innocent.
Spike: Oh, so it's a drakeling thing, then? Remove me from the world, instead of expecting everyone else to control themselves?
PIT: My destiny is to contain you, to suck the poison in your soul from you and spit it as a snake's. Celestia herself has charged me with this holy mission, and I must not fail!
//Celestia herself?
//SHE THINKS CELESTIA TALKS TO HER; WHAT AN ABSOLUTE WHACKJOB
The pony charges!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

Pitaya kicks at the Drakeling with her left front hoof, but the Drakeling dodges away!

//I didn't even need to use my Dashing Rogue punch to dodge that. She's not very good at this without her sling...

Spike: Pitaya.

Pitaya kicks the Drakeling in the lower body with her right rear hoof, bruising the scale!

//And not even using Terrae Corpus (you know, if the land hasn't forsaken me or something). What was she really expecting to do?

Spike: Pitaya!

Pitaya bites the Drakeling in the left upper arm, bruising the scale!
Pitaya has latched on firmly!
The Drakeling breaks the grip of Pitaya's left front tooth on the Drakeling's left upper arm.

//Come on, really?

Spike: Pitaya, stop it! _Pitaya_!!
//She stops for a second, and screams:
PIT: _WHAT_?!

The Drakeling grabs Pitaya by the upper body with his left hand!
The Drakeling throws Pitaya by the upper body with his left hand!
Pitaya's right front leg skids along the ground, bruising the muscle and tearing the skin!
Pitaya's ear skids along the ground, tearing apart the cartilage!
Pitaya slams into the charred wooden pillar! Pitaya's lower body takes the full force of the impact, bruising the muscle and bruising the stomach!
Pitaya slams into the ground!

Spike: Never stop in the middle of battle, what are you, a morooouugck--
//I throw up red all over the cobblestone. Why am I suddenly sick?
PIT: Even your own body knows of your evil; it purges you and tries to escape...
Spike: Actually, that's just grossulars.
//I haven't had anything else in three days.
PIT: Why else would you be sick?
Spike: It certainly wasn't your kick.
PIT: I am infused with the power of Celestia herself, I know--
Spike: Let me guess, she told you in a dream to do the thing you really wanted to do in the first place?
PIT: This... this is my town, this is my home, and you burnt it to ash, you monster, you... of course Celestia would tell me to defeat you!
Spike: Let's assume I'm truly evil in the first place, not just an idiot who made a mistake.
//WHAT, YOU CAN'T BE BOTH?
Spike: Why would a goddess of good tell you to pay evil unto evil?
PIT: To remove your corruption, as a cancer is torn from the body...
Spike: And tears apart the body in the process. Pitaya, paying evil unto evil is not a good act, or a command of a good goddess. It's meaningless self-interest at best!
PIT: Are those who selflessly throw themselves at a better world self-interested?
Spike: Every villager wants the witches dead. Some of them are more willing to do it.
//There are ways to stop evil without becoming wretched yourself. I have to believe that.
\Then why are you trying to kill the Princess? Wouldn't that just cause greater destabilization than before?
//...Shut up...
PIT: You would seek to prove yourself innocent? Of this crime?!
Spike: Not innocent. Neither am I guilty. Pitaya --
PIT: No! No more talk! I will have you controlled!

Pitaya reads from a scroll, casting a spell!
Pitaya: /That which is dead does not leave/
Spike: I'm just going to throw it out there that you're not a unicorn. You know, in case you've forgotten.
Pitaya: /That which has plenty, starves/
Spike: ...What's with that freaky voice?
Pitaya: /He who serves us kills our servant/
//The ground rumbles.
//BAD BAD BAD BAD BAD BAD BAD
Spike: Okay, stop reading, storytime is over.

The Drakeling breathes fire! Pitaya is caught in the dragonfire! Pitaya's black cloak has been singed!

//Pitaya makes a religious gesture and continues chanting:
Pitaya: /A crown lost has forger seen/
The cobblestone tendril bursts from the ground! The cobblestone tendril bursts from the ground! The cobblestone tendril bursts from the ground! The cobblestone tendril bursts from the ground!

Spike: Oh, this _is_ bad.
Pitaya: /The world ends./
The cobblestone tendril slams the Drakeling in the upper body, bruising the muscle and shattering the right false rib!
//whyyyy

//IT'S NOT THAT I'M GOING TO DIE, NO, IT'S THAT I'M GOING TO DIE ONLY HAVING LIVED IN YOU. THAT'S THE REAL TRAGEDY.

//I wheeze, and muster my strength:
Spike: Go to hell! _Celestia, put your world on my shoulders_!

The Drakeling breathes in and focuses, casting Terrae Corpus! The Drakeling's scales become as hard as rock!
//A strength fills me from a place unknown. Pain wanes away, like motivation draining out of a sink.
The cobblestone tendril swings at the Drakeling, but the Drakeling dodges away!
The Drakeling strikes the cobblestone tendril with his Dashing Rogue punch, but the attack glances away!
//I suppose not being turned into several chunks of dragon is a good enough motivation.
The Drakeling breathes fire! The cobblestone tendril is caught in the dragonfire! Pitaya is shielded from the flames!

\Behind you! And to the left!

The cobblestone tendril swings at the Drakeling, but the Drakeling dodges away!
The cobblestone tendril swings at the Drakeling, but the Drakeling dodges away!
The cobblestone tendril slams the cobblestone tendril, shattering the cobblestone! The severed part flies off in an arc!
The cobblestone tendril slams the cobblestone tendril, shattering the cobblestone! The severed part flies off in an arc!

//Two down, but not the ones I want!

Pitaya: Did you... did you say 'Celestia'?
Spike: Yes! I follow her as well!
Pitaya: _Liar_! You abuse her name to justify your own creed! I will silence you!
//I suppose that was to be expected.

The cobblestone tendril slams the Drakeling in the right hand, denting the scale!
The Drakeling strikes the cobblestone tendril with his Fist of Justice, shattering the cobblestone!
The severed piece flies off in an arc!

//Now, before she has a chance to turn away!

The Drakeling breathes fire! Pitaya is caught in the dragonfire! The scroll shrivels and is burnt away!
The cobblestone tendril slams into the ground!

//Pitaya braces herself against the pillar behind her and takes out her wand.
Pitaya: Never! I'll never give in to your evil!

Pitaya points a wand at the Drakeling and starts to cast a spell!
//She's holding it backwards.
The beam strikes Pitaya in the mouth! Pitaya is stunned!

Pitaya was defeated!
Spike gained 4000 experience points!
Spike is now level 18!
//Crazy vengeful bint!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//I walk over to Pitaya's twitching body and kneel down.
Spike: Listen. I know you can hear me, because you don't have... uh, you can't talk right now.
//WHAT AM I, THE IDIOT OUTCAST COUSIN NO ONE TALKS ABOUT?
//I wish you were a real person so I could get far, far away from you.
Spike: There are better tools to help the world than the sword. Try them first. You didn't even ask me to explain myself! You decided before you saw me I was guilty, and--
//She was there when I started the forest fire.
Spike: ...Oh, yeah, whoops. Yeah, so all of this looks pretty bad, but you understand the situation I was in. I understand better now. The correct choice would have been...
//To die, instead of harming others? I mean, I don't want to say my life is more valuable than others', but would I have really done that?
I notice a vial of golden liquid on her belt. I take a swig, just enough to heal my rib, and put it back.

Spike: (Ugh still tastes like wood.) What I mean is, I've learned. I won't put myself in a situation where choosing between that and death are my only options, not again. I did wrong in the past, but no such wrong will come from me in the future, so you don't have to fight me to prevent future atrocities. There won't be any.

//She was talking more about punishment than prevention.

Spike: You shouldn't be so focused on punishment. It doesn't matter what I did; just what I will do, and I can assure you -- when we first met, weren't we trying to be Heroes together? I still want to be a Hero -- I'm not sure what you want, but a Hero isn't it. Heroism is a tricky thing, but if I've learned one thing, it's...

//What was that thing Na-Mira said? Without the verbal clumsiness, and odd fang accent?

Spike: ...'The past is a lesson, not a duty'. A wise old mare told me that. And, just between you and me...

//I lean in closer.

Twilight: Words, words, words.

//Twilight stands in the cobblestone street, below the Horsens exit gate.

//Interrupting mentor says what?

Spike: Hi, Twilight. Haven't seen you in a while.

T: I've been helping organize the relief and fire control teams. It's been a long three days.

Spike: It's been four days.

T: ...

Spike: Sorry, go on.

T: You need to get going. Amends, chop chop!

Spike: Uh, right. I suppose you haven't seen the enemy I've been lecturing after combat, instead of killing her.

//Throwing about my power with disregard can hurt people that I never meant to hurt, as a recent forest fire has shown me.

T: I was wondering why you were talking to that pole.

Spike: Twilight? How much have you slept during the past few days?

T: ...Do you have an abacus on you?

Spike: You should really get some sleep.

T: And you should really mind your own business. Auditory hallucinations only start after forty-eight hours of sleep deprivation.

Spike: It's been ninety-six.

T: ...I still have work to do.

//In another cloud of scentless air, Twilight disappears.

//I turn to Pitaya, who is still twitching slightly.

Spike: So, uh, as you've seen, we've really got this handled, so, even though I appreciate the help, um...

//Man, these sorts of things are always awkward.

Spike: Uh, bye. I guess.

//I leave. There's not much else to do.

//Twilight and I walk on one of the trails leading out of the Valley, into the outer Aquinatics. There is still a long way to go here, but we're making progress.

Twilight: You're making better time than I expected.

//She's had a few more hours of sleep today.

Spike: Must be running away from all the mistakes I made.

T: Hah! Trust me, if you're worried about someone finding out, don't.

Spike: That's nice of you to say, Twilight.

T: I hold you wholly accountable and I'm the only one who matters, so there's nothing to wonder
about.
Spike: ...You are a master at making others feel better.
//I've decided to keep a tighter reign on fighting from now on. The forest fire happened because I wasn't strong enough, or fast enough, or smart enough to win without it. If I can avoid combat entirely, things like that won't happen in the future, and I won't tarnish the reputation of dragons by being associated with that type of thing...
//I hope.
//Twilight perks up.
T: Oh! Speaking of a bad transition, have you been reading that book I gave you?
//Er... Celestia told me not to...
Spike: You know, I haven't found the time--
T: It's okay. It is a really interesting document, if you go slow and study each page it's understandable.
Spike: It's not that--
T: Spike, you don't have to be embarrassed! It's a part of growing up!
Spike: Celestia told me not to read it.
//The smile fades. For a long minute, Twilight silently trots beside me, staring at the ground.
T: Celestia appeared to you in a dream again?
Spike: She never stopped.
//I would have starved if she didn't wake me up to surprise a nearby deer.
T: If you don't mind me asking, Spike, when...
Spike: Last time? Two nights ago. Said you were a trustworthy ally and a loyal friend.
//She said nothing of the sort.
T: Hah, the Princess always liked me; that makes me feel better.
Spike: Were you two close?
T: I was her favorite student.
Spike: What was she like?
//Twilight Sparkle pauses for a long while, choosing words carefully.
T: Amazing. She amazed others with both simplicity and grace.
Spike: What else?
T: Wonderful. To look upon her was to inspire the wonder of worlds.
Spike: You like her, then.
T: Yes. She was iconic. The demeanor of nobles and duchesses was a detailed attempt to imitate Celestia; the physical ideal of the female form was hers. The Princess was, is, a symbol of righteousness to everyone in Equestria.
Spike: Did that blur the lines between personal worship and religious worship?
T: Hmm, maybe. I'm not sure there ever was a line. All this happened very slowly. So I hear; I wasn't alive for most of it.
Spike: What did you think of her?
T: When I was a young filly, she was fantastic. The Princess was an object of fantasy, to use as I pleased -- blech, wrong word choice. Was a component in childhood fantasies, that everyone has, you know.
Spike: No, I don't.
//What part of 'total memory loss' is not understandable?
T: Uh... I would imagine things like meeting Princess Celestia in person, and her being so impressed with me she'd make me a Princess as well on the spot. I mean, silly, just silly things -- could you imagine? Me as a Princess?
//AVOID SUBJECT WITH HUMOR.
Spike: Total nightmare. You'd strip the castle down and organize it into its component bricks.
//Twilight laughs for a while, and we walk past tall shrubs (or maybe short bushes) lining the trail. I think she's laughing a bit long...
T: When I got older, I thought she was enchanting. She weaved enchantments that would swirl and
pulse and frankly I spent too much time staying up late reading descriptions of them. I was so
drawn in, I wanted to be her student.
Spike: And then--
T: And then she was friendly. Up until I moved to Ponyville, I really think Princess Celestia was
the only person in my life who acted like a close friend.
//There's an adjective not in use. Is 'nice' what I'm looking for?
Spike: Was she nice?
T: ...I've been avoiding that word.
Spike: Because you're a schoolmarm?
//Twilight rolls her eyes, but I see a snicker.
T: Because it depends on perspective. The Princess was nice to me, and to most people in
Equestria. Her enemies would tell another story. Rulers are like that.
Spike: Would, if they still existed?
T: ...It's scary how accurate that is.
//No, this is it; it must be.
Spike: Was she honest?
//Stormclouds gather on the far horizon, above the peaks of the Aquinatic Mountain Range. They
loom dark and ominous. Twilight eyes them with suspicion, stopping in place.
T: Not as much as I would have liked.
//Twilight closes her eyes and sniffs the air, cloak shifting slightly over her shoulders and back.
Spike: 'Swings, again with the sniffing?
T: Excuse me for using every sense available to me, I'll see myself to the next Remedial Plato's
Cave as soon as I'm done -- oh drat, and I thought she was going to be doing something useful.
//After a spell, she disappears in a puff of odorless air. I look up.
//Far in the distance but approaching is a speeding, light blue blur with a rainbow mane.

Chapter End Notes

With apologies to Tarn Adams.
//Crap.
Spike: And I'm sure you're miles away by now, Twilight, not like you could have helped, or anything, no...
//I glance around, blue bullet far away but still coming quickly. A person-sized rock lies next to a tree with a sliver of space between them. I leap between them and try to dig in before I'm seen.
//Several breaths pass. Did that work?
//The Avatar of Speed turns sharply and dives like a falcon.
Spike: Great, here we go...
//May as well get prepared. She may fly, but I have the power of the land!

The Drakeling breathes in and focuses, casting Terrae Corpus! The Drakeling's scales become as hard as rock!

//The Avatar cuts her speed by flaring out her wings, and lands gently.
Rainbow Dash: Heh heh, for a moment there you probably thought that would work.
Spike: Yeah, my luck's not that good.
RBD: Come on, hands up and get out of there; I don't have all day.
//...
//YOU ARE PATHETIC.
Spike: I think I'm stuck.
RBD: What?
Spike: I said, I think I'm stuck.
RBD: What do you expect me to do about it?
Spike: A little help?
RBD: Not falling for that one.
Spike: No, I'm really stuck.
RBD: Well, you better hurry it up. I'm already late for something.
Spike: For what? Is there another dragon district somewhere you'd like to terrorize? Other tensions you'd like to strain?
RBD: Hey, that silver dragon's approach was way too aggressive, it looked like he was attacking the city!
Spike: And I'm sure that's a problem that never happens to pegasi.
RBD: Wh-- hey! Are you accusing me of being racist?!
Spike: Maybe a little.
T: (Speciesist, really.)
RBD: I am totally not racist! I would never discriminate against any group of dragons or people!
Spike: 'Dragons or people'.
RBD: ...You know what I mean!
Spike: Does not being racist include saying that all dragons are criminals?
RBD: Oh, that. Funny thing, in that case all those dragons _were_ criminals because they tried to stop me from arresting a known terrorist, but I may have gotten carried away...
Spike: I'll say.
RBD: For your information, featherbrain, I have plenty of friends who are dragons!
Spike: Name one.
//The Avatar of Speed holds a hoof to her chin, wings stretched out. I think I'm almost free from this rock...
RBD: This guy named Spike, we were friends back when I lived in Ponyville. We still talk
sometimes, though nowadays he mostly--
//In outrage, I burst out:
Spike: _That_ is how you treat your friends?!
//The Avatar pauses, then trots a little to the side to get a better view.
RBD: Oh, hey, Spike! I didn't notice it was you!
Spike: 'Swings, I'd hate to see what you'd do to your enemies.
RBD: It looks like you're really stuck between--
Spike: That's what's happening now? You're making bad jokes instead of helping me?
RBD: Sorry, let me get that for you.

Rainbow Dash bites the Drakeling in the bronze vestskirt! Rainbow Dash drags the Drakeling by
the bronze vestskirt!

//I cough and rub my neck; even with hardened scales the little hoops choked me.
RBD: The armor's new.
Spike: It's a dangerous world out there.
RBD: Heh heh, because ponies like me are flying around in it, I know.
//Strangely enough, that was my next line.
RBD: Sorry again about that last fight, I didn't know it was you.
Spike: Is that supposed to be better? That you're okay with people you don't know getting hurt but
not your friends?
//Rainbow Dash recoils, as if struck. She opens her mouth, failing to respond once, and then finds
the words.
RBD: If you don't accept my apology, you can just say so! You don't have to be rude!
Spike: ...Fine. If you think it's an apology, I'll take it as one.
RBD: Ugh, gee, I never really remembered you being this mouthy.
Spike: Twilight says you've been away for a long time.
//Rainbow Dash rolls her eyes.
RBD: Don't remind me. So, anyway, what's up with you? Why the armor?
//Uh, do I tell the truth? Where would I start?
Spike: Well, in case you haven't heard, I completely lost my memory.
RBD: Woah! All of it?
Spike: All of it.
//She thinks for a moment, staring off into space.
RBD: Woah.
Spike: Yeah. It's been kind of weird.
RBD: So why are you in the Aquinatics?
Spike: Oh! Well, since I lost my memory, I decided I want it back.
RBD: Is it around here somewhere? I could find it for you in a jiffy if I knew what it looked like!
//...Lost', not 'misplaced'.
Spike: Uh, that's... I came here to meet up with other dragons. You know, figure out if there's
someone who knew me and ask them about it.
RBD: ...Uh, Spike? You didn't know any dragons. Except for, like, a few punks you met at some
point and saved an egg from.
//I've already done that! Even if it was ponies this time.
Spike: ...Are you sure?
//No dragons at all who knew me... even in a past life, I wasn't as connected with my kind as I
wanted to be.
RBD: Hey, would I lie?
//Yes? I don't know you!
RBD: You lived in Ponyville and Canterlot, as far as I know.
Spike: (Not many dragons there?)
T: (You could say that.)
Spike: Well, whatever. Even if I don't find my memories here, I'm going to make new memories, and figure out what it means to be a dragon!
//With this ankh, I'll convince Quine to take me as an apprentice, and become a Hero to lead dragonkind!
RBD: Heh-heh, if you really want to know more about your past, you should ask--
Spike: Yeah, yeah, I know. But I don't want to have only one person tell me who I am and what I should do.
//It kind of ruins the point of finding out who I am if someone just tells me.
RBD: Funny thing about that, heh-heh...
Spike: Besides, Twilight's busy telling me what to do _now_, it'd be impossible for her to squeeze a word in edgewise about my past.
T: (Oh, come on, I'm not that bad. Am I?)
//I shrug.
RBD: Twilight?!
T: (Celestia she is so transparent.)
//Rainbow Dash continues:
RBD: You two hang out? What for?
//...Didn't Rainbow Dash see us both in Forlegsandria's dragon district? She should remember that...
Spike: Uh, well, it's kind of a long story, and you have things to do...
//She lifts her wing and gestures to a scroll tied there.
RBD: These? Nah, they're not important. I fly pretty fast, you know!
//I haven't forgotten.
Spike: Anyway, what have you been up to?
//The Drakeling dodges away from the incoming question! The Drakeling counterattacks! The Drakeling throws a question at the Avatar of Speed!
RBD: I've been pretty darn busy with this forest fire and the refugee handling, I haven't been back to the dojo in two weeks!
//The flying question strikes the Avatar of Speed in the train of thought, and the severed part flies off in an arc!
Spike: You train in a dojo?
RBD: Oh, right, no memory. I'm the master of a dojo, in the greater Gloucester region. You should visit sometime, the view's awesome.
//Huh?
RBD: It's on top of a mountain overlooking Fillydelphia.
Spike: What are you doing right now?
RBD: I have to deliver Applejack's orders to the troops handling the refugees from the Valley. We're trying to get them to Detrot or out of the region without being attacked by dragons.
Spike: Why would dragons attack them?
//Rainbow Dash shrugs.
RBD: I don't know; I forgot to read the orientation materials. It's a land conflict, I guess?
//If there's senseless violence between dragons and ponies that can be solved, then by Celestia, it's my duty as a Hero to solve it!
RBD: Wait, hold on, you never answered my question!
//Oh, crap, she remembered.
Spike: Oh, so...
//I suppose the truth is better than lying.
Spike: I'm trying to be a Hero, traveling the land and righting wrongs, and Twilight is traveling with me. A land conflict sounds complicated, maybe there's something I can do... but I really just came here to train with fellow dragons. Twilight's advice and training has been great, though. I've learned a lot, even if she isn't a dragon.
RBD: Wow! Did Twilight tell you about the 'Hero of the Land' thing?
Spike: What? Should she have? What is it?
RBD: It's some wacky old law put in place by Princess Celestia, grandmothered in by Princess Hazel. A Hero, known across all Equestria for her benevolence and power, can gather together the Elements of Harmony and challenge the Avatars for the right to an audience with the Princess herself! Uh, Hazel, not Celestia.

T: (But if there were a time for her to come back...)
Spike: _That's really a thing_?!
//Why doesn't the world always work out in my favor like this?!
RBD: Yeah, I know!
Spike: So all I have to do is gather the, the whatever-they-were --
T: (Elements of Harmony.)
Spike: And defeat the Avatars, and I get to meet Princess Hazel?
RBD: Twilight should know more; I just heard one of my students rant about how he was going to meet the Princess. (Not going to happen.)
Spike: You said 'her', but it applies to anyone, right? Even drakelings?
//Rainbow Dash shrugs.
RBD: It should.
Spike: Then I know what I must do! I will be a Hero of the Land in the name of Celestia!
RBD: Heeey -- that means we have to fight sometime!
//I gulp. Whoops.
Spike: Hopefully a long, long way in the future, you know, when some time has passed...
RBD: We should spar!
//What?! Right here?!
Spike: No, no we shouldn't!
RBD: Come on, it's just a little practice! What could go wrong?
Spike: A lot!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//Rainbow Dash leaps into the air!
RBD: You said you were a Hero, right? You must have fought someone after the last time we met. Come on, show me what you've learned!
//I would really rather not.
Spike: Stop! I don't want to spar!
RBD: Don't be such a spoilsport!

//Rainbow Dash swoops down from above!
Rainbow Dash strikes the Drakeling in the left upper leg, but the attack is deflected by the Drakeling's bronze vestskirt!
The Drakeling punches at Rainbow Dash with his left hand, but Rainbow Dash dodges away!

//She takes to the sky until the sun is behind her.
RBD: _What did you DO_?!
Spike: Sorry, I'm not very good.
RBD: That's a guilty stance!
//...What?
RBD: Why are you _that_ guilty?! _What have you done_?!
Spike: ...How can you tell that much from a _stance_?!
//Damn my body language!
//ALL OF TWILIGHT'S FRIENDS HAVE SUPERNATURAL LIE DETECTION POWERS,
REMEMBER? CHAPTER OF YOUR STUPID LIFE PART ONE?
RBD: _Tell me_!!
Spike: (So, what, do I tell the truth, or...)  
//Silence.  
Spike: (Damn it...)  

[[SAVE LOCATION]]  

>>TELL THE TRUTH  
>>LIE

Spike: I haven't done anything! I don't know what you're talking about!  
RBD: Liar!  

Rainbow Dash divebombs the Drakeling!  
Rainbow Dash kicks the Drakeling in the right upper arm with her left front hoof, denting the scale through the bronze vestskirt!  
The Drakeling strikes Rainbow Dash in the lower body with his right hand, but the attack glances away!  
The Drakeling leaps backwards, away from Rainbow Dash!  
//I can't get away from her! She's too quick!  
\Avatar of Speed.  
//...Right.  

RBD: Your scales. Twilight's been teaching you things, hasn't she?  
Spike: What's it matter?  
RBD: Dragonscale is hard, but not that hard.  
//Technically, dragonfeather, but who's keeping track?  
RBD: And I sincerely doubt Applejack would teach a dragon her personal move. So has Twilight taken you on as her own little apprentice?  
//Own little? Why the diminutive?  
Spike: (I thought some historical figure used it to do some terrible thing.)  
T: (It was lost, until we recovered it. Nothing under the sun is new; many things are simply forgotten.)  
RBD: Your body language is an open book, Spike. How'd you disappoint her this time?  
//I stay silent.  
//...This time'?  
RBD: Or are you going to bet I won't beat it out of you?  
Spike: No, I'm certainly not counting on that...  
//Maybe honesty is the best policy?  
//WHEN DID THAT FUCKING START AND WHO DID YOU PICK IT UP FROM, BECAUSE EVERYONE AROUND YOU IS A SHITMOUTHED LIAR

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

>>TELL THE TRUTH  
>>LIE

Spike: I, uh...  
RBD: Yeah?  
Spike: I might have started the forest fire.  
//Rainbow Dash pauses for a long time, staring at me.  
Spike: (Is she broken, or--)  
RBD: You featherbrain!  
T: (Trust me, he's a lot more than that.)
Spike: You don't understand, I was just defending myself!
RBD: By _burning down a forest_?! How?!
Spike: I had to use dragonfire or I would have been killed! What should I have done, die?!
RBD: Yes!
//Uh, what?

//Rainbow Dash leaps into the air!
RBD: You're a Hero, Spike! That means you don't get to say, 'I was ordered to,' or, 'it was self-defense'! Everything you do is on your own head!
Spike: I know that!
RBD: Do you? As a Hero, the privileges you get are hoof in hoof with the things you give up! Forgiveness being one of them! If your choice is between hurting innocent ponies and dying yourself, then guess what? You fall on that sword!!
Spike: Do you teach your students this? That there's no possibility to make amends, and it's better that they die than make one mistake?
RBD: _Heroes don't make mistakes._! You decided that your life was more valuable than the lives of over two dozen others!
Spike: Then I'll take the consequences for that mistake! I know I'll do more than enough good to counteract the damage!
RBD: No, not by yourself. You don't know enough yet.
Spike: I've learned, and I'll prove it by my actions!
RBD: I don't know why Twilight let you loose after that. You've shown you can't be trusted already! You have intelligence, Spike, but no wisdom; you have power but no control. You're a loose cannon and you're going to end up hurting yourself and others. I can't in good conscience let you leave.
Spike: Oh, great, I have a feeling who's about to 'teach' me what control means...
RBD: You're not the old Spike, because the old Spike would know better than to do something like this! I can't let someone with so little wisdom and so much power wander around a dangerous hotspot like the Aquinatics!
Spike: What a coincidence that your morality and sense of duty inspires you to assault me, who knew it would work out like that?!
//This guy.
//THIS GUY.
T: (This girl.)
Spike: I don't want to fight you!
RBD: Just give in!

Rainbow Dash divebombs The Drakeling!
Rainbow Dash strikes at The Drakeling in the upper body with her right wing, but the Drakeling dodges away!
The Drakeling strikes Rainbow Dash in the left front hoof with his Dashing Rogue Punch, bruising the skin!

RBD: Nice try!

Rainbow Dash kicks The Drakeling in the right lower leg with her right rear hoof, bruising the muscle and shattering the bone through the steel shinguard!
An artery has been opened by the attack, a ligament has been torn, and a motor nerve has been severed!

//AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA
//I fall to the side, hard, driving the breath out of me.
T: (Wow, she's serious.)
"Swings that hurts so much, make it go away, please Celestia make it go away...

RBD: Pinkie's move only works with four legs. You're predictable and it opens you up for sorely needed punishment.
Spike: My leg...
RBD: The quicker we get this over with, the sooner it'll stop hurting.

The Drakeling breathes fire! Rainbow Dash is caught in the dragonfire! Her mane has been singed! Rainbow Dash leaps backwards, away from the flames!

RBD: This is for your own good!
Spike: Excuse me if I don't think so!

//The Avatar of Speed flies in a loop just out of dragonfire range. I struggle to stand up
//OW OW OW OW OW OW OW
//And fail.
//Is she drawing that circle in closer, or is it me?
//The wind distorts all along the trail, swirling with the Avatar. I feel it go one way across my feet, but tree branches lean the other way -- it's going in a circle?

Rainbow Dash charges at the Drakeling!
RBD: You can't stop me now!
Spike: Why should I surrender to illegitimate authority?
The Drakeling stands up.

The Drakeling strikes Rainbow Dash in the head with his Fist of Justice, bruising the skin and bruising the muscle!

Rainbow Dash strikes the Drakeling in the right hand with her Wind Drill, bruising the skin, bruising the muscle, shattering the bone, jamming the bone through the right wrist's muscle and shattering the right wrist's bone!
An artery has been opened by the attack, several ligaments have been torn, a motor nerve has been severed and a sensory nerve has been severed!
Rainbow Dash strikes the Drakeling in the right lower arm with her Wind Drill, bruising the skin, bruising the muscle, shattering the bone, jamming the bone through the right elbow's muscle and shattering the right elbow's bone!
An artery has been opened by the attack, several ligaments have been torn, a motor nerve has been severed and a sensory nerve has been severed!
Rainbow Dash strikes the Drakeling in the right upper arm with her Wind Drill, bruising the skin, bruising the muscle, shattering the bone, jamming the bone through the right shoulder's muscle and shattering the right shoulder's bone!
An artery has been opened by the attack, several ligaments have been torn, a motor nerve has been severed and a sensory nerve has been severed!

The Drakeling gives into pain! The Drakeling collapses!

//HOW IN THE WORLD IS THERE SOMETHING THAT HURTS MORE THAN THE LEG

//The Avatar of Speed folds her wings and steps over me.
RBD: Wow, she's serious.
//?
RBD: Taught you her own strike and everything. Twilight really trusted you, kid.
Spike: Doesn't that say something?
RBD: Yeah, her trust was misplaced.

Rainbow Dash grabs the Drakeling by the upper body with her left front hoof! Rainbow Dash
grabs the Drakeling by the upper body with her right front hoof!

//The Avatar sticks her face close to mine, and says:
RBD: I want you to know, when you come out on the other side, this isn't anything personal. It's just business.
Spike: Charming.
//From above, from below, from every side and every angle comes a thundering roar, terrible enough to split the ground open and shake down the sky, a rage only possible from one who knows the dragon instinct.
Spike: That must have been a dragon!
//The Avatar turns her head. Off past the Aquinatics, a silver tail the size of rivers slips behind the mountains.
RBD: Damn, what did he burn down this time?!
Spike: Was that Quine?
RBD: Yes, which means I have to deal with _him_ now! And I'm already late!
//But you had time to do this to me?
RBD: Stay here! I'll be right back!
Spike: Oh, like I'm going somewhere!
//The Avatar of Speed launches off of the ground, and speeds away into the sky.
//...

Rainbow Dash was defeated! (?)
Spike earned 6000 experience points!
Spike is now level 19!
//Crazy rainbow bint...

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//Great.
Spike: Twilight?
//Silence.
Spike: Great. You're either disappointed with me, or there's another enemy nearby. Please, let me black out from pain...
//No such luck. I lie in the sun, unable to move.
//...

//An hour passes. I see a vision in the delirium.
C: Spike. Can you hear me, Spike?
Spike: Celestia! Is that you?
C: Yes, Spike, it is I.
Spike: Celestia, being a Hero is much more confusing than I first thought!
C: How so?
Spike: Heroes are -- well, heroic. Legendary tasks and extreme danger are their foodstuffs. Difficulty is the very road they travel.
C: That much is true, yes. Were your path easy, it would not need a dragon of your capabilities.
Spike: But all the stories tell of Heroes who succeed! Heroes whose strength of will gives them enough physical prowess to overcome any obstacle, completely dedicated to the cause of good!
C: Do you feel, that because you have been defeated physically, your quest is no longer true?
Spike: I don't know what to feel right now.
C: Take hope, my little drakeling. Any beast with bulging muscles can break limbs and tear flesh. Only a dragon of the truest caliber can maintain after such a thing happens to her. A mind is the final, eternal sanctuary of a living being, and it cannot be forced by another.
Spike: ...Is that why I'm always struggling? Because my faith is too weak, and my devotion to your cause uncertain?
C: No. Your opponents are far beyond your level. Your faith is the only grace which saves you.
Spike: Yet...
C: Yes?
Spike: The words that opponents say. The ideas that ponies introduce, challenging how I act and how I think. Am I supposed to ignore everyone and everything but myself and what I want? Or what I think others want?
C: If people could correctly determine and want what is best for themselves, no Hero would be necessary. Your goal, as stated earlier, is to put an end to the life of the current false Princess of Equestria.
Spike: ...Is that absolutely necessary? Is there any way at all the Princess wouldn't need to die?
C: ...An interesting question, so let me ask one in response: a crafty gambler might know the weights of the dice. But does she know the result of a hard throw?
Spike: ...Each 'best path' depends at least a little chance and different outcomes arise from pure happenstance. The wisest plan can be shattered by the fool who acts randomly.
C: Exactly. It is my analysis that only through her death may Equestria's recovery be absolutely secured. You might be inclined to share my path and defer to my wisdom, intelligence, and age. But you should only agree with a person, even a deity, if your own mind guides you so.
Spike: I do believe in you, Oh Celestia! ...You know, not that it matters much now.
C: Spike, why would you ever say such a thing? //Guilt pounds through my veins. I'm not sure if it's for being defeated in the first place, or doubting myself.
Spike: My arm and leg are broken. I'm no use as a Hero. For me, it's over.
C: Never doubt my power, Spike. I think the shadow of hope approaches yet...
//The vision fades, and the pain returns.

//Far off in the distance, a flier silhouetted by the sun races towards me from the mountains.
Spike: Celestia, please, let that be someone other than Rainbow Dash...
//WHY? DO YOUR WANT YOUR MAJOR FUCKING ASSHANDLINGS TO BE FROM VARIED SOURCES?
//...There are two of them. What could this be?...

//I lie another few minutes, watching the fliers. They head directly towards me, and land.
//One is a full dragon of medium size, back legs about the size of a pony, with orange scales and a scar on his neck. The other is a smaller dragon but still winged, with grey scales and sharp claws.
Orange Scarred Dragon: Galsid. Stay alert.
Grey Sharp Dragon: Oh, uh, right!
//Hell yeah, dragons!
//She nods and leaps into the air, circling our small section of road at a low altitude. The orange dragon extends his neck out, looking at me.
OSD: Drakeling, my name is Osdar. I am here to help you. I am approaching now.
Spike: Nice to meet you, Osdar.
//People have the weirdest names.
//Osdar approaches stealthily, slinking like a cat. Galsid motions an 'all clear' to him, and he gently puts a claw on my torso.
OSD: Excellent, you still have your fire. It has not been taken from you. You haven't been made into a brainwashed zombie.
Spike: Yeah, you arrived in the nick of time; she was just about to come back.
//Osdar narrows his eyes.
OSD: Only a creature with the cruelty of a pony could refuse to kill an enemy, instead maiming him for later to use as a toy and a slave. What is your name?
Spike: Spike.
OSD: Spike, you are badly hurt. As we came to survey the damage the Avatar of Speed had done, we have no medical supplies and cannot help you here.
Spike: (Darn, not even, say, one of those nice golden potions?)
T: (One is worth more than the average hospital.)
OSD: We can only help you in Hole Five, a long flight from here. There is no way to stabilize your body in flight. If you ride on my back, it will hurt terribly.
//I'm used to that by now.
Spike: Better than being a horrible pony's boytoy. Man, am I glad you guys showed up. //I THINK 'PERSONAL DRAGON DILDO' IS A BETTER PREDICTION; USUALLY BOYTOYS ARE TREATED BETTER THAN OBJECTS.
OSD: A dragon after my own heart. Galsid!
//She perks up at the sound of her own name and lands.
OSD: Get your rope. We're tying the drakeling to my back and making for Hole Five.
GSD: I hope we'll make it. Strength is about.
OSD: The Avatar of Strength is slow. That is why any of us still live. Rope?
//I'm lashed onto Osdar
//OW OWOWOWOWO OWO WOWOWO OW
//and we take to the sky.

//OW OW OW OW OW WHY DID YOU AGREE TO THIS JUST GO BACK AND GET FUCKED ALREADY IT'S WHAT YOU REALLY WANT
//Trying to ignore the pain (and instinct), I cling to Osdar's back as we tear through the sky. I yell over the thrashing wind:
Spike: You said 'Hole Five'? What is that?
//I have to learn about dragons here.
OSD: A gathering of dragons in an underground cavern beneath the mountains! The situation is rough, but it's better than being torn to shreds or selling our children into slavery!
Spike: How many holes are there?
GSD: That's what he said!
//Galsid snickers as Osdar answers:
OSD: Three of them! Two, three, and five!
Spike: What happened to the others?
GSD: Never existed! It's just a code!
OSD: If you ever hear talk of other holes, none of them exist! Each speaker and intended recipient can have a different code!
Spike: I came to the Aquinatics to meet Quine! Where is he?
OSD: Securing the future of dragonkind!
Spike: What?
GSD: He's the oldest dragon around! He has to dart around pony settlements to draw the attention of the Avatar of Strength, so Hazel's dogs don't put us to the sword!
//What?! Is the conflict really that bad?!
OSD: He's organizes the Holes to try make our lives better, and journeys out for help and places to send refugees!
GSD: Which is why so many of us would die for him, and so many ponies want him dead!
Spike: Where does Quine usually--
OSD: Galsid, look--

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

The Pegasus charges at The Dragon!
The Pegasus headbutts The Dragon in the right wing with his +bronze pickelhaube+, tearing apart
the muscle through the scale!
A major artery has been opened by the attack!
The bronze pickelhaube has lodged firmly in the wound!
//He came from nowhere!

GSD: Kyaaah!
//The pegasus, painted pale brown from above and blue from below, leaves the helmet embedded in Galsid's side and dives back towards the earth!
Spike: An ambush!
OSD: She can't fly!
//Galsid falls rapidly, spinning round and round. She's unable to control her wings or stabilize.
//Pegasi start chasing as Osdar slims himself, moving faster. More pegasi approach as we weave through the sky. Straining to see Galsid, I see figures on the ground.
Spike: Archers!
OSD: Spike, hold on! We're landing!
//HOLD ON? WITH WHAT? HAHAAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA

The Dragon slams into the ground!
//Osdar slams into the dusty earth, kicking up a cloud!
The Dragon jumps away from the flying copper bolt!

The Dragon slashes the Archer (1) in the upper body with his left front claw, tearing apart the muscle through the iron chainmail, shattering the right false rib, jamming the right false rib through the heart and tearing apart the heart!
The Dragon slashes the Archer (2) in the lower body with his right front claw, and the severed part flies off in an arc!
The Archer (2) has been struck down!

OSD: Do you have dragonfire? Use it!
The Drakeling breathes fire! But the Archer (3) dodges away from the flames!

OSD: Now I have you!
The Dragon breathes fire! The Archer (3) is caught in the dragonfire! The Archer (3) has been burnt to a crisp!
The Archer (3) has been struck down!

Spike: Holy crap!
//His dragonfire is a torrent of hell!
//The three archers are dead or dying, but Osdar sniffs around the scene anyway. He finds nothing.
OSD: There are reasons I have lived long in this region, and luck is only one of them.
//Osdar stares into the sky, to where Galsid was injured. He squints for half a moment.
OSD: The pegasi are out of the sky. Likely fighting Galsid. They're not going to have an easy task of it.
//I twitch as a mare steps silently from behind a rock. She has a straw hat on and a strut to her step.
She has no weapons.
Spike: (A civilian? What is a civilian doing here?!) //Silence.
//I open my eyes wide and jerk my head back towards the rock, trying not to draw Osdar's attention.
She needs to hide! I don't know how strained dragon-pony relations are in the Aquinatics, it might be enough to take innocent lives...
//She puts a hoof to her smile. Why is she not running?!
OSD: But if they knew to find us here, more will be coming. We have to go, and can't outrun them on foot. The sky it is.
//The mare steps just behind the end of Osdar's tail, and stretches her neck. What is this crazy bint--

The Dragon leaps into the sky!
The Mare bites the Dragon in the tail, denting the scale!
The Mare latches on firmly!
//She'll get tossed away!

OSD: What is--
//Osdar reaches the top of his leap, and flaps his wings to launch us skyward.
//Instead, he straightens out like a rope pulled taught, unable to rise further in the air!
Spike: _Did she just anchor you to_--
OSD: What?! No--

The Mare takes down the dragon by the tail with her teeth!
The Dragon slams into the ground!
The Dragon's lower body takes the full force of the impact, bruising the muscle and tearing apart the lower spine's nervous tissue!
The Dragon's upper body takes the full force of the impact, bruising the muscle and tearing apart the middle spine's nervous tissue!
The Dragon's head takes the full force of the impact, bruising the muscle and tearing apart the upper spine's nervous tissue!

//She slammed him down like a wet noodle!
//HAHAHAHAHA OW OW OW HAHAHAHAHA THAT WAS AWESOME DO IT AGAIN GIRL
HAHAHAHAHA OW OW OW
//Did she break the dragon instinct?
Spike: Osdar! Osdar, answer me!
//His head lies limply in the dirt, unresponsive.
Spike: (If only my limbs weren't broken, I'd...)
T: (Also lose in a humiliating manner?)
//The mare steps up onto Osdar, using the spines on his tail as steps. Her coat is the same color as Osdar's scales, a pasty orange. Three apples dance on her flank as she walks.
//She sits down, tips her hat, and says:
Applejack: Howdy, Spike.

The Archers have been defeated!
Spike earned 5 experience points!
[[SAVE LOCATION]]

Spike: ...You know my name?
Applejack: Sure do. 'Course, you don't know mine. I'm Applejack, pleased to meet you.
Spike: And -- taking a wild stab in the dark here -- Avatar of Strength?
Applejack: Sure am.
Spike: Great.
//There might be better positions for first introduction to an enemy I'm meant to defeat.
AJ: Why the frown, partner?
Spike: I'm not exactly in the fiercest way right now...
AJ: Huh huh, you mean, tied to a dead dragon?
//Osdar sputters, tongue thrashing about in the dirt.
AJ: Dyin'! Sorry.
Spike: I'm sure I don't stand a chance.
AJ: Hm? Spike, are you thinkin' of me as an Avatar instead of as your old friend Applejack?
Spike: ...Was I friends with everypony in Equestria?! Or just everyone who _happens_ to be known for legendary combat prowess?!
AJ: Hmm. I think I know who you've been talkin' to since you hit your head, and who you ain't.
Spike: You know about the memory loss?
AJ: Spot on. Right shame about your memories, Spike, no one deserves a terrible thing like that.
Spike: Yeah.
AJ: I heard you went crazy and lost everythin'. Or lost everythin' and went crazy, one of them.
AJ: Very not crazy.
//An awkward silence follows. Applejack leans over to glance at my arm.
AJ: Rainbow Dash?
//I nod. The Avatar tuts.
Spike: Is the conflict really so bad that you killed two dragons out of the blue?
AJ: I've been huntin' this one for months, I reckon. Suppose I have you to thank, Spike, for gettin' him to land long enough.
//That makes me feel just peachy.
AJ: That makes me the most dangerous orange critter in these lands, huh huh.
//This pony is an ignorant fool, killing for amusement without regards to the consequences. She is clearly my enemy.
Spike: Celestia, don't you take anything seriously?! You killed a person!
//Her chuckling ends. The Avatar's tone becomes a little more serious.
AJ: Livin' in the Aquinatics leads a pony to take what amusements she can get.
Spike: I've killed people before, but I didn't _celebrate_ it.
//Applejack puts her face much closer to mine and asks:
AJ: Y'all think I like fightin' a war?
//A war? No one said anything about a war.
Spike: What war?
AJ: Maybe they don't consider it that in the rest of Equestria, but trust me, Spike. This ain't nothin' less than a full-scale war between dragons and ponies.
Spike: ...So you just killed two people because they were dragons. That makes it better.
AJ: Squished orange here _burnt down three taxhouses_. And that was at the _beginnin'_, we lost track of individuals after that.
//...Taxhouses aren't really that popular with anybody. But if Osdar burnt them down, there must have been a reason for his actions. Whatever it was.
AJ: Every second I turn my back, or try to get a hint of shuteye, I hear about another attack by dragons on the folk of the Aquinatics. I'm the leader of the Cavalry in the Aquinatics and I won't stand to see one pony hurt.
//But Galsid didn't do anything!
\That I know of.
Spike: It's fine to kill anyone because they share the same species?!
AJ: Ever since the disappearance of Celestia, ponies have been raided by dragons in this here land, almost like clockwork. It ain't even been the same dragons, maraudin'; I brought justice to all the first ones and new ones came out of their Holes to take their place. Every dragon seen in this region's bein' organized and led.
Spike: Aggressive self-defense is still kind of grey...
AJ: Every dragon I kill makes it harder for whoever's directin' these monsters to take more innocent lives. So yes, Spike, I hunt dragons.
Spike: Have you tried talking it out?
AJ: 'Course that was the first thing I tried! I reckon I'm a farm girl, but I ain't braindead!
T: (Not entirely, at least.)
AJ: Problem is, us and them both want the same thing. The Aquinatics. It's exclusionary, and we ain't bein' driven out of our homes!
Spike: Now that I've asked introductory questions I can naively assume that's all there is to the conflict and trust I've been told the entire truth. Where do I sign up for the Equestrian Cavalry? //I mean, knowing the nature of the world, neither side is probably innocent, but that doesn't mean I can't have a preference.
//YES, YES IT FUCKING DOES, 'HERO'
//Why is the _dragon instinct_ of all people have a problem with me supporting dragons?!
//HEROISM DISCLUDES RACIAL LINES AS A LOYALTY, SHITHEAD MCDUMB-NUTS. YOU CAN'T SUPPORT DRAGONKIND AND BE A HERO AT THE SAME TIME UNLESS YOU WANT TO BE A SHITTIER HERO THAN YOU'VE ALREADY BEEN.
//Who are you to decide what a Hero is and isn't?
//I'M NOT SPEAKING FROM MYSELF, BUT FROM TASTE. OF WHICH YOU WOULD FUCKING HAVE SOME IF YOU WEREN'T SO FOCUSED ON BEING FACE-DEEP IN SOME PONY'S--
//Applejack takes off her hat with a hoof and holds it to her heart.
AJ: Spike, do you know what this hat is?
Spike: Particularly cheap looking?
//JUST BE A DRAGON, FUCK THIS DAMN HERO SHIT
//Shut up I'm trying to have a conversation!
//BREATHE FIRE AT HER IT'LL WORK
T: (Her last one was much nicer.)
AJ: It's the Element of Honesty. I'm its holder. And I don't lie.
//She doesn't lie, in the same way a painting shows part of a scene truthfully. No one can be blamed for only knowing their perspective, though...
Spike: Fine.
AJ: So, Spike, what were _you_ doin' in the region?
//Don't say seeking Quine as a mentor, don't say seeking Quine as a mentor...
Spike: Just some Hero things.
//I wonder if she knows any more about the 'Hero of the Land' Rainbow Dash mentioned. I still need to ask Twilight about that.
AJ: 'Tryin' to figure out the whole Aquinatics situation, are you?
Spike: That was part of it. But then...
AJ: Rainbow Dash.
Spike: Yep.
AJ: So what's the other part?
Spike: Trying to figure out why everyone gets all awkward and dodgy when I mention my memories, and finding out who I was.
//A short pause, in which Applejack gets awkward and dodgy.
AJ: I couldn't imagine why that would be, Spike.
Spike: You're terrible at lying.
//She lowers her head for a moment.
AJ: S'why I usually don't try.
Spike: I figure I'll just skip asking you about it so we can avoid a long conversation where neither of us say anything.
AJ: Had a lot of those, have you?
Spike: _You have no idea_.
AJ: Well, I can't say the help up here in the Aquinatics is unwanted, Spike, but I don't know if any one person can do all that much. 'Specially if you're willin' to attack one of the stallions under my command; that sort of thing seems like it'd worsen the problem instead of helpin' it.
//Uh, crap, is this the part where she declares intent to assault me? When I have two broken limbs and am tied down?
AJ: So here's what I'm gonna do for you, Spike.
Spike: Ugh, great, this again.
//Applejack looks inquisitive. If she knew the word, I'm sure she would agree.
AJ: Pardon?
Spike: Go ahead and use whatever justification you need to use to assault me; bonus points if you use a new one that I haven't heard before.
//The Avatar of Honesty laughs.
AJ: I __wish__ I had time for a fuckin', Spike, but I'm a busy mare.
//Huh, that's strange.
//ARE YOU MORE CONFUSED BY THE PRESENCE OF CURSE WORDS OR ABSENCE OF CROTCH-POUNDERY, BECAUSE TO ME THEY'RE BOTH A DELIGHTFUL FUCKING CHANGE
AJ: Nope, you're a prisoner of war now. I take you to camp, you heal up for a while, and then you can contact Twilight about arrangin' somethin' for you to leave. I'd ask if it sounds good, but...
Spike: Wouldn't change anything if it did.
AJ: Sorry. This is the way it is.
Spike: No, no, this is a nice change. I just have to worry about who's going to assault me while lying helpless in a hospital bed later, instead of right now.
//Applejack shrugs. In less than a minute, she unties me from Osdar, ties me to her back, and trots off down the mountain.

//WELL THIS IS OW A FINE SITUATION OW YOU'VE MANAGED TO OW FIND YOUR STUPID UGLY FAT DISGRACE-OF-A-DRAGON SHITASS OW IN, ISN'T IT OW
Spike: Can you -- GAAH -- try not to bounce as mYAA--
Applejack: Sorry, Spike; I reckon it's just the way I walk.
//WALK BETTER OW YOU SHITEATING ASSHOLE OW
//Shut up.
//HAVE LESS BROKEN LIMBS
Applejack: Now, if'n you pay attention, you might learn somethin'.
Spike: I don't see knowledge of strutting being huge in my future.
//She stops walking.
AJ: Look ahead of you.
//We're looking into a gap crinkled into the land between two mountains. Short, flat rectangles of red earth jut vertically up, and others out of the steep cliff faces. There is sand here, too much of it, only broken by the angled rock and occasional cactus. Tucked below the north face of the gap is a collection of shoddy yurts, and another (less shoddy) gathering lies further to the west.
Spike: What is this place?
Spike: 'Mine' as in yours, or--
AJ: Mine as in, more than seventy-five percent of Equestria's galena reserves. Gorge Coltiers is the name.
Spike: That's the point of contention, then?
//Applejack keeps moving, more slowly, downhill.
AJ: What is?
Spike: About the land. You're using it as an expendable resource and taking everything you want from it to further your monetary schemes, and the native dragons of the Aquinatics are opposed to seeing their lands plundered.
//Applejack laughs.
AJ: Uh, Spike?
T: (Oh my Celestia you're such an idiot.)
AJ: Dragons? Opposed to critters taking silver out of nowhere and turnin' it into shiny pieces of art?
WHAT KIND OF FAKE DRAGON ARE YOU
AJ: Their problem is that G.C. is _not theirs_. The mine, the art, and hell, even the critters who dig it up; dragons as I know 'em aren't opposed to slavery.
Spike: (Excuse me for trying not to rely on stereotypes when examining geopolitical conflicts.)
T: (There's a phrase I like to keep in mind sometimes. It is, 'when you're talking, you're not learning'. Learn a little.)
AJ: They ain't goin' to have any luck tryin' to take this place away from us, though. Cliff faces are too close for the big one to get in, airspace is tight for maneuvers and such, we can retreat into the mines 'cause nothing vital is kept in the open air, and half of the active Magic Corps is kept within alert distance.
Spike: The big one?
AJ: Quine. I'm sure you've heard of him.
Spike: Yeah.
AJ: G.C. is one nut he'd be crazy to try and crack. So he hunts down the families of everypony workin' and livin' here, like the coward he is.
//I'LL SHOW YOU COWARD YOU SHIT-MACHINE WASTE OF CARBON--
//Applejack leaps from one boulder to another, jumping over a ravine leading far into darkness below.
//FUCK OW OW FUCK YOU OW OW
AJ: The sayin' goes, there are three things that'll get you out of G.C. The first is the returnin' of Celestia. Second's Princess Hazel, 'cause she's my boss. Third is death.
Spike: For me, you said earlier that Twilight could... do something, I guess?
AJ: Oh, right. Four, then.
Spike: Is Twilight the odd one out in that group?
AJ: Well, Spike... that's a good question.
Spike: Just who the hell _is_ Twilight Sparkle, anyway?
//Twilight pops into existence next to me in a burst of scentless air, carrying a scroll. Her horn glows, but for only a moment.
Twilight: Lieutenant General Applejack!
AJ: Howdy, Twilight.
T: New orders from Princess Hazel.
//The scroll levitates in front of Twilight as she walks. Trotts? Stumbles? Her legs are short and there's an odd, awkward gait she has to adopt to keep up with Applejack, who is faster.
AJ: Great. Put 'em on my desk, will you?
//The orders disappear in a poof of scentless air.
T: Oh, I see you've captured a prisoner!
Spike: So, what, are we pretending you don't listen in to all my conversations and follow me around everywhere I go?
AJ: It's a dangerous place for a drakelin' to wander around. Wouldn't want him mixin' with the wrong kind of folks wounded like he is.
T: Hah, I have heard Rainbow Dash is in the area. Good to see someone's looking out for him.
Spike: Yes, apparently we are. Or I've been magically silenced. I wonder which it is.
AJ: You know me. Always lookin' out for my friends. What're you up to?
T: Hmm? Oh, just the usual business. See you later!
AJ: Wait! You're so busy you can't talk with two of your best friends in the world?
T: You know what they say about idle hooves, Applejack.
//THAT YOUR PARENTS SUFFERED BEFORE THE END AND THEIR DYING THOUGHTS WERE THAT IT WAS ALL YOUR FAULT?
Spike: That your parents suffered before the end and their dying thoughts were that it was all your fault?
//Where the hell did that come from?
AJ: Right, no hooves of Celestia's. See you later, Twilight; hope whatever you're plannin' now works out.
T: Thanks, Applejack. Bye!
//Twilight disappears in an implosion of air. Applejack drops from a tree's roots to the gorge floor.
//OW LEG FUCK OW FUCK FUCK LEG OW
Spike: GCHAAAA -- hoo, don't do that. What's the verdict, magically silenced or ignoring me? What do you say?
AJ: _I would say_ that was rather rude of you, Spike. A good friend shares with you one of her closest moments with her kin, and y'all go and make a comment like that! Damned shamed of yourself, you should be.
Spike: Twilight's parents are dead?
AJ: I don't know, she don't talk about it. You commentin' like that don't exactly open up a pony's heart.
Spike: She never talked about her parents or family or anything. I didn't even realize she had one.
AJ: Everypony's got a family, Spike!
Spike: Do I have one?
AJ: ...Suppose so.
Spike: Who?
AJ: Before thirty seconds ago I'd've said Twilight, 'cause she raised you since hatchin', but it don't look like you agree with that assessment. That ain't no way to treat family.
Spike: Do you know who my old family was, before my memory loss?
//Applejack pauses for a long time. I guess she is the holder of the Element of Honesty if she's this bad at lying.
AJ: Twilight would.
Spike: You didn't answer my question.
AJ: Yeah, I didn't. And I don't reckon I will. Entrustin' a friend with a moment like that, only to have them turn around and say what you said... I wouldn't be surprised if Twilight don't send to get you out of G.C. now, Spike.
//I stay silent. That might be a big problem.
//Why did I decide to say that? Did I somehow pick up that Twilight had no living relatives? How would I? She's not old enough for me to assume that right away. Does the dragon instinct know something I don't?
//FUCKING YES SO LISTEN TO ME MORE.
//See, there's an obvious problem with that.
//I'M INSIDE EVERY DRAGON FOR A FUCKING REASON YOU ASSMIND.
//...Wait. How would you know Twilight's parents are gone unless there was a dragon who cared enough to know?
Spike: Applejack?
AJ: Not sure I want to talk to you right now, Spike.
Spike: Just who _is_ Twilight Sparkle?
//Applejack sighs. The yurts are approaching at a rapid pace.
AJ: Kid... if I really knew, I'd tell you.

Chapter End Notes

With apologies to Tarn Adams.
Head Nurse: Alright, nurses, listen up.
//I'm laying down on a stretcher inside one of the hospital yurts. This is the grouping of yurts that
dragon prisoners of war are housed in; no ponies are here besides unicorns who keep order and
organizers.
//Outside, a dragon shuffles into the mine, late at night. The chains and shackles around his or her
legs, and through his or her wings (permanently disabling the dragon), clink slowly. A voice
growls, and the chains clink faster.
Head Nurse: Describe this patient here.
//The nurses at the foot of my bed think for a moment. They all have veils, while the head nurse
doesn't.
Nurse 1: Short.
Nurse 2: Badly injured.
Nurse 3: Pale.
Head Nurse: ...
//My scales are purple, she can't tell that.
Nurse 1: She's colorblind, sorry.
Head Nurse: What I want is a summary description of the patient and her condition.
Nurse 1: Demon.
//The Head Nurse opens her mouth for a moment, then closes it.
HN: You? You're playing the quiet game for five minutes. I'm going to let you think about what
you said. Anyone else?
Nurse 2: A dragon.
HN: Oh, a dragon, excellent deduction, nurse. Tell me more and you might get a cookie.
N2: Really?
HN: No! Idiot. What stage of her life is the patient in?
N3: Uh... drakeling?
HN: Yes! Why?
N3: Because... she was born within the last two decades?
HN: _Why do you know the patient is a drakeling_? (Stupid.)
Spike: (I know, right?)
N1: Bipedal figure and lack of wings?
HN: Right! But you're still playing the quiet game. Someone else say it.
N2: Bipedal figure and lack of wings.
HN: Good. Common wisdom says that dragons are dangerous creatures prone to violence who are
feared for good reason.
N3: But that's an unfair stereotype that it is our duty as nurses to dismiss outright?
HN: Partly. Every patient has the potential to hurt you; dragons will just hurt you worse and
prisoners of war have an incentive to do it. Stay on your toes.
//Wow, that makes me feel a whole lot better. Totally non-discriminatory.
HN: Now, a surgeon is always going to ask you two things: the sex of the patient, and ignigenic
status. What is the way to check whether or not a drakeling is in possession of their fire?
N3: Head Nurse?
//She sighs, and it echoes through the yurt.
HN: What?
N3: Why are we checking ignigenic status before sex?
HN: Smart question, nurse; I'll answer it in a bit. How do we check ignigenic status?
N2: ...
N1: ...
N3: ...
HN: Celestia's fucking wings, do you remember _nothing_ from your schooling?
N1: We're actually--
HN: Quiet game!
N3: We're actually members of a religious order called Celestia's Faceless.
N2: Hence the veils.
N3: We're volunteering, we have no training.
HN: (_These_ are the ponies they send me, Celestia's wings...)
Spike: (Please tell me none of them will be operating on me.)
HN: (I might strangle them before it gets to that point.)
//The head nurse places a hoof on my chest.
HN: The method to check a drakeling's ignigenics is to place a hoof on her chest. Now, this
drakeling is bound, which means...
N1: What does--
HN: Ap-ap-ap!
N2: What does that mean, head nurse?
HN: Give me the patient's chart, nurse.
//The first nurse bites the clipboard through her veil, and places it on my stretcher.
HN: I was _informed_ that the patient was bound, which should mean ignigenics are dormant.
However--
//The head nurse crosses something out in red pen and scribbles a note next to it.
HN: --this drakeling is in full possession of fire.
N3: Why is that important, head nurse?
HN: There are several glands and organs that cooperate to generate dragonfire and I'm sure if you
had any background in medicine or biology it would be obvious, but for right now all you need to
know is to tell someone smarter than you about it.
N2: And what about the gender of the patient?
HN: Sex, not gender. Gender is a social entity, sex is biological. There are stark differences in
abdominal organ configuration for male and female drakelings -- which, again, a medical
_professional_ would want to take into account.
N2: I mean, how do you tell it?
HN: Oh. Well, if the patient is ignigenically dormant or unconscious, a thorough examination of
the genital slit will suffice. Dragon genitals are not so unlike pony genitals that more than simple
intuition should be necessary. (For someone competent.)
N3: Um, head nurse? What if the patient is neither bound or unconscious?
HN: If a drakeling patient can breathe fire and is conscious, you ask politely what sex they are.
Spike: (If some of that respect could be taken off 'dangerous beast' and placed on 'autonomous
individual', it'd go a long way...)
HN: (Quiet, prisoner.)
N2: What if the patient lies?
HN: Then she dies in surgery. There's an incentive to tell the truth. If you could please tell us what
biological sex you are?
//I was planning on lying, but dying in surgery is kind of a strong disincentive...
Spike: Male.
HN: Thank you. Now, the injuries.

//The veiled nurses then gather around my leg and arm for about an hour each, learning from the
head nurse what should be done for each injury in the field, in a hospital short on equipment, and in
a well-stocked hospital. I try to remember as much as I can. One of the nurses is mostly intent on
staring at me the entire time. I start to worry what she's thinking.
//They leave, and I go to sleep.

//A vision appears in my sleep.
C: Spike.
Spike: Sorry, I'm sleeping. You're a dream.
C: You flatterer. But no, you are hardly asleep.
Spike: Hold on...
//There's something strange about this pony...
C: Take your time.
Spike: Celestia!
C: Yes.
Spike: It's Celestia, creator and ruler of Eque--
C: Must you do this every time?
//I stop, feeling foolish.
Spike: Sorry.
C: Earlier, you had lost hope in your journey, and your will to continue faded alongside your ability.
Spike: But it returned, oh Celestia! I want to be a Hero!
C: And I trust you will be. But today, the onus is on you. I have done for you all that I will to ease your journey, and to alleviate the suffering inflicted upon you by an enemy of dragonkind. This further challenge is yours.
Spike: Further challenge?
C: The world does not wait for someone to save it, Spike. If you are not present, the world will choose other, more dangerous, solutions. You must find a way to continue your journey.
Spike: 'Swings, if only I had one of those golden vials of make-everything-better on me...
//I knew I would regret not taking that one from Pitaya.
C: Indeed. But they are a rare fortune, found only in the care of power.
Spike: Huh. Do you think Applejack would have one?
//Celestia smiles, and it is as the rising of the sun.
Spike: Though I don't care for the idea of dragging myself to her tent with a broken arm and leg.
C: You may care for or not any road which must be. Will you let pain stop you from bringing my glory to Equestria?
Wobbling Voice One: ...was going to be a weather engineer in my Dad's company in Cloudsdale, but then Celestia left, and control of the weather with her...
Wobbling Voice Two: So you joined up?
WVO: What could I do?...
Spike: Why are there pony voices in this dream?
C: There are not. Are you aware of any others who know of you?
Spike: Tell me I won't have to fight off that nurse who was looking at me strangely, with two broken limbs.
C: Awaken, and discover.
//I wake up.

//A small yurt, a stretcher and a thin sheet that lets the cold in like an old friend. My leg and arm are still in casts. A veiled nurse pokes her head in.
//Is that a lamp? As in, with lamp oil? Maybe I can use that... it is on my movable side.
Veiled Nurse: (Uh, hello?)
//Great. Time to be assaulted by the person who should have a conscience but does it anyway.
Spike: (No one's home, go away.)
VN: Did you say something?
Spike: No.
VN: Oh, you're awake.

//The nurse steps over to beside the bed. Ready...
VN: That'll make this easier.
Spike: I usually don't aim to please.
VN: I must be getting lucky, then.

//LIGHT THIS CUNT ON FIRE

The Drakeling grabs the lamp by the base with his left hand!

//The Nurse drops something on my chest, and says:
VN: Here you go, Spike.
Spike: What? What is this?
VN: Hck, what are you doing with that lamp?
//I lift up the lamp and lean forward. A vial of golden liquid?
Spike: Na-Mira?
Na-Mira: Hey, when did you break your leg?
Spike: Yesterday, don't worry about it.
//Hold on.
Spike: Why else would I be in here if not for broken limbs?
Na-Mira: Broken heart?
Spike: Wh--
//Do you get hospitalized for that?
Spike: _How does that make any sense_?
Na-Mira: Hck, it was a joke. Are you going to use the potion, or what?
//I drink the potion. It tastes like wood, but something a little... Apple-wood. Right. I feel only a tingling sensation from my broken limbs, much more intense in my arm. It swells up as --
//WOAH ARE THOSE BONES SHIFTING FUCK THE WHAT
//-- yeah shut up no one cares. It works and that's it. Casts could be roomier, though...
Spike: Okay, I think I'm good. What's with the veil?
//I start tearing off the casts.
Na-Mira: Camp undertakers, I think. Call themselves Celestia's Faceless, something to do with the inevitability of death and humility and lack of identity and whatever. Not important.
Spike: Here I thought you liked holing up with cultist types.
Na-Mira: To hck with that; death cults are freaky.
Spike: Freaky as in freaky, or _freaky_ freaky?
//I can feel Na-Mira's confused stare through the veil.
Na-Mira: Repeating a word twice doesn't change its meaning!
Spike: Sorry, nevermind.
Na-Mira: Oh, yeah, I found out something about the dragon you wanted to see. Quayle, was it?
Spike: Quine.
Na-Mira: Okay.
//Na-Mira stands still, leaning from leg to leg and straining to listen. She glances to the tent flap, where a guard is keeping watch.
Spike: Uh... so what'd you find out?
Na-Mira: Hck?
Spike: What did you find out about Quine?
Na-Mira: Oh! I thought you said 'quiet'!
//Crazy fanged bint...
Na-Mira: There's a dragon by the name of Uuareg who--
Spike: What's his name backwards?
N-M: ...Gerauu?
//WOW THAT WAS REALLY DUMB
Spike: Sorry, got carried away, go on.
N-M: He oversees Hole Five and has the ear of almost every dragon in the Aquinatics. Maybe, if you prove to him you're worthy...
Spike: He'll see fit to lead me to Quine! Na-Mira, you're a genius!
N-M: Aw, you really think so?
//Her body language looks like she's blushing. Snakes can blush?
Spike: Well, uh, no, but that really helps me out. Thank you.
N-M: You're not out of hot water just yet.
//Oh, yeah, prison camp.
//WAS THAT SOMETHING YOU FORGOT OR DID THE POSSIBILITY OF INDEPENDENCE EXTRACTION VIA EJACULATION SEND YOU INTO A STATE OF FUCKNIRVANA?
//Fucknirvana? You're stretching.
//NIRVAGINA, WHATEVER.
Spike: Any plans?
N-M: One. Hold on.
//Na-Mira grabs the leather straps that hang off the stretcher and secures them over me, tightly.
Spike: What are you dhoo--
N-M: Hihihi, sorry, too tight.
//She loosens that strap, and throws a black blanket over the stretcher. The entire world becomes black and muffled.
N-M: (I'm going to smuggle you out.)
Spike: This. Is this really your plan?
N-M: (Quiet, you're sick).
//THIS IS GOING TO BE FUCKING AWESOME
//It's going to fail horribly.
//EXACTLY
Spike: Hold on a second--
//I lean over as far as I can and snatch the ankh, and my cloak, from the bedside table. Everything else can stay.
Spike: --Hokay, let's do this.
N-M: In case I don't make it out with you--
Spike: Come on, don't say that. This is going to work.
//HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA
N-M: Quine's lair is under a mountain exactly 26.2 miles 36 degrees east from north away from Hole Five.
//...Good to know.
Spike: So, why am I not going straight there?
N-M: The mountain has a neverending blizzard on it. I thought it would be easier to arrange to meet Quine elsewhere, so I told Uuareg you were coming.
Spike: That's, uh, actually very helpful of you. Thanks, Na-Mira.
N-M: Hck, hihi, quiet, silly, I'm starting.
//Na-Mira pushes the stretcher out through the tent flap.
Guard Pony: Erm, Miss.
//There's a pause. I imagine Na-Mira freezing up, but I can't see anything.
N-M: Yes?
Guard Pony: What exactly do you think you're doing?
//A long pause. For someone who has non-mammalian nostrils, Na-Mira imitates a snort very convincingly.
N-M: I am a _nurse_, young stallion, and one of Celestia's _Faceless_. I am fulfilling my duty, and need no accusations while doing so. Good night!
//Wow, rather indignant!
GP: What?! He died?!
N-M: Mmm. The leader of my order mentioned he was unwell.
GP: 'Swings, I gotta tell General -- Lieutenant -- Lieutenant General Applejack!
Spike: (As long as it gets him the hell out of here.)
N-M: (Quiet, corpse.)
//I hear the sound of hooves, madly racing away. I'm surprised that worked so well!
Spike: (Hey, that worked!)
N-M: (Brace.)
Spike: (Brace? What does that--)
//Na-Mira shoves the stretcher forward, bouncing over rocks and sand!
Spike: (AaaAAaaAAaaaaAAa be careful--)
//Na-Mira drags the stretcher uphill, bucking back and forth!
Spike: ('Swings mare this is craaaAAaaAAA--)
//Na-Mira throws the stretcher over a ravine, coming down with a crash on the other side!
Spike: (Are you insane?!)  
N-M: (Hck, no. We needed to get away from the camp before the Lieutenant General arrived.  
Now, we're away from the camp.)
Spike: And we've made enough noise to raise the dead while we're at it!
N-M: (I'm not the only one contributing there, you silly boy!)
Spike: (You said we're far away from the camp? Can I get out now?)
N-M: (Hck... not far enough yet. I think it's best if you stay for now, until we get out of the Gorge.)
Spike: (Okay. I trust you.)
//Na-Mira continues pushing the stretcher, slowly to avoid making noise, and we talk softly as we  
move uphill.

Spike: What have you learned about the world so far?
Na-Mira: Oh! I learned Princess Celestia's gone.
Spike: Na-Mira, I told you that.
//A pause.
N-M: Oh.
Spike: Anything else?
N-M: Yeah, dragons were a lot rarer in my day than now.
Spike: Really?
//Why would that be?
N-M: But there were more old dragons back then than there are now.
Spike: Who did you learn this from?
N-M: I was asking around about Quine and some old drakeling started telling stories, I guess.
Spike: Did you at least get his name?
N-M: Yeah, it was Father something.
//...
Spike: Father something.
//Na-Mira pauses.
N-M: What? Did I say something funny?
Spike: In this building you talked to this Father something in--
N-M: It was more of a hole, really--
Spike: --Were there any stylized pictures of someone? Like, stained glass windows, or anything?
//Maybe I can start to find out the general religious beliefs of the dragons in the region. I hope  
they're loyal to Celestia.
N-M: ...I don't think so. Why?
Spike: Was he wearing robes of some sort? Having a fancy cane to walk on?
N-M: Yeah, just like that! Do you know him?
//Do I... Where do this girl's questions come from?
Spike: What color was his robe?
N-M: It was just a normal bathrobe. The cane was nice, though.
//A... bathrobe?
Spike: I thought you said he was called Father.
N-M: Hck, yes, that was what the hatchlings called him. We've been over this.
//Wha...
Spike: Na-Mira, _children_ call their father Father. It didn't occur to you he might have had a different name?
N-M: I don't know! Why is it important?!
//GOOD QUESTION.
//The stretcher comes to a rolling halt.
Spike: (Na-Mira?)
//Silence.
//...I can't decide whether we need to be silent or something dangerous is happening. In preparation, I loosen the leather straps, as quietly as I can.
//HERE'S AN IDEA: LIE BACK AND TAKE IT LIKE YOU KNOW YOU WANT TO. MAYBE A GENEROUS MARE WILL COME ALONG AND SURGICALLY EXTRACT YOUR FUCKING USELESS INDIVIDUALITY.
//I don't think I can stand much silence with this guy...
N-M: --Hck!
//That's my cue!
//I throw off the blanket and put up my fists!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

The Unicorn casts Paralyze!
The Drakeling dodges away from the beam!

The Pony strangles the Lamiequus's throat!
The Lamiequus struggles in vain against the grip of The Pony's right front leg on The Lamiequus's throat!

//An earth pony is strangling Na-Mira! And a unicorn in armor is shooting spells left and right!

Unicorn in Armor: Surrender and come quietly!
Spike: Never!

//I leap into the fray!

The Unicorn points at The Drakeling and starts to cast a spell!
The Drakeling breathes fire! The Unicorn backs away, losing the spell!

The Pony strangles the Lamiequus's throat!

Spike: I won't let you hurt my friends.
The Drakeling punches The Pony in the right front leg with his Fist of Justice, bruising the muscle, shattering the bone, jamming the bone through the right front knee and shattering the right front knee's bone!

Strangling Pony: Yaaagh!!
The Pony releases the grip of The Pony's right front leg on the Lamiequus's throat.
The Lamiequus stands up.

Na-Mira: Spike! We have to get out of here!
Spike: We can't let them raise the alarm!
Na-Mira: It's already raised!
UA: Give yourselves in!

The Unicorn points at The Drakeling and starts to cast a spell! The Unicorn casts Paralyze!
The Drakeling jumps away from the beam!
The Drakeling strikes the stretcher in the steel with his Dashing Rogue Punch, denting the support!
The stretcher collapses!
//Whoops.

//I glance up to the sky, quickly. The stars and moon are blocked by cloud cover as far as the eye can see, but colored lights dance in the sky right over our position.
Spike: We have to end this quickly!

Na-Mira drops the *black silk veil*.
UA: What is that?! Keep it away from me!

The Unicorn points at The Lamiequus and starts to cast a spell!
The Drakeling breathes fire!
The Unicorn dodges away from the dragonfire! The Unicorn casts Paralyze!
The flying beam strikes The Lamiequus in the head!

//Na-Mira falls, very rigidly, right on her face, and then to the side.

The Drakeling charges at The Unicorn!
The Drakeling punches The Unicorn in the upper body with his left hand, bruising the muscle and bruising the bone!
The Drakeling collides with The Unicorn and bounces backwards!
The Unicorn leaps backwards! The Unicorn points at The Drakeling and starts to cast a spell!
//I need to stay in his face!

The Drakeling charges at The Unicorn!
The Drakeling kicks at The Unicorn with his right foot, but The Unicorn dodges away!
The Unicorn counterattacks!
The Unicorn points at The Drakeling and starts to cast a spell! The Unicorn casts Stupefy!
The Drakeling is hit by the beam! The Drakeling collapses!

//OKAY, FUCKING GREAT. THAT WORKED WELL, DIDN'T IT? DID YOU AND YOUR IMBECILIC RATEATER OF AN ASSISTANT THINK YOU COULD WALK YOUR SHITTY WAY OUT OF THE WORLD'S MOST SECURE PRISON -- BESIDES THE BOX YOU KEEP YOUR SEXUALITY IN -- WITH A SHITEATING GRIN AND IT WOULD FUCKING WORK? IF THIS WAS A ROUNDBOZUT WAY TO ASSURE THAT YOU WOULD BE JUICED LIKE AN UGLY STUPID ORANGE DAILY, THEN CONGRATU-FUCKING-LATIONS, ASSHOLE, YOU'VE WON THE GRAND FUCKING PRIZE. WHY IS IT THAT IT'S UP TO ME TO TELL YOU WHAT A WASTE OF SCALE YOUR SMELLY, WEAK ASS IS WHEN YOU'RE CONSTANTLY SURROUNDED BY PEOPLE WHO SHOULD BE DOING THAT FOR YOU, CONSIDERING HOW OBVIOUS IT IS? HONESTLY, I THINK IT'S BECAUSE THEY DON'T CARE ABOUT YOU AT ALL. IF I WEREN'T ALONG FOR THE SHIT-RIDE MYSELF, I MIGHT FIND IT FUNNY TO WATCH YOU DANCE ABOUT AFTER YOUR OWN MISTAKES LIKE THE HATCHLING THAT PISSES ITS OWN PANTS, BUT NO. MY TORTURE IS THAT I HAVE YOU AS MY GUIDE TO THIS WONDROUS DIARRHETIC-SLIP-AND-SLIDE JOURNEY. DO YOU KNOW HOW THAT MAKES ME FEEL, YOU SHITBRAIN? KNOWING THAT I COULD EXPEL WASTE WITH GREATER PROMISE THAN YOU WILL HAVE AND EVER COULD? IT MAKES ME WANT TO THROW UP--
The Drakeling vomits blood!
The Unicorn dodges away from the spewing dragon vomit laced with dragon blood!

Spike: _-_SWINGS, WHAT IS TH_--

The Drakeling vomits blood!
The spewing dragon vomit laced with dragon blood strikes the stretcher in the steel, but the attack glances away!

The Drakeling gives into pain! The Drakeling collapses!

UA: ...What the hell?!
//Na-Mira is tied up next to the stretcher. The earth pony, with no armor besides metal boots, is laying a little ways away from her, looking at his broken leg.
Na-Mira: Don't you see?! You morons! This is why I had to get him away! He's contagious, and he'll infect all of us if we don't get him out of here!
UA: And I suppose that explains why you know his name, and why you were worried about the alarm!
//Na-Mira juts out her fangs at him, then retracts them back a little, saying nothing. She can't think of a lie quick enough.
UA: I thought so. I'm onto you, _snake_. You're scalescum just like them.
//A small cough comes from the darkness.
Twilight: Hi, I understand this might not be a good time, but I'm afraid I have to cut things short.
//The Unicorn in Armor goes wide-eyed as Twilight's voice is heard, and Na-Mira hisses. Twilight emerges from the shadows, and in less than half a second casts a little spell.
UA: Professor Kim? What are you doing here?
//Completely taken aback, Twilight stops walking forward. She stares at the unicorn as, far above her, colored flashing lights disappear from the clouds.
T: Um, I'm sorry? Do I know you?
UA: Y-yeah, you were my thaumoquantum statistics teacher at Canterlot UMS. Urist Armok? I, uh, made a joke about the City on the Hill and you threw me out of class.
T: Oh? Déjà vu, then.
UA: I'm afraid I have to ask you to come with--

Twilight Sparkle's horn glows! Twilight Sparkle casts a spell!

//The unicorn, the earth pony, and Na-Mira all disappear!
Spike: What?! How did you do that!
//Twilight rolls her eyes and points to her horn.
//To be fair, that was a really dumb question...
Spike: Where did they go, then?
T: Hmm? Somewhere in Canterlot. Does it really matter?
//Yes!
Spike: Uh, well, I guess not...
//I wanted to hear more of what Na-Mira found out.
Spike: So...
T: So.
Spike: Why? You know, all this. You usually don't help with my fights.
T: _That_ wasn't a fight anymore; you had already lost.

The Drakeling was defeated!
Spike earned 7500 experience points!
Spike is now level 20!
Spike: Uh, then thanks, I guess; it's good to know--
T: Nope, don't say it, because I won't. If you lose a battle that's on you, Spike. Whether your consequences are being bound to a horrible mare or dismemberment. Or worse, like that snake thing--
Spike: Okay, then what was this interruption about?
//She really doesn't like Na-Mira, for some reason.
T: You've been sick for quite some time now. Have you seen a doctor?
//I have?
Spike: I don't feel sick.
//I sit up, feeling only a little woozy. Twilight is stepping quite a few feet away from the bloody vomit.
T: That's because your immune system isn't responding, because your disease isn't bacterial or viral. If you _had_ seen a doctor, they would have told you that.
//Where would I have found a doctor in the middle of the wilderness?
//WHAT ABOUT THAT VILLAGE YOU BURNED DOWN?
//Hey, I didn't burn the _village_. I burnt down a forest and _coincidentally_--
T: It's... unfortunate, that the weird snake thing--
Spike: She has a name; it's 'Na-Mira'.
T: --decided to do... whatever this was right now.
Spike: I think it was an escape.
T: Sure, we'll go with that.
Spike: Why was it unfortunate?
T: Everything would have worked out perfectly if you had stayed.
//How could that have happened?
Spike: What, some twisted mare would have ended my journey?
T: That's not what I meant. If you had been sick in the tent, you would have gotten a medical examination and been properly diagnosed. Chances are Applejack would have taken mercy on you--
//Is that 'Applejack would have taken mercy,' or Twilight would have asked her to?
T: --and you would have been able to deal with your sickness. As it is now... shame she had to go and ruin it like that.
Spike: Sickness? Just what the hell could I be sick with? I've been drinking health potions like they're water.
//Twilight sighs.
T: And it's a real bummer, because now I have to go and be heavy-hooved with it, when I told you I wouldn't be an ally or anything.
//I'm still focusing on the sickness part.
T: Think back to your adventures. Did you ever kill a spellcaster?
Spike: A couple. I just came out of a Stupefy spell, my head's not exactly the clearest it could be.
T: Did any of them cast a spell as they were dying?
Spike: ...Lemme think.
//Hmm... Marquise, no. The cult leader (whatever her name was), no. Osto Bacchus, pancaked; Pitaya wasn't a spellcaster... am I forgetting someone?
Spike: Maybe not, I--
//The Royal Mistress, that's right.
Spike: Yes. There was.
T: I was afraid so. Spike, you've been afflicted with something called a dying curse. It's--
Spike: I think I can figure it out.
//A pony's last words which are said to hold some sort of power, combined with the release of magic from a spellcaster's death, turned into a grim trigger for whoever fights that pony -- this is a
A horrifying curse.
T: A dying curse is a terrible affliction. There's very little in the world that could remove it.
Spike: Could you cast a spell for it? You did just dispel that unicorn's flare signal; it must be possible.
//Twilight thinks for a moment, raising a hoof to her chin.
Spike: ...Is it possible?
T: Trying to think of how to explain this to you... the curse is keyed to both the caster's mental state at time of death and life history. If you're asking me to _guess_, it would take me several billion lifetimes of the universe before I likely got the combination. Without already knowing who she was, of course.
//Darn, there's something with magic that Twilight can't do?
Spike: What else is there?
T: There _is_ something, and that's all you need to know.
Spike: Wha--
//I stand up.
Spike: I have to go on a quest to find the cure, and I don't even know what it is?!
T: It's a very common quest, actually, searching the world for a cure to a mysterious affliction. Although more often undertaken by others, not yourself...
Spike: What guarantee do I have that a cure actually exists, besides you telling me it's true?
//Celestia warned me not to trust Twilight, and this situation seems awfully suspicious.
T: What? Spike, have I ever lied to you?
Spike: I don't know, but I'm not ruling it out.
T: That's... actually very wise of you. So I guess I will give you a hint: the cure is in Everfree Forest.
Spike: Everfree Forest?
T: Why did you just repeat that back to me?
//...I don't know.
//Darn it, I don't have my books with me anymore, not even that atlas written too long ago to use properly. I can barely remember seeing the name though, was it...?
Spike: Near Ponyville?
T: Yes! You're going to want to get on that right away; the pacing of these things is unpredictable and you can't waste time squabbling about with guards and mines and whatnot.
//Twilight starts casting another spell.
Spike: Before you go--
//She opens one of her eyes and looks at me.
Spike: ...Sorry about what I said earlier, on Applejack's back. It was rude and I had no right to say what I did to you.
//An eyebrow goes up, but it looks mocking.
T: Spike, I magically muted you on Applejack's back. No sound could be heard from you by anypony. (It was pretty amusing, actually.)
Spike: Then how did Applejack know what I said?
//A shrug.
T: Maybe the earth told her.
//The earth?
//Twilight Sparkle casts another spell, and disappears in a scentless POP that washes away the smell of Stupefy and my vomit (for a second). I'm left alone, in the dark and cold.
//...This was possibly the strangest thing that's happened to me in my life so far. What the hell happened here?

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//Hole Five. It took me a little while, but I'm here. I stand in the entrance-way, letting the rain pour
in from behind and into the dusty cavern.
Dragon Guard: You're letting the cold in.
Spike: Do dragons mind cold?
Dragon Guard: The eggs do. Keep moving.
//I scramble inside, letting the bipedal dragon (with a pike) close the entrance door, covered in mosses and a fern and shaped like a rock.
T: (Why did we even come here?)
Spike: (Na-Mira got me a lead to Quine and I'm not going to let her hard work go to waste.)
T: (Spike, you're dying. There are more important things right now than talking to what amounts to 'some old guy'.)
Spike: (I'm sure it's not that urgent.)
Dragon Guard: ...Excuse me, are you talking to someone?
//Twilight, invisible next to me, suddenly goes still.
Spike: Uh, just... talking to myself.
//He grunts, and stretches his neck, standing at his post.
//Hold on, how did I get here? This is Hole Five, but no one mentioned where it was and frankly I'm not geographically-minded enough to extrapolate from Osdar's flight patterns. I've just been following my feet, there's no way that worked out by coincidence.
//IT'S ALMOST AS IF YOU WERE DRIVEN BY SOME STRANGE FUCKING THING LIKE A GENETIC MIND PATTERN THAT INFLUENCES YOUR DUMB BEHAVIORS IN A SIMILAR MANNER AS MANY OF YOUR SPECIES -- BUT THE WORD ESCAPES ME RIGHT NOW. WHATEVER THAT WEIRD THING IS YOU SHOULD PROBABLY THANK IT AND DO WHAT IT FUCKING TELLS YOU YOU PIECE OF SHIT--
//Nah, it was probably just the trail.
//I turn and look into the cavern proper.
//Multicolored scales extend as far as the eye can see. Clustered around stalagmites are makeshift hovels, housing smaller dragons and eggs and families; lying in open spaces wherever they can are larger dragons with wings. Full dragons by age, yes, but the scales stretched tight over their bones and wings tells a different story -- any number could be sleeping, or dead and dying. Clothes look to be a rarity here, and by the ribs and faces of the smaller dragons, food and clean water too.
Spike: By Celestia... what happened?
//The guard next to the entrance behind me grunts:
DG: Hazel happened.
T: (It is unbearably hot in here.)
Spike: What do you mean?
DG: Hazel, that new bitch on the throne, decided the Aquinatics were hers. See, there's a reason that draconic territorial disputes are resolved by the two (or more) involved dragons tearing each other apart scale by scale personally: the rest of us are left the hell alone.
//That's how dragons resolve disputes? Damn...
Spike: ...And this doesn't happen to them.
DG: Her refusal to fight Quine for his territory is the entire reason for our suffering. Any establishment on these lands is property of Quine before others until won in combat. So, when Equestrian tax collectors come around, when Equestrian prospectors and Cavalry start wandering through our sub-territories, they get attacked. As is right and normal.
//Right and normal? It's right and normal to attack ponies for trying to do simple little things like that?
\People are responsible for their actions whether they were ordered to do something or not. Working as a subordinate of the Equestrian crown is an action which a person is responsible for, and therefore reaps the consequences.
//Killing people just over allegiances is awful! It's literally an example we tell children, for Celestia's sake, to demonstrate why war is so terrible!
T: (And a year and a half afterwards, you can see how that mentality has led to dragon prosperity.)
DG: Hazel hides behind her army and her walls, sending others to die for her own territorial gains. She's a coward and a tyrant.

Spike: Hazel...

DG: The damning thing about Her Cowardice is that she's fought dragons before, and she knows how dragon territorial disputes work. She can't even claim ignorance! Hazel is just a scared little pony who knows she can't take on Quine in a real fight.

Spike: So... so, you're saying if Quine and Hazel were to fight, this would all be over?

T: (Nothing is that simple.)

DG: Yes, it's that simple. Knowing Quine, it'd be a fight to the death.

Spike: Why?

DG: He's an old dragon. Old dragons are fucking crazy. They don't mess around.

//He speaks with a tone of respect... you shouldn't respect someone just because they're a zealot in what they do. Having the courage to admit you may be wrong, and that restraint may be necessary, is also something you should respect...

Spike: But, they say it's a war out there... people burning down tax houses and attacking refugees.

DG: Tax houses? Quine has burnt down entire villages, man. And hell, if I could, I would too.

Spike: What?! Why?!

//The guard cocks his head and stares at me for a little while. I think he's starting to realize I'm not from around here.

DG: Because Hazel is doing the same to us. She sends her soldiers out to harass Quine's clan to draw him out, so we do the same to draw her out. We're willing to see the fight further, and in the end, that's what will win.

//...

Spike: That is the dumbest thing I have ever heard.

//Words float through my head, though I have no idea where they're coming from.

|\You believe that your side has suffered an injustice, and the other side are the aggressors. Nobody ever goes to war thinking they're the ones at fault. |

DG: What, you think I'm lying?

|\Neither side is lying... Both sides believe they are in the right. Believing to be the side of justice opposing cruelty, both sides slaughter the other, feeling justified in their own cruelty. |

DG: Quine made his land claim _the hour_ Celestia disappeared. The word of a dragon is as good as his gold, and he's been protecting us ever since -- he swore to protect and provide for every dragon in his clan.

//He opens his arms wide, raising his voice a bit.

DG: And then, a month later, that bitch Hazel makes her claim and starts sending settlers to our land. What are we supposed to do, roll over and die for them?!

|\Each side in this war believe they are on the side of justice. Their enemies are nothing but evil incarnate, and so each gets drunk on the violence when able to punish the other for their perceived misdeeds. |

|\It's not just the war here, but the wars of the world itself. When you stand on the side of justice and the other of evil, it's quite easy to shrug off your own brutality. |

Spike: ...Why can't you just coexist, on the same land?

DG: We shouldn't have to, these are our--

Spike: Aside from your pride, why can't you just coexist? Isn't it better for the average person just to live a normal life, instead of being in the middle of all this destruction?

DG: That is not the dragon way. The strongest rules because those who are strongest are oldest, and those who are oldest are wisest. Compromise is a sign of weakness. It's not who we are as a people.

//I put my hand on my forehead and squeeze. Somehow, someone as stubborn as this exists, and perspectives like this, too.

Spike: Whatever. You're an idiot, but whatever.

//The guard rolls his eyes, and leans back on the wall.
DG: Sure, throw in your lot with Hazel. She's the worst thing to happen to Equestria since Celestia, honestly.
Spike: Uh... what?
DG: Celestia is the damn reason dragonkind is so weak in the first place. Things wouldn't be so bad for us if it weren't for her, missus dragon slaughterer prime. But what do you care about what I have to say? Get out of here, race traitor!
//He spits on the ground in front of him, and stares at me. I decide to walk off, looking for Uuareg. //What an ass.

Spike: (Is that all true, what he said?)
T: (For the most part. It's a common mentality in these parts.)
Spike: (Even what he said about Celestia?)
T: (I can't say.)
Spike: (Can't? Or won't?)
//The inside of the temple is hardly decorated; I would call it more of a circular hole in the cavern wall than a temple. A dragon, barely sprouting wings, sits on a makeshift wooden throne near the far end of the circle; next to him, a pedestal with an item.
Spike: Uh, hi, are you Uuareg?
//The dragon shifts in his chair. The scales on his knees are cracked and look like knotted treebark more than feathers.
Spike: (He must pray a lot.)
T: (Or he has a second, nighttime job.)
Spike: (Don't be rude.)
Knotted Knee: I was once the one called Uuareg. But called that I no longer am.
Spike: I'm told you're able to contact Quine for me.
//Uuareg quickly sits up in a chair. For a long time he stares at me... I blink once or twice and look away.
KK: Have you come here from pony lands?!!
//Uh, he thinks I'm a spy, crap... what do I do?

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

>>TELL THE TRUTH
>>LIE

Spike: Uh... no.
T: (You're a bad liar.)
Spike: (Thanks for the vote of confidence. And it's not a lie, I came here from wildlands.)
T: (Ashen lands, you mean?)
Spike: (Quiet.)
//The newly turned full dragon slumps back in his chair, shoulders falling. He rambles,
KK: For long have I served Celestia, and she has decided to make me her knowledge keeper of the dragon people in this world. I do have of Quine's ear. But... Celestia has instructed me only to serve the drakeling 'with roots in lands of the four-legs'.
//Wait, crap; I was supposed to say yes?! Damn, I should probably get him back on my side...
Celestia instructed him to tell me, so it must mean I have to meet Quine!
Spike: Oh! That's, uh, that's me. I come from Ponyville. Can't get more four-legged than that. I, er, thought you were talking about... where I just was. Ashen wasteland, that place.
//The knowledge keeper leans forward.
KK: You... is your name Spike?
Spike: Yes! It is!
//Wow, he's good!
//A smile breaks across his face, like a child being rewarded.
KK: Ah, Celestia, you have brought the one to me, as you promised! I will see him true!
Spike: (Another follower of Celestia's wisdom, great!)
T: (Something seems funny about him, though...)
Knowledge Keeper: Several nights ago, Celestia came to me in a dream. With her flowing mane, and shapely wings... her appearance was angel's breath, and--
T: (Get to the important part, 'Swings.)
Spike: (He's reciting fanfiction; have some respect.)
//The Knowledge Keeper shudders and returns back to reality.
KK: ...Anyway, so Celestia gave me a revelation. A drakeling, raised by ponies, would come before me. And this drakeling without a proper background would be the one to dethrone Princess Hazel.
Spike: That's me!
//Through Celestia we all see the path!
KK: Now, it is up to me to indicate the path you should take! Three mystical items, infused with magic, you must gather to prove your worth. The Trident of Power, the sword called Reality, and the necklace named Leave A Tin Out For The Cat Will You I Don't Want It To Starve.
Spike: (_What_?)
T: (Latoftcwyidwits was a product of one of the most evil minds to ever cast spells.)
Spike: (Necromancer?)
T: (Jester. But the necklace has been destroyed.)
KK: I shall bestow this only upon the one who has obtained all three artifacts.
//The keeper motions to an amazing helmet set next to his seat. It shines like a star, gems pulsing.
KK: The helmet of a true predator... The Goddess Helm! If you wear this cap, it's said out of respect for Celestia's power all ponies -- even Princess Hazel herself -- will bow to you! No pony may even approach it!
T: (...) //Twilight looks calm. She's certainly in the same room as the helm...
KK: Now, begin your journey to gather the three artifacts! Only they can protect you from the Helm's power, so that you can control it.
T: What a crock of shit. //Twilight lowers her hood as she approaches the helm.
Spike: Twilight, what are you doing?
KK: 'Twilight'? You couldn't mean--
T: Saving time. //Twilight bites the helm and tosses it above her head! In the next moment, the Goddess Helm shatters into pieces!
KK: No! This cannot be!
Spike: Twilight!
T: It's a helm enchanted to glow, Spike. If you fall for crap like that, you'll never put a scratch on anyone. Trident, Reality, Latoftcwyidwits? If you had those things, Princess Hazel would be looking for an audience with _you_, not the other way around. He may as well ask you to get the Rod of Asclopius! This con is transparent. A bunch of malarkey!
KK: ...oooh...
//At the loss of his helm, the keeper is struck pale and stares at the floor. Is he going to be okay?
T: Here's what you should do. Ignore the fact you're a dragon, it has about as much to do with who you are as the fact that you're purple or do a little squeak when you sneeze. There's nothing for you here.
//I really do that?
T: After you go to Everfree Forest and get cured, find out about the Avatars. They're the Princess's knights. //Fluttershy, Pinkie Pie, Applejack, Rainbow Dash, and Rarity. Also known as the best fighters in the world, the knights of the Princess, and the Avatars.
Spike: Why the Avatars?
T: Locate them, and if you pass their test, they'll give you their blessings.
Spike: What will that do for me?
T: You'll gain a mighty power from each of them. And a holder of all five Elements can request an audience with the Princess.
Spike: ...Really...?
//I thought she was listening while Rainbow Dash told me this earlier. Hell, she _commented_, why is this being repeated?
Spike: Why are you just telling me this now?
T: Are you going to do what he said, then? Even your judgment can't be that poor.
//Even if I don't know why, it sounds like she's telling the truth.
Spike: ...Okay, I believe you.
//As I say that, fell laughter rings out.
KK: Fuaahaahoha! Oooo Celestia. Look at what happened! Fufuhaha!
T: (Hey... did he break?)
//It seems like the helm breaking caused some psychological damage to him...
Spike: (I'm getting out of here before someone checks what's going on.)
T: (Good idea.)
//We leave the temple. There's nothing left for me here.
Spike: You know...
T: What?
Spike: ...I still really want to meet Quine.
T: Ugh, you're such an idiot. What does it matter? You still have the curse to dispel, you know!
//Twilight storms off in a huff, and disappears in a burst of scentless air.
//Today has not been a good day for conversations for me.

//Quine's Lair.
//Or, the only mountain path up to it. Gah, why did it have to blizzard today of all days?!
T: It's such a nice day outside. Aren't you glad we came this way?
//I shout over the snow being blown into my face:
Spike: I couldn't hear you over being carried away by the wind and freezing to death! It sounded like you said it was a nice day! But you haven't been struck in the head recently, so that couldn't be it!
T: I said--
Spike: I heard you!
//When you look at a piece of paper, a thirty degree slope doesn't look intimidating. Wading through waist-high, wet snow uphill against a biting wind, thirty degrees is about sixty too many. Visibility is less than ten feet, and I doubt the temperature's much higher.
T: Why are you complaining? Dragons can't feel heat!
Spike: We can feel cold!
//And I really wish we couldn't.
Spike: How are you standing on this?!
//Twilight walks on top of the snow, leaving only light hoofprints. Any snow that hits her slides off, like water off a duck's back.
T: Magic!
Spike: Damnit, magic can't solve everything! Even with four hooves, you're too heavy to stand on the snow like that!
T: Wh-- are you calling me fat?
//I keep struggling through the snow. Yeah, this is exactly what I need right now.
Spike: No, I--
T: Because it sounds like you're calling me fat!
Spike: Gravity, mass, and surface area! The pressure should compress the snow!
T: Dimensional analysis doesn't change what you said!
Spike: Fine! You're not fat; gravity is just too strong!
//Or her hooves are too small. Whichever.
Spike: Also, _how are you not freezing_?!
T: Also magic!
//Go to hell, magic! Why do you make everyone's life convenient but mine?
Spike: Can you throw some of that magic my way?!
T: You can breathe fire, right?
Spike: Only so much of it!
//I turn my back to the wind, and breathe fire on my hands until I can feel them again. Immediately, I feel a little colder inside. It really is dangerous out here...
Spike: Do you know a magic spell for everything?
T: I'm very good at research!
Spike: How about a 'dispel-blizzard' spell? Do you have one of those?!
T: Give me ten days and I'll make one!
Spike: How-- you can _make_ spells?!
T: There's a lot you can do with magic! You see this?
//Behind where I've dug into the snow, Twilight wiggles her butt. I don't get it.
Spike: What is that, a tattoo?
T: I thought you read about pony anatomy!
Spike: I didn't get to the tramp stamp section!
T: It's not -- ugh, you're such an idiot!
Spike: You got the windrose on your flank so, what? Your lover would know which side of the bed is north?
T: It's a cutie mark! They're a biological part of puberty! They reflect what a pony wants to do with his or her life!
//How does that make any sense?! Genetics doesn't work like that!
//THE UBIQUITOUS ANSWER TO EVERYTHING, FUCKING MAGIC. AND NO, THAT'S FUCKING MAGIC, NOT FUCKING MAGIC. YOU FUCK.
//Repeating something twice doesn't change its meaning!
T: The star represents magic! It's what I do and who I am!
Spike: It should have been a book and a whip!
//OR DEAD PARENTS.
//Suddenly, I fall into the snow!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

The Drakeling slams into the ground!
//There's less snow here. I extract my face from the snow-sprinkled rocks and look up.
//This is some sort of short tunnel, dug without any sort of precision or craftsmanship. In fact, it looks like it was carved by some sort of claw. Behind me, high drifts block sight out of the cave, broken only by a me-shaped hole which is quickly filling in. Ahead is a brightly lit cavern, and a slow wave of heat coming towards us.
//Twilight steps next to me. She casts a quick spell and disappears.
Spike: (Gone?)
T: (Invisible. Quiet.)
Spike: (Is this Quine's Lair?)
T: (What were you expecting, a baker's?)
//I walk forward, into the heat. The tunnel ends abruptly in thin air, dropping away below me. Torches every so often are lit, hanging on the great cavern walls. The ceiling is only a few stories above me, but the floor is far down below where the torches reach, shrouded in darkness. Similar tunnels are dug into the walls of the cavern, all around and in levels... like a ring, I guess.
Spike: (So, what, do I knock?)
//I knock on the stone wall.
Spike: Hellowoo-oo? Is Quine home?
//Two sniffs and a grunt come from the darkness below. Like a long, silver serpent, an immense head and neck rises out of the darkness.
//Quine rises to the level of the tunnel, smoke drifting out of his nostrils. He points his head directly towards me, eyes closed. A long, forked tongue flicks in and out between razor-sharp teeth as he snarls.
//Swings, one tooth is bigger than my entire torso...
//Quine snaps his eyes open and roars:
Quine: What arrogant mare dares to disturb the great Quine's slumboh I'm sorry.
//Quine looks me over with a great eye. He takes quite some time to do so.
Quine: ...Should I have been expecting you?
Spike: Uh... what was that bit about the mare?
//A short pause. Quine flicks his eyes downwards for a second, and then raises his eyebrows.
Quine: Well, I, you see,
//mumble cough ratter murmur,
Quine: Was expecting that you were, um, you see, it smelled just a bit like... Please excuse me for a moment.
//The great silver head retreats again into the darkness.
Spike: (Er... what was that?)
T: (How should I know?)
Spike: (He said it smelled like a mare.)
T: (He didn't say that.)
Spike: (It was implied.)
T: (Probably a reaction to intimidate and scare a potential enemy he thought was here, but it turned out to be a dragon.)
Spike: (But he was expecting someone?)
//Quine's head rises again from the darkness, to face me. It is far less menacing this time.
Quine: Can I help you with something?
Spike: Y-yeah, we met in Forlegsandria when Rainbow Dash attacked.
//He nods slightly, continuing to look at me.
//A pause in the conversation.
Quine: Who is that, exactly?
Spike: The Avatar of Speed.
//Quine opens his eyes wide.
Quine: Oh! Oh, I see, yes, you were that small drakeling, in the courtyard. I see. So you came to the Aquinatics, despite all I'd said?
Spike: I did.
Quine: Shame, really, we can't do much for you here. You gathered my location from one of the Holes, I'm sure; you see what kind of state they're in. If you came here to help... well, I much appreciate the spirit.
Spike: I can't help?
//Quine bites his upper lip and rocks his head from side to side.
Quine: I'm sure there's a little you could do, if I put my head to it, but what we really need is any dragon with wings, I'm afraid.
Spike: I'm... not exactly here to fight.
//I don't have a stake in either side, and it doesn't look like in the near future any sort of harmony is going to be possible. There's no reason for me to waste my efforts, or make things even worse.
T: (Ankh.)
Quine: Did you say something?
Spike: I, uh, said I came here to return something to you.
//I hold out the grey ankh for Quine to see. He squints his eyes and peers at it over his nostrils. His tone becomes a bit more serious.
Quine: Jebed told you about that, did she?
Spike: Not as much as I would have liked. What is it?
Spike: I came here to give this back to you. Isn't it yours?
Quine: ...Back in the distant past, these symbols were worn by a certain cult of people. Celestial Inquisitors, they were called. Holy warriors in the name of Celestia, dedicated to hunting down and eradicating dissent and threats to the throne. They were known for their ferocity, and willingness to embrace death. Legend had it Celestia herself ripped fear from their skulls.
Spike: (Is this true?)
T: (A dark, but surprisingly well documented, time in Equestrian history.)
Quine: During this time, dragons were fighting each other as well as Equestrian soldiers. These necklaces were taken from the corpses of Inquisitors for two reasons: firstly, to demonstrate to other dragons one's power, and secondly, to publicly declare by wearing it eternal enmity against Celestia and all she stood for.
//Eternal enmity?
Spike: I thought Celestia was generally regarded as a benevolent figure.
Quine: Even among ponies you will find that is not always true, but it is most certainly true that Celestia's perfect Equestria included no dragons. But that is a long and troublesome subject. The ankh came to symbolize fanaticism; it became a generic symbol for those who fought without fear of death and drove themselves to their goals with no compulsions. It will intimidate your enemies, at least the ones who know what it represents. So, keep it.
Spike: ...Are you sure?
Quine: Of course I'm sure. (It's also a communications device, but that part will come up later.)
//I put the ankh back around my neck. It feels warm.
Spike: Okay. Do you think Applejack would know what it means?
//I wonder if I can get the upper hand by intimidation...
//A long pause.
Quine: Who?
Spike: Avatar of Strength.
//Immediately, Quine narrows his eyes.
Quine: I would doubt it. She is as short-sighted and insular as she is predictable.
Spike: Okay... there were two other things I wanted to ask for your advice on.
Quine: I have some time, drakeling; please continue.
Spike: I caught this thing called a dying curse. It's--
Quine: Fighting spellcasters? Surprising, at your tender age, that you should even survive such a task. Perhaps I underestimated you.
//He nods his head sagely.
Quine: What was your name again?
Spike: Spike.
Quine: Spike, you wish to remove the dying curse, I take it?
//I nod vigorously. Spewing bloody vomit everywhere until I die doesn't sound fun.
Quine: There is a pony, in the village of Ponyville, who tends to a mystical glade in the Everfree Forest. As Keeper of the Glade, she can commune with it, and should she grant you her favor, the pristine waters will cleanse you of this foul affliction. Seek out Fluttershy, Keeper of--
T: Fluttershy?!
//I quickly open my mouth so it looks like I said that. Quine snaps his mouth closed, narrows his eyes, and starts peering into the tunnel behind me...
//I cough, rubbing my throat.
Spike: Sorry, squeaked out there. Fluttershy, you said?
T: (Oh... oh, Celestia, why?!)
Quine: Yes. She will be the judge of your fate.
T: (I did _not_ need to know that about her; 'swings, that's just... _wrong_.)
Spike: (What are you complaining about?)
T: (He knows Fluttershy by name but not the other Avatars.)
Spike: (So?)
T: (Expecting a mare to enter his lair. Greeting with cheesy, roleplay-esque language. First name basis. Avatar of Temptation.)
//Is she saying...?
Spike: (That's not... by Celestia, _how_ would that _work_!?)
T: (It wouldn't! _It's bigger than her torso_!)
Quine: Spike? Are you talking to someone?
//YOU SHOULDN'T DROP OUT OF ONE-ON-ONE CONVERSATIONS WITH PEOPLE WHO ARE MORE HANDSOME AND STRONGER AND MORE INTELLIGENT AND BETTER THAN YOU ARE, IT'S KIND OF RUDE.
Spike: Er... yeah, I was... talking to the dragon instinct.
//Quine rolls his eyes and smiles. He understands.
Spike: There's something else I wanted to talk to you about. I, uh, talked a bit with Jebed in Forlegsandria about it and I decided I want to be a Hero.
Quine: Hero? Like, slay the menacing dragon, rescue--
Spike: --the damsels Hero, yeah, not as much. I want to be a powerful, so I can fight for what's right.
Quine: And what would you like to discuss about that?
Spike: I want your advice on how to do that. You're the oldest dragon I know of, and it's said you fight the Avatar of Strength -- if anyone can give me the wisdom I seek, it's you.
//Quine snorts, amused. Twin puffs of smoke wash over me and pull my cloak back.
Quine: You wish for power? Wait five hundred years; you'll be strong.
//I can't just do that. Ponies and dragons are outside slaughtering each other for dumb reasons as we speak, I can't let that happen for five hundred more years! I need power, so I can show how cooperation is possible!
Spike: I can't. I'm not fighting for myself.
Quine: Then why fight?
//Why am I fighting? If I don't fight, evil -- pirates like Marquise's and cults like Saccr-Ulkip's and goons like Osto Bacchus's -- they'll hurt innocent people! That's reason enough to fight!
//You want to protect others? Join the guard. That can't be it.
//Because... because the world could fall apart. Ponies and dragons are at odds with one another right now, and maybe it's a little better in Forlegsandria but I'm sure there's a lot of work to do there. If people start tearing each other limb from limb because of hatred... there will be no end to it.
//So start a drum circle. Why are you trying to overthrow the Princess? What help does that do, except increase the enmity between ponies and dragons?
//...The Princess let threats like Osto Bacchus rise in her own kingdom. She does nothing to end the Aquinatic conflict, she put 'hundreds of dragons' underground herself... Princess Hazel has to be defeated for any dragon to have sympathy with the Equestrian crown. No dragon will respect ponies if they're represented by her.
//And ponies themselves will start to respect dragons? After one and a half years of war?
//That's why I have to be a Hero. I have to be the best -- the strongest, the brightest, and the most glorified! If I'm universally loved as a noble Hero, ponies will see me -- and all of dragonkind -- in a better light! If I keep defeating evil where I find it, fame has to follow.
//And you're going to do all that by killing their Princess.
//...If I'm a Hero, I'll be able to show them why someone else needs to rule. Someone better.
//HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA
Spike: ...If I wait too long, hate between dragons and ponies will get too entrenched in who we
both are. If I show people -- with my words and my actions -- that coexistence is possible, I'm sure it can be done.

Quine: You want the masses to embrace an ideology?
Spike: I guess, when you put it like that, yeah.
Quine: Gather power. With gold, buy an army; with magic, summon one. Start a religion, or hijack an existing one; usurp the throne. Whichever. Then, force your ideas into the schools, and kill anyone who doesn't agree. That is my advice. Your ideology will be the only one as far as your spears reach.

//That's not any sort of advice at all!
Spike: That's not the point! You can't just go around killing people who don't agree with you!
Quine: On the contrary, young drakeling, you can. Dragons have been doing it for thousands of years. It is our way.
Spike: That... it's not the way I want to be.
Quine: A fish could want to grow wings and fly, and what does that change? Ideas attach themselves to power. That is the nature of our world.
Spike: You said 'power', not violence. There's a difference.
Quine: To dragonkind, the words are one and the same. Violence is the call of power, like thunder is the sound of lightning. One cannot exist without the other.
Spike: Then, then... that's not the kind of dragon I want to be.
Quine: Then you would not be any kind of dragon at all.
Spike: 'Dragon' isn't a mentality; it's just a species.
Quine: With instincts and traditions, youngling, that you would toss aside for your own whims. You will find that if you try to replace them, you will be met with violence.
Spike: There are other kinds of power besides violence. I'll use it only as a last resort.

//Here I'm saying that, when Celestia gave me the quest of killing Princess Hazel.
\...I'll only kill Princess Hazel if there's really no other way. I'm sure there's a way to get her off the throne without doing that.
//She said there wasn't another way. Are you saying Celestia is wrong?
\No... no... there has to be some way to reconcile all these things.
Spike: ...I want dragons and ponies to live in harmony. I want Princess Hazel off the throne. And I want to do it all without killing anybody. Which is why I want to be your student.
//Quine narrows his eyes and looks at me. A long while passes, as smoke drifts up from his nostrils. Eventually, a smile breaks.
//He purrs, like a cat.
Quine: Now, that... _That_ is a challenge worthy of a _dragon_.

Chapter End Notes

With apologies to Tarn Adams.

Some of the text and scenework in this chapter is borrowed from Monster Girl Quest directly. It has been formatted to fit this screen, to run in the plot allotted, and edited for context.
Use Your Mouth

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

[I\LEVEL LOCATION]

//I spend a full month training with Quine. I learn physical strikes, strategic maneuvers, dragonkind's history, board games... whatever he's willing to teach me. I learn that the mystical Keeper of the Glade near Ponyville, Fluttershy, can commune with the Glade so its waters may heal any illness. I harden my body, to try to stave off confronting her.
//It's not enough, and my sickness gets worse. I have to leave.

//Quine: You will travel to the pony city of Detrot. Find the religious order of the veil called Celestia's Faceless and join them. They will provide you safe passage to Canterlot, and from there you may seek out the Keeper of the Glade.
//Spike: The Avatar of Temptation also holds the Element of Kindness. I'll need that if I'm going to defeat the Princess.
//Quine: By seeking out and defeating the Avatars, you will gain power enough to defeat Hazel. There is some respect that comes with power, but it is not enough for your ends. You must rise in the ranks of Celestia's Faceless, and champion good wherever you can. Admiration of Celestia has lessened as of late but not that for her devout; through association both you and the Faceless will grow stronger.
//Spike: And then what?
//Quine: And then you have options. Do you confront Hazel by violence and alone, to establish the new Celestia-chosen ruler of Equestria? Do you lead a popular revolution to hand the throne to the Faceless, as stewards until the return of your goddess? Will the philosophies and influence of the Faceless, headed in all but name by you, control local and regional politics more than the Canterlot throne, cutting her off from her own kingdom? Can you convince the heir, or Hazel herself, to embrace your religious decrees and rule by proxy?
//Spike: So we're going with the 'hijack a religion' route. I don't know if I feel comfortable manipulating people using the name of a goddess...
//Quine: 'Manipulating people'? All gods are extensions of the worshiper. If the people embrace your ideas, then their goddess will take on those ideas. Not the other way around.
//Spike: What if Celestia doesn't agree with what I'm doing?
//Quine: Then you have far bigger problems than public relations.
//Spike: I think I'm going to gather the five Elements of Harmony and talk to Princess Hazel. Whatever happens, I guess I'll figure it out after that.
//Quine: In legend, it is said there are six Elements of Harmony.
//Spike: Six? But there are five Avatars. Where's the sixth?
//Quine: On the head of Princess Hazel. It is her crown. It is the Element of Magic, and it is no trinket. She will use it to enslave you given half a chance.

//On the downward slope of Mount Triponi, there are many shrubs and grasses sticking out from the rocks. There are no animals here to check the vegetation, no fish in the stream rolling down next to me, and no natural predators left around to starve. Dragons have picked clean every last bit of meat in this entire region. I haven't had anything but reed soup for three days.
T: So? How does it feel?
Spike: How does what feel?
//Eating like a pony for days on end? It feels like my stomach is in a knot.
T: Finally knowing what you're working towards, and having a plan to get there. I just love it when
a plan is finally complete, so you can start making real progress instead of stumbling about in the dark, you know?
//Hey!
Spike: Sure.
T: The only thing better than making a good plan is seeing it work. It's just amazing!
Spike: I always knew what I was trying to do.
T: ...It didn't seem like it sometimes.
Spike: Celestia told me from the beginning to defeat the false Princess. And, uh, she said a lot of stuff about dragons being her treasured creation, so I guess advancing our rights was kind of implied. I forget a lot of the wording.
T: That totally doesn't sound like you're putting your own words in her mouth.
Spike: Uh, no, she seriously said all that. It was the first vision I had of her.
//Twilight shakes her head.
T: Spike, I knew Princess Celestia for a long time, and probably better than anypony. Dragons and ponies living side by side as equals, I could see her saying that. But overthrowing the new Princess? That sounds like more trouble than it's worth, and it certainly doesn't sound like the Celestia I knew.
//Strangely enough, she was more insistent about that. The dragon and pony stuff I really kind of tacked on.
Spike: Hazel has the Element of Magic, right?
T: Yes, it's her crown.
Spike: To see her, do I have to collect that? Wouldn't that defeat the purpose?
T: No, it's just symbolic. All the Elements of Harmony are symbolic. Magical analysis indicates none of them are potent in any way, they're just pretty jewelry.
Spike: Even the Element of Magic?
T: Yes. I mean, why would anyone go around with an immensely powerful magical item less than one inch away from their brain at all times? Talk about a safety hazard!
//Quine said it was a powerful magical item... who's telling the truth here?
Spike: Could I skip collecting them and just ask for an audience with the Princess?
T: Symbols are important, Spike. If you show off five of the Elements, it means the owners were unwilling or unable to take them back from you, and that makes you worth talking to. Getting the Avatars to grant you the Elements is one way to do that.
Spike: 'Grant' me? Something to do with the tests you were talking about?
T: Right! You'll find out more as you approach each one. For now--
//She suddenly POPs and in her place is stale air. Why did she disappear mid-sentence like that?
//From downstream comes a furious hiss and a clattering of teeth!
[[SAVE LOCATION]]
//The grey dragon standing on a rock is the one I saw with Osdar earlier. A nasty-looking wound in her wing has scabbed over around the edges, but there's still a hole. Another gash runs up her right arm, from wrist to shoulder. It looks sealed with dragonfire.
Spike: That's unsanitary, you know.
GSD: Shut up!
//THIS IS GOING TO GO WELL.
//She's spreading her wings wide, trying to intimidate by looking larger. Her claws still look sharp, but for a full dragon Galsid is very small.
\She's bigger than you, remember.
//ANYTHING STILL BIPEDAL IS A PUNY PIECE OF SHIT. OH, HEY, WOULD YOU LOOK AT THAT--
GSD: You're an Equestrian spy, aren't you? Answer me!
Spike: No.
GSD: I don't believe you!
Spike: (Didn't see that coming.)
//Galsid shouts above the running stream:
GSD: You led Strength right to Osdar, and you tried to kill me!
Spike: What?! Galsid, I had no idea App-- the Avatar was going to ambush us!
GSD: Liar! The entire thing was a setup, to kill one of the best fighting dragons in the Aquinatics!
Spike: How could that have been a setup? I was lying on the road with a broken leg and arm! What was I supposed to do but lie there?!
GSD: Yes, and now you're miraculously healed. What a coincidence! I thought I smelled burning rubber when we found you, but I wasn't sure -- I wanted to be polite.
//...Do I really smell that bad?
//HELL YES
//She screams:
GSD: And it cost me my best friend's _life_!!
Spike: Galsid, I was on the road because I lost a fight to the Avatar of Speed! Not because I was part of some sort of -- whatever you're accusing me of! And the Avatar and the Cavalry ambushed us because -- because that's what they _do_! They're military units!
GSD: And I suppose that's why you have Celestia's leash around your neck.
Spike: Uh, what?
T: (The ankh.)
GSD: It's their symbol, and their god. You belong to a pony. You're one of _them_.
//Their. Them. Dangerous, tribalist language.
Spike: This? This is _jewelry_, man.
GSD: I will bring you back to dragonkind. Even if you are enslaved already.
Spike: Oh, great, here we go with this crap again.
GSD: That is the power of dragonkind, to break the bonds of any non-dragon mate. Two dragons are more powerful than one, and when I free you you will see what a fool you have been.
//Hold on, what?
//SHE SAID BONING A DRAGON RECOVERS YOU FROM NON-DRAGON DICKSLAVEDOM. I DON'T SEE WHAT'S SO DIFFICULT TO UNDERSTAND ABOUT THAT.
//Why would it?
//BECAUSE THAT'S HOW IT FUCKING WORKS SHUT UP AND GO WITH IT YOU SHITFACE
GSD: And I will make sure you are dragonkind's, forever. The bond between two dragons is impossible to break.
Spike: The last dozen or so ponies who threatened to assault and enslave me I beat the tar out of. You may be a dragon, but I'm gonna stick with that approach. It's worked well for me in the past.
[[SAVE LOCATION]]

The Drakeling breathes in and focuses, casting Terrae Corpus! The Drakeling's scales become as hard as rock!

The Dragon charges at The Drakeling!
The Dragon slashes The Drakeling in the upper body with her left claw, tearing the scale!
The Dragon collides with The Drakeling! The Dragon bounces backwards!
//Yow, her claws are sharp! Try to wrestle!

The Drakeling grabs The Dragon by the right upper arm with his left hand!
The Drakeling punches The Dragon in the lower body with his right hand, bruising the scale and bruising the muscle!
//Galsid snarls!
The Dragon bites The Drakeling in the upper body through the brown cloak, tearing the scale and tearing the muscle!
The Dragon latches on firmly!
//Gyahh! New plan!

The Drakeling kicks The Dragon in the upper body with his right foot, bruising the muscle and bruising the left false rib!
The Drakeling claws at The Dragon in the head with his right hand, but the blow is deflected by The Dragon's scales!

//With a mighty twist of her neck, she throws me into the water!
The Dragon throws The Drakeling by the upper body with her lower front teeth!
The Drakeling slams into the water!
The Drakeling's left lower leg takes the full force of the impact, denting the scale!

//Get out of the stream. There's muck all in it and it's up to your knees, you won't be able to move quickly.
\Also mountain streams like this probably have parasites and bacteria and your shoulder is drooling blood. Stand up, you're already sick enough.
//I'LL SAY.
The Drakeling stands up.

The Dragon charges at The Drakeling!
The Dragon slashes The Drakeling in the left lower arm with her right claw, tearing the scale!
The Dragon collides with The Drakeling! The Drakeling tumbles backwards! The Drakeling falls over!
//Shit!

The Drakeling kicks The Dragon in the right lower leg with his right foot, bruising the muscle!
The Dragon loses her balance and falls over!

The Dragon stands up.
The Drakeling stands up.

The Dragon slashes The Drakeling in the upper body with her left claw, tearing the scale!

Spike: Enough of that!
The Drakeling grabs The Dragon by the left lower arm with his right hand!
The Drakeling kicks The Dragon in the left claw with his left knee, bruising the muscle, shattering the bone, jamming the bone through the left wrist and shattering the left wrist's bone!

//With a wordless scream, Galsid rushes at me!

The Dragon charges at The Drakeling!
The Dragon strikes The Drakeling in the head with her right elbow, denting the scale and bruising the muscle!
The Dragon collides with The Drakeling! The Drakeling tumbles backwards!
//I roll further than I should -- I feel woozy. That blow to the head, wow...
\Get up, you're out of the stream but on your back and vulnerable!
//No rest for even a second?

The Dragon leaps forward, towards The Drakeling!
//Galsid lands firmly on my stomach, flaring out her wings!
Spike: Oof!
The Dragon grabs The Drakeling by the lower body with her left upper leg!
The Dragon grabs The Drakeling by the lower body with her right upper leg!
The Dragon grabs The Drakeling by the throat with her right claw!

GSD: I do this for the betterment of all dragonkind. Not for the love of a measly worm like you.
Spike: Get... off me!

The Dragon places a chokehold on The Drakeling's throat!
The Drakeling grabs The Dragon by the right lower arm with his left hand!
The Drakeling grabs The Dragon by the right lower arm with his right hand!

The Dragon strangles The Drakeling's throat!
//Ugh... the blood in my body pumps overpressured for a second, and my vision twists. My arms feel like lead -- but I can't drop them!
The Drakeling struggles in vain against the grip of The Dragon's right claw on The Drakeling's throat!

GSD: As our little ones go astray, it falls to the older --
The Dragon strangles The Drakeling's throat!
//Wooooooo... I start seeing stars...
GSD: And wiser--
The Dragon strangles The Drakeling's throat!
GSD: To correct them and instruct them. Consider me a lesson, traitor, one you'll never forget.

The Dragon grabs The Drakeling by the waist with her left upper leg!
The Dragon grabs The Drakeling by the waist with her right upper leg!
The Dragon prepares to assault The Drakeling!

//I've got to get out of this, but she's just too strong -- her one arm is more powerful than both of mine!
\\Do something, fast -- if you black out there's no telling if you wake up imprisoned, or enslaved to this crazy bitch, or even not at all. What do you do when the situation's desperate?
//MOSTLY GET SOMEONE ELSE TO BAIL YOUR ASS OUT?
//I: You mean, besides pathetic? That was barely adequate for even a schoolyard fight. Claw out her eyes next time; little tip from the playground.
//Well, I guess if it's my only option...

The Drakeling claws at The Dragon in the left eye with his right hand, but the attack is deflected by The Dragon's scales!

GSD: Come on. There can't be enough blood in you for everything. Pass out already.

The Dragon strangles The Drakeling's throat!

//The world loses color. Light starts to fade.
\\So, what is it that you do in your last moments of agency? What's the most important thing, now that you're going to die?
//STAYING AN ASSHOLE.

The Drakeling grabs The Dragon by the right wing's wound with his left hand! The Drakeling tears The Dragon's right wing's wound with his left hand!
//A piercing shriek comes out of Galsid as her wing is torn straight down and apart, blood gushing
out onto the ground. For a moment, the pain causes her to let up on the chokehold, and I gulp down air.

//WHAT AN ASSHOLE.
The Drakeling punches The Dragon in the head with his left hand, bruising the muscle and bruising the skull! The Dragon releases the grip of The Dragon's left upper leg on The Drakeling's waist. The Dragon releases the grip of The Dragon's right upper leg on The Drakeling's waist. The Dragon releases the grip of The Dragon's right claw on The Drakeling's throat. //She falls off me to the right.

The Drakeling stands up. //Sweet Celestia, that's a lot of blood. I always thought 'gushing' was an exaggeration. //Galsid, looking a little more pale, croaks: GSD: I guess you... really were an Inquisitor... //Is she still talking about the ankh?
Spike: Wh-- Galsid, no!
GSD: Just my luck...
//She tries to stand up.
Spike: Galsid, you're hurt! You're going to die unless you get medical attention! That is _way_ too much blood to lose!

The Dragon stands up.

GSD: I won't let you capture me alive.
Spike: Galsid-- The Dragon bites at The Drakeling in the right lower arm, but the Drakeling dodges away! The Drakeling strikes The Dragon in the left upper leg with his Dashing Rogue Punch, bruising the muscle and shattering the bone!
The Dragon falls over.

//I stand in the same spot, huffing a little. My shoulder still hurts where she bit it. //Galsid lies on her back, with a torn wing and broken femur. She can't do anything now but die.

Galsid was defeated!
Spike earned 7500 experience points!
Spike is now level 21!
//Crazy grey bint...

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//Over the stream rushing by us, and Galsid's groans of pain, I shout: Spike: Are you happy?! Is this what you wanted?! To die for what you believe?!
//Galsid's head turns up slowly. She has a morbid grin on her face.
Spike: You can't do this sort of crap, in any good world. You can't go around trying to kill people -- or worse -- because of what you believe, what you just _think_ is true!
//She doesn't respond. Her wing is still bleeding. She's really going to die here.
Spike: I'm trying to create a world where ponies and dragons are equals. I don't care if you think that's true or not, and it doesn't matter if you do. Because it is true.
GSD: Ponies and dragons will never be equals. They're too different.
//Her voice is more of a hiss than a whisper.
Spike: Shut up. You're dying. Save your strength.
GSD: Any society with both of them will favor one over the other, because dragons and ponies
aren't the same thing. Their powers are too different. Imagine being a pony, and living in fear, having to wonder every day if this is the day some dragon with a meat-tooth decides you look like a tasty snack. Or being a drakeling in mixed society, having to wonder which day some jealous pony will decide you look weak enough to overpower and enslave. Imagine having to live each day knowing how easily it could be your last at the hands of someone else, and you can do nothing about it -- how can anybody live like that?!
Spike: They already do!! People can die any day -- dragon or pony doesn't change the fact there are murders and accidents!

//Galsid snorts, and lowers her head to the side. It looks like she's done talking.
T: (Well, you just swore you wanted to make a better world without killing anybody, and the first fight you had after that you killed somebody. Unless you have any smart ideas.)
//Oh, damn, she's right. Uh...

//SEE? ISN'T IT EASIER WHEN YOU JUST SLAUGHTER EVERYONE?
//Quine: There is another reason you should keep the ankh, little one. It is a communications device.

//Spike: What? Really?!
//Quine: Yes. There's a button on it. You didn't see that?
//Spike: Uh, no. Wow. Guess I didn't inspect it that closely.
//Quine: It's after the inscription. They usually omitted words to make it fit anyway.
//Spike: So who is this gonna call?
//T: (Ghostbusters?)
//Quine: ...Inquisitors would use it to relay information with one another. Speaking into it can be heard by anyone in a thousand-mile radius with another ankh. Take care the information you relay is not too sensitive.

//I take off the ankh and hold it in my hand. Even if Applejack or her troops have one, it's better for Galsid than dying...
Spike: Quine, this is Spike. Can you hear me?
//From the ankh comes a muffled:
Ankh(Quine): Yes.
Spike: There's a dragon on the slope of Mount Triponi, the southeast side, lying by a stream. There's a large tear in her wing and her leg's broken. She needs medical attention immediately. Are there any dragons in the area?
Ankh(Quine): I'll do what I can. Thank you.
//I put the ankh back around my neck, and talk to Galsid.
Spike: Well, you're in the hands or hooves of someone else now. They'll decide whether you can be saved or not. Your life is no longer my problem.
//I've done all for her I could.
//She spits:
GSD: Disgrace. That's what you've subjected me to. I'm no longer meaningful in my own death.
Spike: For what it's worth... I, uh, hope you live. Really.
T: (Inspirational.)
//I continue down the mountain.

//Detrot approaches steadily as I wind my way down the mountain, following the stream as it grows larger and stronger. Tall walls of brown stone, with iron spears jutting up and out at odd angles, surround the city. Not one building is made from wood. The dirt road leading in, and the pegasi in the watchtowers and patrolling the walls, look worn.
Pony Guard: Halt!
Spike: Woah, sorry.
//I take a step back from the pony in my face. The scenery drew me in.
Spike: This place looks more like a prison than a city.
//The guard hesitates, narrowing his eyes at me.
Crap, did you say what you meant to think and think what you meant to say?
PG: We're going to have to ask you some questions.
Spike: Sure, I have nothing to hide.
//EXCEPT YOUR QUEST TO OVERTHROW THE FUCKING THRONE, AND YOUR RAVENOUS DESIRE FOR PONYCUNT--
PG: What is your name?
Spike: Bartholemew Coinhoarder.
PG: What is your reason for visiting Detrót?
Spike: Religious pilgrimage. I worship money, and since I hear you have it here I want to take it through a complex series of immoral but technically legal fraudulent investment schemes and tax loopholes.
PG: If a pegasus leaves Forlegsandria traveling northwest at six parsecs per fortnight, assuming no air friction and minimal escape velocity, what is the bus driver's name?
//...What?
Spike: Could you... could I get a repeat of that? Didn't quite catch it the first time.
PG: We _said_, how long do you plan on being in Detrót?
//...Is that what he said?
Spike: About two weeks at most. Just passing through.
PG: Are you bringing any fruit with you into the city?
Spike: Am I... fruit?
PG: Yes, fruit. Like orthoclase, or anhydrite.
//...Those are rocks.
Spike: Er, I'm sorry, but is there a different person I could talk to--
PG: We are not a _person_, we are _people_, plural, and I ask that you respect our right to self-expression by using the appropriate pronouns!
Spike: ...
//Is this guy going to be okay?
Spike: Um, sir, I'd--
Plural Guy: _Sirs_.
Spike: _Sirs_, right; I'd like to ask the two of you--
Plural Guy: Twelve of us--
Spike: If there is absolutely anyone else in the world I could talk to other than you lot.
PG: Well, sure.
//Oh. Good.
PG: You can always talk with yourselves! We do it all the time.
Spike: That's not what I meant!
PG: Well, why don't you ask the alien in your head?
Spike: I just want to get in the city!
//Another pony in guard armor comes out from the gatehouse, quickly pulling the guardstallion to the side. She says a few quick words to him, and then turns to me.
New Guard: Sorry about that; he's new.
Spike: I don't think that's the problem.
//The mare pauses for half a second, then says:
New Guard: He has--
//From further away the guardstallion yells:
PG: They have!
NG: Been having identity issues.
PG: Prejudiced, insulting language. Identity refers to one, because _you_ don't _want_ a world where people are allowed to be how they feel inside--
NG: Listen, if you promise not to cause any trouble, go on in. I have enough in my hooves.
Spike: It certainly looks like you do. I promise.
NG: You're free to enter the city.
As I walk past them, the two (thirteen?) guards start a verbal argument about whether the first (first twelve, or just first?) should request higher salary for being multiple workers.

...Best of luck to both of them.
Spike: (What was with that guy?)
T: (Some people are weird.)
Spike: (I thought he was making fun of gender identity issues at first, but... he seemed more like a crazy person.)
T: (Undiagnosed mental disorders will do that. Now continue on your quest given to you by a literal god you see in your dreams.)
Spike: (Will do.)

Spike: (What is this.)
T: (It's a rock garden.)
Spike: (Please tell me they're not so dense they're trying to grow rocks.)
//Why the hell would anyone make a rock garden?
T: (No, it's -- 'rock garden' is a loose translation; it's an outdoor structure where rocks of different sizes are arranged to evoke beauty. Usually it's used for silent meditation.)
Spike: (What, sitting on the rocks?)
T: (There are mats under the torii. Which there really shouldn't be; it's an archway not a roof--) Spike: (So we're in a knockoff rock garden?)
T: (Is... are you trying to make a pun?)
Spike: (I had hoped these ponies were the real deal.)
T: (They are. But their Eastern sensibilities aren't.)
//I feel Twilight's presence leave, and I'm left alone.
//After meeting with the (very nice) greeter (in a veil), I was directed to the rock garden. Apparently the mare who does induction into Celestia's Faceless is out to lunch. I didn't have anything to do anyway.
Spike: (It's kind of nice, though.)
Relaxing Mare: Did you say something?
//Woah! Someone's here?!
Spike: Uh, sorry; didn't realize anyone was here.
//...Wait. Where did that voice come from? I look around.
//Small rocks, big boulder rocks, archway thing, raised bed of rocks... this is certainly the most beautiful place in Detrot (not saying much) but it certainly doesn't have a pony in it...
Spike: ...Where are you?
The Relaxing Mare emerges from the bed of rocks!
The Drakeling leaps backwards, away from the Relaxing Mare!
//Rocks roll off her and spill over the sides of the raised bed. Why would you bury yourself like that?
Spike: ...What are you doing?
RM: Rockbathing.
Spike: Rockbathing.
RM: Yeah, it helps keep your skin tough and thick.
//She brushes dust out of her blue coat, eventually giving up and stepping down. There's still rocks stuck in her straight yellow hair.
Spike: ...You know, I'm not going to ask. Hello, miss, well met.
RM: Hi! My name is Rinsusu Megimi. What's yours?
Spike: Spike.
//I feel like I say that a lot.
Spike: Are you the inductor?
RM: Nope! I'm waiting here for her.
//Rinsesu sits down on the rock bed. I take a seat next to her.
RM: Any idea how long it'll be?
Spike: No idea. How long have you been here for?
//The earth pony puts a hoof to her chin.
RM: ...I dunno! I think I fell asleep.
//Under rocks? Isn't that dangerous?
RM: Are you looking to join Celestia's Faceless?
Spike: Yeah, I want to. I've always honored Celestia and I'm hoping working with the Faceless will help me bring her glory to more people.
//IS THAT HOW YOU PRONOUNCE 'REGICIDE'?
RM: That's good! I wish you the best of luck. Celestia hasn't ever been my thing, really, but I'm glad you like her.
//...Hasn't been 'her thing'? And she's trying to join an order dedicated to Celestia?
Spike: So why are you waiting for the inductor?
RM: Well... I do want to join the Faceless.
Spike: Yeah, that much I assumed, but why?
RM: If Celestia's Faceless are willing to take me on, and I train hard for them, one day I'll become an Inquisitor.
//They still have those?
RM: That's the only way for me to be strong enough.
//Rinsesu trails off and starts looking at the sky.
Spike: For what?
RM: I have to be strong for the one I love.
Spike: Oh. Is your love in danger?
RM: No, it's... I have to prove myself to my love. It's complicated.
Spike: Look around.
//Rinsesu cocks her head curiously, and glances around the rock garden. There's still no one else here.
Spike: Does it look like I have something else to do?
//Rinsesu Megimi chuckles, takes a deep breath, and starts her story.
RM: I'll never forget... it happened one and a half years ago...

//RM: S...stop!
//Small Colt: Why? Sis, what's up?
//RM: I don't know, but it's something big!
//SC: Waaah, is that its shadow?! Help!
//RM: Get behind that dune! Maybe it won't see u--
//A dragon the size of a small cottage lands on the desert sands, roaring triumphantly. The small colt falls backwards, into his sister.
//RM: D--Don't come any closer!
//SC: Waaaah, his teeth are so big!!
//Blue Dragon: Hehe... I'm going to have some fun with you two. I haven't eaten pony in quite a long time.
//SC: Waaaaaaah, not a dragon!
//BD: Shut up, whelp! Do you want to be eaten first? Or should I make you watch this one die?
//RM: Som...Someone! Help!
//There is a line in the sky where color is blueshifted, ripping over the sands at a frightening velocity. The line fades as a pegasus appears by the dragon's head.
//Rainbow Dash: Hey you! What are you doing to the defenseless? If you have time to mess with them, you should be training with someone on your own level!
//BD: And who would you be? Some kind of ally of justice?
//Rainbow Dash: I'm Rainbow Dash, punk! Don't forget it!
//BD: This 'punk' controls the entire territory now. The rumors I've heard are true, Celestia is dead. I have laid claim here! For your impudence I shall make you my meal.
//Rainbow Dash: Hah! You think I'll roll over and die like them? Time for me to teach you a little lesson about power!
//In a blur of motion, the dragon slumps forward and slams his head into the ground! His tongue sputters in the dirt!
//Rainbow Dash: Hmph. Only skilled at running your mouth. Know your betters next time. Not that there'll be a next time.
//RM: Umm... Thank you!
//RBD: Uh... right.
//SC: You saved us! She saved us!
//RBD: ...Don't misunderstand, this wasn't for you. Dragons are claiming territory all over the region and I need to show them what's what before they get entrenched.
//RM: What he said is true?! Celestia is dead?
//RBD: Hell if I know.
//RM: Oh, 'swings, who will save us now?!
//RBD: ...That's what I never understand about you people.
//SC: Us what?
//RBD: You. The weak. You keep on thinking the world is something that happens to you, wait for the next thing to fix the previous thing. You depend on others and accept what you're given instead of driving it.
//RM: I'm a pastry chef! Quit lecturing me!
//RBD: Then at least learn from this and stop walking alone in the desert! If you're not going to use your head, you may as well be an animal. You got that?!
//RM: Y...yes. I understand. C-could you tell me your name?
//RBD: ...Rainbow Dash, holder of the Element of Loyalty. Let's see if Celestia's name still means something to these beasts...
//Rainbow Dash flies off.
//RM: ...What a strange mare. And yet...
//SC: Sis?
//RM: ...Am I really feeling this way? I think I'm--

Spike: Okay, stop.
//Rinsesu, hooves over her heart, stops recounting the story. It was surprisingly cliche.
Spike: This is crap.
RM: Excuse me?!
Spike: If someone wrote your story I'd throw it in the trash.
RM: Wh-- ...I'm not the best storyteller, but that's very rude.
Spike: Let me guess how it ends: you fall in love with Rainbow Dash and you spend all your time since then training so you can impress her with your skills. Am I right?
RM: ...I've been researching her. She runs a dojo in the Greater Gloucester region; only the best of fighters can even visit.
Spike: And she has no idea you're doing this, of course.
RM: We haven't met since then. I swore I would never rest until I was suitable to be in her presence...
Spike: You're an idiot.
RM: Hey!!
T: (Tact. Subtlety. Not just words with two 't's in them.)
Spike: You fell in love with someone you met once, who berated you -- and then decided 'these feelings are totally legitimate, let's act on them'!
RM: Love knows no reason!
Spike: The synonymy of protection and romance is barbarian.
RM: I can't change the way I feel!
Spike: But you can choose what you do. Chasing after a fleeting feeling for a year and a half in desperation -- as if love could be bought with muscles, like some sort of primitive savage! Rewarding violence with romance is one of the things that gets us into situations like the Aquinatics in the first place!
//It made dragons who they are today, because dragons who thought like that were the ones rewarded with progeny!
RM: Quit talking!
Spike: You were perfectly willing to listen to Rainbow Dash telling you when you were ignorant, what's changed now?
RM: She's -- she's a wonderful mare! You're just a stupid little dragon boy!
Spike: Oh, great, now I have to deal with _this_.
RM: I'll teach you a lesson!
Rinsesu Megimi attacks!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

Rinsesu Megimi kicks at The Drakeling in the lower body, but The Drakeling dodges away!

Spike: Wh-- hey!!

The Drakeling leaps backwards, away from Rinsesu Megimi!

The Drakeling breathes in and focuses, casting Terrae Corpus! The Drakeling's scales become as hard as rock!

Spike: 'Swings, Rinsesu, there are other ways to have a disagreement!

Rinsesu Megimi charges at The Drakeling!
Rinsesu Megimi bites The Drakeling in the left upper arm, denting the scale!
Rinsesu Megimi latches on firmly!
Rinsesu Megimi collides with The Drakeling! Rinsesu Megimi bounces backwards!

T: (Remember when I talked to you about insulting Marquise Tourniquette? This is why.)
Spike: Violence is not a response to any discussion!
T: (You called her a primitive savage.)
Spike: (She's acting like it!)

The Drakeling breaks the grip of Rinsesu Megimi's upper front teeth on The Drakeling's left upper arm.

Spike: Instead of using words when you're offended, your response is hitting people?! What are you, an animal?!
//Rinsesu Megimi stops. She glowers at me.

RM: You insulted my honor.
Spike: Oh, by Celestia, what horrors a pony is subjected to.
RM: Stop mocking me!
Spike: Sometimes, others won't think the way you do. Trying to kill them for it isn't right!
RM: Honor is what separates a warrior from a thug, and beast from pony--
Spike: Honor is dangerous and foolish and results in people getting hurt for no damned good reason. Talk to me, Rinsesu. Put down your hooves.
Rinsesu Megimi was defeated!
Spike earned 1000 experience points!
Spike is now level 22!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

T: (Wow, that actually worked. Good for you.)
Spike: Why did you attack me?
RM: ...You insulted my honor. I demand an apology.
//You can demand whatever you damn well please, you crazy infatuated bint--
Spike: I could have phrased what I said better, and for not doing that I apologize. But I still have some major concerns about your quest.
RM: You, your name was Spike, right? If you want to return Celestia to Equestria, I suppose you're a Hero, right?
Spike: Yes. I want to be a Hero.
RM: Rainbow Dash trains with ponies whose tails are more powerful than you or I could ever be. And she says--
Spike: Who cares what she says?
T: (Honestly, people don't glorify Dash for her mental prowess.)
RM: _She says_ that any normal person can do two of helping others, living to fight another day, and advancing their cause. A Hero is she who is able to do all three, but there comes a day where the Hero returns to normality. On that day, only your honor will lead you in the right direction.
Spike: It sounds like Rainbow Dash likes dead Heroes better than live ones.
RM: Better dead Heroes than live tyrants. If you don't have the strength honor gives you, you'll end up hurting others for your own ends.
Spike: There is such a thing as thinking like a _reasonable, civilized being_. We could, I don't know, try that instead?
//Rinsesu Megimi sits down. I suppose she's done talking.
//Nothing to do but wait for the inductor in silence, then. With a pony who will most likely never talk to me ever again. Sigh...

//I'm kind of glad for the silence, actually. There's time to think now...
//I think about the dragon guard back in Hole Five. I wonder if he's still alive, or if in the past month he'd got himself killed. If that's true, I wonder if he thought at the end, when he was dying, that it was worth it.
Spike: Mmm...
//Is that really how dragons think? That there's no chance for compromise, and it's better to die than to give something up? It sounds a lot like Rainbow Dash's mentality... and I don't want to think in any way like that.
Spike: Mmm...
//Both Quine and the guard said it was the dragon way to fight for land. But Jebed, and the rest of the Forlegsandrian dragon district, aren't violent about it. They're integrated into pony society, dividing land with others in a capitalist system, instead of warring in a feudalistic one. And yeah, they're struggling, but they're showing that it is possible...
Spike: Mmm...
//Still, Jebed did say that those in the Aquinatics were 'true dragon's dragons'... if that is what a dragon is expected to be, by both dragons themselves and ponies, any progress will be hard to get...
Spike: Mmm...
//I don't think 'dragon' is who I am, or who I was, if 'dragon' means like the people I met in the Aquinatics. That part of me is just how I'm shaped. I'm something more than just what I look like. \And what would that be?
Spike: Mmm...
//...Maybe it's not a coincidence I'm joining a group dedicated to Celestia. I have been listening to her ever since I started my journey. Celestia's wisdom and power is undeniable. Maybe I should be trying to champion her, instead of the advancement of dragons. I can still work towards equality, but it'll come through respect for Celestia, instead of just increasing dragonkind's power.
Spike: Mmm... huh.
//Meditating must have helped me figure something out. I think I can see what Quine was trying to teach me now.
[Patatrin-Vikramana] was mastered!
\\Didn't Quine say Celestia was hostile to dragons?
//She herself said differently. Besides, I'm not counting myself as a dragon anymore. I'm a Hero in the name of Celestia!
Spike: Mmm...
RM: Shut up idiot!
//Hey, I guess she did talk to me again!

Chapter End Notes

With apologies to Tarn Adams.
//Spike: Quine?
//Quine: Yes?
//Spike: Have you ever heard of someone named 'Twilight Sparkle'?
//Quine thinks for some time. Smoke rolls out of his nostrils, up into the gloom.
//Quine: I have heard many names and many titles in my long years of life, little Spike. It is possible that may have been one of them. But it does not evoke memories of anyone important.
//Inductor: Em, excuse me? Are you Spike?
//Spike: Anyone important? What about 'anyone at all'?
//Quine thinks again, for some time.
//Quine: Once, I did hear that name. Something about a coronation, and a Princess. Nothing more.
//Spike: Are you sure? I heard she was the personal student of Princess Celestia.
//Quine: Celestia has held many betwixt her legs over the years, both front and back. That alone does not make a person special.
//T: (This again. I hate this joke.)
//Spike: Wait, you mean--
//Inductor: Em, excuse me-- Spike?
//The inductor shakes me by the arm, and I wake up from my daydream, groaning.
Spike: Ptoo -- I'm fine, I just fell. Lemme stand up.
//I stand up.
//The inductor, a unicorn with a golden coat and silver hair, has a veil in front of her face, completely obscuring her identity. She also carries a satchel.
Spike: Are you the inductor?
//ID: Ohmyskies, I'm so sorry! Are you hurt? Please don't be hurt...
//I spit a rock out of my mouth and say:
Spike: Ptoo -- I'm fine, I just fell. Lemme stand up.
//I stand up.
//The inductor, a unicorn with a golden coat and silver hair, has a veil in front of her face, completely obscuring her identity. She also carries a satchel.
Spike: Are you the inductor?
ID: Yes, I am the Inductor of the Detrot Extension of the Celestian Order of the City on the Hill. Which is too long, so we call ourselves Celestia's Faceless.
Spike: It would be hard to fit the first one on a business card.
ID: We have pamphlets. Much easier.
//I suppose it would be.
Spike: Anyway, I'd like to ask you a few questions about the Faceless, because I'd really like to know more about them.
//"SO I CAN COMPLETELY CHANGE YOUR HIPPIE COMMUNE INTO A BLOODLUST-DRIVEN CULT OF PERSONALITY CENTERED AROUND ME'. ALTHOUGH WHETHER YOU'LL HAVE MORE OR LESS MANDATORY FUCKING THAN OTHER CULTS IS A FUCKING MYSTERY TO EVERYONE.
ID: I'd certainly think so; a drakeling doesn't make his way into Detrot for a vacation.
Spike: You know, I actually had an easier time getting to the city than you'd think.
//Although that new tactics Quine taught me really did help with that... not to mention the full month of training.
ID: Is that so? Did you travel with anyone?
Spike: I traveled by myself, but I never did feel alone... I always felt like someone was guiding my footsteps. Someone who wanted me to be here.

//OOH, OOH, WAS IT ME? BECAUSE IT CERTAINLY WASN'T FUCKING ME, KILL THIS SHITTY EXCUSE FOR A NUN AND KEEP MOVING--

ID: We are in agreement, then. What would you like to know about the Faceless?

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

>>Who just exactly are the Faceless?
>>Why are you faceless?
>>Why am I hearing more than one voice in my head?
>>Who is Celestia?
>>What does the Faceless believe about dragon and pony interactions?
>>Do you have any grossulars?

\Damn it, I always hated these question selection things in video games because I'd always choose the same one and waste time going through it again. That, and who cares about exposition? Let's get to the plot, seriously. The last one has to be a joke, so... uh, let's do...

Spike: Who just exactly are the Faceless?

ID: We are a religious order dedicated to the worship of Celestia. Herr Yyz established our order in Canterlot shortly before the disappearance, and since then ponies who share our piety have established extensions in Detrot, Gloucester, Forlegsandria, and Port Fuscus. (Although the Port Fuscus branch has some interesting ideas about Princess Luna that not many of us share.)

//Princess Luna? Who's that?

ID: We believe that true peace, between peoples and within, can only come by accepting Celestia's love and dedicating ourselves to following her example.

T: (Tack 'true' on anything and you get to redefine it, it seems. Celestia wasn't a pacifist.)

ID: The example she set for us is one of kindliness, charity, hard work and humility. These are the attributes we seek for ourselves. What else would you like to know?

>>Why are you faceless?
>>Why am I hearing more than one voice in my head?
>>Who is Celestia?
>>Who is Princess Luna?
>>What does the Faceless believe about dragon and pony interactions?
>>Do you have any grossulars?

\That last question is really still there? Well, I have to pick again, and -- crap, one more appeared! I don't really care who Princess Luna is! Just get me to the next section!

Spike: Why are you faceless?

ID: Herr Yyz took on her mask as a mark of shame. The mask she wears was once was a tool of debauchery, vice, and ignorance to the greater world in pursuit of hedonism. One day, she received a revelation from Celestia, who told Herr to don her mask and walk out in the daylight. Herr did so, to her great shame, and others looked upon her in disgust. Celestia instructed Herr to keep the mask but throw away the person behind it, and so the first of Celestia's Faceless was born.

Spike: Why were they disgusted?

ID: The mask represents a part of society most would rather ignore. It is a reminder Equestria is not perfect, and such things are troublesome to the ignorant.

T: (One, calling sexual deviance 'imperfect' is repressive; two, it's a leather zipper-mask with stains on it. Yyz wears it because she's a freak, not some visionary.)

ID: We wear our veils in reverence of Herr Yyz, in reverence of the dead, and as a surrender of identity. Once we no longer consider ourselves, then kindliness, charity, and hard work have no
cost, and humility has no alternatives.
Spike: In reverence of the dead?
ID: The Faceless are traditionally gravediggers. Those who are dead have given everything they
could to others, so they are respected. And true humility involves realizing no pony in the world
can avoid death but Celestia.
Spike: Except, you know, those of us who assault dragons.
//The inductor looks uneasy. She paws at the rocks.
ID: ...Gregor Ponydel's Three-Stage Theory is not yet verified by scientists. What else would you
like to know?
T: (_Yes_, yes it _is_, that's why it's called a theory. Sometimes when I hear these crazy ponies
talk I see where Rarity is coming from.)

>>Why am I hearing more than one voice in my head?
>>Who is Celestia?
>>Who is Princess Luna?
>>What does the Faceless believe about dragon and pony interactions?
>>Do you have any grossulars?

\Damnit does it even matter click something.
Spike: What does the Faceless believe about dragon and pony interactions?
//The inductor opens her mouth for a second, and then closes it. Somewhere beyond the rock
garden, a door closes.
ID: Em... meaning?
Spike: Well, I was talking about living side-by-side sort of stuff, but sex and romance aren't
excluded from that, so... whatever you want to talk about, I guess.
//If dragons and ponies are going to live together, some of them will end up romantically together
of their own accord... that will create a lot of problems on its own, but it's better than ponies trying
to assault drakelings left and right...
ID: Er... source documents from Herr Yyz use the word 'pony' to refer to a civilized being, but that
doesn't mean what she says couldn't apply to all people. Celestia's power and love transcends
things like what shape we are.
Spike: Glad to hear it.
ID: What else would you like to know?

>>Why am I hearing more than one voice in my head?
>>Who is Celestia?
>>Who is Princess Luna?
>>Do you have any grossulars?

//Why do I have to go back to this menu I just want to hold the spacebar and fly past this crap!
Spike: Who is Princess Luna?
ID: Em, one of the ex-Princesses. You know, the pony sisters who ruled Equestria?
Spike: Sisters? I've only heard people talk about Princess Celestia ruling the land.
ID: Luna appeared about five years ago, and Celestia made her a co-ruler of the throne. She didn't
do too much, though. Celestia was the older sister and Luna was a bit of a night owl. When she was
even seen. She disappeared at the same time as Celestia.
T: (There's a lot more to Luna than anyone knows.)
Spike: (Okay, Miss Terious.)
Spike: Where did Luna come from?
ID: Hmm?
Spike: If she just appeared five years ago, where did Princess Luna come from? She can't have just
spawned... I don't know, out of someone's forehead.
ID: That's a point of contention for the Fuscus branch. They claim that a creature defeated by
Celestia over one thousand years ago, called Nightmare Moon, was actually Princess Luna in a possessed state. For any pony to survive one thousand years, the claim is that they would have to be a deity like Celestia. And raising Luna to the throne certainly seems like an odd decision, if Princess Luna were only a mortal like you and me.

//I feel like Twilight wants to say something, but isn't.
ID: But Princess Celestia did very many odd things near the end of her rule. Who knows what she could have been thinking?
T: (The mare who has access to her personal library?)
ID: What else would you like to know?

>>Why am I hearing more than one voice in my head?  
>>Who is Celestia?  
>>Do you have any grossulars?

\AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA  
Spike: Who is Celestia?  
ID: The goddess who created the world.
Spike: Well, yeah, I got that--
ID: The Faceless believe that statement is literal. The sphere we stand on would not exist without Celestia's intervention before any of ponykind or dragonkind existed. And she is a goddess. Not just 'powerful', or 'righteous', or 'wise'. Celestia is _the_ goddess. Nothing else will do. The Faceless believe Princess Celestia, 'Princess' meaning the pony visible on this planet until recently, is an avatar of Celestia. The two are not significantly different. Calling Celestia and Princess Celestia different people is like calling heads and tails different coins, so we use their names interchangeably.
Spike: I think I have another question, then.

>>Why am I hearing more than one voice in my head?  
>>Do you have any grossulars?

\Good, I don't have to take the reins here wait crap again?!?! Fuck!!
Spike: Why am I hearing more than one voice in my head?
//Is this really the question I'm asking?
//The inductor pauses and lowers her head.
ID: Em... come again?
Spike: Everyone has an internal monologue, right? A train of thoughts going through their head in their own voice?
ID: Well, mine's in the voice of Princess Luna, but yes. You're hearing other voices?
Spike: Yeah. Well, one's the dragon instinct, a dragon thing; wouldn't expect you to know about it, but there are more than just that.
ID: Does one of them sound like your conscience?
//...I suppose Celestia would count as that, if I had to choose...
Spike: I guess so.
ID: Then listen to that, above all others. If it has led you here, it will lead you true. Although I really would get that checked out...
Spike: I also had amnesia at one point. Would that change anything?
ID: Em, how did you get amnesia?
Spike: I hit my head.
//The inductor raises her head and looks at me oddly.
ID: ...Have you seen a doctor?
//...I should really do that at some point.
Spike: ...Don't worry, it was a long time ago.
//Technically true.
ID: ...Okay. Was there anything else?

>>Do you have any grossulars?

\This was really the one what the crap I wasted so much time--
Spike: Unless you have any grossulars, no; I think that's all. I'm ready to join the Faceless.
//She laughs.
ID: Well, I don't have any gems, but I do have this.
//Out of the satchel comes a silver, red, and purple cape, sized for a drakeling.
T: (Wow! I wasn't expecting that.)
Spike: Why do you have a clown's outfit?
ID: It's not--
Spike: If I also get the large squeaky shoes you have no idea how happy I will be.
ID: Most ponies get a veil when they join, see. Em, all ponies. But you're not a pony.
Spike: I've noticed that, actually.
T: (She's giving you _this_ and you're being rude?)
ID: Spike, you're a drakeling. And, considering the demographics of the Faceless and most of
Equestria right now... a scarred purple drakeling with a black veil is not disguised. Dissolution of
identity is one of our central tenets, and it must be achieved by stronger means.
Spike: (Is the cape filled with acid?)
ID: This is a magical cape which will turn you into a blur, like a smudge on the landscape. It also
has a few more magical properties (which I don't claim to understand) which mean people don't
realize that this happens, and will just treat you as whatever person they expected to be in your
place.
Spike: Oh, right! My friend has one of these!
ID: ...It seems I will never cease to learn odd things about you, Spike.
T: (For what it's worth, I'm glad you consider me your friend.)
Spike: (What? No, Quine has one in his hoard.)
T: (...Really?)
Spike: (Messing. Best friends for life?)
T: (Aww, Spike! Of course!)
ID: But it's not up for me to judge. Herr Yyz meets with every person who joins Celestia's Faceless
and she wants to meet with you.
Spike: What? She does?
ID: Yes. You'll be meeting in Canterlot in two hours.
//...No, no we won't.
Spike: Er, I'm not exactly sure if you're considering how far away Canterlot is...
ID: Nonsense. Canterlot has a teleportation beacon and I have the power to get you there.
Spike: Wow, you're really willing to do that for me?
//The inductor nods.
Spike: I don't really know what to say, thanks...
ID: You don't need to. Put on the cape, though. Canterlot is home to quite a lot of ponies, and some
of them have very odd tastes.
Spike: What--
//Liking dragons is an 'odd taste”?
\Trying to assault and abduct them is.
Spike: ...

The Drakeling puts on the displacement cape, blurring into a vague smudge of purple!
ID: ...Okay then. You're ready to meet Herr Yyz and enter the ranks of Celestia's Faceless
officially.
Spike: Let's get going, then.
ID: In exactly ten seconds, I need you both to say, 'I am a moth to the City on the Hill'. I'll be spellcasting, so it will help me locate you. Do you understand?
Spike: Both, what--
T: I understand.
ID: Good! Start counting!

The Inductor closes her eyes and focuses, casting a spell!

Spike: (What are you doing?)
T: (Getting a free ride to Canterlot. Besides, she doesn't know who either of us are now. Just that we're supposed to be initiates.)
Spike: (You could teleport yourself!)
T: (I'm running kind of low on spell energy; this week's been a little rough.)
Spike: (Earlier you said you spent most of it eating cheese.)
T: (Protein helps accelerate magical rejuvenation. Besides, I'm meeting a good friend and I don't want to look stressed.)
Spike: (Won't she understand?)
T: (This girl makes me stressed enough.)
Spike: I am a moth to the City on the Hill!
T: I am a moth to the City on the Hill!

The Inductor speaks a word of power, forming symbols in the air! The Drakeling disappears! Twilight Sparkle disappears!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//I hit the ground, feet bouncing off the stone as I fall backwards. I'm in the middle of a glowing red circle, person-sized, in a dark brown room.
Announcement: PLEASE VACATE THE AREA SO OTHERS CAN TELEPORT IN. MOVE TOWARDS THE EXIT, THANK YOU.
//At the end of this small room, on open door leads to a hallway lit by candlelight. I step out, and a big unicorn with a briefcase immediately runs me over.
Businessicorn: Excuse me!
Spike: Woah!
//He squeezes by and continues down the hallway, towards the exit, outside daylight. I guess that's where I'm supposed to go?
Spike: People are so rude these days...
//IN DAYS PAST THEY WERE MUCH NICER TO DRAGONS. BECAUSE IF YOU WEREN'T YOUR FUCKING HEAD GOT TORN OFF AND WE PISSED DOWN YOUR NECK.
//I walk out into the light.
//People explode into view, from every angle.
HURRIED ZEBRA: I must hasten now, oh dear/Or I will miss tea, I fear!
Visiting Stallion: You know, I'm happy we chose Canterlot. I heard Mountainville has a lot of dragons, and I get spooked easy.
Yellow Pegasus: But he hasn't talked to me in so long! I'm worried about him, I really am.
Loud Businessmare: Did you see the interview Princess Hazel did with the Equestrian Times? Wearing that dress?
Green Pegasus: Thankfully winds kept most of the ashes within the Valley of Death, or the fires could have spread further than they did.
//I'm in the dead middle of a courtyard, all of the sudden, having stepped out of a door that is no longer behind me. Canterlot Castle looms up the mountain. Everything here is made of marble and gold. What is this place?
Suited Pegasus: It would have been nice to still have some of Celestia's weather control.
Visiting Mare: (Darn, I really wanted to see if I could hook up with a dragon...)  
Businessicorn: For a filly her age? A dress like that is extremely conservative, if not downright prudish!  
Pink Pony: If there's one thing I've learned, it's that you have to trust your friends! He'll come around!  
Yellow Pegasus: Ooooh, I hope so...  
//Off in the distance, I see a pony with a veil holding a sign that says, 'Spike'. I start working my way towards her.  
Yupponie: Where can I get a hay smoothie in this urban jungle?  
Tall Zebra: Please forgive my forwardness, I must ask of you/My hotel room holds one, I hope you'd make it two?  
Green Pegasus: Hah, yeah, see you Friday! Clear skies!  
Pink Pony: Besides, who knows what kind of crazy thoughts somebody like him could have?  
Loud Businessmare: Frankly, wearing a dress at all is too risque for a Princess! What happened to modesty through naturality? The body is nonsexual in nature!  
//I reach the mare holding up the 'Spike' sign and ask:  
Spike: What is it?  
Visiting Stallion: And besides, Mountainville doesn't have an opera! I can't wait for tonight!  
Visiting Mare: (At least I'll get to bang a singer...)  
Veiled Mare with Sign: Sorry, I'm waiting for someone! I can't talk now!  
Yellow Pegasus: But I'm worried, I'm worried, that someday I'm going to pick up the paper and see that headline, and I just--  
Schoolteacher: Alright, kids! We've made it! Headcount! One, two, three, four...  
Suited Pegasus: Clear skies! Say hi to your family for me! And tell me next time your cousin's making goulash!  
//I can't hear myself think in this racket! Maybe I have to use that technique Quine taught me...  
//Quine: I will teach you a technique, Spike, that you may find very useful to center yourself.  
//Spike: Meditation? I already have Terrae Corpus, I'm not sure what else I can add...  
//Quine: This is not a technique to mentally focus you, but to do so physically. Your ears, and eyes, and nose will be so sensitive that you will know only how to leave your surroundings exactly as they are -- and sense only what you have done.  
//Spike: How is that helpful, shouldn't I hear and see everything?  
//Quine: You will, but it will not be as loud. This is a great hunter's technique, as you will know how to move like the stillest air, and hear only your prey's increasing heartbeat. Give in to the flow around you, and breathe...  
//Spike: 'Patatrin-Vikramana'?  
\What is that, Sanskrit?  
//Quine: It is a technique once used by Bucket James himself, to sneak into Castle Canterlot and slay the last of Celestia's progeny. Use it well.  
//Spike: Great...  
The Drakeling breathes in and focuses, casting Patatrin-Vikramana! The Drakeling's step becomes as light as a feather!  
//Suddenly, every conversation fades away into a small buzz, leaking away with final words:  
Pink Pony: It hasn't happened yet. Trust me, they would have asked me to throw the party...  
//Almost like magic, the hustle and bustle of activity around me is no longer registering. There's only me, the sign carrier, and our lack of conversation.  
//I tap the carrier on the arm.  
Spike: I am Spike.  
VMS: What?!  
//She's still having trouble hearing. I need to speak louder.
Spike: I am Spike! Why are you holding the sign?
//I feel a disturbance in the air behind me. It's probably nothing.
VMS: Oh! Herr Yyz will meet you at The Snaffler at three o'clock! Your name is on the reservation!
Spike: Uh, okay! Thanks! Is that all?
Blue Pegasus: (Is that)...
VMS: Yes! Now can you hold the sign? I have to repaint it for the next pony coming in!
Spike: Uh, I--

The Blue Pegasus taps The Drakeling on the shoulder with her right front hoof!
The Drakeling leaps away from the Blue Pegasus!

//Gaah what is that?!
\Oh it's just a pegasus. Wow, this move must really make me jumpy--
//Celestia's wings it's Rainbow Dash!
RBD: Hey! Are you Spike?
Spike: No!

The Drakeling starts to run!

RBD: Hold on!

//Rainbow Dash tries to push through the crowd, but it's too thick to chase me -- this technique lets me see exactly where to step and jump to move through people, like swimming through a river. Eventually, I go too far, and she stops chasing.
RBD: I swear, his body language looked like... but I can't see him now.
//Good! Leave me alone! Crazy stalking bint...

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//For its name, The Snaffler is a fancier restaurant than I thought. Here I imagined a dim inn with cozy, low ceilings. This is an open-air flower garden overlooking most of Canterlot, with dinner tables placed every so often, and cobblestone floor. I think I can see the teleportation courtyard from here. Waiters and waitresses are dressed in suits, and unflinchingly polite.
//And the cape is getting in the way of my tail and how do people sit in these chairs for more than two minutes it's driving me crazy. I'd rather be standing. To distract myself, I start people-watching. Hold on, is that who I think it is?
//A unicorn with a white coat sits alone at a table for six. She is dressed in finery, but not too much of it. The menu is placed to the side, and I think she greeted the waiter by name. Must be a common patron, then. She mutters to herself:
White Unicorn: I did say two thirty, didn't I? I do hope there's not trouble keeping them up...
//Two thirty looks like a popular time to be having lunch. Waiters and waitresses are performing something between a dance and a sprint to keep up with everyone's orders. Everypony's orders; there are only ponies here. A party of four enters, and they start to look around.
\Why does everyone look so uptight? Do fancy pants come with a stick in the seat?
Elegant Noblemare: Oh, Ms. Rarity! There you are!
//The party starts sitting down at the table. The waiters hand them wine selections and scurry off.
EN: As well as could be; each is driving the other out of their minds!
//The laughter seems too practiced, and the smiles fade too quickly.
R: Good, good. There was no trouble on the road, I hope?
//One of the party guests bows her head.
Sorry Equine Looker: I'm afraid our tardiness is completely on me. I saw a design for a necklace in a store window which I would have sworn to Celestia herself was your own, so I just had to look.
R: Oh? What was the piece's name?
SEL: 'Absence in Pearl', also adorned with coral. I considered buying it as a gift, but I'd no idea whom for.
EN: Why, give it to a suitor, Selena.
//Selena blushes.
SEL: I'd need to find one, first.
EN: Nonsense, dear; any stallion in Canterlot would be lucky to have your interest. I'm sure Clark here would certainly agree.
//The one male pony at the table, dressed simply with an insignia hanging off his neck, says:
CLK: Uh, y-yeah--
//He then hastily starts drinking water.
R: Ah, Selena, it must be an impressive piece if it caught your eye, but I simply don't do anything in coral or pearl. My apologies.
SEL: Oh! I didn't know, I'm sorry.
R: Don't be, it's quite alright. I don't work with biological products.
//The bulbous unicorn with quite a few rings to her horn starts talking, slowly and loudly. She looks to be a friend of the Elegant Noblemare.
Drawling Fat Friend: Is that due to the interference effect, Rarity?
R: Yes, partly. I also never took a liking to using remains as a means of art. It seems a little... primitive.
//The waitress comes over and poses a polite question.
EN: We're waiting for one more, would you mind giving us some more time?
R: Actually, while we are waiting for one more, Kim is going to arrive a little late and said not to hold anything up on her account. Is everyone ready to order?
//Orders are taken and the waitress walks (nearly trots; it's busy) away.
R: Why, just a while back a good friend of mine from Port Fuscus sent me a perfume d'ambergris. It stood on my bureau a good long while.
CLK: Where is it now?
R: Improving the scent of the bottom of my trash bin!
//Laughter all around. It still sounds fake.
SEL: I just thought the name sounded so much like your recent work. 'Absence in Pearl'... it evokes the sea, a long voyage away from the comforts of home in search of a greater wealth. Like the pearls, open ocean is a common romantic symbol for beauty, but both are, up close, inhospitable and hostile wastelands...
R: Have you ever been on the ocean, dear?
SEL: No, but I'd very much love to.
EN: I believe our stallion here can tell you about it. Isn't it true that you spent most of your squirehood in the service of the Neighvy, Clark?
//He pulls on his heavy cape, looking a little hot. A scar under his wing can be seen briefly.
Cool Looking Knight: Yes, but I spent a lot of time in Castle Hipocam. I was only, uh, out to sea for about a year.
EN: A year! Why, I couldn't imagine what it could possibly be like to not see land for an entire year!
SEL: You meant cumulative, right?
//The Knight nods with an unsure movement and picks up his water again.
//A waiter coughs next to me. How long has he been standing there?
Waiter: Sir, would you like to order?
//The menu has been in my hands for about ten minutes and I haven't looked at it once.
Spike: Uh... do you have anything with meat in it?
//He pauses, and lowers his eyebrows.
Oh yeah, I'm still wearing the cape, he probably thinks I'm a pony... whoops!

Waiter: Rest assured, sir, this is a vegan restaurant. We offer no animal products of any sort.

//I put the menu a little bit higher and try to listen again.

Waiter: _Which_ soup, sir?

Spike: Uh... forget it, just get me a coffee.

Waiter: How would you like your coffee, sir?

Spike: Black and boiling hot.

DFF: I found your use of simplex noise to bypass the implications of leMoyne's secondary theorem in the infrared spectrum inspiring. I wanted to ask: would it be possible to shorten the targeted wavelength?

R: Ah, you mean, for some sort of scentless invisibility?

DFF: Or its equivalent. Traditional invisibility spells come with significant Tells.

R: Lower the wavelength... I suppose it could be done, but with energy investment going as inverse of wavelength to the fifth...

DFF: Fifth? Forget I asked, then; I had thought your algorithm would be at most squared.

R: At first it was, but a close friend and associate showed me significant artifacts in the 5-F structure, and I simply couldn't have that.

DFF: I don't blame you! That's just a mage having pride in her work.

SEL: (Do you have any idea what they're talking about?)

CLK: (Not one bit.)

SEL: (Heheheh.)

EN: I did see the auction for the vest you are talking about, and I thought it fetched a very reasonable price. Four hundred thousand bits, all in all. Were you there?

DFF: Four hundred thousand, for one of Rarity's works? Better it stay unsold than attract that level of interest! Don't you agree?

R: I simply can't find the time or interest to attend auctions anymore.

EN: Oh, my! Has the Avatar of Avarice turned into the Avatar of Apathy?

R: If you're offering to make a small donation to raise my spirits, Enola, I'd kindly oblige...

//More laughter. Rarity checks a clock, and then looks over to the entrance of the restaurant.

R: I do believe that's her. Kim! Over here, Kim, this is our table!

//A small purple pony sees Rarity's waving hoof and smiles.

That's no Kim, that's Twilight!

Nervous Mare: Y-your coffee, s-sir. Hck.

//She drops the coffee on the table and turns away.

Spike: Get well soon, that sounds like a nasty--

//Hold the hell on--

Spike: Na-Mira?!

//Na-Mira, dressed in a waitress's outfit, turns back quickly.

Na-Mira: S-sir, how do you know my name?

Spike: Na-Mira, it's me, Spike!

//She widens her eyes, and steps closer by a little, wiggling her fangs. I take off the cape.

Na-Mira: Spike! It's you!

//She grabs me and gives me a hug. I'm still halfway through taking off the cape...

Spike: Gee, thanks! I never thought you'd miss me this much.

//I extract myself from the hug. 'Swings, she's still as cold as ice...

N-M: Of course I missed you, hihiihihi! But I knew you'd come back for me!

Spike: Na-Mira, I'm here to meet someone important, but until then I want to keep a low profile. Is it okay if we talk after that?

N-M: Of course! My shift ends at three thirty. I'll be waiting for you outside!
Spike: You really work here?
N-M: Hck, duh! You were gone for a month, so I had to find something to do!
//She trots off, fangs wiggling happily. I guess if I were more sensitive, I'd feel bad for throwing myself boldly into danger when people like Na-Mira care about me so much...  
//BUT YOU ARE TOTALLY OKAY WITH HURTING THEM IN THE NAME OF GETTING FUCKED. DO YOU REALIZE WHAT A TERRIBLE PERSON YOU ARE?  
R: Selena, Enola, Clark, Daffi, this is Kim. She's a very good friend of mine.
Twilight: Nice to meet all of you!
DFF: We were just talking about one of Rarity's works, a vest that distorts the infrared emanations of its wearer.
T: Oh? I've been having trouble with some snakes recently.
//Rarity chuckles.
EN: Do you dabble in the magical arts, dear?
//Twilight gives Rarity a quick glance.
T: Haha, I've been known to cast a spell or two. Nothing on Rarity's level, though.
R: You flatter me, Kim! Enola, if it weren't for Kim I wouldn't know half of what I do about artifact design.
T: (That makes me sound like a teacher.)
R: (You are a teacher, Twilight.)
DFF: A unicorn who advises Rarity in magical matters is a unicorn to know. Well met, Mrs. Kim.
T: Oh, just Miss.
SEL: Sorry for asking, but could I ask where you're from, Miss Kim?
T: ...Any reason why?
SEL: You know, never mind. I thought you looked familiar.
T: Oh, it's no problem! I grew up here in Canterlot, but I lived in the Forlegsandria area for some time.
CLK: Forlegsandria? I'm from Forlegsandria!
SEL: Maybe that's where I recognized both of you from. I've never been the best with names, but I never forget a face...
//Selena leans in, inspecting Twilight as the conversation goes on.
R: (Sometimes I wish I could.)
T: (Enough.)
R: (Yet you should know how it feels, Twilight, for a Princess to give you shining wings and then for her to tear them away from you--)
T: So? Have you ordered yet?
EN: Yes, my dear, we've decided to have the piments au safran. Wild food for wild company, I say!
//Laughter all around.
T: O? Parlez-vous fancais?
EN: Non, I'm afraid, it's just a little habit I've picked up.
R: I understand how that tale goes, Enola; Kim here certainly influenced more than my fashion sense when I was younger.
T: (Now you're making me sound old!)
R: (Twilight, dear, you are old.)
T: That's a funny story, actually. If you look through my dresser, it's a perfect chronological ordering of Rarity's fashion tastes over time.
R: Oh, dear, please don't embarrass me! Let those dreadful things gather dust, trapped in the highest room of the tallest tower of Castle Canterlot, where they belong!
//Laughter around the table, but Selena leans in further.
SEL: That's it! I think I've seen you in the Castle before. I know I have.
//Twilight shrugs.
T: When I was a filly, I loitered around the Castle for hours after school, trying to get a glimpse of
Princess Celestia. ...But that's the last time I can remember I was there. Sorry.
R: (I'm still unclear to whether you have an infatuation with princesses, or just Celestia. Recent events have not helped clarify.)
T: ('Swings, I haven't heard this before. Shove it up your wid--) 
CLK: Hey, the food's here!
//Two servers put down a long serving plate, and distribute smaller plates to everyone. I try to keep listening, but can't hear anything over the clatter of dishes and the commotion of eating. Oh well.
//As I turn back to my full coffee, I hear what sounds like the voice of a haughty yuppie. 
Haughty Yuppie: Excuse me? Are you Spike?
Spike: Huh?
//A pony with black fur sits down across from me. A small cloth square covers her cutie mark, and a leather mask with zippers covers her face. Regions of it are discolored. 
//...Ew.
Spike: Are you, uh, Herr Yyz?
//I hope I pronounced that right.
Herr Yyz: I am. I see you have the inductor's cape. Wise of her to give it to you.
Spike: No, I'm just borrowing it. You can send it back, right?
HY: It's a gift. Keep it.
//Uh, okay, that's kind of forward...
Spike: So, uh, I was told I needed to meet you to enter Celestia's Faceless.
HY: Yes. Do you want to join Celestia's Faceless?
Spike: Yeah.
HY: Good. You are now one of the Faceless.
//...What?
Spike: Is that it?
HY: Usually I have a speech prepared for when groups join. You don't seem like one for speeches.
Spike: I meant, is that all I really have to do? I thought there'd be, I don't know, some sort of test?
HY: If you understand what the Faceless is about and want to join, those are the only tests.
Membership is voluntary.
Spike: ...Okay, then.
HY: Why is it, though, that you wanted to join the Faceless? Dragons aren't our usual fare.
//...This pony is extremely straightforward. It's like subtlety and tact are just words in the dictionary that have two of the letter t.
Spike: ...I want all civilized people to understand Celestia's power, and I want that understanding to be the dominant force in Equestria, before anything else.
//IS THAT HOW YOU DECIDED TO PUT "EQUALITY AND REGICIDE" BECAUSE THAT'S A BITCH WAY OUT YOU SORRY SHITHEAD
HY: ...Really? It seems like you've thought about how to say that.
//...Every damn person in this world has lie-detecting powers!
\Or maybe you're a terrible liar.
HY: You look hardened. 
//...Excuse me?
HY: Tell me about your battles. Maybe then, I'll figure out what we can do together.
Spike: ...
HY: No, I don't mean sex. I left that life behind me.
//After a bit of hesitation, I start telling Herr Yyz my story. She does nothing but listen.
Spike: And, well, that's that. I came here.
//I was vague about the parts with Twilight, the forest fire, and Osto Bacchus, but besides that I basically just told someone my life story. Now that it's out there... it sounds kind of dumb.
//Herr Yyz nods her head.
HY: Celestia really did tell you to overthrow the Princess?
Spike: Yeah. What does that mean?
HY: It means you have to overthrow the Princess.
Spike: Hold on, you're--
HY: Encouraging you? Yes. I believe Celestia really did tell you that, and her decrees are the orders of a goddess. They cannot be ignored.
Spike: So what do I do?
HY: You should go to Ponyville, as Quine advised you. Wear the cape when you are there, and only refer to yourself as a Hero. This will remove your identity, and you will be a better Hero for it.
Spike: I still confront Fluttershy?
HY: Why not? She can, if Quine is correct, cure your dying curse. And she is one of the Avatars, holder of the Element of Kindness. You will be twenty percent closer to your goal of meeting with Hazel. And if you cure your friend Kezno as well, you'll advance dragonkind.
Spike: ...Okay. I think I understand now.
//Herr Yyz smiles. It would look odd even without the mask.
HY: It must seem like I'm rushing you. I'm sorry for that.
Spike: Rushing me? I just spent an hour telling you my life story. We're not rushing anywhere.
//The table where Rarity and Twilight sat is empty now. The Snaffler is a lot less busy.
HY: Yes, but I would like to give you a proper initiation soon, instead of just your acceptance of our mantle. After you receive the Element of Kindness, come back to Canterlot. We can discuss more then.
//Herr Yyz stands up. Neither of us actually ordered more than coffee, but she tosses down a few bits.
Spike: Wait! You're leaving?
HY: It is a busy week. Now that Celestia is no longer in Equestria, her duties fall to us. I will see you again, Spike.
//She trots off, head held high. Several of the waiters glance at her, and secretly make faces.
Spike: ...Huh. I'm not sure what I was expecting, but it wasn't that.
//I take a sip of the coffee, finally, even though it's cold.
Spike: Blech tpppb--
//And spit it out.
Spike: What the crap, people drink this for fun? It's terrible!
//I walk out of the restaurant, disappointed.
//Na-Mira is waiting for me as I walk out, cape over my arm.
N-M: Spike, it's rude to keep a lady waiting.
Spike: Oh, sorry, who's waiting for me?
//I smile and hug Na-Mira, as she snorts (how does she do that?).
N-M: After I was sent here, I couldn't find out what happened to you at all.
Spike: I was training with Quine. I only got there because of your help, so, thanks, Na-Mira.
N-M: Hihi, it was nothing.
Spike: You work for The Snaffler now, as a waitress?
N-M: Yeah! At first, they kept me in the back cleaning dishes because... I think the word they used was 'freak'? But now I'm a waitress! (Every so often.) I never even knew a fancy thing like a restaurant existed, and now I'm working in one! Whoever made Canterlot knew what they were doing.
//Oh yeah, Na-Mira is from the past. I forgot about that.
Spike: ...I don't think they planned what restaurants would be like seven hundred years in the past, Na-Mira.
N-M: Their loss! The future is so cool!
Spike: This isn't the future, it's the present.
N-M: Hck, to you.
Spike: So, what did you want to talk to me about?
N-M: After we got separated, I thought the pony who cast that spell would try to come after me, since she did try to kill me before.
Spike: It was just a misunderstanding.
N-M: Hck, excuse me if I don't think so! I did some digging about that pony, Twilight Sparkle, to try to figure out who she was.
//What?!
Spike: You did?!
N-M: ...Should I not have?
Spike: Na-Mira, that's amazing! I've been asking everyone who she is!
//Maybe now I can figure out if what Rarity said in Longbridge Nights is true or not.
N-M: You were traveling with her, and you don't know who she is?
Spike: Uh... no. I mean, I know a little, but...
N-M: Twilight Sparkle is a unicorn from Canterlot, who moved to Ponyville under the command of Princess Celestia. She had a purple dragon with her when she was a student, but I haven't heard anything more about that.
Spike: Uh, yeah, that was me.
N-M: ...Then shouldn't you be telling me this?
Spike: Na-Mira, I lost my memory.
//Does she not remember anything?
N-M: ...Oh yeah.
//Silly fanged bint.
N-M: Eventually, she got a doctorate's degree in something or other which I don't remember. It was mathy and magicky and long. Her thesis was... oh, what was it... 'Thaumically-Chained Spheres in Flat Banach Spaces'?
//She can remember that but not that I have amnesia?
N-M: After that, the trail kind of goes dark. I mean, the general idea is there: she has powerful friends and adventures and is close to Princess Celestia in some way, shape, or form.
Spike: 'Close'? Is that what she was complaining about...
N-M: Like I said, there's no information. Rumors even mention she had wings at some point, but-- Spike: _Wings_?!
//Like a pegasus? That just sounds dumb!
N-M: They say her wings disappeared along with Celestia.
//Why would that be true?
Spike: That rumor must be false.
N-M: Anyway, there's no documents on her until a few weeks after Celestia disappears. The dragon Opterix attacked Ponyville, a town with no defenses at the time.
//No documents? That can't be right... Quine said there was a coronation of some sort.
Spike: And she defeated it?
N-M: Battle records list four people killed at Ponyville on that day. Three of them have the last name 'Sparkle', and one is Opterix.
Spike: What?!
//No way, no damn way, not in hell--
//I FUCKING TOLD YOU YOU SHIT NOW LISTEN TO ME
Spike: But Twilight isn't dead!
N-M: Right, so I looked for family. But she only has a brother, who's captain of the guard at Canterlot Castle, so... it had to be her and her parents. They were known as powerful magicians in their time.
//How can this be true? Even a powerful dragon couldn't take on Twilight with two other mages...
Spike: So she faked her death.
N-M: I think so. And I think the rumor she had wings is a little more significant than just a rumor.
Spike: What?
N-M: Think about it. How rare are alicorns?
Spike: Uh...
//--I don't know. I have amnesia.
Spike: Rare, I guess?
N-M: Right. Who's the only pony known or rumored to have wings after being born otherwise? Twilight Sparkle. Who is a unicorn of immeasurable power on battle record as dying nineteen months ago but is clearly not dead? Twilight Sparkle. What alicorn appears only three days after the fake death of Twilight Sparkle? _Princess Hazel_.
//--...
Spike: Na-Mira--
N-M: Immensely powerful sorceress? Known as a strict organizer and leader? Alicorn from out of nowhere? Knows the Princess's knights by name? Remember when you burnt down--
Spike: Yeah, skip that part--
N-M: And what she cared about was the big picture, how it would impact all of Equestria?
Spike: She also cared about the dead people.
N-M: This is the only explanation that makes sense, Spike. Your friend, Twilight Sparkle, is really Princess Hazel! She has been all along!
//--That's impossible.
//--WHO CARES KILL THEM BOTH.
Spike: No. I refuse to believe it.
//--I just asked Twilight to be best friends with me forever. Even if it was a joke, I consider her a good friend... maybe the only friend I have. Besides Na-Mira. I don't want to imagine she's the person Celestia told me I have to kill...
//--WHY IS IT 'KILL' WHEN IT'S YOUR FRIEND AND 'DEFEAT' WHEN IT'S YOUR OPPONENT?
//--You?! What do you know about this?
//--I KNOW YOU'RE AN IDIOTIC ASSHOLE AND THIS IS A WASTE OF TIME. GET FUCKING GOING.
//--I can't believe the person I'm traveling with is the one I'm destined to defeat...
N-M: Believe it or don't. I'm not completely sure myself, but it's something you should keep in mind. You're in the presence of royalty! Isn't that amazing?!
Spike: Uh, yeah, pretty amazing. Listen, Na-Mira, if you could not tell anyone else about this--
N-M: Well, yeah, no one else knows who your friend is anyway.
Spike: Na-Mira, thanks. I'll think about this, I promise, but now I have to go back to Hero things. The life of a drakeling is in danger and I'm the only one who can save him.
N-M: Wait! Don't you want me to find out something else?
//--I forgot about that too! Wow, I've been away for a long time.
Spike: You have a life now. You have a job and... I'm sure friends.
N-M: Not really. Not besides you. All my friends are dead, remember?
Spike: Still, I don't want to take this away from you.
N-M: Are you kidding? How am I going to see the world from the inside of a kitchen?! You're still a Hero, and as long as you can use my help I'm here for you.
//--HOW FUCKING SWEET. GET HER KILLED WITH YOUR INSANE DESIRES, WHY DON'T YOU.
Spike: Uh, okay. Rainbow Dash seems to be following me. Can you find out more about her? I want to know who I'm up against.
N-M: Sure! Information gatherer Na-Mira is on the job!
//--She drops her waitress uniform at her hooves and gallops off, leaving me alone with my cape and train ticket to Ponyville (Herr Yyz gave me it). The afternoon bell strikes, welcoming in the darkness.
//--...Time to get moving, I guess.

//--Night train to Forlegsandria. I'm sitting across from an old mare who is getting on my nerves.
Old Mare: Hoof! It smells like one o' them scalescum in here. They could do a better job o' cleaning these compartments, I say.
Spike: I'm going to try to get some sleep.
//Though mostly I hope she just shuts up.
//I put my brown cloak over myself and lie down on the seat. I can already tell I'm not going to get any...
//...

C: Spike.
//Huh. With the rumbling, this must be that dream everyone talks about of the train going through the tunnel. Am I supposed to be inside the train? That seems kind of weird.
Spike: Go away, puberty fairy.
C: You've passed that mark. And I am no creature of whimsy.
//Wait...
Spike: Celestia!
C: Yes. It is I.
Spike: Oh, Celestia, I have dedicated myself to your worship, and want to work to advance your glory through all of Equestria!
C: For that I am glad, my Spike. If you see to it that you are loyal to me, and not to others, reward can be your only end.
Spike: Not to others? You mean I shouldn't work with the Faceless?
C: It is as Quine said, little one. Religious organizations can be helmed by different captains, and sailed in different directions. You mean to do this in my name, as I see it; Herr Yyz would lead them by what she believes me to be. But there are more important topics now.
Spike: What is it, O Celestia?
C: You must awaken. Buffalo mean to take the train and abduct its passengers for ransom. These radicals have blocked the train's path with tree trunks. They will kill you, or worse, if they find you here. There are too many for you to deal with, so you must escape.
Spike: What? I can't just run away! The crash will kill people, and the survivors will be kidnapped!
C: If I told you how to save them and yourself, would the act hold any meaning?
//...I guess not.
C: Awaken, Hero. Learn what 'fight or flight' means.

Chapter End Notes

With apologies to Tarn Adams.
//I wake up. The old mare across from me is pretending to be asleep.
//...Huh, my cape shifted off while I was sleeping. The old mare is staring at me through one slightly open eye.
//I stand up.
Old Mare: What are you doing?!
//...Standing up. What does it look like?
Spike: Here, hide yourself under this.
//I hand her the brown cloak. She lets it drop on the floor, eying me suspiciously.
Spike: Stay out of the way and you might not get hurt.
//First, I have to get the train to stop. Then... I'll figure something out.

The Drakeling puts on the displacement cape, blurring into a vague smudge of purple!

//I step out into the hallway, closing the door behind me. Here's to hoping I'll never meet that person again in my life.
//...Which way is it to the front of the train?
Porter: 'Scuse me, sir, but please don't loiter in the hallways. The track ahead is bumpy and we don't want to see anyone hurt.
Spike: Oh, sorry. I'm trying to see my sister. She said she was one car ahead of me, but I don't know which way that is.
//The porter looks at me oddly.
Porter: Um, sir, can't you tell which way the train is moving? Ahead would mean, to the front of the train.
//...Wow.
Spike: Swings, I'm sorry, it's late. I feel kind of dumb now.
Porter: Of course not, sir. 'Scuse me.
//He moves on by, down the train. I run towards the front once he's out of sight.
Spike: Jebed, can you hear me? I need your help.
Voice One: (Why is that guy running?)
Voice Two: (Hush, we're supposed to be asleep. Hehehehe!)
//After a pause, the ankh responds.
Ankh(Jebed): ...This is an odd time at night to have a request, Spike.
Spike: There's a train coming into Forlegsandria, but the tracks are blocked and buffalo are going to attack it. Can you get help?
Ankh(Jebed): Are you sure?
Spike: Yes! I'm on it!
Ankh(Jebed): I'll see who I can round up.
//I burst through the door to the engineer's room!
Lead Engineer: Hey, what's up?
//...The cape makes them think I'm someone who's supposed to be here. Can I use that?
Spike: Uh, hey, got a message from up ahead. Someone said the tracks are blocked.
//Both engineers whip their heads around to look at me.
Side Engineer: What?
Spike: The tracks are blocked. We have to stop.
Side Engineer: Listen, I haven't heard anything on the radio.
Lead Engineer: Blocked? What would they be blocked by?
Spike: There's a bunch of logs on the tracks. I swear, I'm telling the truth!
Lead Engineer: ...Just who the hell are you, anyway?
//It looks like the cape's powers are limited...
SE: Front to internal, could we get some security in here? Over.
Spike: Listen, I'm not trying to trick you. In the time we could spend arguing, you could be sending a pegasus out there to check.
Lead Engineer: Bub, whatever you're trying to pull, it's not gonna--
Spike: Are you going to risk everyone's lives on that?!
//The two engineers pause. I hear someone large coming up the train car.
Side Engineer: Front to internal, send out a flier to check the tracks, over.
LE: Serge! Cancel that.
SE: If he's lying, then, what? Nothing happens.
LE: Nothing's gonna happen, get your head on--
//The radio crackle interrupts their argument:
Radio: Nix that request, front; over a hundred buffalo in war colors running next to us, over.
SE: What?!
LE: The hell?!
Spike: They blocked the tracks!
SE: Front to internal, confirm war buffalo, over!
LE: If we stop, they'll overrun the cars! Get this idiot outta here!
Security Pony: Sir, get on the ground.
Spike: If you don't, people will die!
//A hundred? That's way too many!
LE: Get him outta here!
Radio: Front, brakes! Track is blocked! I repeat, track is blocked! BRAKES!
//The side engineer yanks the brake lever!
The Drakeling collides with the obstacle!
The Security Pony collides with the obstacle!
The Lead Engineer falls over!
//A horrid screech comes from beneath the cars, echoing through the entire train! It starts to slow down!

LE: Serge, warning next time!
The Drakeling stands up.

Spike: Keep the passengers in their rooms! I'll try to hold them off!
SE: What?!
LE: The hundred war buffalo, you idiot!
Spike: There's still a block on the tracks!

The Security Pony stands up.
//I leap out of the room, running backwards on the slowing train!
//Out of the window, lit by moonlight, I can see a horde of buffalo running next to the train. How they can keep up is beyond me...
Spike: I've got to get to the outside!
Voice One: (What? What's happening?)
Voice Two: Why are we slowing down?
Spike: Stay in your cabins!

The Drakeling breathes in and focuses, casting Terrae Corpus! The Drakeling's scales become as hard as rock!
The Drakeling takes off the displacement cape.
//I reach the end of the car and swing to the outside, holding on to the train's steel pole with my left hand!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

The Buffalo attack!

The Buffalo leaps at The Drakeling!
The Buffalo headbutts The Drakeling in the upper body, cracking the scale and bruising the muscle!
The Buffalo collides with The Drakeling, but The Drakeling holds on!
//Swings, they just immediately attacked me! I guess there's nothing to do but fight back!

Spike: Not today!
The Drakeling grabs The Buffalo by the head with his right hand! The Drakeling throws The Buffalo by the head with his right hand!
The Buffalo collides with The Buffalo! They tangle together and fall over!
//The buffalo try to move around their tripped comrades, but it doesn't look like they're having a successful job of it...

The train slows down!

//I'll try not to kill them, I should be able to restrain myself like that...
Spike: Get away!
The Drakeling breathes fire!
The Buffalo dodges away from the dragonfire! The Buffalo dodges away from the dragonfire!
The Buffalo collides with The Buffalo! They tangle together and fall over!

Buffalo: Make the dragon pay for our suffering!
Spike: Shove it up your--
The Buffalo leaps at The Drakeling!
The Buffalo gores The Drakeling in the left upper leg, but the attack is deflected by The Drakeling's scales!
The Drakeling counterattacks!
The Drakeling kicks The Buffalo in the upper body with his right foot, bruising the skin, bruising the muscle and bruising the left false rib!
The Buffalo bites the train in the steel! The Buffalo latches on firmly!

Spike: Hope you know a good dentist!
The Drakeling kicks The Buffalo in the left front leg, shattering the bone!
The Buffalo falls over!
The Buffalo releases the grip of The Buffalo's teeth on the train.

The train slows down!

The Buffalo leaps at The Drakeling!
The Buffalo kicks The Drakeling in the lower body, but The Drakeling dodges away!
Spike: Damn I'm good!
The Drakeling strikes The Buffalo in the upper body with his Dashing Rogue Punch, bruising the muscle, shattering the bone and tearing apart the middle spine's nervous tissue!
The Buffalo falls over!

The Drakeling breathes fire!
The Buffalo is caught in the dragonfire! The Buffalo is lit aflame!
Buffalo: Aaaaaaaaagggghh!
//The aflame buffalo diverts to the outside of the pack, fading away from view as he slows down.
//I'm fighting, but I'm not doing much damage! There are too many of them!

The train slows down!
//It's almost walking speed now! They can jump right up!

The Buffalo leaps at The Drakeling!
Spike: You jerks like football?
The Drakeling kicks The Buffalo in the upper body with his right foot, bruising the muscle and shattering the right true ribs!
The Buffalo is propelled away by the force of the blow!
The Buffalo collides with The Buffalo! They tangle together and fall over!
The Buffalo collides with the ground! The Buffalo collides with the ground!

//You know, if I weren't doing that to them...

The Buffalo leaps at The Drakeling!
The Buffalo headbutts The Drakeling in the upper body, bruising the muscle!
The Buffalo collides with The Drakeling, but The Drakeling holds on!

The Buffalo leaps at The Drakeling!
The Buffalo headbutts The Drakeling in the right upper leg, denting the scale!
The Buffalo collides with The Drakeling! The Drakeling releases the grip of The Drakeling's left hand on the train!

//It's moving slow enough that I don't need to hold on, but that's not good!
\Compared to what? Crashing and killing everyone?

Spike: Attacking a train full of innocent people... don't expect me to forgive you.

The Drakeling strikes The Buffalo in the right front leg with his Fist of Justice, shattering the right front leg's bone, driving the bone through the right knee, and shattering the right knee's bone!
The Buffalo gives into pain! The Buffalo collapses!

Buffalo: Innocent?! How are you anything but?!
Spike: As if that excuses your behavior!
Buffalo: Dragons slaughtered our people!
Spike: Then take issue with them, not us!

The Buffalo kicks the Drakeling in the left upper arm with her right front hoof, denting the scale!

The Drakeling grabs The Buffalo by the left horn with his right hand! The Drakeling throws The Buffalo by the left horn with his right hand!
The Buffalo collides with The Buffalo! They tangle together and fall over!

The train slows to a crawl!

//Well, here goes nobody.
Spike: Who wants bison burger?
//I leap off the train!
The Drakeling leaps at The Buffalo!
The Drakeling kicks The Buffalo in the head with his left foot, bruising the muscle, bruising the skull and bruising the brain!
The Drakeling collides with The Buffalo! They tangle together and fall over!
The Buffalo has been knocked unconscious!

The Buffalo kicks The Drakeling in the head with her left front hoof, denting the scale!
The Buffalo kicks The Drakeling in the left foot with his right rear hoof, shattering the scale and bruising the muscle!
The Buffalo goes The Drakeling in the right lower leg with her right horn, shattering the scale!

The Drakeling stands up.

The Drakeling breathes fire!
The Buffalo dodges away from the dragonfire! The Buffalo is caught in the dragonfire! The Buffalo's right front leg has been burnt to a crisp!

The Buffalo charges at The Drakeling, but The Drakeling dodges away!
The Drakeling strikes The Buffalo in the lower body with his Dashing Rogue Punch, bruising the muscle and bruising the guts!

Spike: It's because of thugs like you people have to live in fear!
Buffalo: No! It's because of dragons like you that _we_ suffer!
Spike: And you're taking it out on others?!

The Drakeling breathes fire! The Buffalo dodges away from the dragonfire!

Buffalo: Our young were taken from us just moons ago! Should we not take in turn the dragons' young?! The ponies' young?!
Spike: No!

The Buffalo charges at The Drakeling! The Buffalo gores The Drakeling in the lower body from behind with his right horn, shattering the scale and tearing apart the muscle!
The right horn has lodged firmly in the wound!

//Kooo, this is bad...
\Not as bad as seeing innocents hurt. You still have strength!
//IS THAT WHAT YOU CALL IT?

The Drakeling elbows The Buffalo in the head with his left elbow, bruising the muscle, bruising the skull and tearing apart the upper spine's nervous tissue!
The Buffalo collapses! The Buffalo releases the grip of The Buffalo's right horn on The Drakeling's lower body.

//Celestia, this is bad; I'm bleeding and I'm surrounded and it's hard to stand on that foot...

Spike: You think I'm afraid of you?!
Buffalo: You're the monster here! We're just victims!
Spike: Says the trainrobber!

The Buffalo charges at The Drakeling!
The Buffalo headbutts The Drakeling in the right lower arm, denting the scale!
The Buffalo collides with The Drakeling! The Drakeling tumbles backwards!

Buffalo: Hold him down! He is a drakeling!
Spike: _That_ doesn't make you sound evil...

The Drakeling breathes fire!
The Buffalo is caught in the dragonfire! The Buffalo's upper body has been set aflame! The Drakeling stands up.

//Again, that foot's not stable; we need to find something to do here... 
\\What?! Tell me just what, exactly, I'm supposed to do surrounded by twenty buffalo who want to kill me!

The Buffalo kicks The Drakeling in the nose with her left front hoof, shattering the scale and bruising the bone! The Drakeling falls over! //Swings, I wasn't expecting that!

The Buffalo gores at The Drakeling with her left horn, but The Drakeling rolls away! 
The Buffalo grabs The Drakeling by the left lower leg with her right front hoof! 
The Buffalo grabs The Drakeling by the head with his left front hoof! 
The Buffalo grabs The Drakeling by the right upper leg with her upper body!

Buffalo: Calm the beast!

The Drakeling breathes fire! 
The Buffalo dodges away from the dragonfire! The Buffalo releases the grip of The Buffalo's right front hoof on The Drakeling's left lower leg. 
The Buffalo is caught in the dragonfire! The Buffalo's left front leg has been burnt to a crisp! The Buffalo gives into pain! The Buffalo releases the grip of The Buffalo's upper body on The Drakeling's right upper leg.

Buffalo: Cover his mouth!

The Buffalo grabs The Drakeling by the jaw with his right front hoof! The Buffalo forces The Drakeling's mouth closed! //Well, there's a simple solution to this problem. 
The Drakeling punches The Buffalo in the upper body with his Fist of Justice, bruising the muscle, shattering the right true ribs, driving the right true ribs through the right false ribs and shattering the right false ribs! 
The Buffalo gives into pain! The Buffalo collapses!

The Drakeling stands up.

Spike: You want more?! I aim to please! //THE FIRST STEP IS ADMITTING IT. //I can't keep staying on this foot; maybe I need to use this new technique...

The Drakeling breathes in and focuses, casting Patatrin-Vikramana! The Drakeling's step becomes as light as a feather!

//Wow, everything feels so much better!

The Buffalo charges at The Drakeling! 
The Buffalo goes at The Drakeling with his left horn, but The Drakeling dodges away! 
The Buffalo rushes past The Drakeling!

//It's like I can almost feel my opponents, and how clumsily they move! Four legs aren't any sort of benefit in a fight...

The Buffalo kicks at The Drakeling with her right rear hoof, but The Drakeling dodges away!
//You know, we should probably start hitting back.
The Drakeling strikes The Buffalo in the teeth with his Dashing Rogue Punch, and the severed parts fly off in an arc!
//Who knows, maybe she has a career as a 'toothless old wisemare' in her future.

//Suddenly the air takes on a different tone. Something is coming, and I can't tell--
Buffalo: Uaaaaayayaayaaya!
The Buffalo collides with The Drakeling! They tangle together and fall over!
//Oof, she landed on top of my stomach--
Spike: Oouurrrelk--
The Drakeling vomits blood!
The spewing dragon vomit laced with dragon blood strikes The Drakeling in the right upper arm!

Buffalo: Wow, I can't believe that worked!
Spike: Shut up and get off-ooul--
The Drakeling vomits blood!
The spewing dragon vomit laced with dragon blood strikes the ground!

The Buffalo grabs The Drakeling by the left upper leg with her right rear leg! The Buffalo grabs The Drakeling by the right upper leg with her left rear leg! The Buffalo grabs the Drakeling by the jaw with her right front hoof!

//Two more buffalo dive on my arms! This isn't good!
The Buffalo grabs The Drakeling by the left upper arm with his lower body! The Buffalo grabs The Drakeling by the right upper arm with his upper body!

Buffalo: I hope my ancestors will forgive me... doing a vile thing such as this to a vile thing such as you -- but for my people, I must.
//Fire spurts out from between my teeth. Screw her and screw this.
The Buffalo grabs The Drakeling by the waist with her waist!

//What happened to change in the air?! Something was about to happen, I know it!
//YOU MEAN BESIDES YOU BRINGING GREAT SHAME UPON OUR PEOPLE?
//Go to hell!

The Buffalo assaults The Drakeling with her waist! The Drakeling's resistance is lowered!

Buffalo: Stop struggling! I'm enjoying this as little as you are!
//That's a good reason to stop!
Spike: Mmrmh mhr rrhhhm!

//Wait... I think I hear something.
//THERE IS A CHANGE IN THE FUCKING WIND, YOU IDIOT. TURNS OUT I KNEW YOUR RANK ASS COULDN'T HELP WITH ABSOLUTELY SHIT SO I CALLED IN SOMEONE ELSE.
//Who?
//FUCKING ANYONE DOES IT MATTER

The Buffalo assaults The Drakeling with her waist! The Drakeling's resistance is lowered further!

//Out of the skies I see a massive beast drop like a stone!

The Bronze Dragon slams into the ground!
The Buffalo is caught underneath the falling Bronze Dragon! The Buffalo has been struck down!
The Buffalo is caught underneath the falling Bronze Dragon! The Buffalo has been struck down!

Buffalo: What the hell was that?!

//THE HAMMER OF JUSTICE YOU CRAZY HORNED BINT

The Bronze Dragon breathes fire!
The Buffalo is caught in the dragonfire! The Buffalo's entire body has been burnt to a crisp! The Buffalo has been struck down!
The Buffalo is caught in the dragonfire! The Buffalo's entire body has been burnt to a crisp! The Buffalo has been struck down!
The Buffalo is caught in the dragonfire! The Buffalo's entire body has been burnt to a crisp! The Buffalo has been struck down!
The Buffalo is caught in the dragonfire! The Buffalo's entire body has been burnt to a crisp! The Buffalo has been struck down!

Buffalo: Dragon! Dragon on the right flank! Retreat!

The Buffalo releases the grip of The Buffalo's right front hoof on The Drakeling's jaw.
The Buffalo releases the grip of The Buffalo's lower body on The Drakeling's left upper arm.

The Drakeling breathes fire! The Buffalo dodges away from the dragonfire!
The Buffalo releases the grip of The Buffalo's upper body on The Drakeling's right upper arm.

Justice (Bronze Dragon): Hero! Is that you?
Spike: Jebed!
Jebed: Lie flat!

The Dragon breathes fire!
The Buffalo is caught in the dragonfire! The Buffalo's entire body has been burnt to a crisp! The Buffalo has been struck down!
The Buffalo is caught in the dragonfire! The Buffalo's entire body has been burnt to a crisp! The Buffalo has been struck down!
The Buffalo is caught in the dragonfire! The Buffalo's entire body has been burnt to a crisp! The Buffalo has been struck down!
The Drakeling's scales are unharmed!

//--I stand up through the charred remains of the buffalo holding me down. Jebed's smaller than Osdar, and her flame was still like that...

Jebed: Are you hurt?
Spike: A little. Not badly.
Jebed: Good. We were in time, then.
Spike: 'We'?
//--I look up. Parts of the starry sky are blotted out by the shapes of dragons, soaring overhead and diving down into the fray. The side of the train opposite us starts to light up with occasional dragonfire, and the screams of buffalo become more frequent.
//--...It looks like the train is safe.

The Buffalo were defeated!
Spike earned 7500 experience points!
Spike is now level 23!

[SAVE LOCATION]

Spike: You got here pretty quickly.
Jebed: I knew you wouldn't use the ankh unless you had to, because anyone can hear it.
Spike: Better than... you know.
//What was happening there. I never hoped someone would see me like that...
Jebed: It's a dreadful world drakelings have to face, Spike, but thankfully no one has to face it alone.
Spike: I'm glad you didn't think I was joking, but... this many dragons? Was that really necessary?
Jebed: The dragon instinct wouldn't leave me alone. Which was annoying, because I would have come anyway.
//SO WOULD SHITHEAD IF HE HAD GOTTEN THE CHANCE
Jebed: Oh, right, hold on--
//Jebed leans back and extends her head up. She breathes purple flames into the night sky!
Spike: Woah!
JBD: It's the optional disengage signal. I don't want anyone feeling like they have to chase these bison to the ends of Equestria... but I wouldn't be opposed if they did.
//The sun starts to rise over Canterlot mountain. It shows just exactly how many dragons are in swarm over the train car... and that is a scary sight.
Spike: Wh-- they're running away! They've surrendered! There's no reason to keep fighting!
JBD: ...Do you understand what they were trying to do to you?
Spike: That? Everyone tries to do that, don't chase them down on my account!
JBD: ...That is not a healthy mentality, Spike.
Spike: I'm a Hero, I doubt that's a healthy mentality either. Tell them to stop killing! It's not necessary anymore!
JBD: I will leave it up to them to decide. These buffalo would have murdered and enslaved you, and others on the train if they had their way. Criminals need to be brought to justice to prevent crime from spreading.
Spike: They... they didn't do any of that yet. You can't blame someone for what they _would_ do. Call them off!
//Jebed takes a long pause, neck bowing to one side as she looks at me. She sniffs sharply once, and raises her head, breathing green flames into the night sky!
Spike: (How do you control your flame color like that?)
JBD: You're bleeding.
Spike: Hmm?
//I look around me. The blood all over the ground came from my vomit, not the hole in my side... though I should get the wound checked out.
JBD: Get on my back. I'll take you to Forlegsandria.
Spike: I have to make sure everyone on the train is alright.
JBD: We're clearing the blockage on the tracks, and there are enough bipedals to check on the passengers. They'll take care of it. You're hurt. Climb on, I'll fly you.
Spike: Well, if you're offering... //I climb on Jebed's back, and she launches into the sky.

//Jebed hits a thermal about a mile from where dragons are lifting tree trunks off the tracks. We circle around for a bit, gaining height and watching them.
Spike: Do you think everything will be alright?
Jebed: That rarely happens. Very little turns out well on its own. That is why we must work to make it so.
Spike: ...Okay, what do you think will happen?
JBD: The block will be removed, and the trains will run late today. Besides that, nothing out of the ordinary. Only you were hurt, thanks to... well, you.
Spike: Several buffalo were killed.
JBD: Outside my sphere of consideration.
//Jebed reaches the top of the thermal, and stretches her wings wide, coasting Forlegsandria way. I grab two of her spines and draw myself into a ball; it's cold up here (and the wind on my wound
Spike: A few of the buffalo were yelling at me for being a dragon. Why is that?
JBD: The first, and obvious, response is that you were in a fight.
Spike: It didn't sound like that. They said 'dragons slaughtered our young'.
JBD: Oh. Well, they said that because dragons slaughtered their young.
Spike: What?!

//Jebed turns her head to the side, looking at me with a great eye.
JBD: Spike, let no one fool you. Some dragons, particularly from the Aquinatics, like to think of ourselves as a noble people, whose heritage awards us dominion and demands honor from all those of dragon blood.

//I guess I can play demon's advocate here.
Spike: What's wrong with being proud of who you are?
T: (The 'I'm better than others' part of it.)
Spike: (How did you get up--)
JBD: But dragons are savage killers by nature. In practice, we are the scourge of empires, destroyer of peoples, and bringers of war. Dragons are predators, and violence is bred into us.
Spike: ...I don't want to believe that.
JBD: Then look at yourself: how are you helping the world? Not through charity or grace, but via bloodshed. There is a place in the world for white blood cells, though, and it may be better suited to a dragon than a pony.
Spike: There are plenty of dragons who aren't bloodthirsty murderers!
JBD: All sapient creatures, from the smallest ant to the biggest of us, demonstrate behaviors which are a direct result of their biology. Patterns are encoded in our blood, species by species. The question is whether to glorify our natures, or to transcend them.

//The rising sun warms the air a little more. I stretch out my tail, and it cracks.
JBD: Dragons who choose to stay in the Aquinatics and fight, among whom Quine is included, generally believe our natures are either immutable or desirable. Dragons of old divided Equestria and further lands territorially among themselves, fighting recklessly for miniscule power gains, resulting in great and terrible consequences for all. Like animals, they embraced the chaos they made. Dragons themselves led to the extinction of true dragonkind, with only us phoenician drakes surviving.
Spike: So what happened?
JBD: The advent of Princess Celestia. She--
Spike: Wait, no, hold on. I thought Celestia was always here.
//Something like a laugh comes from ahead of me.
JBD: You've been listening to ponies, then. How long do ponies live, again? Fifty years, if they're lucky?
T: (She's off by a bit.)
JBD: I've spoken with dragons who called Celestia 'that young girl', when they were alive. Her origins might be lost in pony history, but I'm sure Quine would be able to tell you what ancient dragons thought of Celestia's emergence in Equestria.
Spike: ...Huh.

//Quine didn't have the highest opinion of her.
JBD: Informal groups were created, out of necessity, to make sure dragonkind survived against Princess Celestia's power. Their actions and ideas reflected their base instincts, and what they felt a dragon should be. Eventually, this resulted in a strict set of feudal rules and honor codes which governed dragon behavior.
Spike: What were they?
JBD: Best left in the past is what they were. 'Dragon' is not a behavior or a culture, and civilized peoples are meant to transcend their nature, not embrace it. I've worked forty years in Forlegsandria on that principle and the situation in the Aquinatics is a direct result of ignoring it.
Spike: ...Everyone has their own opinion on the conflict, I guess.
//Nothing like that is so simple.
JBD: After the disappearance, some dragons thought their restrictions were gone -- the onus of change in the past had now left, so what they thought of as 'glory' could return to dragonkind. And... they started marauding and burning and pillaging and killing whatever they felt like, if they thought there wouldn't be a dragon who challenged them for territory. They embraced our nature.
Spike: Wait, I thought you opposed Princess Hazel because she killed a bunch of dragons after the disappearance. You're saying they were destroyers?
JBD: Hazel killed those dragons, sure. But there were many of us who chose to take territory not out of greed and bloodlust, but to protect as much as we could from the dragons who... well, did. And Hazel, from what I saw, refused to discriminate between the two. To her, a dragon was a dragon was a tyrant, and needed to be eliminated. ...I lost many friends in those three months.
//The more and more I learn, the murkier the world becomes. Hazel killed dragons who were trying their best to help others, but also dragons who were savages... Celestia's existence threatened the entire race of dragonkind, but she calls them 'her treasured creation'... what the hell am I supposed to believe?
Spike: So what happened with the buffalo again?
JBD: Oh! Right. The buffalo were slaughtered, because this region was overseen by a particularly nasty dragon whose name I won't do the service of remembering. They claim Princess Hazel deliberately overlooked their plight after the disappearance, and demand reparations which are not going to happen. To that political end, some buffalo -- not all, which is important -- draw attention to their plight by hurting others.
Spike: Innocents.
//How terrible.
JBD: That usually gets the most eyeballs.
Spike: Wait. Why did Celestia leave again?
T: ('Swings, if Jebed can sum _that_ up in a three-hour flight, she can have my job.)
JBD: No one knows.
Spike: It seems like her absence caused so much chaos, and many people got hurt all over Equestria... didn't she know that would happen?
JBD: It's possible she did. Then again, if you're not one to believe in Princess Celestia's divinity, the events of the last few years of her rule show some significant cracks in her armor. //Celestia appeared to me in a dream. I'm fairly certain she's at least a little little divine.
Spike: She knew about all that would happen and decided to leave anyway...
//What in the world could possibly justify that?
JBD: Whether you blame her for it or not depends on how you view helping others. Is it a duty, or an option?
//For a ruler? Even if you can stop helping people once you've chosen that position, leaving without warning isn't something you can just... up and do one day.
Spike: Leaders don't abandon their people.
//Still, I'm sure Celestia must have had a reason for what she did...
JBD: We think alike, then. Though, to be completely honest, I am glad she left. Dragons under Celestian rule were not exactly equal.
//You know, I keep on hearing that, but I've never actually heard just exactly what was so bad...
\What Jebed's saying about Celestia and dragonkind's history is the same as Quine told you when you were training with him. Did you forget that? Or not want to remember?
//Damnit this entire section is just exposition can we skip to the end of the chapter already my thumb is tired from holding spacebar.
Spike: ...What do you mean?
JBD: ...
T: (Dragon and pony inequality was coincidental, not a result of deliberate policies by the crown.)
Spike: (As opposed to now?)
T: (Hey, that's not--)
JBD: Maybe it is best if I use an example.
//Story-time!

\Oh crap the background changed why are we in Canterlot again?
//Hush, you're not supposed to comment on the graphical limitations. It's assumed Jebed is
describing the setting.
\Well she could have described the clouds better, they look pixelated. And a sliding glass door?
What a security hazard!
\Oh hush Mr. Foreshadowing, we're not supposed to think about that yet.
Accompanying Pony: Come on, come on, this way.
//A middle-aged stallion enters the wide room, accompanied by a shuffling figure with a coat over
it, a little shorter than the pony.
Sniffling Figure: Snif, hhhh...
Accompanying Pony: Quiet.
//The stallion lifts his head up and looks around. He draws the crimson curtains shut across the
door. The figure speaks out in a nervous voice:
SF: Where are we?
AP: I said quiet!

The Stallion kicks The Figure in the upper body with his left front hoof, bruising the muscle and
bruising the bone!

//The figure collapses inwards, laying her head on the floor.
SF: I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, please...
AP: ...It's okay. I forgive you.
//The stallion turns away from the shaking figure, and looks to the side with a conspiratorial
glance, speaking in loud whispers.
AP: You should try to appreciate what I'm doing here. Darling -- this is my home! This is my heart
and center, right here. I want you to understand how much having you here means to me.
SF: This... is your heart and center?
//Slowly, so slowly, the stallion turns around. His brow lowers, and his face darkens.
AP: Are you... _questioning_ me?
SF: No, please, darling, I didn't mean it, I don't--
//With deliberate steps, echoing one by one through the lavish room, he advances towards the
covered girl.
//He stops in front of her, and bends his head down.
AP: Darling, _you're_ my heart and center.
//The transition in his voice, from menacing to sweet, is immediate.
//He raises the figure's head with his hooves, and pushes the coat back over her head.
\Holy crap it's Yiha!
//'Swings, you don't have to spell it out for us.
//Yiha is the figure under the coat. She's crawling on her knees and elbows, tail tucked between her
legs and wrapped around her torso.
AP: ...Am I your heart and center?
//Yiha's lip quivers for half a moment. She stares into the stallion's eyes...
Yiha: Darling... yes. I love you.
//A long pause. The slight, almost mocking smile fades from his face as he stares into Yiha's eyes, and
eventually looks away.
AP: Yiha... sometimes, I don't think that you do.
Yiha: Please, darling, don't say that--
//He spins around and faces the curtain, cutting her off:
AP: And why would I feel like that, Yiha?!
//She continues to beg and plead:
Yiha: No, darling, I love you, I really do --
AP: Enough.
//He drops his head and stares at the floor. Yiha closes her eyes, and visibly forces back tears. She tries to collect herself, and visibly fails.
Yiha: What... can I do, to p-prove that I love you?
//The stallion remains silent. He stares at the floor.
//Yiha pauses for a long time.
Yiha: ...Here? Do you want to take me... here?
//After a short moment, the stallion turns around, and mutters with a wry smile:
//The door bursts open and a mare jumps into the room!
Enraged Unicorn: Apparel, you... you _bastard_.
//Visibly shaking, she spits words at the stallion as if they could cause him physical harm.
//Nonplussed, he trots over to Yiha, and throws the coat back over her head.
Apparel: Hello, Europa.
Europa: And just what exactly would _this_ be?
//Her nostrils flare as she emphasizes words. It's actually kind of distracting.
\Or it would be if the programmer did that effect!
//Quiet.
AP: This is a misunderstanding.
//Apparel puts his hoof on Yiha's back, pressing her to get closer to the ground. She curls up, slightly.
EU: No, I think I understand exactly what's going on here.
AP: I assure you that you don't.
//The silverware on display clatters for no reason.
EU: You're using... that _thing_, as a toy!
AP: What? Europa, I would never!
EU: You might be able to manipulate her, but I'm not a dumb animal!
AP: Shut up, you cow!
//The curtains jiggle slightly, as there's a slight tremor... what's going on?
EU: So now it comes out. I knew, I always knew, but I didn't want to tell myself it was true, and now, _this_.
//The stallion straightens himself up, becoming immediately more calm.
EU: In my own fucking home!
AP: So?
EU: What do you mean, '_so_'?!
AP: What is it you want? A divorce? Are you after my money? Are you going to ruin my reputation?
EU: That... you... you _evil_ fuck. This is all you can think after doing this to me?
//A large tremor shakes the building, bouncing a mirror off the wall somewhere in the house and shattering it.
AP: What the _hell_ was that?
EU: Apparel, you are a sick, twisted fuck and divorce would be too good for you.
//Apparel trots over to the sliding glass door, and opens the curtain.

The Bronze Dragon slams the sliding door in the glass with her head, and the severed parts fly off in arcs!
The Bronze Dragon slams the stallion in the upper body with her head, bruising the muscle and shattering the left true ribs!
The stallion is propelled away by the force of the blow!

The stallion slams into the obstacle!
The stallion's left rear leg takes the full force of the impact, shattering the left rear leg's bone, jamming the left rear leg's bone through the hip and shattering the hip!

An artery has been torn!

//Europa jumps back and looks at the glass scattered all over the floor of her room. Apparel, wide-eyed, screams:
AP: WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU?!
Justice (Bronze Dragon): The consequences to your actions.
//As the dragon speaks, Yiha takes the coat from over her head with a trembling hand.

EU: This isn't what we agreed on, Jebed!
//The bronze dragon, its head and neck sticking into the room from the balcony, holding onto the outside of the building, responds:
Jebed: I don't care.

The Bronze Dragon bites the stallion in the right rear leg, tearing apart the muscle! An artery has been torn, a ligament has been torn, and a motor nerve has been severed! The Bronze Dragon latches on firmly!

//Dragging the stallion out by his leg, Jebed flings Apparel bodily into the skies of Canterlot! The Bronze Dragon throws the stallion by the right rear leg with her teeth!

The Drakeling stands up.

Yiha: No!
//Yiha runs over the shattered glass and out onto the balcony. She is only stopped by Jebed quickly bringing up a wing, blowing Yiha backwards.
//Yiha grabs onto the great bronze wing and tries to see over it.

//The stallion crashes through a window of a tall tower of Canterlot Castle, bouncing with a crunch. Yiha: Mother, I loved him!
//Far below, a frightened street vendor laments the loss of his cart, destroyed by falling bricks. There are claw-holes up the side of the building.
JBD: _No you didn't_, Yiha. As soon as we get you to a drakeling, you'll realize that the chemicals in your system are confusing you.
Yiha: _How can you say that_!
//Because that's how being a drakeling works? It's permanent, brainwashed slavery for anyone who ends up in her situation, unless another dragon breaks it (although that's more like painting over the picture than erasing it).

\Don't editorialize.

//Pegasus start rising from the Castle grounds and weave through the air, like a beehive. An alarm somewhere below is sounded.
//One pegasus, in a speed suit, hovers far behind Jebed and points at her with a hoof.
EU: Fucking _Celestia_! Do you know what they're going to do to me when they find out I've been consorting with dragons?! They'll execute me!
Jebed: I don't care.
//From the tower, a fell and terrible voice radiates, shaking the very stones of Canterlot, echoing:
Pretty Loud: WHO DARES INTERRUPT OUR BEAUTY SLEEP BY THE TOSS OF A CORPSE THROUGH OUR WINDOW?!
//Jebed's pupils become very, very small.
JBD: Honey, we have to go now, Princess Luna is going to kill us.
Yiha: ...And if I want to die? Now that taken from me is--
JBD: No time!
//Jebed picks Yiha up gently with her mouth, then launches off the building, scattering bricks everywhere!
Pretty Loud: WHAT DOST THOU MEAN'ST, A DRAGON? I WILL SHOW THAT HORRID BEAST WHO RULES IN THIS DOMAIN!
//Jebed dives instantly for the ground, ignoring all the pegasi swirling around her. Ponies scream and take cover.
Pretty Loud: AND IT IS US!

Oh, hey, the generic sky texture is back. I think they're re-using this picture.
//Hush.
Spike: ...
Jebed: Oh, sorry, where was I?
Spike: You kind of trailed off at the end there.
T: (Princess Luna wasn't the easiest to deal with even when she had a full day of sleep. I can't imagine what they had to do to escape.)
Jebed: I took us to the sewers, where we spent three weeks hiding from the Canterlot guard until they stopped looking for us. Then, we went home.
T: (...And now I don't want to.)
Spike: Did you... did you ever--
Jebed: Find that drakeling? Yes, someone was willing to do that. He wasn't my first choice, but they weren't exactly normal circumstances.
Spike: ...Does Yiha resent you for it?
JBD: Resent... no.
//Oh. That's good.
JBD: I suspect that she hates me with all her soul. And that she will hate me forever, as long as she lives. And... I'm okay with that.
///...Holy shit. I thought I was the most broken person on the face of the planet...
//YOU ARE
JBD: I can only hope that, one day, she understands me. And I hope, though I never would wish it upon her, that she understands what I have done.
Spike: She's your daughter, Jebed. It's only reasonable that you'd do that for her, like she would do for--
JBD: No. I would do this for any, if I could find them.
///Was it really necessary to interrupt me?
JBD: The life of a drakeling is not merely harsh. Its very design is a cruel joke played on you. The most important treasure a person could find in the world, wrapped in a packet of wet tissue paper.
Spike: I think you're underestimating us, Jebed.
T: (You were nearly defeated by buffalo.)
JBD: Compared to the evil, all that is vile, present in the world? I don't think so. Even you are nothing to overcome, against all those who lust for immortality.
//It can't be bought or crafted or designed or machined or pleaded or begged or stolen or made with magic...
JBD: And if you are attacked -- excuse me, if you are raped -- the chemical configuration of your brain changes to reward the monsters who would do such a deed. The only recompense being, of course, that if you are raped again, you may hope your new master is a slight improvement. ...Why should a player even sit down at the table if these are the rules he must abide by?
Spike: It's not as bad as murder.
JBD: I consider it worse. The mind is the last, eternal sanctuary of any living being, and to invade another's is abominable. If any creature designed our universe, it is cruel and evil for allowing this, and deserves none of our worship.
//Well, hey, I think that's getting a little blasphemous...
GOOD FUCKING KEEP AT IT
JBD: I would die for the safety of any drakeling in this world, even its most selfish or unworthy. That is my duty. As our little ones become the new prey, it falls to the older and more powerful to protect them. And you are no different, Spike. Which is why I am glad you called me.
//Jebed falls silent for a long while. I watch clouds float by, lit orange from below by the rising sun. I don't feel like being a drakeling is that hard, but I don't have the greatest perspective on these things... maybe over her long life, Jebed found some reason to dedicate herself to the protection of those who are not as strong. Does that make her a Hero?
//Oh, yeah, speaking of rescuing drakelings from the hands of terrible monsters (who happen to be ponies), I wonder how Celel and Kezno are doing?
Spike: Jebed, did you meet two drakelings sometime? A wife and a husband?
JBD: The rebirth-mates? Yes, Dracos and Telekom arrived a little over a month ago. They passed through the Valley right before the great fire, I hear.
//Damnit, why does everyone remind me about that?
Spike: How are they?
JBD: Ah, that's right. You sent them, didn't you?
Spike: We met on the road one day.
JBD: There was much more to the story according to Kezno.
//I shrug. Wait, she can't see me.
Spike: I dunno. It was just another quest to me.
JBD: Celel is doing well, she found her place as a doctor for a private hospital. Kezno was trying to join the Forlegsandria militia, archery division.
//Was?
Spike: Uh, and he's not now?
JBD: No. He has fallen ill.
//Uh-oh. That doesn't bode well for me... it's probably the dying curse.
Spike: How ill, exactly?
JBD: Kezno has been bedridden for the last week. Celel insists it is a common disease, but she does not leave his side.
Spike: That sounds bad.
JBD: Yes. It is strange, because his immune system does not smell weak.
//Is everyone in this entire world able to do olfactory magic?
JBD: When he lost the ability to talk, I began to worry.
T: ('Swings, I could never imagine what life would be like if you lost the ability to talk.)
Spike: (Har har.)
//Hold on, Quine told me to visit Fluttershy in order to break the dying curse... if Kezno has the same thing, it's likely that this is the only way to cure him, too.
Spike: Jebed, do you know a little town in the Forlegsandria area called... called, uh, Pony...
//What was it? Darn, is this how Na-Mira feels all the time?
//STUPID? PROBABLY.
Spike: It's got 'Pony' in it?
JBD: Ponyville?
//Yeah, that one.
JBD: What about it?
Spike: Quine told me to meet someone near there.
JBD: The Keeper of the Glade?
T: (Wow, she's good.)
JBD: That would mean, this sickness is shared between you and Kezno?
Spike: (Yeah, she's good.)
JBD: I know of her, and her powers. Quine speaks of her highly.
Spike: (Of course he would, she's the Avatar of Temptation and he's a lonely old dragon.)
T: (Don't remind me.)
JBD: But I would not dare to hope for her assistance. I have spoken with her twice about Kezno's condition, knowing she could easily heal him. The mare has decided not to.
T: (Wait, hold on...)
Spike: What?!
T: (That was Jebed!)
JBD: Other solutions are needed. Unless, of course, she somehow reconsiders.
Spike: (What?)
T: (Fluttershy kicked some angry dragon's tail the other day. I just realized it was Jebed.)
Spike: (Wow...)
// The Avatars are the knights of Princess Hazel for a reason, but a pony powerful enough to thrash Jebed in a fight... and I'm trying to challenge this person? 
// Jebed continues flying. In silence, she swings her tail more vigorously, mood growing worse.
Spike: Uh, Jebed?
// Growling, she responds:
JBD: Yes?
Spike: Could you take me to the Keeper of the Glade?
// In silence Jebed flies through a cloud, drenching the both of us. She rolls over once to shake the water off her wings, and I hold on for dear life.
// Eventually, a sound like far-off thunder comes from beneath me.
JBD: Your wounds need tending.
// I twist my head, and breathe dragonfire on my back to seal the wound. Jebed doesn't even flinch.
Spike: Kezno and me--
T: (Kezno and I.)
// OH MY FUCK WHO CARES
Spike: --have a dying curse. So I'll worry about my wounds when I'm not close to dying. Can you take me to the Keeper?
// The sun rises fully over Canterlot mountain, bringing in the new day. Ever so slightly, Jebed's flight direction changes to the left.
JBD: Yes. But we are quite some time from there yet.
Spike: Good.
JBD: In silence Jebed flies through a cloud, drenching the both of us. She rolls over once to shake the water off her wings, and I hold on for dear life.
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// The sun rises fully over Canterlot mountain, bringing in the new day. Ever so slightly, Jebed's flight direction changes to the left.
JBD: Yes. But we are quite some time from there yet.
Spike: Good.
// I cover myself in the displacement cape as best I can. I kind of wish I still had the brown cloak...
Spike: Because I could really use some sleep.
T: (Flying, what an inefficient way to travel. It's a wonder that...)
// Twilight's voice fades as fast as interest for it, and soon, I am sound asleep.

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

// HEY YOU KNOW THOSE DREAMS WHERE YOU'RE FALLING

The Drakeling slams into the ground!
The Drakeling's tail takes the full force of the impact, bruising the scale and bruising the muscle!
Spike: Aaaah!
// On my back, I raise my fists, ready to fight!
Jebed: Sorry, are you hurt?
// Jebed's head and neck are above me, blocking out the midday sun. To my left and right, birds chirp and sing happily in bright green forest. A winding dirt path leads behind us (I think I fell on a pebble), and to Jebed's back a pretty bridge leads to a...
\..Is that a house? Or a hole with a door and a chicken coop?
Spike: The hell happened to this place?
JBD: It's a visual metaphor for fertility. Considering the occupant, I call it fitting.
T: (Uh, no. Fluttershy's not an idiot.)
Spike: (So, you're saying many lambs _laid_ down their lives for--)

T: (Hero, not comedian.)

Although that type of protection would probably include a hardhat.

JBD: This is as far as I will bring you, Hero. I am not welcome here.

Spike: (The conversation really went that bad, huh?)

T: (Are you kidding? It was hilarious!)

JBD: You should keep in mind that you will be welcomed here. Possibly... far, far too much.

//...Avatar of Temptation. I'm a drakeling. Right.

\Wait, no; I met Fluttershy before I even started being a Hero and she seemed friendly enough. Besides, I knew her before I lost my memory.

//Yeah, and you also knew Rainbow Dash. She also seemed 'friendly enough' when she didn't have a reason to fight you, but now you're a Hero charging into a mare's lair to claim treasure.

\Uh, what?

//Come on. Is the Avatar going to consider this anything other than a challenge for the Element of Kindness? Time to power up, Hero; anything goes beyond this point.

Spike: ...Jebed?

//As she is spreading her wings, Jebed looks down at me and raises an eyebrow.

Spike: Can you pick me up here tomorrow? Uh, if I succeed? If not, I...

//Slowly, Jebed nods her head. She leaps forward, kicking up dirt behind her, and rises into the sky.

//LET'S FUCKING DO THIS

The Drakeling breathes in and focuses, casting Patatrin-Vikramana! The Drakeling's step becomes as light as a feather!

The Drakeling breathes in and focuses, casting Terrae Corpus! The Drakeling's scales become as hard as rock!

//AND NO, NOT 'LET'S DO THIS FUCKING'. DON'T REARRANGE MY WORDS TO MEAN WHAT YOU WANT THEM TO MEAN.

//Shut up.

//I walk over the bridge and approach the door.

//Remember, Fluttershy was one of the ponies who knew you before you lost your memory. But she's also an Avatar, and needs to be convinced that you're worthy of saving by communing with the Glade. Go in, and go in hard.

//YOU'RE SERIOUSLY GOING TO PHRASE IT LIKE THAT WHAT THE SHIT MAN MAKE MY JOB EASIER

//...And try to tune him out if at all possible.

Chapter End Notes

With apologies to Tarn Adams.
Doomed Repetition

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Spike: Uh, I guess...
//I knock on the cottage door. Is this really how I'm approaching this?
//From somewhere on the second floor, a soft voice floats down:
Fluttershy: I'll be just a minute, please hold on!
Spike: O--okay, then!
//I'll be here!
//I stand with my back to the door.
\Doing what? Inspecting the chickens, in case they're going to attack you?
//It doesn't hurt to be prepared.
\I am completely sure the woodland animals are not as threatening as the Avatar who will shortly be appearing behind you.
//Yeah, but... staring at the door just kind of seems... weird.
\...
//I hear a creak, and swivel around, ready for anything!
Fluttershy: I'm sorry to keep you waiting, but you must understand, I was entertaining a guest, and...
//She trails off into silence, lowering her head and staring at the door frame.
FS: Yes? How can I help you?
Spike: Er, hi, I'm--
//Fluttershy rears back, and I raise my fists!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

FS: Oh! Spike! I didn't realize you'd be here so soon!
//She puts her hooves down and starts muttering to a rabbit on the floor. He shoots her a grumpy look before hopping off.
FS: But it's no problem. You're very welcome here, and I'm glad to see you. Please come in.
//Fluttershy turns around and starts walking to (what I have to assume should be) the living room, and I slowly lower my fists.
//This place is a mess. Knotted twine hangs everywhere from the ceiling, host to a family of squirrels skittering about. The furniture, all wicker, is cracked and frayed, and the stuffing is partly torn out of the cushions; there are unidentifiable stains on every possible surface in every possible shade; the entire place smells like sweat and spit and _life_, in all its nasty reality.
\And, come on, birdhouses go outside.
//Fluttershy casually mentions:
FS: I feel awful showing my home to you like this, but I'm afraid I haven't found any time to clean in between everything that's kept me so busy.
Spike: I've seen worse.
//LIKE A FOREST FIRE?
//Hush, you.
//COME ON, THE ONLY THING THAT WOULD ENEMA-IZE THIS SHITHOLE WOULD BE FIRE.
//Fluttershy turns her head around, looking behind herself at me, and swishes her tail once.
FS: Spike? Won't you come inside?
//ARSON IS THE WISER CHOICE. FUCK IT; WHEN IS ARSON NOT THE WISER CHOICE?
//Well, since I made it a life goal to do the opposite of whatever the dragon instinct suggests...
//LEAD A HAPPY LIFE.
//I walk inside, and close the door.
//Fluttershy puts a kettle over the fire which has been inexplicably been burning all this time. How can this tinderbox have a fireplace?
FS: I don't suppose it's a surprise to either of us that you _are_ here, though.
//Quine: Information is the most valuable resource you can buy. Even small items can be pivotal.
Spike: And why is that?
FS: Why, you're a Hero.
//Fluttershy says the word with a smile in her voice. It rings of sincerity, not mocking.
FS: I hold the Element of Kindness as one of the Avatars. You have to pass a test to be granted the Element, and seek an audience with Princess Hazel.
//Less an audience than an assault, but still...
Spike: Actually, I -- well, that's true, that is part of why I came here. But my most pressing reason for coming is I wanted you to give me some--
FS: --sugar?
//Mid-sentence pause. My mouth is still forming the next syllable in the sentence.
FS: Sugar, in your tea. Would you like some?
//After a second, speech returns.
Spike: No, no thank you.
FS: Alright. No sugar.
Spike: Yes -- I mean, no tea.
FS: No tea?
Spike: Yes.
FS: Are you sure? I really don't mind--
Spike: Yes, no tea.
//Fluttershy looks down at the floor, eyes in some strange formation that kind of looks like pouting, but can't be pouting, because she would never want someone else to feel bad that they'd hurt her feelings, and 'swings her tea smells good. What is that?
FS: I'll pour you a cup in case you change your mind later.
//She takes out two cups and saucers from a cupboard and finishes making the tea. Finishes?
Spike: That was quick.
FS: I'm sorry. Please don't feel rushed, I didn't mean for that.
Spike: How can you make tea in less than, I don't know, forty seconds?
FS: Oh, this was a very generous gift to me from one of my closest friends. She's amazing with magic.
Spike: Huh. Okay.
FS: Are you sure you don't want some tea? I seem to remember you liked it.
Spike: What is it again?
FS: Jasmine and ylang-ylang. I have some ginseng, if you'd like.
Spike: Sounds great, but I'll pass.
//Fluttershy lays down on a couch/bed/thing, curled up with her tea.
FS: Now, weren't you telling me why you were here?
//Oh, yeah, that.
//MORON.
Spike: I came on behalf of a drakeling named Kezno and myself. We were cursed with the dying breath of a unicorn cultist, and are looking to break the curse.
FS: Kezno. Where have I heard that name before?
Spike: It might have come up when, ah, Jebed spoke with you.
FS: Ah. Jebed.
Spike: I heard your conversations were not the most... civil.
FS: ...I wouldn't say that. Jebed and I just... have a difference of opinion.
Spike: Over what?
FS: A person's conversations and arguments are her own. It's not my place to tell you, Spike.
Spike: I... kind of have a vested interest. Kezno is a close friend and I'm suffering from the same weird illness spell curse voodoo.
//Can't it only be one of those things?
//Fluttershy spends some time thinking, sipping her tea. Her soft pink mane covers one of her eyes, and with the other she looks me over with a smile.
FS: Please trust me, Spike, when I say there will be time for that, and everything will be sorted out for the best. We will also deal with the Heroism, and the Element. But it's not nearly late enough to have some real fun just yet. Do you want to play a board game?

//A game of Strategy is laid out before us on the floor. Some of the pieces have been chewed. I look over the starting positions. This map looks like an orgy of snakes; there are paths everywhere.
FS: Are you sure you know how to play?
//Quine: It would behoove you to know Strategy. It is a game with which nobles teach their young and the Cavalry sharpens their officers. I will teach you many of the things you must know through this game.
//Spike: Why a game? Can't you just tell me?
//Quine: Yes. But then you would not learn.
Spike: Yes.
FS: Alright then. Shall we start?
//The game begins.
//The map is huge. Fluttershy chose this map. Why did she choose a map so large? It's too early to tell if she's planning a tricky strategy -- I can't punish right away. Does she want to cut defensive corners to build her economy until she sees me coming? Let's hope, if it goes late, her multitasking isn't vastly superior to mine...
\Or this is the only map she has. It does have flowers on it.
Spike: Ah, darn, you almost got me there.
FS: Hmm-hmm, you'd better watch out!
//She attacked a peasant with one of her own, and then pulled away. That fight would have gone in her favor, though... why did she retreat?
Spike: You know, I don't think I've seen your strategy before.
FS: I have very many tricks up my sleeve.
Spike: You're not wearing clothing.
FS: Hmm-hmm!
//Along the three paths into her core operations she has built defensive buildings. They're more than I can handle, so I post my minimal troops outside her lands and spread my peasants out to claim more land.
FS: ...
Spike: It's your turn.
FS: I know. It's just -- Twilight always does this.
Spike: You play Twilight in Strategy?
FS: Oh, quite a bit. We have so much fun together, playing board games, reading books, tending to the animals, brushing our hair... when we have time, that is.
Spike: What do you do against Twilight when she grabs land?
FS: Mostly lose. She's very good at planning.
//Fluttershy moves out from her defensive position with a middling army. It's bigger than mine, but I try to trade well with the units I have.
//Her caretaking of her soldiers is excellent... in four turns she defeats the scouts posted outside her base, and though her units were damaged none were lost. But something is strange about that...
FS: Spike? It's your turn, unless I'm mistaken.
Spike: You took too long.
FS: I'm sorry, I'll try to be quicker with my turn next time.
Spike: Huh? No, not that. You should have destroyed my scouts faster.
FS: Unit retention is the key to victory.
//Quine: Victory is not a door with only one lock. Have a keychain.
//She has quite a few more units than I do, but I've had time to get my finances flowing... by the
time Fluttershy has an army on my side of the map I'll be able to defend against it.
//Hopefully.
FS: Earlier, you were going to ask me something about your health.
Spike: Oh! Someone said you were the Keeper of the Glade for a mystical glade in Everfree
Forest.
FS: What? I'm not any sort of keeper of anything; I'm sorry.
Spike: He said the water of the glade can heal any illness.
FS: I'm so sorry, Spike, but I don't know why anypony would say something like that about me.
Would you mind if I asked who told you?
Spike: Oh, just... someone I met in passing.
//Fluttershy looks at me for some time, then advances her troops forward.
FS: Oh. Okay.
//SUPERNATURAL LIE DETECTION POWERS ARE GO.
//Same with supernatural kick-my-butt powers if I don't get soldiers out right freaking now. I send
out a powerful squad to a defensive position, but it's most of my army right there; it needs to buy a
few turns at least.
//Fluttershy takes her army and moves far to the west, avoiding confrontation.
//Why would she do that? With her numbers, it might have been an efficient trade to squeeze by
and start savaging my peasants, or at least send one or two units. Not to mention Fluttershy's army
would have won any direct fight. Is this the mix-up of a master?
Spike: What?
FS: I said, you're looking a little pale, Spike.
//My scales are purple; she can't tell that.
FS: Are you sure you're okay?
Spike: Yeah, I'm fine.
//I send agile units, freshly created, to the western front and set them in position to get behind
Fluttershy's army, and send my veteran troops towards her lands. My peasants may take losses but
the reinforcing units should destroy her army eventually, and I can do a lot of pillaging in the
meantime.
//Fluttershy spends quite some time staring at the board.
Spike: Uh, Fluttershy?
FS: Please hold on.
Spike: Okay, then...
//A few minutes pass. Fluttershy enlists the aid of a pencil and paper, detailing something in calm
writing.
//She moves all her soldiers in an elaborate pattern, which avoids perfectly the troops that tried to
trap them, and prevents my veteran troops from reaching her peasants.
//...but it's a terrible move.
Spike: Why'd you do that?
FS: ...What do you mean?
Spike: That last move. You're going to lose now.
FS: I still have my army, and my peasants are all healthy.
Spike: But there's no advantage to that.
FS: To keeping your people alive?
Spike: Sure, you have that; but comparatively I have the same sized army with a better resource
base, in ten turns the game will be over.
FS: I can only work with the people I have on the board, so keeping them alive keeps me in the
game.
//Is she so concerned about her units that she's willing to lose the game to save them?
Spike: Hmm...
//I put more units on the board, advance them, and end my turn.
Spike: Your turn.
FS: Spike, you're not looking so well.
Spike: Uh, I feel fine.
//IF YOU WERE FINE YOU WOULDN'T BE HERE. OR MAYBE YOU WOULD; YOU'D GO
ANYWHERE IF IT MEANT A THOROUGH FUCKING.
FS: Spike, I must insist -- you look dreadful! You're shuddering!
Spike: Nonsense, just because you're going to--

The Drakeling vomits blood!
The +gamepiece+ is struck by the spewing dragon vomit laced with dragon blood! The severed
part flies off in an arc!
The -gameboard- is struck by the spewing dragon vomit laced with dragon blood!
The sheep wool rug is struck by the spewing dragon vomit laced with dragon blood!

FS: Oh my goodness!
Spike: Ughhoohh...
//I guess I wasn't okay...
FS: This is much more serious than I thought!
Spike: What? No, this has been happening for a while now, it's nothing--

The Drakeling vomits blood!
The -gameboard- is struck by the spewing dragon vomit laced with dragon blood!
The sheep wool rug is struck by the spewing dragon vomit laced with dragon blood!

//Fluttershy peeks out from behind her couch once I'm done.
FS: Spike, you're very sick. We need to get you to help.
Spike: If there were anyone else in the world who could help me, I'd have found them.
//Fluttershy inches her way out from behind the couch and, with nervous grace, lays down next to
me.
FS: Mount me.
Spike: ...
//Once more I am left speechless by her choice of words.
FS: We'll go faster with you on my back. Do you want help getting on?
Spike: And here I was about to win the game...
FS: I promise you, we can continue that some other time. Spike, you're very sick and it's dangerous
for you to do anything but try to get better. We've only met for a short time, but I consider you a
friend, and you need help right now. I can help you through this. Even if it's scary.
//...
FS: Spike.
//...What choice do I have but to trust her?
//I mount the Avatar of Temptation, and we fly into Everfree Forest.

//The Avatar lands on the rocky shore, and I slump off her back immediately, crashing into rough
pebbles.
Spike: Maybe... worse than I thought.
FS: You'll be okay. You have to be okay.
A crescent moon lights up the quiet forest. Still waters curve around us, shaped like a kidney bean, folding us in and protecting from the looming trees and thick underbrush. The night sky, colored the same as a bruise, is only punctured by stars far away who steadfastly refuse to twinkle. For a moment, there is only the sound of me struggling to stand up. The scenery is unnatural, forests aren't like this... like a person holding her breath. 
//I can't tell if this place is supposed to be dead or peaceful. 
//From further ahead I hear a sharp intake of breath.
Voice: What? Is that Spike?
//Footsteps race towards us over the rocks. I look up, eyes still stinging from the wind, but I can't tell who this drakeling is. She puts her hands on my shoulders for a moment, and then embraces me.
Concerned Drakeling: Spike, no, not you, not you too, oh Celestia...
//I see a lumpy figure curled up in the rocks. That must be Kezno.
Spike: Why are you here?
//From behind me, Fluttershy speaks:
FS: Angel's brought them here.
Spike: (If there's one thing I don't need right now, it's a cultist nutjob. That's how we got here in the first place.)
T: (...Uh, Spike? Angel is the rabbit.)
Spike: (I'm sorry, it sounded like 'angels brought them here'. Nevermind.)
FS: I have gathered you both here: Spike, the Hero; Kezno, the friend. The glade and I will commune, and you will have the answers you seek.
//Celel steps past me and demands:
CD: Answers?! We need _medicine_, not prophecy!
Spike: Another for the medicine, in case it's a vote.
FS: I'll do what I can, but the glade has a mind of its own. It's very cold this time of year, and the glade needs as much water as it can to prevent freezing--
CD: Then we'll boil it once we're all better!
//Fluttershy looks at Celel for quite some time.
FS: ...I don't feel that would be nice.
Spike: Celel, quit yelling.
//Celel glares at me.
Spike: --I mean, please calm down. It's not helping. Fluttershy, is there any reason you can't start right away?
//Fluttershy advances to the edge of the water, speaking with great care.
FS: I must only say that this, Hero, is your test. Everything that happens after this moment is your responsibility.
//What?! How is dispelling the curse related to the Element of Kindness?!
T: (Ooh, ominous.)
//Fluttershy jumps with sudden quickness, and beats her wings to stay hovering. The tiny splash of water moved by the draft underlies Fluttershy's strange, booming voice.
FS: THESE DRAKELINGS MAY TAKE OF THE WATERS OF THE GLADE, FOR IT IS PURE, AND THROUGH PURITY IT WILL AID THEIR ILLS AND STRENGTHEN THEIR SPIRIT. THE DYING CURSE THAT AFFLICTS THEM WILL BE LIFTED THEREAFTER, UNDER ONE CONDITION. A DESIRER MUST FILL A DRINK FOR ANOTHER, AND NEITHER AGAIN MAY EITHER TOUCH OF THE WATERS OF THE GLADE, LEST IT BECOME WORTHLESS AS THEIR PROMISES.
//The Avatar stops flapping her wings, and lands softly on the beach. Her mane falls in front of her
eyes, concealing them.
CD: ...Was that the communing?
Spike: I think so.
CD: What did it mean?
Spike: Well, it said we could drink the glade's water and it would heal us. That's a start.
CD: There was that part about the condition, though.
Spike: ...Yeah. Could we get a repeat of that?
CD: 'A desirer must fill a drink for another, and neither again may either touch of the waters of the glade, lest it become worthless as their promises'.
//Wow, that's impressive.
Spike: You're pretty good.
//Celel smiles briefly.
CD: Nurse. Comes with the territory.
Spike: A desirer must fill a drink for another... I can't just dunk my head in.
//Is this the part about the Element of Kindness? The glade's waters have to be given to me by someone who needs the waters, and to save Kezno, I have to give him a drink...
CD: The second part, I hope it doesn't mean what I think it means...
Spike: ...One person saves one person. Neither of them touch the glade again.
//One drink per two people. Hard limit.
Spike: ...Why?
//We have exactly two people who can touch the water -- the two of them who need the water.
CD: Because the water wouldn't work, that's what it said--
Spike: No...
//If I take the water for Kezno, I can't drink of the glade myself. If he takes the water for me, no one can help him. We can't save Kezno and save me... It's only one of us!
\This is the test. Who do you want to live more?
//I spin around.
Spike: Why is this the test? Why is choosing who has to slowly die the test?!
//Fluttershy looks calmly into the water. Her hair floats forward, blocking her face, carried on a breeze that doesn't exist. The thousand yard stare is beyond what is in front of her, drifting listlessly into the past.
FS: Being a Hero means you watch your friends die.
//No. It can't.
Spike: That's not true.
CD: What, is this some sort of _game_ to you?
FS: This is your test, Hero.
Spike: It's poorly designed and has no answer!
//So it's not like most tests, but it is like situations I'd encounter in the world. Which, oddly enough, makes it an excellent test.
CD: How can you expect us to choose who to cure? How can you just... _stand there_ and let someone die?!
Spike: Maybe... we don't have to.
//Celel turns to me, wide-eyed.
Spike: 'A desirer must fill a drink for another, and neither again may either touch of the waters'... Kezno and I can fill the other's cup. We can both drink.
CD: Spike -- Kezno's paralyzed! He can't move due to sickness!
//...Oh. That plan is shot.
Spike: ...'Desirer'. Does that mean someone who needs the waters? Or just someone who really, really wants them?
CD: ...You mean--
Spike: Celel, your husband is about to die. It's fair to say you desire that not happen.
CD: I could get him a drink, but then you -- there's no one to help you. Neither Kezno or I could
get you a drink.
//Softly, Fluttershy speaks.
FS: Heroism and sacrifice are intertwined ideas. A Hero suffers, and a Hero is beset -- it seems like common knowledge.
Spike: I can't be a Hero with a curse that will kill me, Fluttershy.
FS: ...Yes, I agree, a dead Hero is no Hero. It is easy to accept suffering for yourself, Spike, but a Hero must be stronger than just that.
//I stay quiet, and Celel holds her breath beside me.
FS: A Hero must have the strength of spirit and the sense of duty to let others be hurt for her cause. A Hero must accept that she will see others hurt, even killed, due to her actions...
//Celel's face molds to one of horror, and an anger jumps into my throat.
Spike: I won't let that happen! I refuse!
CD: No, you can't possibly be saying...
//Fluttershy stops staring at the water. She turns her head to us, and smiles.
FS: ...Or she must stop being a Hero. One of these must be.
Spike: The two aren't mutually exclusive!
//Celel turns away from me and grabs her chest.
CD: Oh, Celestia, this is a test, for, he chooses, oh my goodness--
Spike: Celel. You can get the glade's water for Kezno, and--
CD: Then you die, Spike!
Spike: Could you get water for me?
//Celel holds her head.
CD: I -- I don't know! I just -- I don't know, if, oh my Celestia, if I want it that much!
//...To tell the truth, that stings.
Spike: ...You're not to blame, Celel. This is your husband. I under-- well, I don't understand because I've never been bound, but I can see it.
FS: ...You'd have to force her.
//I turn around again. Fluttershy is standing on the rocky shore, a stick lying by her hooves. It is thicker on one end.
Spike: ...Fluttershy, you are one sick, twisted bastard.
//Wait, that's no stick -- that's my telescope! Where'd she get that?
FS: I'm nothing. You're looking at this the wrong way, Spike. You see only two choices when there are really three.
//Fluttershy draws a triangle in the pebbles with her hoof. One end is marked, 'Hero'. Another 'Life'. The last is 'Others'.
FS: You see your choices, don't you? Give Kezno the drink, and give it up yourself -- a true Hero, as Rainbow Dash would say. My, my, what a reward. The natural state for a Hero in this world is the grave.
Spike: Dying won't let me pass the test.
//Is this the same triangle Rainbow Dash thinks on? Remain true to others and your cause, strongly enough so that when something tricky comes up you're supposed to die immediately... the people who would do that are exactly the people we need alive.
FS: Take the drink for yourself... force it out of Celel. Let others die to continue your life, and your quest. This is the only way to continue, Spike.
CD: Why, why is this happening, this is... this is...
//Not happening. I'll be a Hero without that; I'll find a way.
FS: Remaining a Hero means you watch your friends hate you.
Spike: The third choice...
//Fluttershy nods. She crosses out the word, 'Hero'.
FS: The third option is to fail the test. Stop being a Hero. You would both live, and go back to quiet, peaceful lives -- ones without Heroism and other such silly things.
Spike: Choosing between my quest, the people I want to protect, and my own life...
//It's impossible. I can't find the right way out of this. My quest was given to me by Celestia herself... but I'll fail if I die, and I swore not to cause the deaths of others!
CD: You said -- you said they both would live? How?
//Fluttershy stares me in the eye. I see a twinkle of sadness, thousands of yards deep into her eyes, for only a moment -- then it disappears.
FS: Sacrificing yourself for others makes you a martyr. Sacrificing others for yourself makes you a tyrant. No Hero can live long enough to make a difference. Only a person can.
//She lays down the telescope in the middle of the triangle, across 'Life' and 'Others'.
FS: I would love to give you the water of the glade. But first, you must abandon your quest as a Hero. Only then can you start to help others.
//...That's her angle. The Element of Kindness belongs to such a twisted person?
\It's called the Element of Kindness. If, at the end, you're supposed to be granted it, that means you can't let Kezno die. Letting Kezno die would actually be failing the test, meaning all you have is your life -- that's obviously out.
//Makes sense. Besides, in all the stories, the Hero usually volunteers his life to save others -- part of Heroism is self-endangerment for the betterment of others.
\Yes, and to maximize the betterment of others, this is done many times -- hence, the 'not dying' part is important.
//If I give up the test, decide to fail it, I can help others still. I can be a different sort of Hero -- I can still fight, defend, assist those in need wherever I can. I would only be sacrificing my quest to defeat Princess Hazel.
\\Which is entirely who I am up until this point. The only way to get the Element of Kindness is to give Kezno the water, and refuse to take some myself -- an effective death sentence. Can I complete my quest before the curse destroys me? Am I willing to bet there's another way to get rid of it that I can find in time? It's been on me for as long as it's been on Kezno; what's happened to him could happen to me any day and it'd be my immediate end...
//Her angle is that a Hero can't make a lasting, positive difference. They don't live long enough. If I choose to give up any corner -- Life, Heroism or Others -- I prove her right no matter what. I should be looking to prove her wrong.
CD: ...Spike?
//Angel hops down from Fluttershy's back and goes to inspect Kezno's still body.
FS: Don't go too far, Angel!
//Quine: Different rules mean different things, little one. Some rules are laws, others social expectations, a few are just general good ideas. If they are not physical laws of the universe, then they can be broken; if they can be broken, there is some benefit in that. Sometimes, the tipping point is not which dragon is stronger. It can be which dragon will see the fight further.
//Spike: How will that help me? I'd have to take into account literally every single thing I could do, and figure out what is best. There has to be some sort of filter.
//Quine: Yes, there should be. But you should take care it does not get caught up on your assumptions. You can always do more than you think.
FS: What is it going to be, Spike? You can force Celest to give you the waters, and lose your friendship. You can curl up and waste away. Or... you can give up your quest, and finally start to make a difference.
\\Three choices... to hell with that! There's as many choices as I'm able to find!
//The only other creatures here are Fluttershy and Angel. Twilight's probably here, but using her in some sort of plan is not at all going to work. Ignore her. What can you do with those two?
\\We most likely cannot convince Angel to gather water from the lake. Unless you have a supply of carrots stashed conveniently in that telescope.
//...The glade said 'desirer'. That doesn't have to mean, 'water desirer', or 'heal-curse desirer', but just anyone who wants to get something from, of, into, or out of the lake. Can I...
\\What was it I thought earlier? 'Is she so concerned about her units that she's willing to lose the game to save them?'
/...  Spike: ...Yeah. Yeah, that'll work.  CD: Spike?  Spike: I have a plan.  //I walk over the triangle, destroying the lines with careless feet, and pick up the telescope at Fluttershy's hooves.  FS: Oh? Would you please share with us your decision?  Spike: No.  //I walk over to Kezno, and sit down next to him.  Kezno: Uuuuurrcck...  Spike: Don't worry, Kezno. It's Spike. You're going to be alright, in just a minute. I promise.  //I start tearing off strips of Kezno's clothing with my hands, until I get a strip that looks suitable for the task I have in mind.  CD: ...Spike?  FS: What do you think he's doing?  The Drakeling grabs the Rabbit by the left upper leg with his right hand!  The Rabbit struggles in vain against the grip of The Drakeling's right hand on the Rabbit's left upper leg!  CD: Wha--  FS: Spike, put him down right now! _You let go of Angel_!!  Fluttershy charges!  The Drakeling ties the -telescope- to the Rabbit's left upper leg with a strip of cloth!  The Rabbit bites The Drakeling in the right hand, denting the scale!  The Drakeling throws the Rabbit by the left upper leg!  //The rabbit arcs over the glade, plunging in at the direct center with a great SPLOOSH!  //Fluttershy shouts,  FS: Angel!!  //, banks hard, and dives into the water.  CD: Wh... why did you do that?  Spike: That was my plan.  CD: How is that any sort of plan?!  Spike: Trust me. You'll see.  //In a few moments, Fluttershy rises to the surface of the glade, holding Angel by the neck in her mouth. The telescope trails at her side, bumping into her wing.  //Fluttershy emerges from the water and places Angel gently on the rocks, then turns to me, eyes bulging.  FS: And just _what_--  Spike: Proving you wrong.  //I grab the telescope, twist off the top, and throw the rest of the rapidly draining water down my throat.  A foul miasma begins to rise from The Drakeling, into the sky!  //Sheeze, it reeks like the sweet smell of rotting flesh, but... I really do feel a lot better!  The dying curse has been removed from The Drakeling!  //Angel bounces behind Fluttershy's leg. She stands, leaning slightly towards me, shaking visibly on the shore. Drops of water vibrate off of her.  Spike: It's alright, Celel. You can help him now. He's going to be okay.
Behind me, I hear Celel gather water from the glade.

FS: How... dare you. _How DARE you_!! You--
//I take a step towards her and ask,

Spike: Do you want to know how I dared?
T: (She could tear your head off with a wayward glance. Don't be cheeky.)

//Fluttershy, silent and fuming, only glares at me.

//IF LOOKS COULD FUCK YOU'D FINALLY BE SATISFIED.

Spike: I thought about it. And I decided you were wrong. If someone can't be a Hero, help others, and survive, it's because they are not good enough at being a Hero. Not because the world works that way.

T: (Dig yourself deeper, kid; I'll come to your funeral.)
FS: You hurt an innocent little creature who had done _nothing_ to you, to further your own schemes!! I would have understood if you had hit _me_, because I'm the one who set up this test, but you do NOT! HURT! _ANGEL_!

//Fluttershy drives her forehead into mine for each of the last words, pushing me backwards. I take a small step to the side.

Spike: I didn't hurt anyone. At most, this is a temporary inconvenience. Angel is fine, you're just wet and angry, I'm okay, Celel's not hurt, and Kezno is going to live. Compared to five minutes ago I'd say that's a major improvement!

A foul miasma begins to rise from The Drakeling, into the sky!

CD: Oof, 'swings, that stinks.

The dying curse has been removed from The Drakeling!

//Kezno groans. Celel hugs him, on the ground.

FS: You might think you've circumvented the test in action, but you've failed it in spirit. You hurt another and risked innocent life in order to advance yourself!

Spike: I thought the test was to find a way out -- I found a way to stay a live Hero while others end up unharmed. What should I have done, _died_?

FS: The test was of _empathy_! Any answer besides taking the water for yourself would have been acceptable! You were just supposed to think about it!

Spike: I did exactly that!

//Fluttershy raises her head high, standing tall instead of aggressively, as she was just a moment ago.

FS: As Keeper of the Glade of Everfree Forest, and Avatar of Temptation, I declare that you have failed this test. You may not have the Element of Kindness without combat. And I am disappointed.

Spike: A solid strategy doesn't depend on generosity and expecting a reward for morality -- you cheapen your own test by making wrong answers work, because it is less like reality. Righteousness needs to be on its own a viable way of life, one that brings success. Not a charity case.

//Behind our staring contest, I hear Celel helping Kezno up.

FS: You're not the old Spike. The old Spike would have known better than this.

//Fluttershy jumps into the air, and flies away.

//Kezno coughs, and sniffs. Everything is silent for a moment.

KT: ...Where am I, why is there a draft, and how come that looks like Spike?

//The Avatar of Temptation's house. A bright sun shines down, and whispers of wind roll through my legs. I'm sure if I had memory of it, I'd say this looks just like the days we used to have back when ponies controlled the weather.

Spike: It's like a scene out of a fairy tale where people are happy because they don't know how to be sad.
//THIS WEATHER SUCKS AS MUCH AS YOUR METAPHORS.
//Celel and Kezno made it out of the forest without too much trouble; we traveled together. They're going to tell Jebed what happened... I hope she doesn't expect the worst.
\\The worst is the most likely, after all.
//I stop on the small bridge that leads to the Avatar's house. The house, dug into a hill, looks... somehow different.
//IF YOU SAY IT LOOKS UNINVITING OR FOREBODING I WILL SERIOUSLY THROW AN ANEURYSM. GET FUCKING GOING.
//I sigh.
Spike: Well, let's get started.

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

The Drakeling breathes in and focuses, casting Terrae Corpus! The Drakeling's scales become as hard as rock!

//OH LIKE BECOMING AS HARD AS A ROCK IS GOING TO HELP YOU AGAINST SEXUAL ASSAULT. YOU FUCKING MORON.
Spike: I'm expecting a bit more combat.
//FROM THE AVATAR OF FUCKING TEMPTATION? WITH YOUR MENTAL APTITUDE I'M NOT SURPRISED BY THAT TRAINWRECK OF LOGIC.
Spike: It becomes sexual assault when I _lose_ the combat. Have you not picked up on that yet?

The Drakeling breathes in and focuses, casting Patatrin-Vikramana! The Drakeling's step becomes as light as a feather!

//GOOD PLAN; NOW YOU CAN RUN YOUR ASS AWAY.
Spike: If it comes to it, yeah, that was part of my plan.
//I WAS BEING SARCASTIC, THE AVATAR CAN FLY. IDIOT.
Spike: I wish Patatrin-Vikramana tuned you out. Screw this hunter/sneaky stuff, what I really need is the complete and total absence of your voice.
//I LOVE YOU TOO.
//Time to get going.
//I move over the bridge, and hop over the fence to hide behind the chicken's nest. They cluck and peck at the dirt (and each other); they haven't seen or heard me yet.
//I can't approach from the front door, that's too obvious.
//AND WALKING YOUR SHITTY FACE UP TO THE BRIDGE WAS MASTERY OF STEALTH, DUMBASS?
//I need to go in a window or something, find an entrance that the Avatar doesn't have a plan for me to use...
Spike: The second floor! Of course!
//STATE YOUR PLANS OUT LOUD MORE OFTEN, MY DOCTOR SAYS I NEED TO START LAUGHING.
//I skirt along the fence, avoiding disturbing the chickens, until I can finally hop up on the side of the hill and pull myself up to the second floor balcony.
T: (Is this seriously where you want to confront the Avatar of Temptation?)
Spike: (What do you mean?)
//I look around. There's a bed with tussled up blankets, multicolored bead ropes that hang from the ceiling, a shelf full of knick knacks... this room looks a lot tidier than the rest of the house. Clock is wrong, though.
Spike: (Is it really going to matter that the clock is five minutes late?)
T: (...What?)
I bend my knees slightly, leaning forward to get a better fighting position, as I hear the faintest sound of a spell being cast. Whatever it is, I'm prepared for it. I don't expect this to be easy, but by Celestia, if there's going to be a fight, I'll make it such a fight--

The clock advances five minutes.

Spike: ...  
T: (You do know what _happens_ in a bedroom?)  
Spike: (No, what do your books say?)  

A slight pause. I think about how best to use my firebreath, and decide it can't be done. Neither the Element of Kindness or the Avatar are in the room.

Well, here goes nothing.

I slip across the room on lightened feet, aiming for the stairs.

Fluttershy grabs The Drakeling by the left lower leg with her left front hoof!  
Fluttershy takes down The Drakeling by the left lower leg with her left front hoof!  

I headbutt the floor. It takes more damage than I do.

FS: Oh, dear. You and Twilight talk so loud I could have heard you from the chicken coop, hmm-hmm!

How the hell was she in here and I didn't notice her?!  
The Drakeling struggles in vain against the grip of Fluttershy's left front hoof on The Drakeling's left lower leg!

Spike: 'Swings, your legs are strong.  
FS: All the better to hold you with, my sweet--

The Drakeling punches at Fluttershy with his right hand, but Fluttershy dodges away!  
Fluttershy releases the grip of Fluttershy's left front hoof on The Drakeling's left lower leg.  
The Drakeling stands up.

FS: You're very skilled with the Patatrin-Vikramana.  
Spike: It's your move; I learned it from Quine.  
FS: Yes, I see that.  
//She's at the top of the stairs, and I'm between her and the bed... I need to move!

Fluttershy charges at The Drakeling, but The Drakeling dodges away!  
The Drakeling punches Fluttershy in the upper body with his Dashing Rogue Punch, but the attack glances away!  
Fluttershy strikes The Drakeling in the lower body with her left wing, shattering the scale, bruising the muscle and bruising the guts!  
The Drakeling is propelled away by the force of the blow!  
The Drakeling's left foot skids along the ground, denting the scale!

//Somehow, I manage to stay on my feet.

Spike: Are all the Avatars like this? Even your wings are strong.  
FS: All the better to carry you away. Wouldn't you like that?  
Spike: You're as dangerous and destructive as any other enemy, and I'll defeat you like I did them!

The Drakeling punches Fluttershy in the left front leg with his right hand, but the attack glances away!  
Fluttershy kicks The Drakeling in the right upper arm with her right front hoof, shattering the scale and bruising the muscle!  
The Drakeling kicks Fluttershy in the lower body with his left foot, bruising the skin and bruising
the muscle!
//That connected! Though, all in all, neither of us are doing much damage...

Fluttershy bites The Drakeling in the left upper leg, denting the scale!
Fluttershy latches on firmly!
Spike: Woah! Hey, what do you think you're doing?!
//She mutters something unintelligible which vibrates up my leg.
Fluttershy throws The Drakeling by the left upper leg with her upper front teeth!
The Drakeling's head skids along the ground, denting the scale!
The Drakeling's right ear skids along the ground, bruising the cartilage!
The Drakeling's right lower arm skids along the ground, denting the scale!

//She threw me back onto the balcony. I'm losing ground, but in a fight of endurance I'm sure I can win.
Spike: Y'know, pony dental structure is not naturally that strong. Mouths don't throw entire persons bodily across the room.
FS: All the better to --
Spike: Alright, I get the point!

The Drakeling stands up.

FS: The Patatrin-Vikramana makes you feel light, doesn't it? And not just on your hooves, but inside your heart. You feel wearyless and free... but isn't that dangerous?
Spike: Let's go with what you really wanted to say: it's dangerous for me to be unbound.
FS: Every pegasus who flies has close friends who can't. No matter how far you can go, there are always loved ones you can't take with you, and that should be grounding.
Spike: I'm not interested in only my own benefit. I became a Hero to help others!
//YOU BECAME A HERO BECAUSE YOU WANTED TO FUCK CELESTIA

Fluttershy leaps at The Drakeling!
Spike: By stopping me, you're hurting others. I will not let that happen.
The Drakeling punches Fluttershy in the right rear leg with his Fist of Justice, bruising the skin, bruising the muscle and bruising the bone!
Fluttershy slams The Drakeling in the upper body with her right rear leg, denting the scale and bruising the muscle!
The Drakeling is propelled away by the force of the blow!

//Gah, straight for the chicken coop!
The Drakeling slams into the obstacle!
The Drakeling's head takes the full force of the impact, bruising the muscle!
The Drakeling's left upper arm takes the full force of the impact, chipping the scale!
The obstacle collapses!
//Several chickens run over my back, out of the coop.

The Drakeling stands up.
//I won't even say the one about her flank.

//Fluttershy lands in the yard, a dozen feet away.
FS: Get out of there! Don't hurt my chickens!
Spike: ...Why would I do something like that?
FS: You've already hurt someone I care for, and I won't let you hurt another! Step away from the coop!
Spike: (Wow, she's serious about these chickens.)
T: (Fluttershy loves her cock.)
//HAHAHA I LIKE THIS PERSON CAN WE FUCK HER
FS: _Now_!
Spike: Alright, alright, I'm moving.
//I take a step forwards, out of the coop. The chickens hop around me, pecking at the ground (and my feet, and each other).
FS: I'd much appreciate it if you gave my friend and I some space. Would that be okay?
//Fluttershy clicks her tongue twice. The chickens scatter, except one, who clumsily hops on my foot.
Spike: That's not where you go.
FS: Elizibeak, please be a dear, we have some important business to get to. Go play with your friends, it's time to play somewhere else now.
//The chicken looks up at me and clucks once.
Spike: Uh, I'm not your father, so don't hug me. It's weird.
FS: Don't use Elizibeak as a shield! Stay out of this!
Spike: What?! I would never do that!
//Chicken are much more useful as a main course!
FS: Elizibeak, please, it's dangerous out here and you should go.
Spike: Listen, little chicken, Mommy is very shortly going to be very short with me and if we're lucky the house will still be standing by the time she's through. Get on, now.
//JUST EAT THE FUCKING CHICKEN.
//Elizibeak stares up at me for a few seconds, turns her head to Fluttershy, clucks once, and pecks at my foot.
Spike: Ow -- hey!
//Fluttershy shakes her head, and says:
FS: Elizibeak, no! Don't peck others! I'm sorry, Spike; Elizibeak likes to play rough with her friends. Now I have to go find her cream...
//Fluttershy turns and trots away, into the house.
Spike: Wha-- chicken cream?!
//Cream of chicken?
//The chicken looks up at me, squints its little eyes, and makes a sound like a cough. Then it hops off my foot and takes shelter among the rest, by the fence.
Spike: Was it... laughing?
//I spend a moment wondering, then snap out of it, and start sneaking towards the house. Maybe I can get the element of surprise.

//The inside of this house has completely changed. The twine hanging from the ceiling is gone, as are the animals; all the furniture has been moved out and the stained surfaces have been either replaced or scrubbed with magic, leaving the vague smell of some spice I can't place. The front room(s) are nearly empty except for a gameboard and the Element of Kindness on a pedestal next to it.
//The gameboard has been left exactly how it was. Huh.
Spike: Uh, Fluttershy? You around?
//Silence. I look around for a moment; she must be upstairs.
Spike: Huh.
//DO THAT THING WHERE YOU STEP FORWARD AND GET YOUR ASS HANDED TO YOU AGAIN.
//Come on, I'm not that dumb.
//I wait a little while, holding my breath, paying attention to my surroundings. The air smells slightly of cinnamon (I thought about it a little more). The board beneath my foot bounces slightly. Sounds of fowl, and a gust coming from a slightly open window, overlay...
//...the sound of nobody. Just a drakeling trying to be silent.
Spike: (...Really?)
//She should have been coming back down if the cream was upstairs, by now.
Spike: Well, okay, then. Hope I'm not breaking any rules by doing this.
//I step over the gameboard, take the amulet off the pedestal and put the Element around my neck.

Spike has acquired The Element of Kindness!
[1/5] Elements acquired!
Congratulations!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//WOW, I FEEL TOTALLY AND COMPLETELY DIFFERENT NOW
//Buzz off.
//I'm standing at the other side of the gameboard now. Fluttershy's perspective is rather grim. She has a lesser resource base, worse strategic position, similar technology, and an army that will be rapidly overrun in just a few moments. There is very little she can do right now...
//Except make the most of what she has. To make it out of this with any sort of hope, she needs to make the most of every single soldier and peasant she can... she needs to deeply care for each of them.
Spike: (Uh, she seriously isn't back. Is something wrong?)
//Silence.
\That could mean Twilight isn't here, or that the Avatar still is. And I have no idea which.
//I stand at the bottom of the stairs. Even if I was in it just a second ago, it seems kind of rude just to trudge up the stairs into her bedroom...
Spike: ...Fluttershy? Are you okay up there?
//Silence. A chicken clucks outside.
Spike: Er, I'm leaving now. Thanks for the fight, I guess; it was, uh, an experience. Bye.
//I walk out of the house.
//Most of the chickens are back in the coop (one wall smashed in), door shut. The yard's gate is open. I close it, and turn around to look at the house.
//Can I really just leave like that? There's no way a holder of an Element would just let me walk in and take it. That's barely any kind of test at all. And yet, here I am, having walked in and taken it...
//Fluttershy is nowhere in sight. Even still... I feel like I have to do something.
Spike: Uh...
//THIS IS STARTING WELL.
Spike: Sorry about the coop. You know. Even if I did crash-land in its side. I didn't mean to scare or hurt the chickens.
//Tasty, tasty chickens.
Spike: And... I'd like to say I'm sorry about the test, and what happened with Angel. I'd like to, but I'm not. Not only was Angel complicit in your schemes by bringing Kezno and Celel to the glade, but...
//Less blame, more fake shame.
Spike: No one was hurt. In the end, at the very least I want to do no harm. I swear, if in some way, I hurt you or Angel or caused you harm, then when all this is over I'll come right back here and make amends for it.
//What is the interest rate on amends? Is it compounded continuously?
Spike: If it comes down to it, and I have to make a choice... I don't really know what I'll do. I might give up my life, if there's at all any possibility I'd succeed. Or I might abandon my quest. I won't throw others to the wolves; you can hold me to that.
//I guess I'm talking to thin air right now. No one is around to hear this.
Spike: But I said 'when all this is over' because, until it comes down to that, I will be a Hero in the name of Celestia, and I will help others, and I will continue as long as I can. The game of Strategy
on your floor is exactly why Heroism is necessary and good. Your troops are outnumbered, so you say to lead them they need a person to care for them above her own ideals and strategies in order to win. And that's true.

//YAWN YAWN YAWN YAWN YAWN SHUT YOUR FACEHOLE YOU BORING LOSER.
Spike: But those fighters themselves, they need to be Heroes. They need to fight -- or at least think they are fighting -- for something greater, for someone else, and they need to keep doing it as long as they can. And I'm doing that. I'm fighting for Celestia, for Equestria, for their children, and for myself. I will do that -- and only that -- for as long as I can.

//YOUR ARGUMENT IS THAT YOU WANT TO BE THE BEST PAWN YOU CAN BE. INSPIRING.

//The house stands still in response. A breeze picks up from the west.
//...Guess that wasn't necessary. Time to trudge on.
//Let's see, I have the Element of Kindness. That makes one of five. Applejack is in the Aquinatic Region, that's rather far away (and I'd rather not confront her now). Rainbow Dash I'm avoiding as long as I can, so that leaves Rarity and Pinkie Pie. I haven't met Pinkie Pie yet, maybe I should find out where she lives... But Rarity's in Canterlot, I already know that.
//Quine: If there is one thing you can find in the City on the Hill, it is a person. Capital culture, nobles in particular, make it their business to know where important ponies are at any when. Remember that this also applies to you.
//Aw hell yeah! This should be easy!
Fluttershy: Spike.
Spike: Whaba--yaa!

//I spin around and put up my fists, ready to fight!
\Fluttershy is sitting down on the path behind me, hair in front of both eyes. She blows it away.
//How did she sneak to exactly where I was half a second ago?!
FS: It's okay, I'm not going to hurt you.
Spike: ...
//Well you don't have to sound so patronizing about it!
FS: I see you found the Element of Kindness.
Spike: Yeah, hope it wasn't bad form for me to just take it.
FS: Oh, of course not! I understand.
Spike: Okay then.
//We stand for a few seconds, on the bridge. Water murmurs happily below us.
FS: I did hear what you said earlier. It seems like you've thought a lot about this.
Spike: ...Yeah. Celestia told me I needed to find answers.
//NO, FUCKING STOP IT. YOU'RE TRYING TO SUPPORT YOUR OWN COGNITIVE DISSONANCE. STOP ASSIGNING GOOD VIEWS TO THE EVIL GODDESS, SHITBAG!
FS: She was always such a wise pony. It was very wise of you to say what you did, even when you thought no one was listening. And -- while I can't say you feel the same way I do about these things -- it seems at first I misjudged your dedication to your friends, and to others. I hope you'll forgive me...
//Really?!
FS: Now that I've reconsidered, as the Avatar of Temptation, Keeper of the Glade of Everfree Forest, and holder of the Element of Kindness, I grant you my power.
//Fluttershy holds out her hoof.
Spike: So, uh, do we shake, or--
FS: Hmm-hmm, it is ceremonial.

The Drakeling shakes Fluttershy's right front hoof with his right hand! A power surges through The Drakeling, like lightning through his blood! [Walk of the Third] was mastered!
I pull my hand away and hold it close.

Spike: 'Swings, what was that?!

FS: That was the power of the Element of Kindness. It fits you very well, Spike! Better than you may think.

Spike: I feel strange... like, if I wanted to, I could remove myself from the scenery and let life thrash on around me.

FS: The Elements affect different people different ways. Maybe it wants to tell you that sometimes, the best thing you can do for someone is leave them be.

Spike: Yeah... maybe.

//If that was so common there'd be no need for Heroes. Or techniques like that. I think it replaced my Patatrin-Vikramana. Eh, I didn't understand that move very much anyway; I didn't have it for too long.

Spike: Well, time to get going. Unless you want to tell me anything about Rarity.

//I can use any advice I can get.

//A short pause. Fluttershy's face looks a trained blank.

FS: Didn't you tell Jebed you wanted to be picked up here, tomorrow?

Spike: ...Right. You're sure you don't mind?

FS: Please, you're very welcome to stay. Come inside, hmm-hmm! I believe we still have a game to finish, and you haven't even touched your tea...

Fluttershy was defeated!

Spike earned 9000 experience points!

Spike is now level 24!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//Crazy soft-spoken bint...

\Celestia said she'd restore my memory if I defeated Princess Hazel. I am now one step closer.

Chapter End Notes

With apologies to Tarn Adams.

End of Pony Girl Quest Part 1. Part 2 will be posted at a later date.
Have You Ever Tried Running in a Dream?

Part 2 of Pony Girl Quest begins here. From where we left off, the Hero Spike had fought his way across Equestria's wildlands to the dangerous Aquinatic mountains in search of a mentor. He trained under Quine, a silver dragon almost a millennium old, and dedicated himself to gathering the Elements of Harmony to earn the right to meet with Princess Hazel: the new claimant to the throne since Celestia's disappearance and the very same pony Spike had been told to kill. But all signs point to Princess Hazel actually being his best friend, Twilight Sparkle -- not to mention all the Elements of Harmony being in the hooves of Equestria's most powerful knights, the Avatars...

And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

//Fluttershy's cottage, midday. Sounds of the burbling water, chickens clucking, and squirrels skittering about come in through the open windows on warm air. The chicken coop outside is being repaired by some earth pony with a hammer on her flank, interrupting the melody with occasional whacks.
/I wish Jebed responded as quickly as the carpenter.
//Fluttershy flies throughout the house with loops of string in her mouth, re-tying it to the ceiling. I don't know what she did with all the furniture.
Spike: So, is this how it normally is here? Animals running about everywhere?
//It would drive me mad. It must be a predator thing.
Fluttershy: I'm not here very often, so I let the animals have it when I'm gone.
//...Avatar of Temptation. Probably doesn't spend very many nights in her own home.
//Angel, the rabbit who follows Fluttershy around for some reason, opens the door a creak and hops in. He gives me a wide berth.
FS: Yes? What is it?
//She lands so the rabbit can speak into her ear. If I still had my Patatrin-Vikramana, I'd be able to hear him...
FS: Oh, dear, already?
Spike: What's going on?
//Fluttershy mutters something to Angel and noses him away, hair bobbing.
FS: I'm afraid you may not be able to stay for the rat tail soup, Spike. Jebed's come a little bit early.
Spike: Oh, well.
//I kind of doubt that the soup has real rat tail in it, anyway.
//The Strategy board is already packed away, and the pedestal which held the Element of Kindness has been pushed into a corner. I won the board game, but I haven't had any of the tea yet.
Spike: (So, what did she and Jebed argue about, again?)
T: (Nothing important now.)
//I hurry up to Fluttershy and walk next to her as she leaves the house. A bronze full dragon is sitting on her haunches beyond the bridge, gazing at us. I wave, and give her a thumbs up, pointing at the Element. She smiles.
We walk over the bridge, meeting Jebed.
Jebed: Hello, Spike.
Spike: Hi, Jebed. Did Kezno and Celel make it back safe?
JBD: They're fine, thanks to you.
//I shrug.
Spike: Fluttershy helped.
//Jebed swishes her tail through the grass once, bouncing up a few stones.
JBD: I sincerely doubt that.
//Fluttershy still has her welcoming smile on, looking up at Jebed. It's true that she made it a little harder than it needed to be...
//I scratch my scales and mutter:
Spike: Jebed, don't be rude...
//She snaps her teeth together and responds:
JBD: Honesty, little one, is a responsibility of those granted power, because it is an empowerment of others. I do you and this one a disservice by holding my tongue.
FS: I'm sorry if I made you worry about your friends, Jebed. Even with their bonds, if something went wrong I'd feel just awful.
//Our...
Spike: Wait, did I not think of that?
//Jebed puts her face in front of Fluttershy, snorting. Her head is as big as Fluttershy's torso.
JBD: Spike is unbound.
//Kezno is bound to Celel, right. If he did die from the curse, he'd just revive in full health...
//Fluttershy opens her eyes a little wider. She glances at me before responding:
FS: ...Then I'm very happy everything turned out alright, in the end.
Spike: So Kezno would have just revived... there was no reason to include him in this whole thing. He would have been fine!
T: (What, is death the only ill that matters?)
//Well, in a way... it kind of takes precedence.
//Fluttershy shakes her head, mane bouncing against her shoulders.
FS: Kezno was in a lot of pain. Whether he would die or not isn't as important as making sure our choices don't hurt others.
//...I see how shrugging off his sickness with 'He'll live' wouldn't be compatible with the Element of Kindness...
JBD: Then you should check your own methods. You achieve your ends through trickery and deception, using harmful methods to bring the same ends because it is easier. Spike, take a lesson from this one, and never fall to the same kind of temptation.
//Fluttershy shakes her head slightly.
FS: If you'll remember, Jebed, I told you many times that Kezno would be healed. I'm sorry for not setting a date for when it would happen. It seems Spike here travels on his own schedule, hmm-hmm!
JBD: There was no reason to convolute his recovery by weaving him into a Hero's test.
FS: Wouldn't you say a Hero's close ones are often endangered by their relation to her?
//Jebed growls:
JBD: Yes. By evildoers.
Spike: Woah, Jebed, that's a little--
FS: Isn't it more dishonest for each of them not to understand that?
JBD: You risked their _lives_ to teach them a lesson? Are words no longer in your repertoire?
//Fluttershy lowers her head a little, staring vaguely in front of her as Jebed smolders.
FS: Do the ones you love listen to your words, Jebed?
//Slowly, Jebed retreats her head and neck, rising her whole body up. I can't tell if she's preparing her words or firebreath, so I step in front of Fluttershy.
//WOW YOU ARE DUMB.
Spike: Jebed, come on. Fluttershy's not a bad person.
JBD: There are no 'bad people' in this world, Spike. Only bad deeds.
//This world'? Is there some other world I should know about?
Spike: She thought about it a little more than normal, that's all. In the end, everyone's okay. She knew she wouldn't hurt others or herself, and found a way to teach us all a lesson.
//Jebed snorts, blowing smoke out of her nostrils. Behind me, Fluttershy paws at the ground, lightly.
JBD: Your life was in great danger at her hooves.
Spike: Well, she didn't know that. And I'm a Hero, so I'm used to it. Besides, if someone really was going to be hurt, I'm sure Fluttershy would have stepped in. It just looked like we were in danger, when we really weren't.
T: (Oh, you're trying to draw a parallel between what you did in the test and Fluttershy. Smart!)
//Thanks for clarifying, Twilight...
//I don't want there to be tensions between Fluttershy and Jebed. They're both important people, and dislike between them will echo down into others.
Spike: I'm not asking you to agree with it, Jebed. I'm just asking, as your friend... let it be. It's over now.
//The past is a lesson, not a duty.
//Jebed looks at me for a long time, inspecting me with eyes like amethysts. As hammer sounds come from the pony working on the chicken coop, she opens her wings to their full span, and then closes them. Fluttershy's mane floats in the wind created.
JBD: For you.
Spike: Good!
//More painful than it needed to be, but now that that's over with, we can move on to important things. I hope.
JBD: I'm ready to take you to Forlegsandria now. Are you done with everything you wanted to do here?

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

>>STAY
>>GO TO FORLEGSANDRIA

\Think, think. Are there any unlockables you didn't get yet? You searched every corner? I don't want an item to be lost forever if we can't come back here later. Man, I wish I had a walkthrough...
Spike: Actually...
T: (If you're staying, avoid the rat tail soup. Things get socially awkward in the immediate future.)
Spike: So, Fluttershy, it's true that I lived in Ponyville before I lost my memory, right?
FS: Yes, you did. We all had such a fun time together.
Spike: Who's 'we'?
FS: Me, you, Pinkie Pie, Rainbow Dash, Rarity, and Applejack. We all used to live in Ponyville before Princess Celestia disappeared. And Twilight, of course.
JBD: Until she got herself and her parents killed, that is.
//...I guess the dragon instinct really was telling the truth earlier.
//WHY WOULD I EVER FUCKING LIE
//You said I went on this journey to find a pony to assault me.
//STILL NOT LYING
Spike: So, there should be someone in Ponyville who knows me?
//Fluttershy bites her lip and looks away.
FS: There are probably ponies who know _of_ you, but you've been away for a long time...
Spike: It's been six weeks.
FS: ...
Fluttershy lets her soft pink hair fall in front of her face. She opens her mouth to say something, but I have a feeling I know how it sounds already.

Spike: If you're gonna be vague again, like everyone else, don't bother.

FS: ...A person's history is her own. It's not my place to tell you, Spike.

I roll my eyes and turn back to Jebed.

Spike: Hey, I want to check out Ponyville for a little while. Is that okay?

Jebed nods.

JBD: Of course. Just tell me if you need anything, you know how to contact me.

//Didn't Herr Yyz tell you to wear the cape in Ponyville and only refer to yourself as a Hero? Why do you want to meet people in Ponyville like that?

I'm not going to wear the cloak until I'm in Hero mode. Besides, Celestia never said anything about anonymity, that's all on the Faceless.

//Jebed flaps her wings and takes off vertically, causing waves of grass around us. The birds stop singing for a minute, scared as she leaves.

Spike: So, uh... bye.

I need to learn how to say goodbye to people.

FS: Goodbye, Spike. I have a feeling we'll be meeting each other again very soon.

Spike: For what it's worth, I hope everything turns out alright with Jebed.

FS: Hmm-hmm, I'm sure it will. We just have to work to make it so.

//With that, the Avatar walks back to her chickens. The carpenter pony, almost the same color as Fluttershy save the red mane, tries to shoo away a curious Elizibeak.

Spike: ...Hold on. Why did you think I was bound?

//Fluttershy looks over her shoulder, and smiles with eyes closed.

FS: I did? I'm sorry, I must have assumed. You know what they say about assuming, hmm-hmm.

Spike: Uh, no. What do they say?

//I stare at the Avatar of Temptation's back as she walks away, not responding.

T: (I think it makes sense. What kind of adventurer passes up a 'get-out-of-death free' card?)

Spike: (No, seriously. What do they say about assuming?)

//Twilight shrugs as she fades into view. Guess it's not important.

Spike: If I'm bound to someone I'm dedicated to them forever. I can't ask the first pony I see to mount me 'just in case'.

//A bird flies by overhead, carrying a stick to its nest. Fluttershy tuts at her livestock to leave the carpenter be.

T: ...Why not?

Spike: 'Cause then I'd end up serving microwaved food to ungrateful old people who tip poorly for sixty years because my rebirth-mate's dream in life is to own a diner.

T: I think it would be appropriate for your quest. You just have to find the right pony!

Spike: Or dragon.

//Her eyes flit to the ground for a second.

T: Or dragon.

Spike: It seems more trouble than it's worth. If I'm going to be a Hero in the name of Celestia, can I do that while being attached to -- I don't know, Starshine Glitterflank the librarian?

//Twilight Sparkle leans her head in, serious.

T: Spike, as your close friend, you should think about it! I don't want to see someone... something bad happen to you.

Spike: Nothing bad happen to me? Please.

//I roll my eyes and walk past Twilight, towards Ponyville.

Spike: You may as well tell me not to be a Hero.

Spike: You know, '-ville' implies village.

T: And?

Spike: This place is not what I was expecting by the name.
The middle of Ponyville. We're both standing next to a fountain in the afternoon sun, watching ponies mill about. It seems quiet enough, but not sinister. There are a lot of smiles, and only a few of them seem fake.

Spike: Not as Lovecraftian as I was expecting, honestly.
T: It's a great place to raise a baby dragon.
Spike: And I suppose you would know about that?
T: Yes, hah-hah, I would!
Spike: But it's not a place you feel comfortable taking off the displacement cloak.
T: Twilight leans against the fountain as she checks that the cloak is still on correctly.
Spike: Is not a synonym for lies of omission. Speaking of that--
Mysterious Caller: Hold on... is that you, Spike?
T: At the sound of my name, I turn away from Twilight. A plump mare with an apron has her head cocked, looking me up and down. As she sees my face, she brightens up.
MC: Dearie me, it is you! I haven't seen you in forever and ever, don'tcha know!
Spike: Sorry, I've been away for so long that I think I've forgotten everybody's names...
MC: Don't worry, dear. You moved on to bigger and better things, I hear!
Spike: She snickers to herself like a schoolgirl. I don't know if I want to admit I have amnesia, or just pretend to make it easier...
Mrs. Cake: Pleased to meetchya again, I'm Mrs. Cake!
Spike: I can see that.
T: Twilight prods me with a hoof, saying:
Spike: The hell did that come from?
T: After the disappearance, a dragon named Opterix attacked Ponyville. Killed five ponies.
Spike: Opterix was the person Na-Mira was talking about in the battle records... I knew I could trust Na-Mira, but does that really mean...
T: I'm frankly surprised Mrs. Cake can stand the sight of you.
Spike: Wh-- because I'm a dragon? You're surprised that she isn't racist because of one bad experience?
T: She's a good person. (And it's speciesist.) But there are people out there who do blame dragonkind for things like that. Pursuing your journey to make dragonkind and ponykind equal, not only do you have to deal with those people, but also people like Mrs. Cake who lost everything because of dragonkind, or dragons who lost everything to ponykind. Telling them just get along and everything will be hunky-dory disrespects what they've been through.
Spike: ...But she doesn't let on that anything like that happened in how she acts.
T: Of course not. The world's tough, and reacting to something like that you either have to laugh or you have to cry. At some point you run out of tears.
Spike: ...That's really messed up.
//Twilight snorts and looks away.
Spike: Uh... Twilight... can I ask you something?
//She keeps looking away, down the street.
T: About what Jebed said?
Spike: No, actually, I figured that out when you said Opterix. Na-Mira told me about the battle records.
//There's no response by Twilight, but she is turned away from me, so I can't see her face.
//It's kind of obvious. To better serve Equestria after the disappearance, she faked her own death so she wouldn't have to be weighed down by all the mundane stuff a ruler has to do. And, her parents, Fluttershy said that herself. A Hero's close ones are often endangered by their relation to her. So Twilight faked their deaths, too. A simple battle report would be easy to forge for a person who... does whatever it is that she does.
//She's probably wearing the displacement cloak because most of these ponies think she's dead.
Spike: What I was going to ask, was: do you _ever_ have any fun?
///...Strangely enough, that did not help her mood.
T: Oh, that reminds me! Tomorrow's Nightmare Night!
Spike: Why would that remind you?
New Joiner: Ahem.
//I turn around. A pony is sitting in front of us, staring at me. She has a white cap on, with a red plus sign on it.
Spike: Oh. Hi, Nurse Joyful.
Nurse Joyful: Hi, Spike. And... someone with a displacement cloak on.
//Woah, what? You can recognize that? How do you do that?
//Twilight nods. I wonder if, to Joyful, her blur's head moves up and down.
Nurse Joyful: Hmm, fifty/fifty shot... Twilight?
T: Yes, it's me.
//Wait, 'fifty/fifty'? Who else could she have been?
//Nurse Joyful curtly nods. She turns back to me.
NJ: What happened to that followup appointment you were going to make?
//Oh, right. That thing I was never going to do.
NJ: It's been six weeks. Where have you been, young dragon?
Spike: I, uh...
//For some reason, I think a medical professional would look down on being a Hero.
NJ: And...
//Nurse Joyful stares at my chest for half a second. She then grabs my hands with her hooves and brings them closer, inspecting.
NJ: Are these _scars_?
Spike: No, they're hands.
//I pull my hands away from Nurse Joyful's grip. Why do ponies just think they can crawl all over me? Is there a sign on my back that says 'Public Property'?
NJ: What the hell have you been doing?
Spike: I, uh...
NJ: Did you ever see a doctor? Or did Twilight throw you into a pit of rabid wolverines?
//To some of the enemies I've faced, I'd prefer the wolverines...
T: No to both.
Spike: I did see a doctor, actually.
//Nurse Joyful's tone immediately softens.
NJ: Who was it? Where? What did she say?
Spike: I... rescued him from a cult that was going to sacrifice him to their weird snake god. He said I'd probably be fine.
//The conversation stops dead, like a train crash. Nurse Joyful looks at me, blinking every so often.
The sun falls a few notches in the sky as she stares, speechless. She then turns her gaze on Twilight. I can feel the disappointment radiating outward from her.

//Twilight adds in an embarrassed voice:
T: He's the one who decided he should be a Hero, not me.
Spike: I lost all my memories after I hit my head, so I decided to become a Hero and ran off. Sorry.
//Nurse Joyful now turns her disappointment ray on me. 'Swings, that look could get a charging dragon to back down...
NJ: How was it not clear you should have seen me before doing anything?
Spike: No, it's okay, really.
NJ: You needed to see a neurologist, and still do. Three, if you can afford it. Spike, you hit your head hard enough to knock out your memories, and you want to run around making it _worse_?
//Hey, it's not making it worse. I can't lose memories I still don't have.
NJ: And you, why would you let him do this?! What part of 'hit his head and was knocked out for a quarter hour' says 'let him make dramatic life decisions' to you?!
//Twilight stays silent. It's a really good question...
//If not for one thing.
Spike: No, Nurse Joyful, it's okay. Celestia told me so.
//Joyful's eyebrows almost leap off her face. She says nothing.
Spike: Yeah, I saw Princess Celestia in a vision after hitting my head. She said I should be a Hero, so everything's going to be alright.
//Nurse Joyful shakes her head. It's so strange how with a simple gesture she can totally dismiss everything I've known and believed in...
NJ: Spike, you hit your head, got knocked out, have total amnesia, then hallucinated, and you're telling me everything's going to be fine?
T: It wasn't a hallucination, Joyful.
NJ: The kid sees a goddess after blunt force trauma to the head, and it's 'not a hallucination'? By rights he's a mental patient. I should call and have him locked up; he's a danger to himself and others as he is.
//You know, I don't want to think my next fight is going to be in the middle of Ponyville, but it seems like it will be if things keep going like this...
Spike: Woah, hey, let's not jump to conclusions here.
NJ: Spike, it's okay. I'm going to get you the help you need.
//Twilight's horn glows, very quickly. SCRUNCH is heard as Nurse Joyful's pager is crumpled into a cube and drops from her belt.
T: That's not necessary, Nurse.
//She steps away from the destroyed pager, glancing up at Twilight once. The nurse kicks it to the side and mutters:
NJ: Of all the people that could've been there when he said Celestia told him to be a Hero, only you'd be stupid enough to let him.
//There's a loaded, Wild West pause. Thousands of miles away, someone somewhere is not watching two ponies try to strangle each other with only their eyes.
Spike: So, aside from all that, how've you been doing?
//She shrugs, relieving the tension. But only a little.
NJ: It's been mostly quiet. Today's the night before Nightmare Night, though, so I am expecting a little activity. Especially with those Four Bandits around.
//Why does it sound like she's saying that in capital letters?
Spike: Who?
NJ: Four Bandits. Group of ponies located in the Everfree Forest. Few days ago, roughed up a little colt pretty badly. He said they were trying to take him to Deific Castle, but he hasn't said anything else. They've also been threatening travelers in the region. Probably something for you to check out, Twilight.
//Twilight nods. I don't think she feels like speaking right now.
Spike: Thanks for telling us, Nurse Joyful. I'll get on it, too.
NJ: No, Spike. You just see me as soon as possible, and that's all you worry about.
//Disgust visible in her body language, Nurse Joyful trots off, into the setting sun. That conversation took a lot out of everybody, it seems.
Spike: You know, after all that, the world seems so much simpler!
//Twilight snorts, amused.
T: Oh? How so?
Spike: Well, the rest of it is all mucky and weird and I don't know yet. But for now, I have four bandits to defeat!
//I start walking away from the fountain. Everfree Forest was that way, right?
T: Wait! Spike, you can't just wander into Everfree Forest without finding out where you're headed!
Spike: Isn't that exactly what Heroes do?
//STUPID SHIT? YES.
//Twilight gallops to catch up with me. Out of nowhere, she summons a map and puts it in my hands. Her horn is still glowing.
T: Deific Castle is the old castle of the pony sisters, the two ex-Princesses; it's marked there. Joyful made me feel bad enough about mentoring you in the first place. Don't make me be a mentor to a dead Hero.
//In a burst of scentless air, Twilight disappears.
//...
Spike: Yeah. That makes me feel a whole lot better.

//Everfree Forest seemed more pleasant when I was walking out of it.
//Night has fallen, bringing a sky of bruised plums and tiny holes. The moon's full tonight, which is good; I wouldn't want to be out here in the complete dark. The tree cover blocks a lot of light, though...
Spike: Oh, I think I'm coming up on that river.
T: River? What river?
Spike: This one, here, that's shaped like a sea serpent.
T: You mean dragon? (And it's more like a stream.)
Spike: Uh, no, sea serpent. They're different things. (And whatever.)
//I should probably look on the map for a ford somewhere. The sound of rushing water tells me it might be a little late for that.
T: The stream's shallow over most of its length. You should be fine.
Spike: And if it's not?
T: You'll drown in a deep, dark forest where nobody will ever find your body.
Spike: ...I think you're re-using that line.
//Twilight shrugs. I walk out of the forest, to the bank of the river. It's about thirty feet to the other side, but the river is a blue pastel that I can't see into. There's no telling how deep it is.
T: Don't you know how to swim?
Spike: Uh...
//I mean, unless it's muscle memory, I don't really think so...
T: Don't worry! You'll probably be fine, Spike.
//"Probably"?
Spike: Yeah, dying isn't something people worry about.
//I wade into the water. It's running fast, and trying to drag me by the cape, but I'm able to stand in it without too much trouble.
T: See? You're a natural!
//I walk further in, probing the ground in front of me with a foot every time I take a step. It's pebbles underneath, thankfully, but the ground slopes down further and further. Almost halfway into the river, I'm standing on the tips of my toes just to keep my chin above water.
Spike: Natural.
//Swings, this water is cold.
//Twilight is floating above the water, amused.
T: Spike, you should try out that new power Fluttershy gave you.
Spike: Not the time, Twilight.
T: You never know. It could be a walk on water spell.
/_Why_ would it be a walk on water spell? From the Avatar of Temptation. Holder of the Element of Kindness. To a dragon Hero who is journeying in the name of Celestia. How is any of that related to water?
Spike: Sure, why not.
//Standing on the tip of my toes, I breathe in and try to concentrate.

The Drakeling breathes in and focuses, casting Walk of the Third!

//...Huh. This kind of does feel like Patatrin-Vikramana, but it doesn't do anything to my senses. In fact, I'm not feeling the water pushing against me as strongly now, and everything feels a little less cold. All the background noises of the forest seem downshifted, as if played in a lower register. If anything, this dulls all my senses, not heightens them! What a useless technique!
//I try to move my arm in front of me. I have to work harder to do it, as if the water is thicker.

The Drakeling's Walk of the Third ends.

//I hop up as the river pushes harder against me, floating a foot or two before sticking my toes down. Twilight floats over to me.
T: What a useful technique...
Spike: Nothing interesting happened.
T: Is that what you saw?
Spike: Uh, yeah.
//Twilight puts her hoof to her chin.
T: Let's see, how would you do that with magic?... It's not invisibility, because the water didn't flow around you but through you, and you didn't see it... conditional illusion, maybe? Or sense manipulation?
//Invisibility?
Spike: Did I just disappear?
T: I saw you disappear for a second. What did you think happened?
Spike: I stood here feeling silly.
//It's cold and I want to get out. I hop forward a few times, standing on my toes, and then start walking out of the river. It's slow progress.
T: You should use the technique in combat sometime. Hold on...
//Twilight sniffs the air. She points her head towards the side of the river where I'm wading.
Spike: I forgot about the nose thing.
T: Oh, so that's how it is.
//In a puff of air that makes an inch-high wave, Twilight disappears.
//I step out of the river. Suppose that wasn't so bad.
Spike: So, river defeated. What next?
//A great shake works its way down my body, from head all the way down the tip of my tail. Blue pastel water is thrown in all directions. I take my cape off and wring it out, then beat it against a tree. Hypothermia is nothing to--

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

Bumbling Attacker: Hah ha! I got yo--woooooo-ah!
//A pony leaps out of the bushes, but she trips on a root and faceplants into the rocks!
The Drakeling leaps backwards, away from The Filly!

Spike: The hell do you think you're doing?
//The pony extracts her face from the rocks and stands up. Huh, she's smaller than most of the ponies I'm used to fighting.
BA: You-- I did that on purpose!
Spike: Sure.
BA: I'm Erubetie, of the Four Heavenly -- wait, no, hold on.
//This girl is exceedingly silly.
BA: I'm Beatrice, of the Four Bandits! I'm the strong one!
Spike: Uh, are you sure?
//She's the strong one? She looks smaller than the first pony I ever fought...
BA: Quiet, slave!
Spike: Woah, what's that about? There's no need to call people names.
BA: You're my prisoner now! I've captured you!
//...Not really, no.
//Her voice is much higher than I'm used to hearing. Was this person's growth stunted, or something?
Spike: You're really part of the Four Bandits? Why would they need a runt like you?
BA: Rrrr... say that again, to my face! I dare you!
Spike: You're really part of the Four Bandits? Why would they need--
//She shouts:
BA: I didn't mean it like that, idiot!
//Hold on, it sounds like... I try to lean to the side and look at her flank.
Spike: _Celestia_, you're a child?!
BA: I'm not a little kid!
Spike: Saying it like that doesn't help your case.
//She doesn't have a cutie mark yet, and here she is, in the middle of Everfree Forest, threatening travelers...
BA: I'm gonna make you shut up!
//What happened to the whole 'childhood innocence' thing?!

The Filly leaps at The Drakeling!
The Filly kicks The Drakeling in the left upper arm with her right front hoof, shattering the scale!
The Drakeling counterattacks!
The Drakeling punches The Filly in the right rear leg, bruising the skin, bruising the muscle and bruising the bone!
The Filly has been propelled away by the force of the blow!
The Filly rushes by The Drakeling!

//She sails past me, spinning in the air, and faceplants again into the rocks!
BA: Owowowowow, ow...
//That kick didn't even make it past my scales, even without Terrae Corpus. I guess I'm really getting above the abilities of normal people now.
//The filly extracts her face from the rocks again, and says:
BA: Why'd you do that, you big dumb idiot!
Spike: You just said you'd make a slave out of me, do you not know how a fight works?
BA: You're not supposed to hit back! You're a slave!
//...How does that make _any_ sense?!
\Child. Come on, dude.
//...Oh, right.
Spike: If you try to hit someone they're going to hit you back.
BA: The last one didn't hit back!
Spike: Is that the colt you were trying to take to Deific Castle?
//Beatrice's face immediately drops. Terrified, she looks away from me, at her own hooves.
BA: ...You know about that?
Spike: Yes. You are in a _lot_ of trouble, little filly.
//She pouts, and spits:
BA: Sugar sticks.
//Huh. I guess this is working.
BA: Are you gonna tell my parents?
Spike: If you cooperate, your parents are the only people I'm going to tell.
//A long groan. She throws herself on the rocks dramatically.

The Bandit of Strength was defeated!
Spike earned 9000 experience points!
Spike is now level 25!
//9000 experience points? For that? Wow.

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//Then again, I guess I did defuse a situation where an innocent person was on the road to evil deeds. That deserves some sort of reward.
//I THOUGHT THE EXPERIENCE POINTS WERE FOR NOT FALLING ON YOUR FUCKING KNEES AND BEGGING FOR IT LIKE IN EVERY OTHER ENCOUNTER. GOOD ON YOU.
Spike: It's dangerous out here, so you're going back to Ponyville. You're not hurt that badly, you can walk, right?
//She grumbles:
BA: Yeah, I can swim.
Spike: Okay, good, we're going across the river. Stay in front of me.
//I roll up the displacement cape and tie it around my waist. If I'm going to be wading through the water again, I want to try to catch Beatrice if she tries to escape, and I need to be as mobile as possible for that.
BA: Eh, I suppose it's not so bad.
//The filly leaps into the crystal clear river and starts swimming. I hurry after her.
Spike: This is no place for a pony to hang out at night.
BA: Yeah, and I didn't really like being a Bandit, anyway. It was actually kind of boring.
Spike: What do you like to do for fun, Beatrice?
BA: I love knitting! But they never let me take my needles with me when we're out here.
//To each her own, I guess.
//Still paddling close in front of me, we've reached a third of the way into the river. It's up to my chest here.
Spike: Okay, Beatrice, you're going to want to swim at an angle to offset the flow of the river...
//...The river's not moving.
BA: What do you mean?
Spike: Hold on.
//The river's not moving at all, it's almost perfectly still. The only perturbations are from me and Beatrice moving through it. How can this be?
\Swings, it's cold, just keep moving so we don't freeze, please.
//But it's almost like it's thicker here, like it's a different kind of water entirely... and the river was blue pastel a minute ago, not clear.
//The water swells over my shoulders on a movement of its own.
Spike: Get out of the water! Now!
BA: What--
The Drakeling grabs The Filly by the left rear hoof with his left hand!
The Drakeling throws The Filly by the left rear hoof!
BA: Aaaaaaaah!
The Filly splashes into the water!

//I threw her closer to shore, and myself further out! Damn you, conservation of momentum!
//I wade like mad, trying to get back to the riverbank!
BA: Why--
Spike: Just keep moving!
//A ball of water forms above the level surface, bulging out like a knot. It spins, and lets off a wobbly voice:
Water Fabrication: ~I think I recognize you~, hehehehe...
BA: Did it just _speak_?
Spike: It's a Kelpie! Swim!
WF: And it looks like you remember me... who are ~you~?
Spike: Not particularly a fan, Wafa.
//Beatrice makes it to shore, scrambling out of the water. I'm wading through at stomach level now.
Come on...
Spike: Dry yourself off!
BA: With what? Do you have a towel?
//Does it look like I have a towel?
Spike: I don't know, roll around in the grass! Is that something ponies do?
T: (Hay, more often.)
WF: That's too bad! Did I tell you that I'm a Princess?
BA: She is?
Spike: Are you kidding?! She's a murderous fish!! Why would she be a Princess?!
//Beatrice leaves, hopefully to find a way to dry herself off. I've waded to thigh level, almost there...
WF: Well, if you're not a fan of me, you are shaped like a drakeling! So I'll just have to ~make~ you a fan of me!
//I get to the edge of the water and dash onto the riverbank!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

WF: AND I AM NOT A FISH!!
The Kelpie attacks!

The Kelpie assaults The Drakeling! The Drakeling's resistance is lowered!

//Water's covering my entire body, but there's only one place she's concentrating on...
Spike: That won't work this time.
WF: I think it ~will~, hehehe.
//I'm not on a ladder now.

The Drakeling breathes fire!
The Drakeling has been caught in the dragonfire! The Drakeling's scales are heated!
The Drakeling is caught in a burst of steam!
//Not the most flattering of positions I've been in, but hey, if it gets the job done...

//Out of the river, I can sense the orb which must be Wafa pouting. Spouting. Whatever.
WF: You're no fun anymore.
Spike: I'm not sure I ever was.
T: (I'll say.)
WF: Take this!
//A pony-sized glob of water leaps out of the pool and onto the dry land, ready to attack!

The Drakeling breathes fire!
The Kelpie jumps away from the dragonfire! The Kelpie is absorbed into the water!
//She just jumped back into the river. At least I know how to scare her...
\I can't boil off an entire river!

WF: No fair! Meanie!
Spike: Get away from me!
The Drakeling leaps backwards, away from the river!

WF: I'll get you for that!
//Three large orbs, each the size of a boulder, rise up from the water, lifted on water tendrils!
//THE HELL IS THAT WHAT THE SHIT
//She's going to throw them at me! Remember last time?! That's bad!

The Kelpie throws water at The Drakeling! The Kelpie throws water at The Drakeling! The Kelpie throws water at The Drakeling!

//I can't dodge all three! Maybe I'm going to have to trust Twilight about this move...

The Drakeling breathes in and focuses, casting Walk of the Third!

//Everything slows down dramatically. The huge orbs of water hurling towards me hover in the air, wobbling in place, but on closer inspection they are moving towards me. I step out of the way.
The spinning ball of water strikes The Drakeling in the first finger, left hand, shattering the bone!
//Swings, didn't move far enough!
The spinning ball of water strikes the ground, and is absorbed!
The spinning ball of water strikes the ground, and is absorbed!

//From a deep, low rumbling, it sounds like Wafa is saying something. But I can't manage to figure out what.

The Drakeling’s Walk of the Third ends.

WF: --did you go? _Where did you_-- oh, ~there~ you are!
//I guess I really do disappear while I'm using that technique, and everything slows down for me... but it doesn't last all that long. Even so, it's extremely powerful.
Spike: Not anymore!
WF: What do you--

The Drakeling breathes in and focuses, casting Walk of the Third!
The Drakeling disappears!

//Slowed down in time, I think I hear Wafa say:
WF: Hey!

The Drakeling runs away!

The Kelpie was defeated!
Spike earned 10000 experience points!
Spike is now level 26!
//Crazy watery bint...
Not far into the forest, Beatrice is rolling around in a grassy patch, getting the water off of her. I tell her she can stop.
BA: Good, I was getting tired.
She stands up.
Spike: You... didn't have to roll around until I told you to stop, you know.
BA: How was I supposed to know that?
That... completely derails the train of thought I had about orienting myself with the map and sending her -- aww, darn it!
Spike: The ink's ran!
BA: What is that?
Spike: A map of Everfree Forest. (I'm borrowing it from a friend.) And now it's ruined!
An owl hoots far away, disturbed by our voices and ushering us out. Twilight is identifying mushrooms with the displacement cloak around her shoulders, not five feet in front of us.
BA: Is your friend going to be mad?
It's amazing how well that cloak works.
Spike: ...I'm going to apologize and get her another map.
Beatrice twists up her face in half surprise, half shock.
BA: Ewww hahaha, you're friends with a _girl_? What a weirdo!
Spike: (Yeah, she is sometimes.)
Twilight gives me a mock-angry look. I wink back at her.
BA: What is she, your _girlfriend_ or something?
Spike: Know what, let's -- do you know which way Deific Castle is?
BA: Yeah! It's this way! Follow me!
Wow, I guess she really changed her tune after seeing Wafa. Wafa's not exactly someone to take lightly...
BA: After the rockslide, there's an easy path right up to the bridge!
Spike: Rockslide?
We might want to choose another path.
BA: Don't worry! It happened ages and ages ago!
Twilight grumbles:
T: (I wouldn't call it ages...)
Spike: If it's all the same to you, Beatrice, I'd like to keep quiet anyway, just in case.
T: (That's avalanches.)
Spike: (Not the reason.)
I don't want to have to listen to a kid for an entire long walk. Palla-Walla already taught me that lesson.
We keep walking through Everfree Forest, full moon illuminating our way.
Spike: ...Is this the bridge?
BA: ...Yeah.
Spike: The bridge which is still there which certainly does lead to Deific Castle?
BA: I don't know! It was fine last time!
Deific Castle looms worn and decrepit in front of us. Rotting banners, torn by wind and rain, hang off the tallest tower on the far end of the castle ground, bouncing against the dark stones in the breeze. A thick fog (mist?) envelops the area, not grey but a strange purple that brings to mind bioluminescence. A huge gash in the landscape cuts the ground in front of us, and the bridge that is supposed to connect the two pieces of land has been untied on our end.
It's not that far, I could probably jump it... but I can't see how far I'd fall if I missed. I toss a stone down there to check.
BA: So what do we do now?
A voice comes from the other side of the bridge, out of the mist:
Giddy Braggart: Hehehe, someone must be here to worship my greatness! Who is it?
Spike: (Hide!)
Beatrice leaps into the bushes as a small pegasus flies into view, hovering over the gap!
GB: Of course he is! I'm Granberia, of the Four Heavenly-- wait, no I'm not!
These are the silliest bandits I've ever met.
GB: I'm Gabrielle, of the Four Bandits! I'm the speedy one!
I lean over, trying to get a glance of her flank. Just like I thought, it's blank. Are all the bandits children?
GB: Everyone is amazed by my quickness!
Spike: Then get on with it already!
GB: Uh... get on with what?
If they're trying to be like the Avatars, Gabrielle certainly has Rainbow Dash's intelligence...
Spike: The fighting, what else did you expect?
GB: Fighting? I'm not a brute!
I guess she's not like Rainbow Dash...
GB: You want to get over the bridge, right?
Spike: No, I just came here to look at the Castle and walk away.
GB: If you want me to re-tie the bridge, you have to answer my three riddles!
Really?
Spike: ('Swings, the only thing older than this scene is Twilight...)
T: (Hey!)
GB: But be warned! They're really, really hard! Do you take up the challenge?
Spike: Yeah, yeah, riddle me, come on. I take the challenge.
GB: And also, if you get any one of them wrong, you have to become my personal slave for ever and ever!
Spike: Woah, wait, hey, you didn't say anything--

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

GB: Okay, prepare yourself! Here's the first riddle!
She's not going to listen to my protests, so I pay attention.
YOU'RE TEACHING HER SILENCE IS ACCEPTANCE? YOU SICK PIECE OF SHIT.
What?!! No!!
GB: What walks on--
Spike: Demons, next riddle.
Really? The riddle of the sphinx?
GB: You didn't let me finish! What walks on four legs at morning, three legs at noon, and not at all at evening?
Oh, it's a bit different. Still easy, though.
Spike: A dragon. Next riddle.
GB: Come on, you didn't even think about it!
Spike: Uh, am I wrong? A hatchling crawls, a drakeling’s tail drags along the ground as he walks, and full dragons fly.
GB: ...You won't get this next one!
I sincerely doubt that.

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

GB: I curl without folding, I sneak without feet. I break my own molding, without teeth I eat. My front is the end, my circle has two holes. Myself I have rend, my movement is in rolls. What am I?
Spike: ...I wish I could write that down.
GB: Just ask me to repeat it. Unless... you give up?
She raises an eyebrow at me mockingly, hovering up and down in place. It looks like she hasn't figured out subtlety in facial expressions yet.

Spike: Of course not! I'm a Hero, and Heroes never give in!

//EXCEPT TO MONSTROUS SPIDER-PONIES.

//...Shut up.

//I UNDERSTAND YOU'RE UNCHARACTERISTICALLY OPPOSED TO PRESENTING YOURSELF SPREAD-EAGLE TO THIS LITTLE SHIT, BUT EVERYTHING'S GOING TO BE OKAY. THERE'S A CREVICE RIGHT THERE, YOU CAN WALK IN AND DIE NO PROBLEM. IT'D BE LIKE FLYING, WHICH YOU'LL ALSO NEVER GET TO EXPERIENCE YOU FUCKING WASTE--

//So, the riddle. The first line says it sneaks, so it's an animal or person or personification. Which is a huge category of nouns dismissed, and an uncountably infinite number left.

\It doesn't have feet. Which rules out, if we're being technical, drakelings and demons and precious little else (ponies have hooves). It also doesn't have teeth, or doesn't use them in eating. Could it be a fish of some sort?

//Fish don't move in rolls. The last half of the poem is the stranger part, because the first half could just be an animal. It comes out of a molding... what breaks its own shell? An insect of some sort?

Spike: Can you give me a hint?

GB: Nope!

Spike: So, probably an animal, something without feet, that eats without teeth, breaks its own -- a snake! It's a snake of some sort!

//Gabrielle flies back a little bit, raising her head.

GB: ...Is that your answer?

Spike: ...No. It doesn't fit the last part.

//My front is the end'... certainly could be, to the snake's prey. And maybe it has a circular mouth, or bite cross-section, explaining the two holes. 'My movement is in rolls, though'... snakes slither, only things that are in a circular shapes can roll. 'Myself I have rend'...

Spike: Oh! That, uh, that snake thing! The one that bit itself in the tail!

T: (Ouroboros?)

Spike: Yeah, that one!

//Still hovering in midair, the flying filly waves for me to continue.

Spike: It's a snake, so it curls and doesn't fold, eats without teeth because it just swallows things, sneaks without feet, and sheds its scales every so often. It bit itself in the tail, rending itself and putting its tail and head in the same place, making it a continuous circle -- and the two holes are from its own fangs. Hyaa!

//I punch the air in front of me, excited. I'm sure this is it!

//Gabrielle shrugs in midair, and says:

GB: Sure, sounds good to me.

Spike: Wh-- what? What's the answer?

//She shrugs again.

GB: I don't know! I overheard the riddle one time, and it sounded cool. Your answer makes sense.

Spike: You can't ask a riddle if you don't know--

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

GB: Okay, last and final question!

Spike: But I'm not done yelling at you!

T: (If every enemy waited for that you'd still be in Westside Caves.)

GB: Hey, you got it right, so quit complaining! You big baby.

//Ugh, fine. I stand in a fighting stance, waiting for the next riddle.

Spike: Bring it on!

//Gabrielle flies side to side, laughing as she leaves holes in the mist.
GB: Haha, you're not going to get this question right! I can just feel it! And when you don't, you're going to do everything I want forever!
//For the Bandit of Speed, she's not very quick about these things...
GB: So, here's the question: do you want to join us and be the Fifth Bandit?
Spike: What?
GB: Sure! You're pretty smart, you know, and after a few days with us we'd roughen you up quick! You'd be a great Bandit!
//I think being a Hero kind of precludes that.
Spike: Why would you think I'd be okay with this?
GB: That way, we could all be like the Avatars! Five of us!
//I thought they were trying to emulate someone, but they're a cheap knockoff of the Avatars...
GB: I'm the Bandit of Speed! We have the Bandit of Luck, the Bandit of Strength, and the Bandit of Avarice! So you can be Fluttershy!
//Bandit of Temptation, eh? How my adventure's been going, kind of seems like it...
Spike: I'm gonna have to say 'no' on that one. Sorry. Can you tie the bridge for me now, please?
GB: Pffft, no! You got the question wrong, dummy!
//I got the question right!
GB: Sorry, kid! I can't let you through!
//"Kid"?! I'm older than you!
GB: Unless you agree to become my personal slave for forever, then I'm sure we could work something out...
//...I think I'll pass.
//I turn my back to Gabrielle and walk away from the crevice. Beatrice is still hiding in the bushes, watching us. That wasn't even a fair riddle, it was just a dumb question!
GB: Hey! Don't walk away from me! I'm talking to--

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

The Drakeling starts to run!

//I run as fast as I can at the crevace edge, aiming for the other side. It's far away, but I have to make it!
BA: Hey! Wait!
//The dirt here is dry and packed hard, so I get a good run-up to the edge, going fast -- it might be fast enough! All I need is a good jump!
GB: Wh-- waaaaaagh!
//I'm running straight at her. Here's hoping she stays there, I could use a little assistance.
//I place my foot on the edge and push off--
//HEY, REMEMBER THAT STONE YOU DROPPED? WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THAT?
//The dirt crumbles underneath my foot halfway through the motion, falling off into the deep! I launch into the air at a shallow angle!

//Beatrice rushes out of the bushes, towards the forest-side edge!
BA: He's not gonna make it!
//The mist catches my cape and clings to it, slowing me down as it forms running droplets. My arc won't reach the cliff edge now!
//I reach to Gabrielle, trying to get a hand on her -- if I can toss her back, and me forward, it might work!

The Pegasus Filly speeds backwards, away from The Drakeling!

Spike: No!
//No... I'm not going to make it...
//The mist waits in front of and below me, clinging to my legs in anticipation, covering jagged rocks in the crack that look like teeth.
//CLICK.

The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Walk of the Third!

//The world slows down around me, mist swirling slower. I'm drenched in odd purple water, but now it's not as cold. I'm not even falling as fast...
//I'm... not falling at all.
Spike: What is this?
//IT'S A WALL, DUMBASS.

The Drakeling collides with the obstacle! The Drakeling's upper body takes the full force of the impact, bruising the muscle and bruising the left true ribs!
The Drakeling grabs on firmly!
Spike: Hoo--
//Drove the wind out of me. Hold on, how was I still moving forward?!

The Drakeling's Walk of the Third ends.

BA: No! Hero!
GB: Oh my skies, he...
BA: I lost him in the mist! Hero, did you make it?!
//I still haven't got my breath back. I don't respond.
//What the hell happened there? I just cast Walk of the Third spontaneously, and the world slowed down, even gravity, and that's all normal, but... it was like I was gliding.
//YOU'RE FUCKING WELCOME.
GB: Aaaaaahannh no, no, this is all my fault!
//Gabrielle starts bawling, in midair.
BA: Hero?!
//Talk to me!!
//What did you do?!
//YOU WEREN'T USING WALK OF THE THIRD RIGHT, HALF BECAUSE THERE'S NO CUTESY PINK PONY TO TEACH IT TO YOU LIKE A DOG ON A LEASH AND HALF BECAUSE YOU FUCKING SUCK AT EVERYTHING YOU DO. I DECIDED TO LET YOU USE IT RIGHT.
//Why would it do that? Why would I... glide?
//BECAUSE THIS FUCKING SHIT METAPHOR WASN'T OBVIOUS ENOUGH.
BA: He didn't... he couldn't have...
GB: I, I, I, he was coming right at me, and I...
BA: ...fell?
//Gabrielle digs her hooves into her eyes.
GB: He was reaching out for me, for me to help him, and I just...
//Why would you help me out? You've never helped me out.
//COME THE FUCK ON, I MEAN, I'M AN ASSHOLE, BUT THAT'S JUST UNFAIR.
//Fine, you barely ever help me out.
//YOUR DUMB SHIT HAS TOO MUCH OF MY ATTENTION ALREADY, I'M NOT GOING TO LET AN INVESTMENT OF MINE FUCKING ROT AT THE BOTTOM OF A PIT. SO I UNLOCKED A PART IN YOUR HEAD YOU COULD HAVE REACHED WITH TRAINING, BECAUSE IT WAS EASIER THAN SEEING MY FUCKING VALUABLE TIME AND EFFORT GO TO WASTE.
//You know that's actually a fallacy, right? Sunk costs are ignored in healthy decision-making, they don't change anything.
//WELL IF YOU REALLY FEEL THAT WAY THERE'S THIS NICE BIG CLUSTER OF
NERVES HERE I CAN FUCKING PINCH OFF--
//And you totally made the right decision despite that please don't kill me.
GB: I... he fell, and I didn't catch him, he...
BA: Hero...
GB: This is all my fault!
//On the ledge, Beatrice strains out to yell at Gabrielle:
BA: No, don't say that! It's not your fault!
GB: It is, it is, he wouldn't have jumped if I had a better riddle, if I -- oh my skies, he's dead
because of meeeeee-he-he-he!
//Regaining my breath (and taking advantage of fortuitous timing, I'll admit) I pull myself up onto
solid ground and roll a little bit inwards.
Spike: Hoof, 'Swings, that was bad...
//If the dragon instinct didn't save me from the danger he caused himself, I might have had an
angrier (and much shorter) journey.
//I DIDN'T DO SHIT, THAT WAS JUST BAD LUCK.
//At the sound of my voice, both fillies pipe up:
BA: Hero!
GB: Is that you? You're okay?!
T: (What happened there, Spike?)
//My chest hurts, and the finger that Wafa broke is starting to throb. I stand up.
//Gabrielle flies over to where I'm standing and lands. She stares at the ground at my feet, eyes
twisted up. She's scared and trying not to cry...
GB: I'm... sorry, I really am...
//I walk towards Gabrielle, kneel down, and put a hand on her shoulder.
//WOW CREEP.
Spike: You should be.
//HOLY FUCKING SHIT THAT WAS AN ACCUSATION NOT A COMMAND, CALM THE
FUCK DOWN.
Spike: You feel bad because someone almost got really, really hurt.
GB: ...Sorry...
//She just keeps repeating that, I guess.
Spike: If you feel this bad, even though no one actually got hurt this time, how do you think you'd
feel if someone did get hurt because of your actions?
GB: ...Sorry... I don't wanna be a Bandit, anymore...

The Pegasus Filly was defeated!
Spike earned 10000 experience points!
Spike is now level 27!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//I stand up, trying to listen to the ambient noise around us. Besides the echoes in the crevace, I
think I can hear two young fillies talking off in the distance.
Spike: You can start making up what you've done by reconnecting the bridge here.
//Sniffing and looking at the ground, Gabrielle mutters:
GB: Uh-huh.
Spike: Then, stay here with Beatrice.
BA: Wait! Hero, where are you going?!
//I stalk off into the mists, fists at the ready, ignoring Beatrice.
T: (You're leaving two scared little fillies in the middle of Everfree Forest without supervision?)
Spike: (Uh, they hang out here themselves. And why do people think this place is scary, anyway?)
T: (Back when Celestia was around, Everfree Forest was the only location in all of Equestria where
the clouds moved, the trees grew, and the animals lived all on their own. Everywhere else, ponies were in charge of those jobs.
Spike: (So... ponies worked growing trees? Were they also gainfully employed to dry paint?)
//Twilight groans and trots away.
Spike: (No wait, I have a great one about the government paying people to dig a ditch and fill it in -- come back! I'm not done telling you how stupid this is!)

Chapter End Notes

With apologies to Tarn Adams.
A Golden Tongue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

//Two fillies, a unicorn and an earth pony, sit in front of the gate to the keep of Deific Castle. The unicorn is thinking madly, while the earth filly is looking around frightened, almost expecting something to happen. Neither of them have their cutie marks.
Almost Expecting: Why d-do we have to g-get in this d-darn thing anyways? Let's g-g-go!
Thinking Madly: Are you kidding me? This has got to be the place with all the loot! We searched the rest of the castle!
//Loot? What loot?
T: (Wait, are they-- no, they couldn't know about that.)
Spike: (If you're going to tell me something, you don't need to pretend to mutter to yourself. You can just tell me.)
TM: Besides, why else would someone put this magical seal up unless there was something in here worth protecting?
AE: T-Tammy, I--
TM: Use codenames!
AE: T-Tamamo, I d-don't think this is a g-good plan...
//Twilight rolls her eyes.
T: (I use this tower as magical item storage, because of its out-of-the-way location and the atmosphere.)
Spike: (Atmosphere?)
T: (Abandoned castle in the middle of dangerous Everfree Forest, with ominous mist swirling around and a giant gaping chasm around it? Draws Heroes like moths to a lamp. Everyone knows it must already be looted.)
//Reverse psychology. Clever.
T: (Everyone intelligent, at least.)
Spike: (You underestimated how stupid some people are, Twilight!)
T: (Clearly.)
TM: Nonsense, I just have to guess the password!
AE: T-Tamamo, it's c-cold out here...
TM: Uh, 'melon'! 'Kidney stones'!
//With each shout, the unicorn filly shoots a beam of light at the keep's gate, trying to get it to lower. The beam strikes the wood and is absorbed.
AE: Maybe it's n-not a magic lock?
T: (Don't worry, there's no way they can guess the password. It's undefeatable.)
Spike: (I trust you.)
TM: Nonsense, we just have to find the combination! Let's try... 'friendship'!
//Nothing. The unicorn filly rocks her head back and forth, trying to think, and then shouts out in a bad accent:
TM: Tu ne te prosterneras pas devant de telles porteurs d'incendie, car l'Eternel, ton Jument, tolère aucun rival!
T: (_What_?!)
//As the beam of light strikes the gate, a rhythmic clink of metal begins, and the gate starts to lower!
AE: Woah.
TM: See? I told you it'd work!
T: (Darn, now I have to change all my passwords...)
With a puff of scentless air that shakes the mist around her, Twilight disappears.
AE: What was the p-password?
TM: Eh, it was some weird thing my mom says a lot when people bring up dragons. Thought I'd try it.
AE: Must b-be an old p-person thing.
TM: I can't wait to see what's inside!
//Wait -- there are a whole bunch of dangerous magical items in there! Twilight just left! How irresponsible!
//Well, guess that means I'm up to bat!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

The Drakeling leaps out of the mist, towards the Unicorn Filly!

Spike: Stop right there!
//Both fillies whirl around towards me. The earth pony cuts her scream short when she sees me.
AE: S-Sugar sticks, I thought it was something n-nasty...
//...I can be nasty...
TM: What's this? A challenger?
Spike: You shouldn't go in the keep. It's dangerous.
//Also you beat up a colt and threatened travelers, but we'll get to that.
TM: And who's going to stop us? Who can threaten the great Tamamo and Alma Elma?
AE: That's n-not my name, T-Tammy--
//Tammy spits:
TM: (I swear to the skies, Alexa, you have rocks for brains--)
Spike: I will! (And can!) I'm a Hero!
TM: Pffff, Hero! Those things are like talking monkeys and cool boys! They don't exist! Show him what's what, Alexa!
AE: (You m-mean Alma--)
TM: That's what I said!

The Drakeling charges at The Filly!
The Drakeling slams The Filly in the upper body with his left shoulder, bruising the skin and bruising the muscle!
The Filly is propelled away by the force of the blow!
The Filly's lower body skids along the ground, bruising the skin and bruising the muscle!
The Filly slams into the ground!
//Alexa squeezes her eyes shut and shakes her head, whining:
AE: J-just my luck, I g-get attacked first...
TM: Are you going to sit there and cry about it, or fight back?!

The Unicorn Filly points at The Drakeling and starts to cast a spell!
The Unicorn Filly casts Stupefy!
The Drakeling jumps away from the beam!

//Whoa! Even a child spellcaster is ready to fight! I should take this a little more seriously...

The Unicorn Filly points at The Drakeling and starts to cast a spell!
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Walk of the Third!

//Tammy swinging her head at me slows down, and the world around it. I sneak behind her, and prepare for the Walk to end.
The Drakeling's Walk of the Third ends.
The Unicorn Filly casts Charm!
// The beam shoots off into the mist, hitting nothing!
TM: What?! Where'd he go?

The Drakeling grabs The Unicorn Filly by the lower body from behind with his left hand!
The Drakeling grabs The Unicorn Filly by the lower body from behind with his right hand!
Spike: Boo!
TM: Aaaah!
The Unicorn Filly kicks The Drakeling in the head with her left rear leg, bruising the muscle and bruising the skull!
// Gaah Celestia damnit crap stupid why did I do that
The Drakeling falls backwards!
The Unicorn Filly begins to run!

TM: Alma Elma! Run!
// Alexa shakes her head, still on the ground.
AE: I'm staying d-down right here.
TM: What?!
AE: We're in t-trouble, d-dummy! D-don't make it worse!
// Tammy runs towards the keep!
Spike: Don't go in there!
// As she tries to run through the archway, a solid wall of purple magic stops her!
The Unicorn Filly collides with the obstacle! The Unicorn Filly's fuzzy nose takes the full force of the impact, bruising the muscle!

// Carried by stale air that wafts from the tower, a voice like sugared poison echoes:
Twilight: In trouble? You certainly are now, little ponies...
// Wait! Why is Twilight speaking out from the keep?
The Drakeling stands up.
Spike: (What is this?)
// Terrified, the two fillies watch as clouds of mist converge at the archway. They spin and fuse together, letting out a terrible laughter:
T: Ha ha ha, ha ha ha ha-haa!
// Wow, she's bad at acting.
TM: No! I didn't mean any of it! I swear!
T: It is too late for you!
// Tammy scampers backwards and runs away from the swirling mists. A flash of purple shows--
// In the archway stands Twilight, with polished steel armor and wings!

The Filly stands up.
T: You fools! Your meddling has awoken my spirit to roam Equestria once again!
// Tammy bumps into Alexa, and the two fillies cling on to each other, terrified.
TM: Aaaaaaaah!
AE: Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!
// Swings that's hard on the ears...
Spike: Who are you, foul spirit? Answer me!
T: I am Princess Twilight Sparkle, risen from the dead. And you look like my first victim!
// Princess Twilight Sparkle, that must mean what Na-Mira said was true...
\ Rarity said it in Longbridge, this is old news.
// ...But I like Na-Mira better...
// I turn my head and shout:
Spike: Girls! Run to the bridge and tell your friends to hide! I'll deal with this ancient witch!
//For a split second, Twilight glares at me. Then the crazy smile returns.
AE: Aaaaaaa--
TM: Alexa, let's go!
//Half dragging and half running next to her, Tammy gets Alexa to run back through the mists as fast as they can, screaming. In only a moment they can't be seen or heard at all.
//I turn back to Twilight. She has a look on her face.
T: 'Ancient witch'?
//I shrug. It felt right to say at the time.
Spike: So what were you doing?
T: Trying to make sure a curious child doesn't get access to my storage of powerful magical items.
Spike: Well, uh, thanks for doing it in a way that helped me out.
//Twilight shrugs.

The Fillies have been defeated!
Spike earned 10000 experience points!
Spike is now level 28!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//Twilight's horn glows for a second. Her armor and wings are dismissed, fading away.
T: You picked it up pretty quick. Good job, Spike.
Spike: So what's in there that's so valuable, anyway?
//I try to walk past Twilight into the keep, but she puts a hoof on my chest, stopping me.
T: What part of, 'trying to make sure a curious child doesn't get access to my storage of powerful magical items,' don't you understand?
Spike: Not a child, Twilight...
//I'm sure I couldn't use half of whatever's in there anyway.
T: If you get to call me an ancient witch, I get to call you a silly little boy. Which you are. Silly little boy.
//She pats me on the head twice. I'd feel insulted if the image of her doing this weren't so odd.
Spike: Oh, at some point we also should probably pretend you get defeated.
T: What's stopping you?
Spike: I meant, say, a triumphant laugh from me and you scream as the gate slams and seals you in, or something.
T: Eh, I don't know... I'm not much of a screamer.
//She trots off the lowered gate, and I follow. After a quick spell on the gate, it starts to rise, and I belt out:
Spike: Ha-ha, I have you now!
//Twilight adds a jagged scream, and the gate slams shut with a boom!
Spike: ('Swings, what was that? Something in your throat?)
T: (...I didn't think it was _that_ bad.)
Spike: (Wh-- you were serious? That was the worst acting I've ever seen, and Applejack tried to lie to me.)
//Twilight laughs.
T: (Sorry. Now get moving, you have Bandits to chastise.)
//She disappears in a collapse of scentless air. I turn away from the keep and start running towards the bridge.

//YOU ARE THE FATTEST AND UGLIEST AND WORST-MANNERED FUCKER I HAVE EVER HAD THE DISPLEASURE OF MEETING IN THOUSANDS OF YEARS OF EXISTENCE
//Oh my Celestia why does this pie taste so goooooood
//I'm sitting on the edge of Ponyville's central fountain, eating a custard pie with red confectionery
sugar. It's fair to say the pie and my face have melded into one symbiotic being.

T: Where did you get the pie this early in the morning?

Spike: Mmmm.... mmmmglorp-phhmmmm...

//This pie is better than my friends. Sorry, Twilight.

T: Quit trying to get to fourth base with that pie and answer me. Where'd you get it?

//I finish the last of the crust. Custard hangs off my cheeks and covers my nose and chin. With a tongue longer than I thought (had I ever a reason to pay any mind to the subject), I try to clean off my face.

Spike: You know, they call it 'home plate'. Not 'fourth base'.

T: It's covered with gem powder. Ponies can't eat it. So, where did you get it?

//Is that why it tasted so good?

//I put the tin to the side, and pull the corner of my displacement cape out of the fountain. My face still feels sticky.

Spike: Sugarcube Corner. And really, you're missing out, that was a heck of a pie.

T: How did you buy it? You don't have any money.

Spike: They left coins lying about in this fountain, for some reason. So I gathered them up.

//I start cleaning my face with the wet corner of the cape.

T: ...Spike, those were offerings. For good luck.

Spike: Offerings to what?

//Twilight pauses, trying to find words. She chooses:

T: It doesn't really matter what. They're not yours to take.

Spike: Unless they were offerings to Celestia, they weren't really doing anything useful, so I made them useful. Besides, there's no such thing as luck.

T: People are allowed to believe in hocus-pocus if they want, Spike.

Spike: They would have just been swept up by the maintenance pony and kept in a bank or locked away in the town's coffers or something. Isn't it better for the local economy that I spend it?

//Under her breath, Twilight mutters:

T: (More like Braynard Keynes, if you ask me...)

//And I hop off the fountain, looking at a pony approaching with a professional posture. The grey mare has similarly boring hair, glasses most likely pilfered from a museum, and a satchel.

Spike: (Is that the mayor? I didn't get a good look at her earlier.)

//Earlier, before dawn had broken, I brought the Four Bandits to the Mayor of Ponyville, and left them in her care. Maybe I should have mentioned that first.

T: (Yes! She's a lot younger than she looks, actually. Be respectful.)

Spike: (I don't need to be lectured, Twilight...)

//In a scentless burst of air, Twilight's horn glows and she doesn't disappear.

T: (Ack, hold on a second, you have something--)

//She dips her hoof in the fountain and rubs custard from behind my ear, then disappears completely.

Spike: (She could have just told me.)

//I turn to the mayor and bow, Element of Kindness hanging off my neck as I do. She bows back. Mayor: I'm assuming this is you, Hero?

Spike: It is, Mayor. Always glad to be of service.

//With the cape on, she sees me as a blur.

Mayor: If you do change your mind and feel like taking your cape off, it would be no trouble at all. We're all friends here.

//I raise my hands up.

Spike: I'm journeying as a Hero in the name of Celestia, Mrs. Mayor, not in my own. But thank you.

//The Mayor smiles.

Mayor: Your choices are your choices, I wouldn't take that away from you. I will say, though, that Ponyvillians are more than able to keep a secret.
Don't I know it.

Spike: So, how did it turn out with the girls?
Mayor: I talked to all of their parents, and together we reached an agreement.
Spike: Not too lenient, I hope.
Mayor: We believe that it takes a 'ville to raise a child, and even the harshest private punishment wouldn't be enough.
//That's way too far in the other direction; these ponies mean business!
Spike: Wh-- you can't punish them on _display_, they're children!
//Something serious has to be done, sure, but that's not the answer!
Mayor: Hey, hold your horses!
//Not literally, I hope.
Mayor: We decided the girls will be going door-to-door to every single house in Ponyville, explaining what they did and apologizing to everypony.
//...Oh. That's different.
Spike: Everyone? ...Sounds like punishment enough for a young filly.
Mayor: They'll still participate in Nightmare Night festivities, but we'll keep a close eye on them. Two, if we can spare it.
Spike: And the colt who was injured?
//The Mayor looks away for a second.
Mayor: The parents of the girls are taking care of his medical bills themselves. They're somewhat responsible for what happened, too.
//As our little ones go astray, it falls to the older and wiser to correct and instruct them'. It doesn't sound like their parents are bad people, just maybe a little inattentive.
Mayor: Trust me, they're all going to be keeping a closer watch on what the girls are doing from now on. I don't blame anyone in particular. Everything was just a youthful mistake.
T: ('Youthful'? She still lives with her parents.)
Spike: (Not everyone is as old as you, Twilight.)
Mayor: What was that?
Spike: Uh, I said, I'm glad everything turned out for the best.
Mayor: I'm glad you were here. If you hadn't rounded them all up, I just don't know what would have happened. There are worse things than ghosts in Everfree Forest.
//Ghosts... I guess the ponies of Ponyville really do think Twilight is dead.
Spike: Speaking of that, could you tell Jebed a certain Kelpie was seen in the area again? I think she'd like to know.
//Probably best to be on guard around watering holes, now that Wafa has been frustrated two times...
Mayor: ...The Forlegsandria dragon matron? I can send her a letter, yes.
//Her voice skips when she says 'dragon'. Opterix must have left a big impact on this town.
//The Mayor rears up, betraying her youth, and opens her satchel.
Mayor: Oh! Speaking of mail, I have these for you!
//Out of the satchel, she pulls a smaller bag, and a postcard.
Spike: Huh? What is this?
Mayor: That is a small award I'm empowered to grant you for your service to the people of Ponyville. And this is--
Spike: Mayor, I can't take this. I'm journeying for Celestia, not myself.
//The Mayor gives me one of those stares with a smile. She's not having any of it.
Mayor: Give it away or leave it as you wish, Hero, but I'm not taking it back. And this is a postcard, for you.
Spike: For me? How do you know my name? From who?
//I take the postcard and look it over, as the Mayor hoists up the satchel and starts to leave.
Mayor: It said 'Hero' on it. I tend not to ask her questions.
//'Her'? Who is that?
Mayor: Now if you'll excuse me, I have to go find my clown outfit.
She leaves.
\...Is that how you say goodbye to people?
//I inspect the card. On the front, a view from a mountaintop, ponies and dragons laying about,
watching a beautiful sunset with expensive drinks close by. On the back:
::Dear Hero (hehehehehe!):
::I would just loooooooove to _personally_ show you a great time at Mountainville Casino and
Resort! Please come as soon as you can! I'm sure I can find a way to fit you in!
::~Pinkie Pie!!
Spike: ...Pinkie Pie? The Avatar of Luck?
//I feel fur brush my arm. Invisibly, Twilight also starts reading the card.
Spike: (Why are you reading around my arm?)
T: (I'm not tall enough to see over your shoulder. Hush.)
Spike: It's just a taunt from an Avatar. And a rather transparent one at that.
//In Strategy, flustering your opponent and degrading their mental state can be as effective as any
in-game move. But it's just a card.
T: Hmm, I don't think so. Pinkie Pie's usually pretty blunt.
Spike: I'll say.
T: No, more so. If she wanted to have sex with you she'd send you a card that said, 'Hi! Come to
Mountainville so you can have sex with me'!
Spike: ...Is that really how she talks?
//Twilight did a high-pitched, almost mocking voice that sounds like a cartoon character more than
a person.
T: I mean, she's gotten a little better, but I still wonder what this could be...
//I shrug, and pick up the small bag.
Spike: Doesn't really matter. I'm getting a train ticket to Canterlot; I'm sure Herr Yyz can figure it
out.
T: Don't trust ponies just because they're decisive, Spike. That doesn't make them right.
Spike: Of course not. I trust Herr Yyz because Celestia is guiding her.
//IN THE SAME WAY YOU CAN TRUST A PONY WHO ALWAYS LIES TO ALWAYS LIE.
YOU KNOW, LIKE TWILIGHT.
T: ...Okay, Spike. See you in Canterlot.
//She puffs away, and I start walking to the train station in the early morning light.

//Train to Canterlot. Midmorning. I might be drunk.
Spike: Gimme 'nother.
//I wave my empty glass at the bartender. He shakes his head at me from behind the small bar.
Bartender: Sir, you've already drank what little liquor we have. This is a public train. Also, it's ten
in the morning.
//Bah!
Spike: Tha' was liquor? I though' it was pneumonia.
//Ammonia. My tongue isn't obeying me right now.
//Outside, a cheery morning speeds by, fluffy clouds overseeing the tiny mountain range whose
north end includes Canterlot and south end stretches beyond Forlegsandria. I should have stopped
in Forlegsandria, honestly. My finger is beginning to hurt.
Spike: Gimme a Fuscus Flash, 'n' make i' hot.
BT: Sir, I cannot offer you liquor we do not have. If you'd please make your way back to your
cabin, I'm sure there are establishments in Canterlot willing to serve you when we arrive.
//A few old ponies are sitting at tables in the train car, having meals or quietly talking. No one else
is at the bar, besides an employee on break drinking milk.
Spike: Then jus' gimme the peppers for it.
//With eternal patience, the bartender pushes a plate of hot peppers towards me, and continues
reading a book under the bar. I try to take a peek at it. Wait...
Spike: ...Issat 'The Real Princess Hazel'?
BT: I'm sorry, is there something I can help you with, sir?
Spike: ...Nevermin'.
//I eat a few peppers, inspecting the outside world through the window with the bar to my back. It looks like we're a few minutes off from a tunnel.
//A griffon opens the door to this car and steps through, wind howling. Her talons clack on the floor as she walks up to the bar and takes a seat.
Thirsty Griffon: One Canterlot Special, please.
//I chomp on another pepper. Maybe the heat will distract me from my finger.
BT: Sorry, Ma'am, we're out of gin. Could I get you anything else?
Spike: A better tas' in drinks?
//I snark, chewing. These peppers aren't even spicy.
TG: Hey, what did you say to me?
//The griffon changes seats, moving next to me.
TG: And what would a dragon know about alcohol?
//...They made me take off the displacement cloak to order drinks. I should have thought of that before insulting someone...
Spike: ...Nothin'. Go away.
\"Go away?\" That was how you decided to end the conversation?
//Shut up. I'm drunk.
\"You had three drinks because you didn't want to be drunk meeting Herr Yyz again, quit pretending.
//The griffon does not, in fact, go away.
Spike: ...Damnit.
//I sit up and stop slurring my words. The bartender audibly rolls his eyes, and the griffon doesn't move.
TG: What are these, piments au safran?
//She pops one of them into her mouth and chomps down.
Spike: No.
//In a second, the griffon starts coughing into her fist, then braces the bar as she struggles to choke down whatever's left of the pepper. She raises her head again, eyes watering.
TG: That's a hell of a pepper.
//I eat the last one, and push the plate away from her.
Spike: No.
TG: Hey, who told you to be such a Negative Naga? Lighten up!
Spike: Who told you you could take one of my peppers without asking?
//She opens her beak for a moment, looks at the plate, and then closes it. I swing around on the stool.
TG: ...Sorry. Can I make it up to you?
Spike: Do you have more peppers?
//The bartender looks up from The Real Princess Hazel and nods.
Spike: Get the lady a plate, then. It was fun to see her in pain.
//The griffon lays her talons on her cheek and stares at me.
TG: Skies, you don't lay off, do you?
Spike: ...Sorry. I'm irritated.
TG: Why? Wake up on the wrong side of the treasure pile?
//I take the new plate of peppers from the bartender with my left hand, revealing my broken finger.
TG: Oh my skies, that looks terrible...
Spike: Eh. Had worse.
//At least I'm not strapped to a dragon's back with two broken limbs.
TG: I can't believe your rebirth-mate would let you get on the train with that sort of injury, it's only going to get worse.
//I stay silent, pick up another pepper and keep eating.
TG: ...
//The griffon stares at a knot on the bartop. She mutters:
TG: ...Oh. Sorry, that was probably pretty rude, wasn't it?
//Still not understanding why the griffon hasn't left me alone completely, I bite into a pepper. I can't tell if I'm getting heartburn or the combination of her and my finger is annoying me.
TG: Would you mind... could you tell me you got it?
//Whatever it is, sitting here and eating more peppers isn't going to help. And I'd like to be polite to this person, but frankly she's pushy and I'm never going to see her ever again.
Spike: ...I'd rather swim with a kelpie. Bye.
//I stand up from the stool and put the bag of the bits on the bar.
TG: Wait, what is that supposed to mean?
//The bartender looks at it and comments:
BT: Er, sir, this is too much. You only ordered--
Spike: Keep it. I've been kind of rude to you. If it's really too much, get the lady a drink, maybe that will shut her up.
//I fasten the displacement cloak and stalk back to my cabin, feeling worse than when I first came out here.

//Gaah, why do I feel so bloated? I'm swelling uncomfortably; every time the train shakes my stomach does a somersault.
//Maybe you're pregnant?
//Maybe you're stupid. Shut up.
//I open the door to my cabin and stagger in, holding my stomach.
Spike: Ugh, why do people have to talk to me when I'm irritated?
//I lie down on the cabin seat (alone this time) and groan. Maybe I shouldn't have eaten so many peppers.
T: I think she was trying to be friendly. In her own, not very effective way.
Spike: ...What kind of person invites themselves to a stranger's food and then asks intensely personal questions after having met for two minutes?
T: ...The kind of person who wants a drink at ten in the morning?
Spike: Hey, I have an excuse, my finger's broken.
//And my stomach is churning, I think I might be sick...
Spike: Uuuuooohh...
T: Maybe her heart was broken.
Spike: And I'm supposed to be the one to remedy that? Tell me, in all the trashy romance novels you've read for the vicarious thrill of imagining yourself with an active love life, has _anyone_ met by drinking on public transportation?
//Twilight raises her front leg up, looking greatly offended.
T: _Trashy_?!
//I start laughing, but the motion causes something in my stomach to riot.
Spike: Urk... I think--
//Twilight ducks as I let out a huge belch, releasing everything pent up in my stomach. I squeeze my eyes shut afterward and lean back, feeling much better. My tongue stings.
Spike: Ahh...
T: The curtains are on fire.
//What?!
//I snap my eyes open.
Spike: The curtains are on fire!
//Twilight covers her nose with a hoof and leaves with:
T: I have to step out; I have a meeting in a few minutes. Also, it smells in here.
//I leap out of my seat and rip the curtains off the wall, so nothing else catches fire. They're letting off too much smoke, someone's bound to notice, it's a closed room with no air flow...
//There's a window in the cabin, but no real way to open it. The glass is held in by great big brass screws.

Spike: 'Swings, I'm really doing this, aren't I...
//I wrap the curtains around my neck like a thick scarf and grab a screw, twisting it with my claws.
Spike: Gah, come on, why of all times now is the train a safe and reliable mode of transportation...
//The screw falls to the floor with a heavy THUD, and I get to work on the next one. I need to take it out before my displacement cape catches fire...
//Wait, why did Twilight leave when the curtains caught fire? Couldn't she just have put them out?
//I take the screws off the window and gently take out the glass. Wind tries to wrench the glass pane out of my hands as soon as I get it loose. It screams as loud as it can into the train.
Spike: Shut up!
//I try to throw the curtains out the hole, but the wind drives them back in and they hit me in the face. I have to wrap them around my forearm and stick it outside so the wind takes them.
Spike: Hold on...
//I look out the window as the curtains fall away.
//WHY ARE YOU TRYING TO THINK WHEN IT'S THIS LOUD PUT THE FUCKING GLASS BACK IN BEFORE SOMEONE INVESTIGATES
Spike: We're about to enter the mountain in a minute. Over there's where we come out, right?
//WHY THE SHIT ARE YOU ASKING ME?
Spike: Why is there a prye of griffons floating about where we exit?
//WHO CARES?
//I do, that's why I asked. You're the worst conversational partner ever...
Spike: Wait, scratch that. Why would a griffon need to ride a train in the first place?
//WHY DIDN'T YOU JUST STOMP OUT THE FLAMES YOU FUCKING IDIOT
//...Uh, probably should have thought of that...
//From further back on the train, I hear a scream over the wind, and then a tough, beaky voice:
Tough Griffon: _Where is the drakeling_?
//Oh, that sounds good.
The Drakeling puts on the displacement cape.
Spike: Allez-vous!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

The Drakeling leaps out the window, away from the speeding train!
//THIS WAS NOT ONE OF YOUR BETTER IDEAS
Spike: Shit!--

//I slam into the grass!
The Drakeling slams into the ground!
The Drakeling's left upper leg takes the full force of the impact, bruising the muscle and bruising the bone!
The Drakeling bounces!

Spike: Shit!--
The Drakeling's tail skids along the ground, tearing the scale and bruising the muscle!
The Drakeling slams into the ground!
The Drakeling's head takes the full force of the impact, shattering the scale, bruising the muscle, and tearing apart the right ear's cartilage!
The Drakeling bounces!
Spike: Shit!!!--
The Drakeling slams into the ground!
The Drakeling's left hand takes the full force of the impact, bruising the muscle, shattering the bone, jamming the bone through the left wrist and shattering the left wrist's bone!
//Gaaaaaaah why why why why
//BECAUSE YOU'RE A FUCKING MORON. YOU FUCKING MORON.
The Drakeling's tail skids along the ground, denting the scale, bruising the muscle, and bruising the bone!
The Drakeling lands.

//I lay my head back, arm on my chest, and groan.
Spike: Celestia...
//TELL ME WHY YOU DECIDED TO LEAP YOUR RANK ASS OUT OF A MOVING FUCKING TRAIN.
//I slowly scoot over half a foot, and lean my back against a bush. The train rushes by in front of me, going through the tunnel.
Spike: They... looking for me...
//It hurts, but nothing could hurt worse than what Rainbow Dash did earlier, I just need a second...
//FULL SENTENCES, COME ON. YOU BROKE YOUR WRIST, NOT THE SHITMEAT YOU CALL A BRAIN. ANY MORE THAN IT ALREADY IS.
Spike: If... someone's looking for me, as a Hero or drakeling, it's... I can't confront them where there are others...
//Removing myself from the situation as a Hero strangely enough is the correct move when someone's trying to manipulate me. The griffon(s?) was (were?) clearly nefarious, and likely willing to use the other passengers as leverage. It's better for them that I left, instead of fighting where there were innocents.
//YOU COULD SAVE A LOT MORE LIVES BY RUNNING AWAY COMPLETELY. MAYBE AN ENTIRE FOREST'S WORTH.
//I'll just have to... find another way to get to Canterlot to see Herr Yyz. I'm sure that won't be too hard.
Spike: Agh, I need to find something for my wrist...
//It looks worse than it feels and feels worse than it looks. I can't move it at all (not that I'd want to). The bone is jutting out through the scale, and there's a lot of blood.
//I try to look around, feeling a slight breeze coming down the mountain on my torn ear. There are flat green grasses here, but making a sling is out of my range of motion right now.
//OH, YEAH, WAIT THE FUCK AROUND, DUMB BASTARD; GET YOUR ASSHOLE TORN OPEN BY GRIFFON CLAWS WHEN THEY REALIZE YOU'RE NOT ON THE TRAIN AND COME LOOKING.
//...Bully's got a point. But is there anywhere to move to?
Spike: I have a feeling I'm going to regret this decision more than anything else I've ever done.
//JUMPING OFF A TRAIN? THAT'S WORSE THAN BURNING DOWN A FOREST?
Spike: I was talking about listening to you.
//I stand up, holding my left arm still with my right, and look around. Far away, up the grassy mountain, repeating grey poles jut up out of the...
Spike: ...
//...No, it can't be.
Spike: Ski lifts?
//There's no snow here! Not even above the treeline!
//A clear blue sky shines above. The sun is warm this season, but the altitude is cooling. This mountain is an active volcano, but there's no tree cover for miles around, just grass growing thick in the fertile ash. If I remember right, there was widespread logging, to support the construction of...
\...Mountainville. Of course.
Spike: Just my luck.
//I start trudging through the thick grass, up the mountain. There's no cover for me at all, unless I can find a way to hide purple scales in dark green grass. Celestia, I guess the ski poles are closer than they look... or my head's getting woozy from the pain.
//OH SHIT, WE'VE LOST HIM. THE ALLURING ATMOSPHERE OF ALCOHOL, GAMBLING, DRUGS, CASUAL SEX AND TOTAL HEDONISM DID HIM IN. GOOD RIDDANCE.
Spike: I'm moving before the griffons find me, my wrist needs medical attention, and Pinkie Pie is there anyway. ...Even if she probably had a hand in this.
//I jumped off a train, completely evading people who wanted to hurt me, and escaped with only a broken hand. That was pretty lucky, to tell the truth.
//A griffon cry comes from the other side of the mountain, stained with anguish!
Spike: Yeah, it couldn't last. Knew it.

The Drakeling breathes in and focuses, casting Terrae Corpus! The Drakeling's scales become as hard as rock!
The Drakeling breathes fire! The Drakeling's scales are caught in the fire! The Drakeling's wound has been sealed!

//Feathery lions start to tear through the sky on wings of fury.
//IT'S A RAPE NOT A METAL ALBUM CALM THE FUCK DOWN
//They spot me and start to fly over. I keep walking up the mountain.

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//One griffon pulls up closest, and says:
Aggressive Griffon: By Warhelm, you _jumped_?
Spike: Excuse me for thinking of '_Where is the drakeling_?' as a bad sign.
AG: Man, this means we're getting damaged goods...
Spike: There's nothing good about this.
//A second griffon with a rougher voice swoops in, a little too close.
The Drakeling breathes fire!
Second Griffon: Eeeeeee!
The Griffon dodges away from the flames!

//Quine: Some fights are about dimension. One degree of freedom over you and your opponent should have no contest.
//Spike: Should?
//Quine: You may be fighting idiots.
SG: Hey, you almost burned me!
Spike: Sorry, I didn't mean to. I give in. I'll go quietly.
//I stand still, hanging my head. Several of the griffons look at each other, forming a flapping circle around me.
AG: Well, okay, man.

The Griffon charges at The Drakeling!
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Walk of the Third!
//Her dive slows down. I step a few feet closer, and then do some mental arithmetic.

The Drakeling's Walk of the Third ends.
The Drakeling breathes dragonfire!
AG: Yaaaaah!
The Griffon is caught in the dragonfire! The Griffon's left wing has been set aflame! The Griffon's upper body has been singed!
The Griffon rushes by The Drakeling!

The Griffon slams into the ground! The Griffon's right front leg takes the full force of the impact, bruising the muscle and shattering the bone!

Spike: Celestia, you're on fire!
//I rush over to the griffon, trying to put her out!
The Drakeling charges at The Griffon!
The Drakeling kicks The Griffon in the upper body with his right foot, bruising the muscle, bruising the left false ribs and bruising the left lung!
//She screams and scrambles away!
The Drakeling rushes by The Griffon!

Spike: Skies, I'm sorry! I missed!
//The other griffons still circle and follow our short chase up the mountain as the griffon engulfed in flame tries to take off.
The Drakeling charges at The Griffon!
The Drakeling kicks The Griffon in the left wing with his right foot, bruising the muscle and shattering the bone!
The Drakeling collides with The Griffon! The Griffon tumbles backwards!
//Removed 3D from the equation, this should be no challenge now.
The Griffon slashes The Drakeling in the lower body with her left front claw, but the attack is deflected by The Drakeling's scales!

Spike: Hey, stay still! I'm trying to put you out!
The Drakeling stomps The Griffon in the left wing with his left foot, bruising the muscle, shattering the bone, driving the left wing's bone through the left lower scapulocoracoid and shattering the left lower scapulocoracoid's bone!
The Griffon gives into pain!
//With a sickening crunch her wing flattens into her body. It's mostly put out. All the feathers have burned off or been kicked out.

Spike: I mean, that's just irresponsible. Do you know how much damage a wildfire can do?
//YOU DO

//I shrug at the fainted griffon as the others fly around and over me, a little further out. Is that some sort of insignia on her chest, or...
The Drakeling picks up the red helmet badge.
//She had this pinned to one of her feathers. What is it?
Second Griffon: You... you-- if she dies, it's your fault!
//I spin around, yelling up to the leering griffons:
Spike: You're trying to assault me, and I shouldn't defend myself?
//I fold the red badge into my displacement cape, putting it away for now.
SG: You surrendered!
//And you were dumb enough to believe it!
Spike: I can see why you're criminals. Actual work must require some sort of brainpower.
SG: False surrender is a war crime!
//I start working my way up the mountain. This argument isn't worth sticking around for.
Spike: I'm not a soldier or at war. You're trying to enslave me!
SG: Bull, you're a Hero and everyone knows it.
Spike: Oh, so you were with the griffon on the train.
//She must have...
//I stop for a second, long grasses waving against my legs and tail as the griffons follow me.
Spike: ...I never told her I was a Hero.
Third Griffon: Sir, Agatha is down. You're the most senior officer here. Orders?
//Sir? Orders? What's happening?
SG: ...
//I continue walking up the mountain, trying to listen in on the conversation. If only Patatrin-Vikramana wasn't replaced...
SG: (Okay, he's far enough. You two, airlift Agatha out of here.)
//Two griffons, smaller than the rest, zoom back down the mountain and land.
TG: (We have him to rights. His arm's broken and he's hurt one of our own. Should I--)
SG: (No, I'm not calling in heavy ordinance so close to Mountainville. The crown doesn't respect their own rules of warfare, too risky. Help with Agatha, I'll distract him.)
//The rest of the griffons, about five in total, fly in formation over to where the first lies. Remaining, the officer begins to shout at me:
SG: You selfish prick!
Spike: Yes, shame on me for wanting my freedom over your personal benefit. It's completely inexcusable, I know.
SG: That's the worst part. You're so brainwashed you don't see anything wrong with it.
//I reach the bottom of a cliff edge, make a guess and start to work my way left. Insects of different sorts crawl in the concealment of tiny rocks, lying along the grassless strip that follows the cliff bottom.
Spike: So, to clarify: we're talking about assaulting a drakeling in order to mentally enslave them, right?
SG: 'Assault' -- 'enslave' -- have you ever talked to any bound drakeling? A single one, at all?
Spike: ...You're not going to say 'because they retroactively accepted it, it was okay'.
//Griffons off in the distance are carrying Agatha away. They made a sling with the grass for her wing...
SG: What if I am?
Spike: ...Consent isn't eventual, it's immediate. Evil done in the progress of something that turns out okay is still evil -- and that's saying 'assault being rewarded with immortality' is turning out okay!
SG: Liberators are always resisted by people who are entrenched. These are people who have been convinced by someone else their way is the only way. Why do you have such a strong opinion about something you've never experienced?
//...I don't need to go through some things to understand them. That's part of being intelligent. You don't have to experience a perspective to empathize with it.
Spike: I've never been murdered either, but somehow I have an opinion about that.
SG: 'Murder'? You're being prejudiced. You need to open your eyes.
Spike: You need to shut your mouth!
//Her idiocy isn't making my wrist feel any better.
//The griffon scoffs.
SG: What? Your convictions can be shaken by merely the existence of alternative viewpoints?
Spike: Assaulting a drakeling... their whole personality changes. You may as well kill them and put someone else in their place! It's like murder, but worse, because someone else is dancing around in their body, hurting the people who were close to them and swearing loyalty to someone who doesn't deserve it!
SG: People change their mentality when significant events happen to them. It's part of life.
Spike: This shouldn't be.
//She looks around, and back at where the others were taking off. They are far away in the sky, still visible.
SG: You...
The Drakeling breathes fire!
The Griffon dodges away from the dragonfire!

//She gradually flew closer as we were talking. Thought that would work, darn...
SG: Have you thought about immortality? For even the slightest damn second, the littlest bit, about what it would mean?
Spike: It would mean evil is eternally rewarded!
SG: Mathematical and sociological models of destructive behavior arise from competition for scarce resources. Introduce immortality. No resources are needed to live! Evil has no longer any reason to be! Immortality is an infinite gain for finite costs. You're, what, inconvenienced for ten minutes, at most?
Spike: People aren't only evil for their own gain. More people are evil in the name of others than that!
SG: Why does any conflict need to happen if someone is going to live forever? What is there to fight over? _You_ are Outside Context Solution. Through removal of its causes or directly, immortality would completely solve every single problem of the world right now, and for all eternity! It would be a new world, a better world -- imagine if for every person to exist there were a drakeling to make mistakes, absolutely any mistake, completely fixable! Including death!
//...She's a zealot. A complete and total nutcase, wrapped in a wrapper of freak.
Spike: Your plan to fix the world is for every single person to have a slave of their own to take care of all their needs.
SG: You're forcing us to _die_ because you don't want to be uncomfortable for a few minutes! How can you be anything but greedy?!
Spike: In the name of Celestia, some day I hope you see how crazy you sound.
//A lion's roar echoes from down the mountain. We both spin to look.
//Pegasi in blue suits are attacking the griffons carrying the hurt griffon away. It looks like the fight is going in favor of the pegasi.
SG: _Medics and wounded are protected_, you savage fuc--

The Mysterious Mare charges The Griffon!
The Mysterious Mare strikes The Griffon in the tail with her Wind Drill, bruising the muscle and shattering the bone!
The Mysterious Mare collides with The Griffon! The Griffon loses control and spirals downwards!
//A dark blur came out of nowhere!
Spike: (Why is she wearing a kooky outfit?)
//The pegasus who just attacked the griffon has an obfuscating purple body suit, a black cape and hat. It looks stupid.
T: (It's the Mysterious Mare Do Well!)
Spike: (No, it's Rainbow Dash. No one else can fly that fast and she used Wind Drill.)
//I remember that move. For good reason.
T: (...You're very perceptive.)
Spike: (I could tell by the ultra-violence.)
//On the ground, the griffon sputters:
SG: You -- I'll kill dishonorable muck like you!
RBD (muffled): Yeah, right! Bring it on!
//Not only is she a bad actor, but her text box says 'RBD (muffled)'. Who does she think she's fooling?
//I reassure that my displacement cloak is on tight and start to sneak away. Being in the general vicinity of Rainbow Dash doesn't seem to go so well for me...
//...Strangely enough, she doesn't follow. I run further up the mountain as the two are fighting, getting away.
The Griffons were defeated!
Spike earned 1000 experience points!
//Crazy bint. And the griffon, too.

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//Hours pass as I climb up the mountain path. Grass starts to fade away with the elevation, and grey poles start to reach higher and higher. My wrist throbs uncomfortably in tune with my heartbeat. It feels hot.
Spike: So, this may not have been the best idea.
//BEING A HERO? I FOR ONE FUCKING AGREE.
//Not a cloud in the sky oversees my journey. Further up the mountain, I can see the bumps across the angled horizon that might be buildings, but they're so far away...
//It's afternoon, all of the sudden, and nothing is looking any closer. The grasses and pretty much anything besides pale yellow dirt disappeared some time ago. There's actually a significant risk of dehydration if I can't find anything or get anywhere soon. To keep myself sane, I practice speaking in the voices of others, to surprisingly find I'm pretty good at it.
Spike: The _slain_ lie on the _plain_ beside the _train_ in Transyl-_vain_-ia...
//...I'm walking, what more do you want from me?
RBD (muffled): I didn't take you for a hiker.
//I whirl around, fists up!
//Rainbow Dash is standing a few feet behind me, Mysterious Mare outfit still on. There are tears in the cloth where her blue feathers peek through.
Spike: (...Twilight?)
//Silence. I guess she must have gotten bored.
RBD (muffled): Then again, _that_ cloak isn't exactly hiking gear. Don't you have any others?
//Others? Why would I...
\...If you were a different person, you'd have others. The displacement cape obscures your identity. She thinks you're someone else.
//Twilight isn't here to interrupt, so, maybe, I can... I was just getting the last part down, actually, and I feel pretty confident about it...
Spike: Why, of course I have others, Rainbow Dash, but discretion is not something to be taken lightly. Even if both your and my wardrobes seem to lack it as of late.
//I try to speak from my head, breathier than normal. Now that it's out there for someone else, this accent sounds goofier than I'd ever imagined. Who speaks like this?
//Rainbow Dash takes off the mask of the Mysterious Mare costume, and breathes in.
RBD: Yeah. Sorry for messing up the costume, Rarity. I know you put a lot of time into it.
//...Must be a passable imitation.
Spike: Please, dear, don't apologize! I know you; you play rough with your things. If I wanted to see it preserved, I wouldn't have given it to you.
//The Avatar of Speed chuckles, and takes off the costume fully. She puts it to the side, gentler than I've ever seen her handle anything.
RBD: I should get one of those displacement cloaks. It's probably a lot easier than the costume!
//I nod, not wanting to wear out the voice.
RBD: What are you doing here, anyway? Twilight told me to clean up the griffon attack, as far as I know.
//Twilight did? Was that the meeting she had to go to?
Spike: Oh, I'm visiting Mountainville so I can speak with Pinkie Pie. (And perhaps some gambling, I haven't decided yet, hohoho!)
RBD: Oh yeah, I haven't talked to Pinkie in ages! What are you meeting her for?
//Uh, are we really shooting the breeze here in the middle of nowhere? I had hoped imitating Rarity would get Rainbow Dash to ignore me and leave, but if I am going to do this, maybe I can gain

some information before it falls apart...
Spike: I had heard rumors that Spike had defeated Fluttershy for her Element, and was planning on confronting me in Canterlot. I was going to ask Pinkie...

//At the mention of my name, Rainbow Dash's friendly face slides away. She leans forward, staring at me from narrowed eyes.
Spike: ...Is something wrong, dear?
//She takes a step forward, flaring out her wings.
RBD: I'm gonna ask you to take off the cloak now.
//I take a step back, covering my broken wrist. My impression wasn't the greatest, then...

The Drakeling breathes in and focuses, casting Terrae Corpus! The Drakeling's scales become as hard as rock!

RBD: _I said_, I'm gonna ask you. And I did. So now I'm gonna tell you: take off the cloak!
\lIt's a powerful magical item, given in the name and duty of Celestia, whose scarcity is enough to impress even Twilight. It's not worth risking in a fight with someone who's beaten you twice before.
Spike: Fine.
The Drakeling takes off the displacement cloak.
//Rainbow Dash recoils, as if physically struck.
RBD: _Spike_?!
Spike: You were expecting a baker?
//Rainbow Dash hops into the air, pushing yellow dirt away from her as she flaps in place. For a few seconds, she doesn't speak.
RBD: ...Has anyone ever told you you're messed up?
//I KEEP TRYING BUT HE DOESN'T LISTEN
Spike: Why?
//She doesn't respond to that, twisting her lips to keep some shout in.
RBD: ...I'm not going to let you get away unpunished with impersonating one of my friends.
//SHE'S GOING TO FUCK YOU TO GET CLOSER TO RARITY?
Spike: Oh, so you're going to mount me to strengthen your relationship with Rarity?
RBD: ...
//That bit deep. I think I'm beginning to understand...
//Is what I would say if I were a blockheaded moron who can't take a hint.
RBD: You defeated Fluttershy. That means you may be a Hero of the Land someday. But as Avatar, I get to see if you're for real!
Spike: Right, this again. Glad to see you haven't changed.
//Rainbow Dash looks at me oddly. Her gaze grows a little colder, further away.
RBD: If you're gonna help out, you need to pull your weight! Let's see if you can stand up to what I have in store for you!
//Celestia just get on with it.

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

Chapter End Notes

With apologies to Tarn Adams.
An Arsenal of Innuendo

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

//Rainbow Dash digs something out of her piled costume and throws it to me.
RBD: Catch!
//I snatch the yellow thing out of the air, whatever it is. It's...
Spike: ...Why would you give me this?
//It's a small bottle of gold liquid, smelling like wood. A healing potion!
RBD: You're gonna give me all you've got, one way or another! No excuses!
//I inspect the glass a little more closely. It has a sigil scratched into it, a simple crystal with a beam. A magical trap?
//...It smells enough like wood, and Rainbow Dash doesn't seem smart enough for trickery. I guess it's fine.
//HEY I HAVE SOME SHIT YOU SHOULD SAY
//You have no idea how much I don't care.
//IT'LL HURT THIS COWARD AND THAT'S ALL THAT FUCKING MATTERS
//...In Strategy, flustering your opponent and degrading their mental state can be effective, true. Hit me.
//The dragon instinct gives me two lines and I use them:
Spike: From the northlands, huh? I suppose it's only fitting.
//The cork slips out with ease.
Spike: I'm going to give you the wounds you should have got there.
//I drink the potion. My broken finger, broken wrist, torn ear, and everything else heals.
//EXCEPT YOUR FUCKING HEAD WHY WOULD YOU SAY THAT TO A FRIEND YOU ASSHOLE?
//You told me to!
//Rainbow Dash leans forward, readying an attack.
RBD: I'm going to enjoy making you regret that!

Rainbow Dash charges at The Drakeling!
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Walk of the Third!

//Even under Walk of the Third, Rainbow Dash is moving fast. It doesn't look like she's giving it her all, either... let's change that.
The Drakeling strikes Rainbow Dash in the lower body with his Dashing Rogue Punch, bruising the skin and bruising the muscle!
Rainbow Dash rushes by The Drakeling!

The Drakeling's Walk of the Third ends.

//Rainbow Dash lands and skids, kicking up dust. She whips around and spots me immediately.
RBD: What did I tell you about that move?!
Rainbow Dash charges at The Drakeling!

The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Walk of the Third!
The Drakeling breathes fire!
//The dragonfire sticks in the air, spreading like bright molasses.
The Drakeling breathes fire!
//After putting another spout into the air, I walk backwards a few steps, readying my Fist of Justice.
The Drakeling's Walk of the Third ends.
//Rainbow Dash flares out her wings as the wave of dragonfire approaches!
Rainbow Dash spreads her wings, and casts Wind Wall!
//A spike of wind drives forward from her wings, blowing away the fire and kicking up dry dust!
The Wind Wall strikes The Drakeling in the upper body, but the attack is deflected by The Drakeling's scales!
//The wind and dust forces me to blink!

Rainbow Dash charges at The Drakeling!
Rainbow Dash strikes The Drakeling in the upper body with her left wing, bruising the muscle through the scale!
The Drakeling punches Rainbow Dash in the left front hoof with his right hand, but the attack glances away!
//Damnit, I forgot the Justice!
Rainbow Dash rushes past The Drakeling!

//I feel her slowing down, let's try a new tactic.

The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Walk of the Third!
//I open my eyes. Rainbow Dash is turning in a midair arc around me. At full speed, I wouldn't have been able to react.
The Drakeling leaps at Rainbow Dash!
The Drakeling grabs Rainbow Dash by the lower body with his right upper leg! The Drakeling grabs Rainbow Dash by the lower body with his left upper leg!
//Success!
//I'm on her back. If I could find a good pun for 'mounted', I'd use it.

The Drakeling's Walk of the Third ends.

RBD: Wh-- get off me!
Spike: Coming from you, I'd expect 'get me off'...
The Drakeling punches Rainbow Dash in the head with his right hand, bruising the skin and bruising the muscle!

Rainbow Dash struggles in vain against the grip of The Drakeling's right upper leg on Rainbow Dash's lower body!
//She stopped flying to try to jerk me off. Uh, with her back legs. You know what, that sentence isn't recoverable, moving on.
Spike: I'm sure I had a lot of practice not being bucked.
The Drakeling grabs Rainbow Dash by the left wing with his left hand! The Drakeling grabs Rainbow Dash by the left wing with his right hand!
//Going down!

Rainbow Dash slams into the ground!
Rainbow Dash's right front hoof takes the full force of the impact, chipping the hoof!
Rainbow Dash's upper body takes the full force of the impact, bruising the skin!
The Drakeling slams into the ground!
The Drakeling's right lower leg takes the full force of the impact, denting the scale!
The Drakeling's right lower arm takes the full force of the impact, chipping the scale!

//My right leg is pinned under her flank! I can't tell who has what advantage now.
The Drakeling punches Rainbow Dash in the upper body with his left hand, bruising the muscle, bruising the left true ribs, and bruising the liver!
RBD: Celestia, take it easy!
Rainbow Dash kicks The Drakeling in the head with her left front hoof, shattering the scale, bruising the muscle and bruising the jaw!
The Drakeling is propelled away by the force of the blow!

The Drakeling's upper body skids along the ground, chipping the scale!

Rainbow Dash stands up.
Spike: See, they say they want me to mount them, but when I do...
The Drakeling stands up.
/I leap to my feet, hands at the ready. Rainbow Dash hops into the air again.
Spike: (Does she ever stay on the ground?)
T: (Flying is actually very fun.)
Spike: (I'm sure if Rainbow Dash had her way, I'd never get to try it.)
RBD: Just what the heck is that move?!
Spike: What move?
RBD: Don't play dumb! I know a speedup move when I see it!
//Then why did you ask?

Rainbow Dash charges at The Drakeling!
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Walk of the Third!
//Rainbow Dash is flaring her wings, pulling back. She started reacting before Walk of the Third was cast... I can't hit her right now.
//I walk over a few feet, pick up the discarded costume, and throw it in the air.

The Drakeling's Walk of the Third ends.
RBD: Heh-heh! Baited it--
Rainbow Dash charges at the costume!
Rainbow Dash strikes the costume in the cloth with her Wind Drill! The severed part flies off in an arc!
The costume has been struck down.

Spike: Oh, I guess this means you're as dumb as a bull.
//And about as horny.
//Rainbow Dash takes scraps off cloth off her, dropping them.
RBD: ...You fought Fluttershy, but this is nothing like her P-and-V.
//'P-and-V' and 'Fluttershy' don't belong in the same sentence together. She means Patatrin-Vikramana, I guess.
RBD: Even at her best, Fluttershy can only take away some of your senses. But you disappear completely. That's not a thing!
//Fluttershy can do that? ...She must not have been using her full power against me. I don't know how I feel about that.
//IT TOTALLY IS A THING, YOU WOULD KNOW IF YOU STOOD AND FOUGHT MORE OFTEN
Spike: It totally is a thing, you would know if you stood and fought more often.
RBD: Grrrr... your battle strategy's kind of obvious. You're trying to enrage me into attacking! It won't work!
Spike: It won't? You have to come down into 2D to attack me at some point. Unless you're continuing the trend of running away.
//Rainbow Dash doesn't have a ranged attack move, unless she's planning on dropping rocks...
RBD: That's it!

//Rainbow Dash rises up into the air and does a twirl!
Rainbow Dash twirls in the air, casting Wind Pool!

//In a ring around me, wind starts to drive dirt and stones into the air. It gets stronger quickly, and I have to pull my limbs close so I'm not dragged along.
RBD: 2D is so lame!
//Rainbow Dash does another twirl, aiming for one radius away from me. There's nowhere to go, I'll be blown away!
\Not necessarily. A stone might hit you in the head and kill you.
Rainbow Dash twirls in the air, casting Wind Pool!

The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Walk of the Third!
//The wind around me slows down, but not too much. I'm able to dodge through the flying rocks and debris, and leap away--
The Drakeling's Walk of the Third ends.
//Why did it cut out so soon?!
RBD: Heh-heh, got you!
//Oh, I'm near a twenty-foot drop. That's not good.
Rainbow Dash charges at The Drakeling!
Rainbow Dash kicks at The Drakeling with her left front hoof, but The Drakeling dodges away!
Spike: Watch it! You almost hurt me!
The Drakeling counterattacks!
The Drakeling strikes Rainbow Dash in the left front hoof with his Dashing Rogue Punch, bruising the muscle and bruising the bone!
Rainbow Dash rushes by The Drakeling!

RBD: Do you even listen to me?!
//Why would I?!
Rainbow Dash charges at The Drakeling!
//I'm on the cliff edge! There's nowhere to go!
Rainbow Dash kicks The Drakeling in the right upper leg with her right rear hoof, tearing apart the scale, tearing apart the muscle and bruising the bone!
//I stumble backwards half a step, one foot slipping off the edge!
The Drakeling falls over!
//Celestia, that was close, I almost fell... why is Rainbow Dash just standing there?
RBD: Come on! Use that move and fix everything!
Spike: For it to fix everything it'd have to make _you_ disappear.

The Drakeling stands up.
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Walk of the Third!
The Drakeling's Walk of the Third ends.
//Wh-- it ended as soon as it began...

//Rainbow Dash has a jackal's smile on her face. Does anyone in this world smile like a normal person?
RBD: You're out of it, kid! And also out of luck!
//She leaps into the air, flaring out her wings, directing them towards me.
//Is Walk of the Third limited? Does it draw a resource of some sort, do I have to wait for it to recharge?
\\There are more important things right now, Spike...
Spike: Uh, I just want to say, everything I said earlier, I didn't mean any of it. Really.
//SO THERE ARE TWO SHIT-EATING FUCKING COWARDS HERE, GOOD TO KNOW
RBD: Heh-heh, don't worry about it. You were trying to win, but... hey, you tried your best, right?
Rainbow Dash spreads her wings, and casts Wind Wall!
The Wind Wall strikes The Drakeling in the upper body, denting the scale! The Drakeling is propelled away by the force of the blow!

//Thrown into the air over the cliff edge, I tumble about, ground approaching rapidly! Come on, let me get one more Walk of the Third, please, Celestia, help me...
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Walk of the Third!
//I gently float to a stop in mid-air--
Rainbow Dash strikes The Drakeling in the left upper arm with her Wind Drill, shattering the scale, bruising the muscle and dislocating the left shoulder!
The Drakeling's Walk of the Third ends.
Rainbow Dash collides with The Drakeling and they tumble downwards!

The Drakeling slams into the ground!
The Drakeling's head takes the full force of the impact, shattering the scale, bruising the muscle and bruising the skull!
The Drakeling's upper body takes the full force of the impact, shattering the scale, bruising the muscle and bruising the right lung!
The Drakeling's left lower leg takes the full force of the impact, shattering the scale, bruising the muscle and bruising the bone!
The Drakeling's tail takes the full force of the impact, shattering the scale, bruising the muscle and bruising the bone!
Rainbow Dash strikes The Drakeling in the lower body with her left wing, shattering the scale, bruising the muscle, bruising the guts and bruising the pancreas!

//Rainbow Dash jumps off me and back into the air!
//Why, so much pain, why, I didn't ask for a fight...
\You're a Hero in the name of Celestia. Is this what Celestia wants? For you to give up?
Spike: I, I...
//I try to stand up, but my legs won't obey me. Lead pounds through my muscles. In front of me is the cliff face, all around a featureless plateau of dirt, not even grass... far away to my right there's a pair of tall grey ski poles holding up a cable. Nothing that could help me in a fight.
//I'm out of the Third, broken, beaten and bruised. I can't fight. It's over.
//With tears in my eyes, I let out:
Spike: ...Sorry...
//I'm sorry, Celestia, I can't go on...

RBD: What do you mean, 'sorry"? Get up!
//I prop myself up on my right elbow, breathing funny.
Spike: That's... that's all I have. I surrender.
//Rainbow Dash wins. That's how my journey ends. Damnit. It couldn't have been anyone else...
RBD: Is this a trick? Maybe I wasn't giving you enough credit. This is a pretty good trick.
Spike: You broke my arm, threw me off a cliff, cut my leg open, blew dragonfire back in my face, and slammed me into the ground. So if it's all the same to you, I'm gonna bleed out now.
RBD: You can't bleed out! What kind of Hero bleeds out in the middle of nowhere?
//Rainbow Dash swoops down from the sky, landing next to me and folding her wings.
RBD: Come on, it can't be that bad.
//She pokes at the cut on my thigh, and my leg spasms and bleeds more.
Spike: Waaugh! Don't do that!
RBD: Hold still!

Rainbow Dash takes The Drakeling down by the lower body with her right upper body! Rainbow Dash grabs The Drakeling by the right upper leg with her right front hoof! Rainbow Dash grabs
The Drakeling by the right upper leg with her left front hoof! The Drakeling is pinned!

RBD: Oh, come on! It didn't even hit the artery, what are you complaining about?
Spike: Get off... hurts...
//She's lying across my stomach, looking at my leg. Is that her body heat, or am I feeling warmer...?

The Drakeling is unable to break the grip of Rainbow Dash's right upper body on his lower body!

RBD: Oh, what's this?
Spike: It's not...
RBD: Hey, what the hell?! I mean, not that I'm complaining, but you could learn some timing, kid!
Spike: It's just a physical reaction!
RBD: How'd you get past Fluttershy if you get excited this easy?
Spike: Fluttershy... a lover, not a fighter...
RBD: I know, right? How am I doing this?

Rainbow Dash pokes The Drakeling in the right upper leg with her left front hoof!
The Drakeling struggles in vain against the grip of Rainbow Dash's right upper body on The Drakeling's lower body!

RBD: Heh-heh, should get a white flag to tie to it.
Spike: Can't I just bleed out in peace?
RBD: You'll be fine, it's just a scratch!
Spike: With several internal injuries causing bleeding as well.
RBD: Oh, right. We probably want to keep your body temperature up, legs raised up, and breathing stable to prevent shock...
//Rainbow Dash puts her hooves on my chest, spreads my legs up, and lays her body on mine!
RBD: And hey, would you look at that!
Rainbow Dash nuzzles The Drakeling in the upper body with her fuzzy snout!
Spike: _That's not a proper medical procedure!_
RBD: Sure it is! And I mean, if it's all the same to you, no reason to waste it, right?
//She smiles. Strangely enough, this one looks less deranged.
RBD: Besides, you said you were sorry, but I think amends are going to be pret-ty pricey...
//A thundering echo rolls down the mountain, washing past us and tearing out shrubs and grass from the ground by their roots further down. It sounds ominously like language designed to carry sound, but no meaning.
//Rainbow Dash groans.
RBD: Damnit, Pinkie Pie!
PP: Rainbow Dash, I haven't seen you in six whole months, and this is the greeting I get?
Assaulting a guest on my doorstep?
//Rainbow Dash shouts back:
RBD: Pinkie Pie, I'm in the middle of something!
PP: No, it looks like something's about to be in the middle of you! Stop that!
//Okay, I'll admit it, I laughed.
RBD: Besides--
//Rainbow Dash leaps into the air, talking back to the mountain.
RBD: --it wasn't, like, _assaulting_ assaulting, it was more like, testing/assaulting!
PP: I think you're lying to me, Dash. My crystal ball says you're lying to me.
RBD: Ugh, I hate that thing.
PP: Why, because it's always right?
RBD: I have something to get to anyway. Later, Pinkie Pie!
PP: Bye!
RBD: Thanks for the battle, kid. You're not terrible. But get better!
//Rainbow Dash flies away!

Rainbow Dash was defeated! (?)
Spike earned 10000 experience points!
Spike is now level 29!
//Crazy rainbow bint...

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//Out of nowhere Pinkie Pie steps into view. Not from behind a rock or boulder, but directly out of thin air. As if someone had quickly turned a switch labeled 'Pinkie Pie' to 'YES'.
PP: Ooo, you look bad, Spike! Are you sure don't need to see a doctor?
Spike: Why, did you bring one?
PP: In water tablet form and inflatable!
Spike: ...I think I'm good. Dragons are made of tough stuff.
//I can walk, but combat in the near future is going to be a no-go.
PP: What are you going to do about your broken arm?
Spike: Just dislocated. Give me a minute.
//I hold my wrist between my knees and with a loud CRACK set my arm back in place.
PP: ...Spike, that's disgusting.

The Drakeling stands up.

Spike: I have to make it to the top of the mountain somehow. I've lost a lot of time but I want to make it before nightfall.
PP: Top of the mountain? Oh, that's right! To defeat me! Hehehaha *snort* hehehaha!
//Now that I think about it, Twilight's impression of her wasn't far off...
Spike: ...Yeah.
//I was going to go to Mountainville and contact Herr Yyz in Canterlot, but if Pinkie Pie is on the way...
PP: You're climbing? Why don't we take my gondola?
Spike: I'm not sure I would feel comfortable accepting help from the pony I'm destined to... you do mean a gondola lift, right?
PP: Kinda!
//Pinkie Pie points off into the distance. Coming up the mountain on cables, I see a cable car shaped like an oversized flat-bottomed Venetian boat. Its doors are open, even though it's moving.
PP: Come on! If we miss it there won't be another cable car for another fourteen point one three minutes!

Pinkie Pie starts to run!

Spike: What? Pinkie Pie, wait up!
//Crazy pink bint!
//We leap into the cable car at the last possible moment, and the oversized boat continues to lurch its way up the mountainside.
//The cable car is decorated head to toe with streamers, party balloons, banners, festive cards and decorations, and 'HI SPIKE!' is spelled out on the wall in red grossulars. Pinkie Pie closes the doors.
PP: Surprise, Spike!
Spike: I am so utterly and completely confused.
PP: It's your surprise 'It's So Nice to Finally Meet You, Again' party!
Spike: ...Those are a thing?
PP: When I learned you lost your whole entire memory, I was so sad, I cried for days! The little Spike I knew was gone, forever. But then I thought, 'Hey! There's a new Spike around who I've never met before! I wonder what he's like!' So when I heard you were in the area, I was so happy! I just knew I had to throw you a big old party and welcome you to Mountainville!

Spike: ...Your card was rather forward.
PP: Apparently not forward enough! You almost escaped past me to Canterlot! (Wonder what you wanted there, hehehaha!)

//...'Almost escaped'?
//I point at Pinkie Pie.
Spike: Did you send those griffons after me?
//Innocently, she asks:
PP: Griffons? What griffons?
//Her intonations and facial expressions are so different from everyone else that I can't tell if she's trying to lie, mocking me, or being honest.
Spike: ...Griffons forced me off the train just before this mountain.
//Coincidences are unlikely, given I'm facing the Avatar of Luck herself, but military organization doesn't seem Pinkie Pie's style. I guess I'll let it go.
PP: That was rather rude of them! ...Even still, I'm glad you came.
Spike: I'm glad I didn't.
//Pinkie Pie giggles.
//The red grossulars on the wall are attached by string. The string smells like sugar.
Spike: Are these...
PP: Go ahead, Spike. They're for you!
//I bite into one and

//HOKAY, FUCKING SHIT. EYES FORWARD, ASSHOLE, BACK OF YOUR HEAD'S GOT NOTHING IMPORTANT BUT THE SHITPAIL MORON WHO TOLD YOU IT WOULD BE A GOOD IDEA TO INJECT THE OBVIOUS POISON TRAP. WHY ARE YOU FOCUSING ON YOUR ARM, FUCK THE FUCKING ARM, THAT OBNOXIOUS MOTHERFUCKER HAS NOWHERE TO BE BUT TEARING OUT YOUR DAMN BRAIN IF IT WOULDN'T TURN YOU INTO A ONLY VERY SLIGHTLY LESS COMPETENT DROOLING IMBECILE WITH A GREATER HORRID STANK THAN PERSONAL CHARISMA. WHAT ARE YOU DOING WITH YOUR LEGS OH YOU'RE DOING NOTHING WITH YOUR LEGS WELL GUESS WHAT FUCKNOSE THAT MEANS YOU'RE FALLING WITH YOUR LEGS SO GET FUCKING ON THAT. IS IT TOO MUCH TO FUCKING ASK THAT WE DON'T COLLAPSE LIKE A BITCH EVERY TIME YOU PUT FOOD IN YOUR MOUTH OR DID YOUR Horsedicked masters only feed your nasty face every time an intelligent thought came out of your mouth. Great, we're on the fucking ground; I'm out of here like a shitstain on an ape: you're ugly and smell bad. Enjoy the ensuing violation, I hope you pop a blood vessel halfway through and fucking die, not that anyone would notice the change.

PP: Spike? What are you doing on the ground?
Spike: Ugh... what did you put in the gems?
PP: Gems? I didn't put anything in the gems! You fell down and started yelling a lot so I want to make sure you're okay!
Spike: Oh, was I yelling, hah...
PP: Really angry things.
Spike: I think I'll pass on the grossulars, thanks.
PP: I knew that even if you-past-you had met me before, you-now-you haven't met me at all so it
would be like meeting a new person for the first time! And even if you past you can't come back I figured I could be friends with you now you and it would be just like making a new friend!

Spike: Well, thanks, Pinkie Pie.
PP: Of course! I wanted to take your mind off all the doom and gloom of being a big Hero and you not knowing who you are and just say, 'Hi, Spike! Nice to meet you!'
Spike: That's--
PP: So hi, Spike! Nice to meet you!

Spike: Hi, Pinkie Pie, nice to meet you too. Especially because you're the first old friend I've met that doesn't want to assault me or bring the old Spike out of me.

PP: Aww, thank you, Spike! Here at Mountainville Resort and Casino we aim to please everyone!
//Out the gondola window, several dragons are playing and swimming in an exposed pool of lava by the cliffside. Far above the volcano rim, a suspended glass tank of water serves as a heated pool, home to ponies and dragons alike. It's gotten a bit dark now.
Spike: Casino?
PP: The house always wins.
Spike: Right. Avatar of Luck.
PP: That doesn't mean you shouldn't play anyway, Spike! It's not all about the money, it's about the fun!
//The type of fun that can build and maintain a volcanoside casino and resort at profit, of course.
PP: And besides, what kind of world would it be if people only tried things they thought would work out for them? Bo-ring! I mean, sometimes, you have to hope you can...
//I wonder if the other grossulars are any good...

Pinkie Pie nuzzles The Drakeling in the side with her fuzzy snout!
PP: ...get lucky! Hehehaha *snort* hehehaha!
Spike: Hey, watch it!
PP: Just teasing! Besides, if you're such a grumpypants, how are you going to watch the fireworks show?
//Fireworks show?
//At the base of the mountain, dragonfire lights the first rocket. It whistles upwards, to the other side of the mountain from the open pool, and explodes into -- a smiley face? Pinkie Pie squeals and claps her hooves together at the window.
Spike: Fireworks?
PP: Dedicated chemical/mechanical engineering teams. Also, magic!
//A second firework detonates ten feet from the gondola, shocking through the metal hull and scattering bright ash over the window.
Spike: Woah!
PP: Hehehaha *snort* hehehaha! Sorry, Spike, I thought we would be further along by now!
Spike: You planned all this out? What's the occasion?
PP: It's a celebration of you, Spike! Not only is this the first time I'm meeting you, but I heard you defeated Fluttershy and took your very first steps on being a big strong dragon champion Hero! Congratulations, Spike!
Spike: Very first? I've done heroic things before...
PP: Also, it's Tuesday, so we kinda have to.
Spike: Wait, hold on. You're partying because it's Tuesday?
PP: Of course not! We're partying because we're _here_ on a Tuesday! There's a big difference.
//I'm not sure there is.
PP: And it's Nightmare Night! We always set off fireworks on Nightmare Night!
//I'm still not seeing why she went to the trouble of rescuing me from Rainbow Dash if it wasn't for her own sake.
//YOU ARE THE WORST DAMSEL IN DISTRESS FUCKING EVER
//And the only altruistic ponies I know are dedicated to Celestia...
Spike: So why aren't you, you know, putting your face out there? You own this place.
PP: Well, duh! I've thrown a lot of parties in my time, Spike, and if there's one thing I've learned it's
that no party can be the best party without all your bestest friends!
Spike: ...So you rescued me from Dash because _you_ want to 'party' with me instead?
//I should look out for something put into my drink.
//Pinkie's silliness drops away.
PP: No! Well, I didn't mean it like that! Well, I--
Spike: Take your time.
//It all seems to get to the same place anyway.
//Pinkie Pie breathes in.
PP: ...Best friends are best friends because they're so close, Spike. And best friends share
everything with each other. They can share their games and their notes and their rooms and their
clothes and their thoughts and their food with each other because they feel okay with sharing
everything, even their deepest and most strangest thoughts. Right?
Spike: I don't have friends, Pinkie Pie; I wouldn't know.
PP: Spike! ...Of course you have friends!
//...I guess Twilight would count if I thought about it. And probably Na-Mira, too. Kezno, Celel,
Jebed, Quine... Heroes don't have regular friends, but these are all people I can trust and depend on.
Even if I don't see them that often, they still are friends, and we've shared a lot...
Spike: Okay, go on.
PP: And if best friends can share your games and your notes and your rooms and your clothes and
your deepest most strangest thoughts with each other, I thought, what's so different about sharing
your bodies with your best friends?
//I think she means singular, 'body'. Unless Pinkie Pie is a grisy serial killer.
//...Note to self, don't turn your back on Pinkie Pie.
PP: And I don't want to say it's just that simple because people have some really strong opinions on
what a best friend like that means and what sharing your body means but Spike, it's just that
simple!
//It's okay everybody, Pinkie Pie just completely figured out sexuality. You can stop trying now.
PP: Isn't having fun what you do with friends? Why is it so important which way you have fun? It
seems like just a pile of pesky petty pickishness to me!
//Pinkie Pie and the Pile of Pesky Petty Pickishness, an alliterative allusion allocated almost
unalienably.
PP: But some ponies think it's really important what you do with your body. And some people
think it's ultra-important what your body _is_, never mind what you do with it!
//When did this turn from 'hey Spike I want to mount you' to a lesson in the sociological impact of
opinions on sexual activity?
Spike: If you're applying to be a server at a Casino and Resort, it does.
//A job where you're paid to be attractive has to take that into account.
PP: Spike, I don't mean eye candy. I mean a pony, like me! Or a dragon, like you!
//She pokes my chest with a hoof. Was that really necessary?
PP: They say people are different because of how they're shaped, and they do awful things because
of it! Do you think Rainbow Dash or anyone else would be so wacko towards you if you were a
stallion?
//C: ...Think about this: immortality is almost nonexistent; it cannot be bought or crafted or
designed or machined or pleaded or begged or stolen or made with magic, or anything else a pony
could do...
Spike: Right! Being shaped like this doesn't make attacking me okay!
PP: Of course not! No matter what you look like, people shouldn't be violent towards you!
//If we agree on that, can I just have the Element and leave then?
Pinkie Pie turns around. The fireworks show outside has longer pauses between it now. Bright lights flood out the stars.

PP: ...But that's how it was, after Celestia left and Hazel took the throne. Ponies, she treated one way, and dragons were treated totally different...

//Jebed told me about how many well-meaning dragons died at the hooves of Hazel because she didn't discriminate.

Spike: I see where you're coming from. ...Well, not really, you're facing me right now, but it's a figure of speech and I meant it metaphorically not literally why don't you just go on with whatever you were saying while I shut up.

PP: And ponies in Canterlot were the same way! A pony was a pony and a dragon was a dragon and never the twain shall meet! If you knew a dragon, or were friends with one, or even thought maybe they couldn't be so bad, it was a dirty secret that you should never ever tell...

//That must have amplified the drakeling slavery underground. Forbidden fruit and all.

PP: But when it's not okay to say how you feel -- like doing best friend things, or being friends with dragons -- so much doesn't get said that should!!

Spike: Oh, like how Twilight hasn't told me that I used to be Rarity's rebirth-mate before my amnesia.

T: (_What_?!) //Come on, have you been paying attention?

Spike: (Yeah, really obvious, by the way.)

PP: She hasn't?

Spike: Nope.

//It would have been hard to bring the subject up. Which is probably why everyone tried so many times and dropped so many hints.

PP: See, that's exactly the kind of thing I'm talking about! And -- and Rarity, too!

Spike: Her too?

//I think she tried to tell me once. If assault counts as communication.

PP: Both of them saw the shame! They saw how people treated you and Rarity different, Spike, just because you were a dragon!

T: (I was going to tell you, Spike, I swear, but things got in the way...)

Spike: Twilight, shut up. Pinkie Pie, go on. How did you know Rarity and me, anyway? //I'm convinced anyone of any importance knows of Twilight Sparkle. No use asking about that.

PP: Twilight? Is she here?

//SHE Follows ME AROUND TO FIND OUT WHO WILL BE HER NEW SISTER IN LAW

Spike: She follows me around, probably to find out who will why am I saying this?

//In the resulting hushed silence of the gondola, I feel Twilight staring at me. Was I seriously about to say that? I don't even know what he meant!

Spike: The dragon instinct is an ass and I'm not going to repeat what he said. Sorry.

//Pinkie Pie looks at me, amused.

PP: Dragon instinct? What's that?

Spike: A rude person in my head who makes comments.

//ASK TWILIGHT IF SHE THINKS A SHALLOW GRAVE WAS A NICE ANNIVERSARY GIFT

Spike: Twilight, do you think a shal--gaah, stop it, no! Get out of my head!

//I grab my head, hoping to find some way to take the dragon instinct out of it.

PP: Spike, are you okay?

T: What were you about to say?

Spike: Stop! I don't want you! I don't want you in my life any more! Go away! Go away and stay away! You ruin everything!

//After a short, silent pause, I feel Twilight disappear from the cable car. The dragon instinct is silent. Maybe now we can get on with it.

//Pinkie Pie looks at me, hesitant to continue.
Spike: I didn't say that about her! I didn't mean it for -- I was talking to him!
//HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA I ALWAYS WIN
//Damn it! Damn you!
Spike: I'll apologize when she comes back. I hope she comes back... How did you know Rarity and me, again?
//After a short pause, Pinkie Pie continues:
PP: I was always the party planner for all of Rarity's big fancy shmancy parties, and you were always there, too. You would always be dressed up in whatever sweet little boy costume Rarity made for you, and... oh, Spike, hehe, you looked so _cute_!
Spike: Thanks?
PP: But to Rarity it was never 'Spike, my best friend' in a costume, but 'Spike, a boy I'm looking after' in a costume! Because there were always powerful, important people she was entertaining who didn't like hearing about that kind of fun, never mind a dragon being something besides a pet or a servant or a nuisance! And they most certainly didn't like hearing about the two together! Rarity never said a word about you to any of them... she barely talked about your friendship with us, either!
//More fireworks burst outside of the window, but I can't see the patterns when I'm so close. It all just looks like bright streaks.
Spike: Was she a private pony? She was rather straightforward with her thoughts when I saw her...
PP: I can't say, Spike, but what I can say is that you were miserable! Just seeing your face, when she talked about what a wonderful trip to Canterlot she had or what crazy adventure she went on with all of us, but left _you_ completely out of it, made me want to... made me want to go out there and give her a piece of my mind!
Spike: Woah, calm down!
PP: But you wouldn't let me. Because that wouldn't be what was best for Rarity. It made me so sad, Spike, that you had to be so sad because you loved her so much. I thought a lot about it. I thought, 'I wouldn't leave Spike out like that! For me to be happy, my friends have to be happy, too'! Dragon or pony or weird snake creature, a bestest friend is worth too much to hurt like that, and for it I will not stand!
Spike: You're sitting.
PP: Exactly!
Spike: Rarity couldn't be open about it because of prejudice and hatred. That's why I'm a Hero, Pinkie Pie. I'm on a Celestia-given mission to dispel these dangerous ideas, and by Celestia, I'll do it!
//SHE WASN'T HONEST BECAUSE SHE DIDN'T WANT SOMEONE LIKE JEBED F**KING KILLING HER, SOMEPONY BLACKMAILING HER FAT ASS, OR TO FALL OUT OF THE VAUNTED 'HEY WE'RE GOING TO DIE' CUNT-CLUB. YOUR EX-DICKSHEATHE'S MOTIVES WERE PURELY SELFISH.
//If you're insulting her then I guess she's not that bad of a person.
PP: ...What if they've already been dispelled?
//The grammar was okay there, but that question seems fundamentally wrong to me.
Spike: Uh, no. They haven't.
PP: Look around us, Spike. It is the finale.
//A rapid series of brilliant red swirls burst and echo in series, forming a heart far over the center of the volcano, backed by the dark blue sky. Two more white dazzlers pop high in the sky, and then
the words form: 'THANK YOU FOR WATCHING!'

PP: Fireworks designed by dragons and ponies, constructed and lit by dragons and ponies, paid for by dragons and ponies at a resort staffed by dragons and ponies, for the enjoyment of mingled dragons and ponies who will go to sleep tonight with whatever dragon and pony entertainment they desire and can afford! You've been looking for a place where dragons and ponies live side by side, haven't you? Where people won't judge or say 'shame' because of your friendships? Isn't this just the way you imagined? You found your perfect world, Spike! You've found it! Mountainville is it! You can be happy here!

//Uh, maybe that is part of my quest, but I meant it to benefit others like Celestia did, not just what I want to see myself... and I have to defeat Princess Hazel to get my memories back. I think she's projecting. I'll bite anyway.

Spike: One small corner of the world is not a journey victorious, Pinkie Pie.

PP: But it's a small corner nonetheless! What does it matter if the world thinks one way or another? This is our corner! It's a haven, a stronghold, and if we are all true to our love for one another we can hold off the hatred of the entire world!

//This corner of the world has no prejudice because it has _money_. It's in the poor and the downtrodden, those who need Celestia's light most, that ignorance and hatred has its strongest roots, and those are the people I want to inspire with a mythical Hero. I can't just stay here. What good is a shining spot on a rotten apple?

\And if the shine is all I can see? Who's to say the world doesn't wink out of existence when I turn my back? If ignorance and hatred are the elements I want none of in my world, can't I cut them out entirely and live where they aren't?

//Doing so would be selfish and greedy to the core. You can't blind yourself to reality just to feel better. Celestia and Herr Yyz wouldn't accept that out of me.

PP: This place is happy, Spike. Here, everyone can be happy, no matter who they are, or what friends they want to have. _You_ can be happy here.

//Do I want to be?

PP: I don't know how to say this, so I'll just say it: Spike, will you stay here with me? And be my best friend?

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//...Really? Is this the test?

Spike: You're... just asking?

//It's refreshingly straightforward.

PP: You sound surprised!

Spike: I'm not used to my opinion being considered. It's very nice of you.

PP: Thanks!

>>YES

>>NO

Spike: ...But I'm going to have to decline. The world's needs are more important than mine.

//BESIDES, I HAVE LESS SHIT ON PINKIE PIE THAN I DO ON YOUR CURRENT FUCKGOAL, YOU WOULDN'T BE ABLE TO RUIN YOUR RELATIONSHIP AS OFTEN. YOU DO KNOW TWILIGHT HATES YOU, RIGHT?

PP: Oh, that's okay. I thought you would say so!

//The gondola lurches to a halt, rocking back and forth and throwing grossulars to the ground like priceless marbles underfoot. Pinkie Pie keeps her footing, but I fall on my front.

//...Is this really it? Say no, receive Element?

Spike: If you thought I'd say no, why'd you ask?

PP: Sometimes, you have to do things you think shouldn't work simply because they shouldn't work! Otherwise you get too predictable!
Pinkie Pie leaps out of the gondola, turns back, and smiles, leaving me to figure out her strange battle strategy.

PP: Come on! I'll show you my personal collection! It's got a bunch of neat stuff!
Spike: Great.

Two hours. Two hours of walking around, listening to Pinkie Pie. Have you ever listened to Pinkie Pie before? Good, imagine two hours of it, leading you back and forth across a 'personal collection' which happens to be a huge junk pile in a ballroom with a big glass dome overhead, overlooking the volcano, misplacing items and gizmos left and right. Does this count as a mind-affecting enchantment yet? There's nothing else I'd like to do than tune into the angry yelling dragon instinct guy and drop out, hard. Let someone else hear how an unsatisfiable dimwit spewing a plethora of meaningless noise sounds, for a change. I honestly think she's shown me this part six times before. Why am I still even here?

Spike: Pinkie Pie, this is great, but if we could get to--
PP: And penultimately, the Element of Laughter!
Spike: You keep it in a cardboard box.
PP: Well, it's not like anyone's going to take it!

PICK IT UP, TURN AROUND, AND WALK THE FUCK AWAY.

PP: It takes a lot of luck even for me to find it in all this mess, and besides -- who would have the nerve to steal from the Avatar of Luck herself? Talk about a bad idea!
Spike: In a box, on the floor.
PP: Oh, Spike! You're focusing too much on the jewel! The Element of Laughter is a part of me, mine to share with whoever I please! If I choose to keep a jewel to remind me of that, it's out of convenience, not storage.
Spike: Okay. Wait, penultimately?
PP: Hehehaha *snort* hehehaha, just noticed that? The final artifact is a personal favorite of mine, I always keep it on me.

From beyond the reaches of space and time, Pinkie Pie pulls an old, dirty coin out from behind her side, and tosses it to me. It's bright yellow on one side.

PP: Now pay attention, this is part of your test.
Spike: This is the test? What was all that back in the gondola then?
PP: I thought it was a nice conversation, how about you?
Spike: W--... 'A nice conversation'? That's cheating!
PP: Cheating? How was that cheating?
Spike: You can't just up and ask me to be your rebirth-mate and not expect it to be a test!
PP: Spike, are you honestly offended that I honestly asked for your honest opinion on an honest proposition?
...Maybe I'm overreacting a bit.
Spike: I'm sorry. Go on.
PP: I'd like to give you the Element of Laughter.
...?
PP: I'd like to give you the Element of Laughter, Spike, but I can't do it just like that! You have to risk something in order to get something! That's simple!
Spike: Of course, it's never that easy.
PP: This coin is a special artifact coin. It's called the ~Coin of Decisions~.
Spike: (Probably spookier if we weren't standing on brightly lit piles of shiny junk.)
PP: The tosser of the Coin thinks of two things, each of which she wants! And the Coin knows which of the two things the tosser wants most, in her heart! The--
Spike: And I have to be true of heart and clear of mind and strong convictions blah blah blah give me the Coin I want to get out of here.
PP: It's not that simple! The Coin knows which of the two things the tosser wants most, and it wants to give her the other one!
Spike: ...That's a terrible coin!
PP: It's called the Coin of Decisions because it gives you a higher probability of choosing something you don't want to do, so you decide for yourself! Its magic reminds the tosser that sometimes, the best way to decide what to do is to flip a coin, not because it gives you an answer, but because when the coin's in the air you know what you always wanted! The only safe way to use the Coin is when you really don't know what you want more!
Spike: This is a dangerous Coin.
PP: It's not to be used lightly, Spike. That's why it's your test!
Spike: Oh, joy.
PP: I'm willing to wager the Element of Laughter. That will be heads! So on heads you can take Laughter and continue on your quest, as normal!
Spike: I know what tails is going to be, then.
PP: Oh? Would you care to fill me in? (Hehe!)
Spike: On tails, I stay here with you and become your rebirth-mate, right?
PP: A good a wager as any, Spike!
Spike: Hold on. You're the Avatar of Luck; how do I know you won't cheat?
PP: Oh! I'll turn my back, but you have to tell me what it is, okay? No lying!
//Pinkie Pie turns around and covers her eyes.
//Okay, this should be easy, just toss the Coin and...
//...crap, it's not that easy.

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//If I start to think all Hero mode, and the Element of Laughter is what I want, the Coin will give me tails. In order to get the Element of Laughter, I have to... not want to get the Element of Laughter. What kind of messed up test is this? Am I supposed to be a casual, nonchalant, easygoing Hero? Not particularly care about continuing my quest?
Spike: The hell kind of test is this?
PP: ...Do you not understand how a coin works?

\You're thinking about it wrong. The test isn't the Coin; the Coin is irrelevant to the test, it's tangential. Stop thinking about the Coin and start thinking about the rest of it. Why do you have to do the test in the first place?
//...To get the Element of Laughter.
\Oh, really, I never would have guessed. Try again. Why are you even concerned with flipping the Coin in the first place?
//Flipping any coin usually represents making a decision of some sort. Would not tossing the Coin and putting it in my pocket be not making a decision? I don't think the solution to the test is to act like I'm scared to make a decision, that doesn't seem very Hero-like.
\No, flipping a coin doesn't mean making a decision. It means the opposite: you are refusing to make a decision, and instead leaving your fate in the hands of something else, something you have no control over. Refusing to flip the Coin means taking your fate into your own hands, and taking responsibility for your choices and actions.
//So the solution is to put the Coin in my pocket.
\..It would be, but there's also the wager involved. You're gambling, which is the other function of a coin.
//Right... when you gamble, instead of internally refusing to make a decision, you decide to gamble and you're externally finding out what the results of that decision are. So putting the Coin in my pocket is a null gamble. It signifies I'm not willing to lose something, so I can't gain anything.
//There must be another way.
PP: Uhhhh, Spike? Have you flipped the coin yet?
//The options I see are: don't decide between them and subtly hope for heads (if that's even possible) or find a way around the system. Or, more generally: get lucky or cheat.
Hmm... if you look at the test from Pinkie's point of view, she tried to do both: she tried to win the game before it even begun (cheating), and now, she still has a chance for luck to turn her way. You know, if she's not cheating now, in which case all of this is moot. Does it mean anything that your options and her options are exactly the same?

// This is an exceptionally designed test.

Spike: Holy crap.
PP: Spike? There's no kind of trick to the test. You just... toss the Coin.

// Try this: what is the test doing to you? In order to deal with the test, what do you have to do?
// At first, I have to think about what I want. I also have to think about the test, which is getting me to think about my challenges and obstacles in my way to getting what I want. So the design is to generate thought about my situation and goals? But the more I think about my situation and goals, the more likely I am to decide on one or the other being right, which means I fail the test, so the design of the test is also for me to _not_ think about my situation and goals!

// What did Pinkie Pie just say?
// There's no kind of trick to the test.' Tricks are used by the player least likely to win in order to better the odds by denying the opponent information... so Pinkie Pie thinks she's the better player if she's not using one. Which means I need to take a risk and get lucky, because I'm the lesser player.

// No, no, no! Remember the context. There's no trick being used _to disguise the strategy based solely around luck_. There is no doubt Pinkie Pie is the lesser player here given her strategy; the entirety of the game is literally in your hand and its outcome will be decided solely by you and you alone. Her only hope is that you mess up.

// So the solution to the test is simply to choose the correct strategy. I'm the stronger player; what is the stronger player's strategy? The stronger player will win if she avoids trickery and takes little damage from luck, the strongest player in the world's game plan can be naive and even simple, and she'll still win on her power alone.

// A naive and simple gameplan? Even you can do that.
Spike: Okay, okay, okay... I have a plan.
// If the coin turns out my way, fine. Otherwise... there's always combat.
// TAKE WHAT YOU WANT BY FORCE, THAT'S THE LESSON YOU'VE LEARNED?

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

>> FLIP THE COIN

// I flip the Coin.
PP: Oh! That sounded like a flip! Was it? Huh?-huh?-huh?
Spike: ...
// In the middle of its arc, both sides flash at me, reflecting far away fluorescent lights. Heads and tails whirl around, dancing my choice away, suddenly removing me from my own life.
// I know what I want. Celestia help me, I know exactly what I want.
// Plink, tink tink.
Spike: Out of the way, Pinkie Pie, I can't see!
PP: You move! You're standing in the light!
Spike: It's a bright yellow coin!
// I'm sure we can find it in this sea of junk!
PP: ...I think I lost it.
Spike: WHAT?!
PP: I'm looking, just -- just don't move, okay? You might tip it over!
Spike: It was over there when it landed!
PP: I think it bounced away! Let me find it!
Spike: How do I know you won't flip it when you find it?!
PP: I wouldn't do that, Spike!
Spike: How can I be sure?!
PP: Fine, I won't look for it!
Spike: Good!

After a few seconds pass. Pinkie Pie and I stand in place, looking by our feet.
Spike: So, uh... did you find the Coin?
PP: Nope! I haven't seen heads or tails of it!
Spike: Are you sure? Did you check under your hooves?
PP: ...Nope! Not there! You?
Spike: Nothing under my feet.
PP: Darn it!

We spend a minute or so idly looking about the immediate area, afraid to move as to not disturb the coin.
Spike: This is really how this test is going. Wow.
PP: Don't worry, it'll turn up somewhere.
Spike: Can't you pull it out of nowhere like you did before?
PP: Yeah, but I won't know what side it was on!
Spike: I'll just flip it again!
PP: You can't do that! For big, dramatic scenes like that you can't just _flip again_!
Spike: Great. So what do we do?
PP: Gimme a minute.

Pinkie Pie stands on three legs and starts to scratch her head. I close my eyes and try to think of something too.
Spike: (If you have any suggestions, I'm all ears.)

Another minute of silence passes. Pinkie Pie shrugs and puts her hoof down again.
Spike: ...What do you do when you usually can't find things?
T: (No, don't--)
PP: Oh, yeah!

Pinkie Pie opens her mouth wide and takes a deep breath, then screams:
PP: TWILLIIIGHT!!!
T: (Uughhh.)

Another deep breath; this time I cover my ears:
PP: TWILLIIIGHT!!!
//Twilight Sparkle pops into view, floating only an inch over the pile of junk.
T: Pinkie! Stop doing that!
PP: Hi, Twilight!
T: You can't just do that! I don't have some 'Pinkie volume monitoring system' set up; you can't just scream my name and expect me to be there!
PP: But it always works!
T: That's... that's not important! You still shouldn't do it!
PP: Oh, so Twilight, me and Spike were having this teensy little problem--
T: It's over there, it's heads.

The Coin starts to radiate swirls of rainbow smoke that pinpoint its location. Just like Twilight said, it's heads.
PP: Congratulations, Spike! I'm so happy for you!
Spike: Woo.
PP: ...Wait a minute, this isn't my Coin of Decisions!
Spike: It's not?
PP: Nope! It's just a cool weird coin I found! Isn't that funny? You were flipping a plain old normal coin the entire time! How about that!
Spike: How... about that...

Chapter End Notes

With apologies to Tarn Adams.
//We walk to the bottom of the junk pile at the end of the room. Pinkie Pie is carrying the Element of Laughter in her mouth. Twilight is floating along.
Spike: So, Twilight...
T: Hmm?
//She's reading an unmarked book intently.
Spike: I, uh... back there, in the gondola, when I held my head, I wasn't talking to you. I was talking to the dragon instinct.
T: Dragon instinct, mm-hmm.
//She could at least listen to me. It's kind of rude ignoring someone's apology...
Spike: You're one of my best friends if not the only good friend I have, and I do want you in my life. I wasn't saying any of that to you.
T: Of course you weren't... --!
//Twilight opens her eyes wide, then zips over to hug me, saying:
T: Oh, no, Celestia, no! I didn't--! Skies, no!
Spike: Uh, okay, what?
//I pat her on the back with one hand, feeling awkward.
//She holds me in front of her with her hooves.
T: I didn't leave because I thought you said that to me! I saw what a hard time you were having with the dragon instinct and left to find something about it!
Spike: Oh. Okay, that's good to hear.
PP: It is! What's also good to hear is: you're two fifths of the way towards being able to meet Princess Hazel and being knighted Hero of the Land!
//Pinkie Pie tosses the Element of Laughter over my head!

Spike has acquired The Element of Laughter!
[2/5] Elements acquired!
Congratulations!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

Pinkie Pie steps on The Drakeling's tail with her left front leg!
A power crawls up The Drakeling, like ice through his blood!
[Touch of Grisly Terror] was mastered!

//Ow!
The Drakeling jumps away from Pinkie Pie!
Spike: Watch it!
//I hold the tip of my tail in my hands. Darn, that's going to bruise...
PP: Hehehaha *snort* hehehaha, sorry! I was going to run my nose down your back, but that works too, I guess?
//My legs don't feel as jumpy now. Did it replace my Dashing Rogue Punch? I liked that, it was the first move I had...
Spike: Touch of Grisly Terror? Doesn't sound like you at all, Pinkie Pie.
PP: Hehehaha *snort*, it's _not_ me, silly! It's a move designed to strike fear into your opponents!
When you touch them with this, the limb you hit will stop responding!
T: ...I've never heard of such a thing before.
It was a secret between me and the Element! But now it's not, hehehaha *snort* hehehaha!
Spike: ...How is that related to Laughter at all?
PP: Fear is the power to take laughter away. Which is why, I say, you always have to laugh!
Spike: ...I'll try to remember that, Pinkie Pie.
PP: Bye!
//Pinkie Pie walks out of the room, onto another gondola. The doors start shutting in front of her.
Spike: Wait! Did you know that wasn't your Coin of Decisions? What was the test really about?
PP: Oh, Spike! You must really not be the old Spike!
T: Huh?
PP: The old Spike would know better than to expect a straight answer out of me!
//The doors close, and the gondola moves off, further up, to the top of Mountainville Casino and Resort. I turn to Twilight.
T: For the record, Spike, I'm sorry that I didn't tell you about Rarity earlier. Even if, strangely enough, it seems you've already forgiven me.
Spike: Twilight...
//I try to sum up what I want to say before I say it, so it comes out right.
Spike: You're not sorry. So don't apologize.
T: Spike, I am--
Spike: No, you're not, or you would have told me. I trust there is a reason you didn't tell me, and I trust you enough to believe that reason was worth it. The same goes for all your other lies of omission.
//Defensively, Twilight responds:
T: Lies, what other--
//I wave my hand.
Spike: It's fine, I'm okay with it. I'm a Hero of Celestia now, not something that happened to me far in the past that I don't remember. Besides, it's not like I ask you about my past.
T: Again, I'm still not understanding why that is.
Spike: I can't take the past just from one source.
//If I used to be a bound drakeling, and I'm not bound now (as the nurses and Osdar said), then that must have been reversed, but common sentiment is that such a thing can't be reversed... only some of the most powerful magic in the world could do that.
//And still, what kind of idiot would I be to trust the first person I meet after waking up?
Spike: So, uh, can I ask you the same thing?
T: ...Ask me what?
Spike: About the test. Was it really heads, or did you fix it?
//Twilight looks at me for a short time, not betraying anything. She responds:
T: Would it change anything if I told you? It was a dumb test anyway.
//I suppose that's true.
//From another entrance, a well-manicured pony approaches with a dark blue vest on. He is flanked by two slim mares with heavy eyeshadow and bouncing hair. They look like twins. Twilight disappears again.
Spike: (You're still wearing the displacement cloak.)
T: (Chance favors the cautious.)
//The clothing the two mares are wearing (what little of it, that is) looks odd, it's like they would have been less sexual if they had worn nothing at all...
//Twilight pokes me in the shoulder. My eyes go up.
Vested Pony: Hello, my name is Maurice. The twins are named Lilith and Lilin.
Lilith: Pleasure to meet you~.
//Lilin just winks.
Vested Pony: As a guest of Madam Pinkie--
Spike: (Madam? So they are prostitutes?)
T: ('Call girl' is the preferred nomenclature--)
VP: --I am to lead you to your suite. Lilin and Lilith will take care of any needs you have from there.
Spike: Cool, I get a suite?
VP: Yes. Right this way.
//We leave, the twins walking not uncomfortably close to me.

Spike: Actually, you know, there is something I'd like you two to do for me.
//I'm holding the door open to my suite from the inside. It's huge, with its own mini bar and refrigerator and lavaside view of the mountain. Twilight's entire tree-house could fit in here.
Lilith: We're here to please.
//Lilin gives me a smile. She's very good at making people feel welcome. And other things.
Spike: If you could both stand outside and make sure no one comes in, I'd really appreciate it.
//I close the door and lock it. Twilight reappears as I walk to the center of the room, resting her hooves on the tree growing in the middle.
T: Hah. Not your type?
//I doubt Herr Yyz would be thrilled to hear if I threw myself into the same hedonism Celestia herself told Herr to avoid. Besides, I want to work on something.
Spike: Not nearly crazy enough to be involved in my life. Help me with this, will you?
//I grab one of the (extremely expensive, I'm sure) carpets and drag it to the side of the room, out of the way.
T: With... what, exactly?
Spike: I'm sure these are expensive and I don't want them to get ruined.
T: I thought you didn't like the twins?
Spike: Har har.
//Above us, through the skylight, I see two stars dancing together, curling in around the same center. They smack into one another, and a bright flash is given off.
//I'm sure it's just a show.
Spike: If you really want to know, I'm training.
//Twilight steps off the tree's roots and gives me a look. One of her many looks, actually. I find all of them seem to convey disappointment.
T: Spike, you're badly hurt. You need to rest.
//Evil doesn't wait. I can't either.
Spike: Herr Yyz and Celestia are depending on my strength to bring about a better Equestria.
Besides, I can't do anything to myself Rainbow Dash hasn't already tried.
//I want to ask if she always was a crazy bint, but I don't know if the answer matters either way.
T: ...When does Spike start to come first?
//I shrug my shoulders, tossing the last priceless carpet onto the heap in the corner of the room. The floor's marble, it should be fine...
Spike: Oh, sure. I'll just invite the twins back in and spend the rest of my days wallowing in hedonism, completely forgetting about the welfare of anyone else. The Faceless will love that.
//The Coin would have landed on tails, I know it. Others, even people who I don't know, are depending on me... I can't let them down!
T: ...Spike, it can seem noble to give everything you have to others. But nopony can live like that forever. If you keep on trying, one day, it catches up to you, and...
//I test my dragonfire on the invitation Pinkie Pie sent me. Hot enough.
Spike: Speaking from experience?
//Twilight bites her lip, and taps her hoof on the marble three times.
T: In the end, you're the one most responsible for the happiness of you. Maybe there could be one person, in the entire world, who can make you as happy as you can, but even that's...
//I try to remember Rainbow Dash's pose. How she was hovering in the air just before she used that move, where her limbs were moving, where she was looking. But all I can see is her sneer.
Well, the inside of my eyelids, but you get the point.
Spike: ...A rare event?
//Twilight stays silent, watching what I'm doing.

The Drakeling breathes fire!
The dragonfire curls slightly to the left!

//I stop the flame. Only slightly...
T: What are you trying to do?
Spike: Besides figure out why you're lecturing me?
//Twilight moves away from the tree and next to me.
T: Because I'm your friend, Spike. I want you to be happy.
//YEAH THERE'S TOTALLY NO SEXUAL TENSION HERE I'LL JUST BE ON MY FUCKING WAY THEN WITH MY OBVIOUS LIES AND BLATANTLY WRONG JUDGMENTS
Spike: ...Rainbow Dash used a move called Wind Pool. It made the wind spin in a circle around me, closing me in.
//If I could do that with fire, not only would it be stronger, but it would restrict an enemy's movement a lot more.
T: Getting that to work with fire is going to be quite a trick.
Spike: So is finding excuses to assault me, but somehow, I'm confident Rainbow Dash will find a way.

The Drakeling breathes fire!
The dragonfire curls slightly to the right!

//Hmm... maybe if I twist my head more... or is it my mouth?
Spike: What should I do with my mouth? Maybe my tongue's not moving right? Help me out, here.
T: Does it look like I breathe fire to you?
//I'm sure she has a spell for that.
//Out on the volcano, dragons and ponies are starting to emerge out of their respective heated pools. Is it almost midnight?
Spike: Guess they're calling it a night.
T: Not likely; skinny dipping hours are about to start.
//...Skinny dipping hours.
//I retake my pose. Maybe it's in the limbs?
Spike: Okay, there's two things wrong with that.

The Drakeling breathes fire!
The dragonfire curls slightly upwards!

//No, I think ballooning my chest out cut the length considerably. Darn.
Spike: First, people don't normally wear clothes anyway.
//Twilight chuckles.
T: I'm not saying I understand it either.
Spike: And second, is this seriously a casino and resort based solely on sex? Or is there some actual gambling and entertainment that goes on here?
T: Yes, actually; you just haven't seen that part.
//I must have been distracted by the complete lack of anything that looked like it.
Spike: Maybe if I control my stomach, that could do something...
T: See, Pinkie Pie built Mountainville from the ground up solely as a place where she could live out her fantasies.
The Drakeling breathes fire!
The dragonfire curls downwards sharply!
The marble has been scorched!

Spike: Uh...
  //I'll cover it with a carpet.
Spike: Word choice?
  //Twilight zaps the scorch away with a little magic. The marble remains white.
T: Yes and no. To Pinkie Pie, sex isn't different from anything else she does, so that kind of fantasy is like any other kind. I'm sure you saw that when you talked with her.
  //She talked to me, that is.
  //Up, down, left, right... I need to figure out a way for it to keep moving, all on its own, no matter which way it goes, never mind gravity or wind or anything.
T: She's always been a party planner, a goofball, a fun-lover, thrill-seeker, risk-taker... here she can be all of those things, and whatever else she wants.
Spike: Pagan fertility goddess.
T: ...
Spike: Well _excuse me_ for pointing out her childbearing hips. And I think she wears them well, so _there_.
  //I'm not sure a Fire Pool actually be done, but as a Hero, it'd be useful to find a way... if I don't find a way, no one else will.
T: ...Aside from that... Pinkie Pie's always had a slight problem with empathy. That someone else could feel different ways, and she doesn't catch on unless she's told.
  //When did this turn from me wanting to develop a new move to me listening to Twilight complain about her friends?

The Drakeling breathes fire!
The dragonfire curls slightly to the left!

  //Not even an improvement...
T: It's naive to think a more positive attitude about sex is going to be accepted naturally. Social ideas are unlike empirical phenomena; it actually matters what people believe. Sex is meaningful and carries significance simply because people think it does!
Spike: Except that it makes children. Being irresponsible about that hurts them and others.
  //Twilight lowers her ears and looks away, sheepish.
T: Well... there _are_ spells for everything. And you can plan around estrus.
  //Oh yeah, ponies have a mating season. Unlike dragons, who have a mating garnish.
Spike: Pinkie Pie thought people should say what they feel, about sex and species relations, and everything would magically be fine. Is there a spell for that?
  //She giggles as I flex my chest in and out, trying to work up more dragonfire.
T: No, spells can't change a person's mind. Not directly, at least.

The Drakeling breathes fire!
The dragonfire curls slightly to the left!

  //Wait, 'spells can't change a person's mind'? I've been hit with a charm spell...
T: But it's possible to change how society thinks if you're patient enough. As a leader, there's a window of acceptable ideas for you to have. Celestia talked about it in her journals... if you stay just outside that window, and keep yourself there as it moves, you can drag public opinion as far as you want.
  //I breathe in and out. My throat is getting sore from so much dragonfire...
Spike: Seems like you could jump far out there, and force conversation to start up halfway just for people to respond to you.
Walking to my side, Twilight shakes her head.
T: Spike, you've seen how ponies respond to dragons in Equestria. A rapidly changing status quo won't bring about understanding and harmony! It'll cause revolution!

//Twilight's eartip is folded in the wrong direction. I fix it for her.
Spike: Maybe that's what we need.

//Thousands of people will suffer as Hazel slowly shifts public opinion, choosing to delay justice in order to remain in power? How is that acceptable?!

Why are you assuming Hazel feels this way? Just because Twilight said it?

//...
T: ...Do you really believe so, Spike?
//I shrug.
T: ...Living inside the law is comfortable. Work towards harmony and peace happens over time. You can't force chaos on people and throw away their stable lives, even if that's what you choose for yourself.
Spike: What, so instead of fighting for justice I should go back to the marriage in which I was presumably so happy that you decided not to mention it to me?

//She was about to tell Rarity to 'shove it up her widowed ass' back in the Snaffler.

Silence.
Spike: So?
T: ...Things like that need a lot of care.
Spike: Uh, how much time have you spent around me? A 'by the way you boned' would have sufficed.

//Huh. If I kill Hazel and get my memories back, would I be bound as a drakeling to Rarity again?
Spike: I mean, are we still married? Not even from an emotional perspective, but legally, that's relevant information. Which you haven't mentioned at all. Again, lies of omission.

//Even if, looking back, Rarity seems not to have gotten over it as rapidly. Then again, I don't have any happy memories to linger on...
T: Spike, I...

CLICK.

The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Lake of Fire!
Bouts of flame coat the ground!
//Roaring flames leap out of my mouth and stick to the marble like glue, creating a pool in front of me!

Spike: Agh...
//I hold my head.
//What did you do?

I TURNED ON THE PART IN YOUR HEAD WHERE YOU WOULD GET HOW THIS MOVE WORKS. BECAUSE THE ONLY THING MORE STUPID THAN YOUR ASS IS THIS CONVERSATION.
T: Wow, Spike! How do you put them out?

LIKE THIS

The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and dismisses the fires!
//The fires fade away, leaving not even smoke. The marble is unharmed.

T: ...Wow.
//You, you, you can't just muck about with my head like that, it's dangerous, it's...

I GIVE AS MANY SHITS ABOUT YOUR OPINION AS YOU DO FOR THOSE YOU HURT
Spike: Agh, damnit, get out of my head...
//I sit down on the floor.
//Twilight looks me over, finding nothing, and puts her forehead against mine.
T: Is it the dragon instinct again?)
Spike: (I hear him every day of my life.)
//AND I'M WHAT KEEPS IT RUNNING FROM ONE DAY TO THE NEXT MOST OF THE FUCKING TIME
//Twilight smiles. Somehow, I know if she could take any of the burden on herself, she would do it without hesitating.
T: Come on. Get some sleep. You'll see someone better in your dreams, I'm sure.
//..I actually haven't seen Celestia for a few days. Last time was, when, the buffalo incident?
//Still, sleep sounds really good right now.
//I stand up and start walking to the bedroom.
T: I call the second bed; there's someone in Mountainville I want to meet tomorrow.
Spike: Can't you teleport to Canterlot for the night?
T: I try not to waste magic like that. It's habit-forming.
//I open the door to the bedroom and count the beds.
Spike: So, uh, you're going to be disappointed.
//The beds in Mountainville look exquisite, softer than a cloud with more than enough room to stretch out and carved out of oak (I think) and covered with sheets of dark red silk and there's only one of them in this room.
T: What?
//Twilight trots over and sticks her head past me, looking in.
Spike: Sorry. Looks like you're going to have to find somewhere else.
T: You've got to be joking.
Spike: Honestly, given this place's atmosphere, any more than one bed would be weird.
T: I can't go back to Canterlot tonight; I have to numerically solve the absolute worst PDEs tomorrow and I'm not doing that by hoof!
Spike: What are you doing tomorrow?
T: Waking up in this bed, for starters.
//She walks into the room. I follow her.
Spike: Uh, no, sorry. Don't invite yourself to my things, Twilight.
T: Is there another bed in this suite?
//Let me think...
Spike: There was... the main room, the balcony, the kitchen, the game room, the lounge, the library, six bathrooms, a room that can only be described as a dungeon, uh...
//Unless Twilight plans on sleeping on the swing in the dungeon, there's not really anything else.
Spike: If you get some pillows from the lounge the floor here isn't too uncomfortable.
//Snorting, she lifts a hoof and looks down.
T: The floor. Do you know what the floor's like?
Spike: Is it any better than the sheets?
T: They change those.
//I start rubbing my forehead. Is this really that big of a deal?
Spike: Can't you just ask Pinkie Pie for another room?
T: Yes, that will certainly maintain the low profile I'm looking to keep. Ask the eccentric casino owner for a private room because I'm close friends with her. Any other clever ideas?
//Besides you leaving me alone and finding a solution to your own problem?
Spike: You buggering off? This is my bed to sleep in.
//It's late and I want to go to sleep.
//Twilight groans and folds her ears back.
T: I'm not going to like this any more than you will, but if you're going to be like that we'll just have to share the bed.
//No, we're not going to do that.
Spike: Twilight, there is no way in hell I am sharing this bed with you.
Past midnight. I haven't slept a wink. Why are mountains this cold at night?!

Spike: Quit hogging the sheets!
T: It's freezing in here!
//Then I'll light your ass on fire!
//Twilight is on the other part of the bed, with at least twelve sheets wrapped around her. I'm a dragonicle with less than one.
Spike: So I need some too!
T: You have fire literally churning in most of your torso!
Spike: I used most of it today.
T: I'm small, so I need more covers than you do!
Spike: Then how are you taking up so much space?!
//I'm pushed to a one-fourth corner of the bed by Twilight's cocoon of sheets, barely able to stay on at all.
T: Wha-- are you calling me fat?!
//Great. This is exactly what I need right now.
T: Because I think you're calling me fat!
Spike: Fine! Roll your larval, fat ass over and make some room!
//I roll Twilight over like a log, and reclaim some of the bed. If I curl into a ball, I might be able to retain some body heat.
T: Hey!- Don't do that! I almost fell off!
//How?!
Spike: Why did I agree to this again?
//Twilight sighs.
T: I'm going to try to get some sleep.
//What the hell else were you supposed to be doing?!

//In my dream (someone dark in starry armor, nothing important) I hear three knocks, and that rouses me.
Spike: Blurb, what...
//Twilight snores in response.
//I'm curled up on one of the pillows while Twilight is sprawled out across the entire bed, despite the fact I'm larger than her. Carefully, I extract my tail out from under her hoof and slink out of the room.
T: Hhhhhooccccck...
//Damn she snores loud.
//Walking past the haphazard pile of priceless rugs, I notice the door is unlocked and my bag and cloak right next to it are in a different position than I left them.
Spike: Hmm...
//I did lock it, right? Unless Twilight left for some reason, that means...
\...I don't feel or see anyone around me, but the ambient casino lights don't exactly flood the room.

The Drakeling breathes in and focuses, casting Terrae Corpus! The Drakeling's scales become as hard as rock!

Noise Muffled: Uh, hello?
//Three more knocks come from the door, louder. I say nothing.

The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Walk of the Third!
//I look around quickly, seeing nothing, and bolt towards the door to wrench it open.

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//Oh! It's--
Spike: Na-Mira!
The Drakeling's Walk of the Third ends.
//Na-Mira flinches as the wave of air from the door hits her. She blinks and shakes her head.
Na-Mira: What was--
//I interrupt her with a hug. She's still so cold...
N-M: Hck, it is you! Finally!
//Na-Mira hugs me back. Her fangs bang awkwardly into my collarbone.
Spike: 'Finally'?
N-M: I thought you came here, so I had to check. And now I've found you, hihiihi!
Spike: Hold on. Did you go suite by suite knocking on doors until I answered?
//She opens her mouth for a half-second, looks behind her and to the left, and says a little quieter:
N-M: We might want to make this quick.
Spike: Why did you think that would--
//Na-Mira puts a hoof on my face and continues:
N-M: I did some digging about Rainbow Dash's past like you asked, hck.
Spike: Oh, what'd you find?
N-M: Before the disappearance, Rainbow Dash was just another pegasus. She was kicked out of flight school despite being an amazing flier, and settled for weather control in Ponyville.
N-M: (Rumors say she was kind of a braggart.)
N-M: She used the Element of Loyalty to defeat an enemy of the crown alongside Twilight Sparkle. When the disappearance happened she became an Avatar, for helping banish the goddess of the night.
Spike: Fluttershy?
//Na-Mira wiggles her fangs after a second.
N-M: Silly boy, it was Nightmare Moon! Don't you know it's Nightmare Night tonight?
//Uh, no? Why should I care about any holidays besides those celebrating Celestia?
N-M: A few months afterwards, she opened a dojo in the greater Gloucester region, but what's really interesting is what happened before then...
Spike: What was that? Did it have something to do with the northlands?
N-M: Yes, hihi! This is the part I really had to do the digging for! The rest was all publicly available information that I'm surprised you didn't know.
//Celestia, how many times...
Spike: Na-Mira, I lost my memory.
N-M: Hck? You did?
//Silly fanged bint...
N-M: Oh. Sorry, forgot. Anyway, some say the Avatar of Speed was present at the Fall of the Crystal Empire!
Spike: The Fall of the what now?
//Crystal Empire? Have I heard that before?
//YEAH WHEN YOU ALMOST MADE TWILIGHT CRY IN LONGBRIDGE
//You ass, that was you!
N-M: The Crystal Empire! It was a legendary city in the frozen north, whose tranquility was magically protected by the faith and love of the Crystal ponies. It burned to the ground.
Spike: But the rest of the Empire was okay?
N-M: ...The Crystal Empire was the city.
Spike: That's -- what?
//Na-Mira shrugs.
N-M: It's gone now, either way. There were no survivors.
//So, she's saying... I made fun of Twilight for the death of thousands of people. Who could have all been protected if they loved and believed in her more.
N-M: After the disappearance, the Thirty sieged it, and the city fell. Officially, no Equestrian troops were involved, but sealed diplomatic records show one Princess Twilight Sparkle, ‘the fastest flying pegasus of Equestria’, and Canterlot Castle's head of the guard all trying to end the siege before the barriers fell.

//The dragon instinct called Rainbow Dash a coward, she must have run away... and all on her lonesome, Twilight couldn't do much against a full army of -- wait, what are the Thirty?
Spike: Do you know what the Thirty are?
N-M: Nope! I'm looking into it.

//Darn. It would be nice to know what could possibly threaten Twilight, even if it was one and a half years ago.
Spike: Oh, okay. There's something else I'd like you to look into.

//Those griffins made me very suspicious, there's obviously something more to what they're doing than just trying to abduct a drakeling...
N-M: Hck, what is it?

//I walk over to my bag and start rifling through it.
Spike: I fought griffins just... today, yesterday, something -- they had red badges that looked like a helmet on them, and acted like a military unit... it's in here, somewhere.

//I stick my head entirely in the bag, because nothing's where I left it. The Real Princess Hazel threatens me with a papercut.
N-M: Hihihi, you won't find it like that.
Spike: It can't be...

//The badge is gone. I check over my cloak, where I hid it, but it's not there either. I swear, I checked it before going to bed...
Spike: Anyway, I want you to check them out. Oh, and find out something about the Thirty if you can, too. Can you do that?

//Na-Mira salutes with her hoof, fangs wiggling proudly!
N-M: I haven't let down Sir Hero Spike yet and I don't plan on it! To hck and back I will go!
Spike: Well, just be careful. I don't want you...

//Spotting something out in the hallway, I stop talking.
N-M: ...Spike?

//Putting on the displacement cape and bag, I step past Na-Mira and out into the hallway, greeted by the limp bodies of Lilin and Lilith. I shake each of them. They're not sleeping...

Spike: (Did you do this?)
N-M: (Are they dead?)

//I glance both ways. No one else is here in the hallway.
Spike: (Just unconscious. Why did you knock them out?)
N-M: (I didn't! They were like this when I got here!)

//Na-Mira would be the person to overlook something like that.
Spike: (Are you sure?)
N-M: (Yes! I wouldn't lie to you!)

//Door unlocked in the middle of the night, bag unsettled, badge gone, guards knocked out... I don't like this one bit.
Spike: (...So. I need to leave. Strange things have been happening, and it means someone is paying far too much attention to me.)
N-M: (Hck, guess I'll leave too.)

//Oh, right, Twilight's still in there.
Spike: (Oh, can you go and wake up Twilight? She's in the bedroom on the right.)

//Na-Mira shakes her head.
N-M: (I'll take my chances gargling magma, thank you very much.)

//You know what? Twilight's scarier than anything in this resort. Let's get going.
Spike: (Right. She should be fine. See you later, Na-Mira.)
//She trots off, holding her head low and looking around. Maybe I should have given her the
displacement cape if she's going to look that suspicious...
//From around the other corner come approaching footsteps!
Spike: (Oh, great, here we go...)
//Lilin and Lilith on the floor, the door's wide open, Na-Mira slowly slinking away... there's no
hiding for me. But I can get the element of surprise.

The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Walk of the Third!
//I close the door and sneak a little ways towards the corner. The footsteps draw closer now,
echoing louder but lower in the Walk's effect as I wait...
The Drakeling's Walk of the Third ends.

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

The masked pony leaps out from behind the corner!
The masked pony gestures wickedly at The Drakeling!

???: Boo!
Spike: Pinkie Pie?
//She stands up straighter and pouts, behind the mask.
Pinkie Pie: Aww. I didn't scare you?
//...Nightmare Night. Right. I stand up from crouching.
Spike: A bright pink pony with a small dragon mask is not disguised, Pinkie Pie.
//She shifts the mask up with a hoof, shaking her head.
PP: You're grouchy at three in the morning. It's Nightmare Night! You should be having some fun!
Be scared!
//I shoulder the bag again, gesturing towards Lilin and Lilith.
Spike: Heroes don't have fun. Not when that happens to the ponies around them.
//She pauses for a moment, inspecting the two from far away.
PP: (I'll call someone for that.)
Spike: So, what are you doing here? Besides waking people up by shouting?
//I haven't seen Pinkie Pie in combat, but she's an Avatar, and I'm not a shabby Hero myself... if we
stick together, no matter what's in the resort we should be okay.
PP: There was a complaint about a door-knocker, but we may have a teensy bit bigger problem
than that...
Spike: Yeah. Something was also stolen from me tonight.
//Pinkie Pie tenses up.
PP: Oh, no! Are you okay? Is Twilight...?
//How could anything in the world threaten... wow, did I phrase that poorly.
Spike: It was a badge, just something I picked up along my journey.
//With a shrug, the tension slips away.
PP: Hehehaha *snort* hehehaha, I thought you meant -- of course, I'll have my head of security
look into it.
Spike: Sure. Could you point me to the exit? I need to get going.
//Herr Yyz is probably waiting on me, wondering why I'm so late... but at least I can tell her I have
two Elements now.
PP: Honestly? No. It's best if you just follow me.
//...What? How does that make sense?
Spike: Uh, Pinkie--
PP: It's kind of a big resort, but I find that if I just start walking, I always end up where I need to be!
Weird, huh?
//I'm sure it has nothing to do with being the Avatar of Luck.
PP: So come on! As a host, I have to see you out!
Spike: Oh, all right...
//At the very least, Pinkie Pie's amusements will keep me awake. I start walking with her.

//On a walkway above the bright casino lights and slot machines. There are quite a few patrons below, enjoying themselves by gambling into the night. The serverponies are wearing costumes without masks; some patrons wear masks that are artistic but not scary. Security is, of course, nowhere in sight but always close by.
PP: And I said, 'bonemeal? Are you craz--'
Spike: So, getting back to my question.
PP: What was that again?
//I roll my eyes.
Spike: Why did you build Mountainville on top of an active volcano? If it erupts you've lost everything, never mind that there are more convenient places for a casino and resort.
//Pinkie Pie looks over the railing for a few seconds, putting her front hooves on it. Below, a tired gambler pulls the slot lever once more. His machine starts ringing and spewing coins.
PP: Hehehaha *snort* hehehaha!
Spike: So?
//We keep walking.
PP: I'm afraid I can't answer that. Twilight chose where to build Mountainville, not me!
Spike: She did? How? What for?
//Suddenly deadly serious, Pinkie Pie looks behind and in front of us. She also looks ways and directions that a normal person would be neither able nor inclined to look, searching for eavesdroppers. She then whispers to me:
PP: (Spike. Can you keep a secret?)
Spike: Things are really loud down there, you don't need to--
PP: (Can you?!!)
//Is it really that important? I asked to continue a conversation, not to get to the bottom of anything.
Spike: (Sure.)
PP: (You have to Pinkie Promise -- if you ever ever ever _ever_ tell, I _will_ find out, and -- oooooooohh, you don't want to break a Pinkie Promise!!)
Spike: (Why not?)
//What is she going to do, break my little fingers?
PP: (If you don't tell, then you never ever have to find out.)
Spike: (_So_ unconcerned with whatever this secret is anyway.)
PP: (Do you Pinkie Promise to never ever tell?)
Spike: (Yeah, I do.)
//After checking around once more, Pinkie Pie whispers in my ear:
PP: (This volcano is one of the few places in Equestria, other than near ponies's skin, where magic is in the air) hey, what are you doing?
//I dig a claw in my ear to scratch it.
Spike: Sorry, your nose tickles.
//Pinkie Pie giggles.
PP: (Something with long words and ambient free magic and harnessing and so on. It's oobly-woobly sciencey stuff, but even if we can't use it we _can_ put it uniquely into coinage and track where it goes in the planet's magnetic field.)
Spike: (Really?!!)
PP: (Yep-per-oonie! Every coin you've ever handled and in circulation right now is tracking its own movement with thaumomagnetic interference, telling us where you are, what you've bought, where you got it--)
Spike: (...That sounds like some of Twilight's verbiage.)
PP: (Hehehaha, does it look like I do magic?)
Spike: (So, you're saying Mountainville is some sort of... experiment?)
PP: (Way beyond that! It's past the experimental stage; it's working! We're the biggest data collection facility in all of Equestria!)
//The idea is both awe-inspiring and immensely terrifying. To be able to perfectly track millions of coins at any given time, resulting in that much information about every one who carried it and every thing that was bought with it... this is unprecedented.
Spike: (Is anything else done with all this magic?)
PP: (Nope! It's unexpendable. You can look, but not touch!)
Spike: I suppose it's good to know Twilight can't blow up the world accidentally.
//We round a corner and step off the walkway, moving into what I suppose is a break room with yellow/blue tile floor. Staff of various persuasions are sitting and having coffee, or reading or taking a nap. Only one or two nod to us walking in; the rest continue whatever they were doing.
//One pony is practicing juggling with salt packets when he thinks nobody's looking, but I see him.
PP: That's why she's meeting with one of my researchers tomorrow, like she told you!
//Suppose that makes... wait.
Spike: Uh, Pinkie Pie, she told me that in the suite. When we were alone.
//A coy smile from a person who I am quickly learning is not as naive as she puts on.
PP: You honestly think I don't have this whole place bugged up and down? I did say 'biggest data collection facility in all of Equestria'!
//Not only every coin that comes in and comes out, but every conversation that goes on between anyone here...
Spike: That's a huge invasion of privacy; you shouldn't have listened in on us.
PP: And miss the most dramatic burgeoning romance in all of forever-dom between two of my bestest friends?! No way!!
//Pinkie Pie rolls her eyes and walks out of the break room.
PP: Yeah, boys always think that.
Spike: What's that suppo-- hey wait up!
//I jump through the closing door and somehow find myself outside on a balcony, next to Pinkie Pie, watching the sun rise. It's dawn already?
PP: No matter what you think about it, you shouldn't give Twilight such a hard time. She deals with a lot already; as your friend you should try to support her.
//Hard time? Like, say, omitting vitally important information and trying to mold my life to fit her own plans?
Spike: 'Deals with'? She's not even a Princess anymore. Everyone thinks she's dead. What does she _actually_ have to deal with?!
//While Twilight obviously helps in some significant manner with the organization of Equestria, I'm hoping to sound ignorant enough to get a revealing response out of Pinkie Pie.
//Pinkie Pie narrows her eyes at me, opening her mouth in a half-shocked, half-incredulous kind of way. She then thinks about her words.
//Damn.
PP: Maybe it _looks_ easy to you, on the outside, but we're not gears in a clock turning in our little positions, you know! If it weren't for the seven of us working to the bone each and every day, who knows where Equestria would be right now?!
Spike: Uh, still here? It's a geographical area; those don't move.
\'The seven of us', there are five Avatars and Twilight, who's the seventh...
PP: The world is held together with shoestring and gum half the time! There's no, 'we'll make it, somehow, some way, if we try' -- civilizational collapse is never more than one ill-timed breakdown away!
Spike: You're leaders, and you let your emotional state rule you like that?
//There needs to be a better way. Or better people.
THAT'S WHAT I'M SAYING
Pinkie Pie's tone grows a little softer.
P: ...We're not leaders so much as we are people who madly scramble each day to keep it together, both ourselves and everybody else. Me, I try not to let anyone else worry about me, and I try to make them happy when I can, to keep them a little further from breaking. So long as my friends aren't happy, I'm not happy.
The jester is the one who cries most on the inside. But the task of running an entire nation, when it was taken care of in the past entirely by one perfect person... it would destroy anyone but the strongest.
T: ...Spike, it can seem noble to give everything you have to others. But nopony can live like that forever. If you keep on trying, one day, it catches up to you, and...
P: But then you add this one thing, this one crazy, totally uncontrollable thing, and, and...

She flops to the ground, dramatically illustrating her point.
P: ...People _do_ have a snapping point. I can't help them all with everything. I just...
Spike: You're going to have to sum this up for me because I'm working off less than three hours' sleep.

Thanks, Twilight.
P: ...I can't make you help if you don't want to. But I don't want you to be the one thing, the crazy thing. Know what I mean?
/...She's worried about me. Both for me, and for her friends. It's kind of sweet.
LIKE SUGARED POISON.
Spike: ...I'll try not to give Twilight such a hard time.
P: Thanks. Spike, I really appreciate it.
The sun rising over the horizon hits my face for the first time, and I turn away from it.
Spike: So what was that about an exit?
P: Oh, Launa here should be able to teleport you to Canterlot.
A plain unicorn walks onto the balcony from another entrance, followed by four stallions, who are carrying on their shoulders a featherbed with silk curtains, pillows inside, gems and gold and jewelry sprinkled about on it...
P: I'm glad you understand I'm doing this for my friends' sakes. There are times and places for fun and games, Spike, but we can never ignore the happiness of others to live only for ourselves.
Two muscular, oiled stallions lift Pinkie Pie up above their heads and place her on the raised featherbed.
P: I mean, we can't live in a fantasy world.
...Right.
Spike: I understand. I'll be sure to take that with me to Canterlot.
Launa: Canterlot?
Spike: Yeah, I'm--
The unicorn speaks words of power, forming symbols in the air!
The Drakeling is Teleported!
Spike: Woah!--
/What?! I didn't even get to say goodbye!
...
[[SAVE LOCATION]]
When in Canterlot, I decide to go straight to Herr Yyz, displacement cape on. Twilight appears as I'm nodding off in a carriage. By raw reflex I grab her and throw her out of it as we're moving. The rest of the morning is spent apologizing over brunch.
The Faceless rent office space in a modern tower near the outskirts of Canterlot. It's a horridly modern affair, all steel and glass and unrelenting functionality, with zero concessions to the eye or
artistic expression. Located in one of the less reputable Canterlot districts (though this would be akin to saying 'the least skilled person in a room of world champions'), the gray slab rising out of the earth oversees the shorter buildings in the area. There are other places for marble and gold; here, stone-faced business is conducted.

///They rent office space as high as possible, as a reminder of how far they've risen since their old lives.

Unicorn Secretary: Yes, how may I help you?
Spike: Uh... is Herr Yyz in? Floor 67, Celestia's--
US: Faceless, yes. Should I give them your name, or are you here on official business?
///...Right, elimination of identity. Glad I'm still wearing the displacement cape.
Spike: Herr should be expecting me.
US: Of course. Hold on a second.
///She pulls out a device from under the desk, uncoils a strange tube, and starts speaking into it.
US: Floor 67? This is Shinra, first floor. There's a person here to see you.
Spike: (Is she talking to someone?)
T: (It's basically two cans on a string, so yes.)
///Something corrupted and unintelligible comes back out of the device. It sounds nothing like words.
US: Of course; I'll send him right up.
///She puts the device away. It sounds like they were expecting me, that's good...
US: You're cleared to go. Just show your keycard on the dumbwaiter and they'll start pulling you up.
Spike: ...Isn't there an elevator?
///The secretary laughs a fake laugh.
US: No, sorry; building codes prevent magically-assisted construction in this sector. Do you have your keycard?
///...Keycard?
Spike: I haven't a clue if I should.
///Rolling your eyes at me doesn't help with either my conundrum or your pleasantness, lady.
///She holds out a keycard with her picture on it, saying:
US: If you promise to give it back I'll let you borrow mine.
Spike: Thank you, I'll return it as soon as I'm done.
///Why is this person taking up so much of my time.
///ON YOUR WAY OUT YOU SHOULD SET HER ON FIRE
///Yeah, that's an appropriate response to mild annoyance.
///Twilight and I step on the dumbwaiter. I flash my keycard to a waiting veiled pony, who signals to someone at the top, and then leaves.
T: So--
Spike: Uh, you should probably float.
T: Huh?
Spike: It'd look really suspicious if I was somehow twice the weight I should be.
///Twilight considers it for a moment, then jumps into the air right before the Faceless start pulling.
Sixty-seven floors is a long way up...
T: So, what do you think this little chat is going to be like?
Spike: Personal and between me and Yyz?
///Twilight just laughs.
Spike: I think we're going to figure out a way to use my power, and what I've done so far, to spread admiration for Celestia and the Faceless dedicated to her.
///A short snort punctuates Twilight's amusement.
T: That's very specific; I can tell you're quite the go-getter.
Spike: I've defeated Pinkie Pie and Fluttershy for their Elements of Harmony, but those weren't visible. Kezno, Celel, and Jebed are the only ones who know about Kindness, but they supported
me before that.
//That's not to say saving the life of an innocent drakeling wasn't worth it, but it was a private affair...
Spike: And you're the only one who knows about Laughter.
//There's silence in the dumbwaiter as we're pulled another few stories up.
T: You don't think I support you?
//Honestly? No. If Twilight wanted Hazel off the throne, Hazel would be off the throne.
Spike: It's not that, Twilight.
T: Then?
Spike: ...Trying to change your mind would be like trying to stop a freight train with my teeth.
You'll do whatever you want, so I don't count you on the list of people I can influence.
//Though she's invisible and I can't see it, I can almost feel Twilight pout.
T: Am I really that bad?
//I shrug.
//She can be very stubborn at times. Then again, I can't remember a time when Twilight's been flat-out wrong...
//YOU MEAN, BESIDES ALL THE FUCKING LIES?
//Ugh, great, not now.
//TRUST ME I'M FUCKING OUT OF HERE. NO WAY IN SHIT LAKE AM I HANGING AROUND WITH THREE GODDESS-FREAKS. MAYBE I'LL GET ASCALON TO TRAMPLE OVER MORE GRAVES, THAT MIGHT AMUSE ME FOR A WHILE.
//I fold my arms. This is taking entirely too long.
Spike: I think it'll be a great conversation, though. I didn't get to talk too much with Herr before; now we'll really be able to hash out something concrete.
//Quine is one of the oldest and wisest dragons alive; whether or not he's working towards the quickest solution to the Aquinatic Conflict, he certainly didn't steer me wrong. And not only are Herr Yyz and Twilight going to help, but Celestia is watching over all of us. With this sort of guidance, how could I possibly go wrong?
T: I'm glad you're finally doing something _you_ really want, instead of someone else directing you.
//...Does she need to dig at me like that?
//We've reached the top of the dumbwaiter. I step off, nod to a few veiled ponies, and walk past waiting guards.
//Herr Yyz is standing at the end of a long room. The far wall is entirely glass, overlooking this sector of Canterlot with an appreciable view of Canterlot Castle. The side walls and the wall behind me are covered with mirrors. Not that they _are_ mirrors. They're covered with mirrors. Like, bathroom, framed mirrors are nailed to the wall every -- oh what does it matter?!
T: (Still with the mask?)
Spike: (Hush.)
//We walk in.
//Herr Yyz still has a black cloth covering her cutie mark on both sides. It blends in with her fur.
Spike: Hello.
//She turns around. Upon seeing my vague blur, the mask's eyebrows rise.
Herr Yyz: Ah. Hero, is that you?
Spike: I'm certainly not a baker.

The Drakeling takes off the displacement cape.

//I take off the displacement cape and hold it in my arms. The Faceless's gift to me has been very useful for all this time.
Spike: Thank you so much for the cape. It really saved my tail a few times.
//In addition to flustering Rainbow Dash, which itself is worth its weight in gold.
HY: Think not of it.
Spike: Uh... okay.
HY: I asked you to return after curing your dying curse. You also were to defeat the Avatar of Temptation and earn Kindness.
Spike: Yep, that's all taken care of. I also did a little more, which... explains why I'm late.
//Unable to find something to say, Herr Yyz nods. I continue:
Spike: I was... waylaid by griffons on the train back. So--
HY: 'Waylaid' being one word.
Spike: Wh-- ...yes. So I escaped, went to Mountainville, and earned Laughter from the Avatar of Luck.
//From Herr Yyz comes an impressed smile. It's a crescent moon against a backdrop of starless night sky.
HY: You saved your own life, the life of another. You earned two Elements in nearly as many days.
//...I mean, it wasn't easy.
HY: You come to me for advice. I should come to you.
Spike: Well...
//I did tell Herr Yyz about my desire to lessen the power of Hazel, and to help dragonkind become equals, but maybe I should stress how important that is...
//CONSIDERING YOU'RE USING HER SHITTY LIFE'S WORK FOR YOUR OWN PUSSY-CHASING ENDS? NAH, JUST KEEP LYING TO THE BITCH. YOU HAVE TWO GOOD EXAMPLES OF THAT, AFTER ALL.
Spike: I wanted to talk about my future as a Hero. You know, being the face of the Faceless (but not, because we're the Faceless), getting the rest of the Elements but still finding time to do good deeds. Bringing harmony between all peoples of Equestria. And so on.
//After thinking for a moment, Herr Yyz shakes her head.
HY: Yes. That will not be necessary.
//Hold on. What?
Spike: I'm sorry?
//Did she mean the talking part, or the doing part?
HY: I said that will not be necessary. You said to me when we first spoke that Celestia told you to overthrow Princess Hazel.
Spike: Uh... yeah.
//Celestia told me to kill her, but I don't think I've told anyone that. Regicide is a little different than usurping.
//THOUGH BOTH ARE TREASON, SO WHY ARE YOU WORRYING?
//It's only treason, why worry' he says...
HY: I have prayed much since then. And circumstances have changed. A Hero of such old ways of thinking is not needed at this time.
T: (Somepony is finally talking sense here.)
//...Why not? A Hero could solve everything, if they were strong enough...
Spike: What do you mean?
//Herr Yyz looks a while at me. She gestures to the guards waiting outside, and they step in the room.
T: (Never mind.)
Spike: (I'm sure it's ceremonial.)
HY: Membership in Celestia's Faceless is voluntary. But before I tell you any more, I need to have assurance that you are dedicated to us. This information is sensitive.
Spike: (Should also ask for my invisible friend to leave.)
T: (You're not going to throw me out this time?)
Spike: (...I said I was sorry.)
//Dedicate myself to the Faceless... They don't seem like ill-meaning people. But this is really
something else going on right now, and I don't know if I'm willing to give up being a Hero. Still, I could always hear Herr Yyz out, and then decide...
HY: It's okay if you decide to leave. I will understand. Asking you to take these words with you to the grave is not easy on me either. All I need is your assurance that you are trustworthy, and loyal to us.
//I don't have the Elements of Honesty and Loyalty yet; how would I know?
HY: Are you?
[[SAVE LOCATION]]

>>SWEAR TO FACELESS
>>DON'T SWEAR TO FACELESS

Spike: ...
//Will this really work?
Spike: I am sworn to Celestia in heart and mind. If you follow her, then we walk the same path.
//She can interpret that however she wants.
//YOU'RE SO MUCH OF A COWARD YOU CAN'T EVEN MAKE A FUCKING DECISION ON YOUR OWN, HANDING IT OFF TO ONE OF YOUR TO-BE DICKHANDLERS. YOU SICKEN ME MORE THAN RAINBOW DASH DOES, BUT THAT MIGHT JUST BE YOUR LUST FOR GODDESS-HOLE LEAKING OVER.
//After a long period of deliberation, Herr Yyz smiles.
HY: I knew you were trustable. Close the doors.
//Behind me, the guards close the doors, and Herr Yyz begins to speak softer. For a given definition of softer. She still sounds like a haughty yuppie.
HY: The punchline at the end is, I want to destroy Equestria.

Chapter End Notes

With apologies to Tarn Adams.
My Kingdom Come. My Will Be Done.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

//...What?
Spike: You're going to have to run that by me again.
//She kind of jumped a little there. I didn't follow. Was that a joke?
HY: I am serious. Let me explain. I said the shocking part first, it's more reasonable than just that.
Spike: Uh... okay?
HY: Some say Celestia's behaviors in the years leading up to her disappearance were erratic. I think they were characteristic of her. After studying Celestia for a long time, if you'll excuse my lack of humility, I understand her better than anyone.
//Next to me, Twilight stiffens.
T: (No, you don't.)
//Why does she choose now to take offense to Herr Yyz, and not the 'destroying Equestria' part?
HY: Did you know Celestia had a family?
//USED TO.
Spike: ...You mean theologically, or...
//I was about to say 'in reality'. Probably should check that phrasing.
HY: Outside of theological grounds. Though Celestia was created herself out of the aether, she birthed children in a very normal way. Her blood ran through Equestrian nobility, at one point synonymous with it, until five hundred years ago.
Spike: What happened?
HY: It's a state secret, or it has been lost to the sands of time. Celestia had many enemies, as does all good.
//A person living for over a thousand years, being the ruler of Equestria for such a time... it would get rather lonesome...
//Herr Yyz shakes her head, dismissing the topic.
HY: She is more important than they. These centuries show a change in Celestia: She becomes more matronly.
//A gust of wind bounces the windows in their panes, covering up a slight huff from Twilight.
T: (If you read her journals, Celestia had absolutely no clue how to be a caregiver. Which is why she wasn't to most of them. Herr is wrong.)
//I'm not sure who I more want to believe... the person who says they want to destroy Equestria, or the person who's implying Celestia had several children and abandoned them to the care of others. \How is that a bad thing? Dragons used to do it all the time.
//Ponies aren't like that, there's a little bit of a difference...
HY: Five hundred years ago, family dead, Celestia made Equestria Her child. Or recognized that it always was. When She left two years ago, it is because we called ourselves grown, and She gracefully bowed out as unnecessary.
Spike: Uh...
//I say 'uh' very loudly to cover up the sound of Twilight holding something in. Herr's words are really getting to her.
Spike: Like how thousands of people died in the ensuing dragon-pony conflicts and assorted chaos? Not to mention the Fall of the Crystal Empire? That doesn't sound responsible or grown to me.
//Herr hangs her head, the rising sun coming up behind her. If she weren't already a silhouette...
HY: This is punishment for our hubris.
//Herr Yyz turns away as Twilight bursts:
T: Celestia is not that type of goddess!
//The zippers on Herr's mask swing as she turns around, but I put my hand on my hip and continue
in Twilight's voice:
Spike: We are _not_ being punished! Punished for _what_? It doesn't make any sense!
//SO VERY, VERY ODD THAT YOU CAN DO THAT.
//Herr, and the guards, stare at me a very long time. I stare back, hand on my hip still.
\\I am a sassy purple pony on the inside and you'd _better_ respect.
//Slowly, Herr Yyz asks:
HY: Does it smell like lavender?
Guard 1: ...Ma'am, no, ma'am.
Spike: It smells like a certain pony has no idea what she's talking about.
//None of this is connecting to destroying Equestria, and it's all easily wrong. Where's she going
with any of it?
//Herr barks back at me:
HY: Parents take care of their child until the child is grown enough to survive on their own. We are
still _children_, as a people. We have grown _none_.
//She whips around, advancing towards the window. I think I see a flash of gold on her flank...
HY: This world is dangerous. But it is not the world that makes the world dangerous, it is us. What
are your greatest threats, Hero? Is it a ravine, a raging river, or a twisting cave? I think it is others.
The absence created two niches in social ecology, parasite and carnivore. Harming others for self-
gain is now a strategy, with Her gone. You have dedicated your entire life to combating these
people.
//She stops in front of the window, overlooking Canterlot.
Spike: And I'm doing my best! I have two of the Elements; I've saved people from death and
worse. And the Avatars -- Fluttershy, Pinkie Pie, Applejack, Rarity, even Rainbow Dash -- they try
as best they can! I can't say anything for their guidance, but no one is _worthless_! We're not
helpless!
HY: It hasn't made a difference. You're the only one, the only person still trying to be a Hero in
this damned world. And one isn't enough. You don't register statistically. There is not a dent in any
of the _rates_. I could exaggerate your story and give it to the biggest papers and hire recruiters to
seek out Hero-apprentices and give them all the power I could, and it wouldn't be enough.
//Is this what she thinks about my quest, my journey? Doing good isn't acceptable unless you fix
_everything_?
HY: There are simply too many people.
//I CAN TRY TO HELP WITH THAT
//Not you! Not now!
Spike: I refuse to believe we're unable of living up to Celestia's example.
HY: You see, I worship Her. I do, She is perfect and unquestionable. But the lesson She meant to
teach us has fallen on deaf ears. A parent's first and foremost job is to prepare their child for
reality, but by clinging to Her we have not been prepared for the world but sheltered from it. To
draw her attention back in a time when we still desperately need it, there must be a trigger. Like
pulling a child back before he jumps in a fire.
T: (This. This is the reason she wants to destroy Equestria.)
Spike: Because you want to bring Celestia back.
//Herr Yyz raises her head up, looking outwards at the sky,
HY: My father is an old, dying, foolish stallion. He thinks by offering me his money we may bond
in his last moments of life. Although I will slightly regret his death, his assets are... considerable.
Some people need to die for the good of the world.
//Stay silent, keep it together, she'll reveal her plan if you let her ramble...
\\Why is it all the crazy ones want to tell me everything, but sane and well-meaning people like
Twilight never do?
HY: I once was a lawyer, investigating insider trading in agricultural markets. Many of the contacts
I made still have my name and number, and would be delighted to hear from me again.

Spike: You said you wanted to destroy Equestria. Why does any of this matter?

HY: Several well-placed investments into cash crop ventures, a few bribes to important senators to lessen agricultural subsidies in face of the Aquinatic rising debt burden. Great amounts of farmers, more than normal, switch out their grain for richer crops. With the farmland destroyed by the Valley Fire unsuitable for cultivation until next year, any sudden attack by dragons, uprising from the buffalo, accident, or even simply the slow march of time...

///...Usually, Herr speaks in short sentences. The way she's speaking now, it almost sounds like she's fantasizing.

Spike: Mass starvation. That's your plan.

T: (Oh, that's a simple fix. Excuse me.)

///Without even a puff of air, Twilight vanishes. I doubt Herr's scheme will work now that Twilight can plan against it.

Spike: You realize how many people would die? How many would starve -- even if Celestia came back you'll be the one she blames for it!!

///She shrugs.

HY: Some people have to die for the good of the world.

///That phrase, dammit, it's like a stopping block for thought that nothing goes beyond...

///Herr Yyz starts walking towards me, speaking in a somber tone:

HY: With what I have at my disposal, there is no way I can save the world. Not alone. But even the gods obey laws. We can manipulate Celestia into doing it for us.

///IN THE CRYSTAL EMPIRE THEY THOUGHT CELESTIA WOULD SAVE THEM, TOO.

///Stopping directly in front of me, she finishes:

HY: I will do this. I can cause the famine and ubiquitous suffering that can only be alleviated by a goddess, and She will have no choice but to step in. And this time, when She comes back and we nestle safely under her wing, we will learn.

///This is terrible, I can't allow something like this to happen...

HY: So? What do you say, Hero? Will your emotion overpower the frank need for Celestia to return?

///[SAVE LOCATION]

///It isn't even a choice...

Spike: ...You're horrible and evil and cowardly and in no sense of the word Hero would I ever be allowed to let you get away with this.

///In front of me, above the dark fur of Herr Yyz's back, the sun rises out from behind the clouds and shines through the window. The guards shield their eyes, but I stare entranced. It says, in the simplest tone, heard throughout the room and bouncing off the mirrors:

Celestia: Then kill her.

Herr Yyz: What?! No!!

///[SAVE LOCATION]

The Drakeling attacks!

The Drakeling grabs Herr Yyz by the head with his left hand!

///Ugh, remind me to breathe fire on that hand later.

Herr Yyz kicks The Drakeling in the head with her right front hoof, bruising the muscle and bruising the jaw!

The Drakeling releases the grip of The Drakeling's left hand on Herr Yyz's head.

///YOU ARROGANT FUCKING PRICK, YOU'RE STILL LESS THAN A PONY WITHOUT THE POWER I GAVE YOU. DON'T GET COCKY.

///Herr Yyz scrambles away, fixing her mask!
HY: Guards! Guards! Help!

//Well, great. This is really a fight now.
//INSTEAD OF JUST A MURDER?
The Drakeling breathes in and focuses, casting Terrae Corpus! The Drakeling's scales become as hard as rock!

The Guard (1) kicks at The Drakeling, but The Drakeling dodges away!
The Drakeling counterattacks! The Drakeling punches The Guard (1) in the right front leg with his left hand, but the attack glances away!
//Wait, that wasn't my Dashing Rogue Punch... oh, right, it got replaced.
The Guard (2) bites The Drakeling in the right lower arm, but the attack glances away!
//It does surprise me into dropping the displacement cape, though.
The Drakeling drops the displacement cape.

HY: I, I, I don't understand!
The Drakeling kicks The Guard (2) in the upper body with his right foot, bruising the muscle, bruising the left true ribs and bruising the left lung!
The Guard (2) is having trouble breathing!
Spike: You don't understand why _killing a bunch of people_ is deplorable?!
The Guard (1) charges at The Drakeling!
The Guard (1) kicks at The Drakeling with his right rear hoof, but The Drakeling dodges away!
The Guard (1) rushes by The Drakeling!

//Herr Yyz starts to gallop towards the only exit, the door twenty feet behind us.
Guard (2): On the ground! Now!
//Wasn't he having trouble breathing?
The Drakeling punches at The Guard (1), but The Guard (1) dodges away!
//Damnit! Now they're blocking me from getting at Herr! If she escapes, this is really going to get messy...
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Walk of the Third!
//Now they're all moving slower, but I'm still not sure I can reach Herr Yyz in time...
The Drakeling leaps over The Guard (1)!

The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Lake of Fire! Bouts of flame coat the ground!
//Between Herr Yyz and the only exit, a great wall of flame erupts!
The Drakeling's Walk of the Third ends.

HY: Kyaaaohmyskies!
//She leaps away from the roaring flames!
The Guard (2) kicks The Drakeling in the lower body with his right rear hoof, shattering the scale, bruising the muscle, bruising the right kidney and bruising the lower spine's bone!
The force of the blow knocks The Drakeling to his knees!
Spike: 'Swings, give it a rest, will you?!
The Drakeling punches The Guard (2) in the head with his right hand, shattering the teeth, bruising the muscle, bruising the skull and bruising the brain!
The Guard (2) has been knocked unconscious! The Guard (2) collapses!
//I LIKE YOUR DEFINITION OF REST.

The Guard (1) grabs The Drakeling's right upper arm from behind with his right front leg! The Guard (1) grabs The Drakeling's left upper arm from behind with his left front leg!
Guard (1): Got him!
Spike: I sincerely doubt that.
The Drakeling struggles in vain against the grip of The Guard (1)'s right front leg on The Drakeling's right upper arm!
//Huh, maybe he's stronger than he looks...

Guard (1): Quick, Lady Yyz! His front!
HY: Excuse me?
Spike: Does it ever end?!
//YES, AND RATHER QUICKLY.
The Drakeling struggles in vain against the grip of The Guard (1)'s left front leg on The Drakeling's left upper arm!
The Drakeling tries to stand up, but The Guard (1) is in the way!
//...I can't tell if that was a joke about my--
Guard (1): He's a drakeling! Take his fire before the building burns down!
//Behind the stained mask, Herr Yyz is indignant.
HY: That life I left behind me!
Guard (1): The exit is blocked! There's no other way!

//How do I usually break out of bonds?
//PURE LUCK?
The Drakeling breathes fire! But nothing comes out!
//_What_?!
//PROBABLY SHOULD HAVE MENTIONED THAT, BUT IT'S FUCKING INTUITIVE THAT YOUR FIRE'S TIED UP RIGHT NOW, SO MAYBE YOU SHOULD HAVE THOUGHT FOR ONCE IN YOUR FUCKING LIFE.
//If I dismiss that to break out of this hold, Herr will escape, but if I don't, I'm stuck here... or worse.
HY: Then you do it!
Guard (1): I'm holding him!

The Drakeling bites at The Guard (1)'s right front leg, but The Guard (1) is out of reach!
The Guard (1) locks The Drakeling's right shoulder with The Guard (1)'s right front leg! The Guard (1) locks The Drakeling's left shoulder with The Guard (1)'s left front leg!
//He's going to break both my shoulders at once! Damn, where did this pony learn to fight? That's badass! And horrifying, because it's happening to me!
HY: And I thought past decisions left a bitter taste in my mouth...
\And for the low low price of thousands of donations, you too can have a burly stallion break a person's limbs while you assault and enslave them.

Spike: That's the end I'm getting? Bad sex puns?
//I won't stand for it!
\That's good, because you're kneeling.
//Time to see if that move Pinkie Pie gave me works like she says it does...
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Touch of Grisly Terror!
The Drakeling touches The Guard (1) in the right front leg and the left front leg! They become limp and useless!
//He slides off my back as I swipe between his back legs with my tail.
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Touch of Grisly Terror!
The Drakeling touches The Guard (1) in the right rear leg and the left rear leg! They become limp and useless!
//I guess it really is a limb paralyzer...
The Guard (1) falls over!
//On his side, he shudders and screams at his limbs:
Guard (1): No! No!! What did you _do_?! Aaagh!
//The muscular pony strains his neck, trying to stand up or even move. Nothing is happening. He
can't get any of the places I touched to respond at all.
The Drakeling stands up.
Spike: Uh, it'll wear off... I think.
//Who knows?
//Herr Yyz gallops towards the other end of the room, drawing my attention back to her. I start
walking towards her and the windows.

Spike: See, I was willing to just go and tell the authorities myself.
HY: Good to know.
//I walk at a slant to try and box Herr into a corner. She's faster than me without Walk of the Third.
Most ponies are.
Spike: But if Celestia told me to kill you, that means the authorities wouldn't be enough to stop
you. Just another failure in Hazel's long list.
//Herr glances out the window, and then speaks straight upwards.
HY: I -- I don't understand! This isn't what you wanted!
//Is she speaking to Celestia? Or trying to, at least?
Spike: Quit pretending.
//As she's talking, she's not running. That's right, stay put... out that window will be the last view
you get.
HY: I am not! Celestia told me to do all this!
//I scoff.
Spike: Why would Celestia tell you to do all this, then tell me to kill you for doing it?
HY: ...I don't know!
//And I thought Applejack was a bad liar.
Spike: I didn't set out to kill people. But if it has to be a choice between an evil schemer like you,
and innocent--

The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Walk of the Third!
//While I myself am talking. Never expect it.
The Drakeling leaps at Herr Yyz!
The Drakeling grabs Herr Yyz by the upper body with his left hand!
The Drakeling grabs Herr Yyz by the left front leg with his right hand!
The Drakeling's Walk of the Third ends!

Spike: Reality to Herr Yyz! Trying to convince Celestia we're not ready to handle ourselves by
starving a bunch of people isn't cool!
//Maybe I should say, 'Herr Yyz to reality'... at terminal velocity from sixty-seven stories up.
Herr Yyz kicks The Drakeling in the right lower leg with her right rear hoof, chipping the scale!
HY: My Celestia, My Goddess, why have you forsaken this worl--

The Drakeling throws Herr Yyz by the upper body!

Herr Yyz strikes the glass window with her head, shattering the glass! The severed parts fly off in
arcs!
//I think the impact broke her neck. She drops out of view before I can tell.
//HAHAHAHA THIS WILL BE GOOD
//What?
Spike: Uh oh.
//I stick my head out the broken window, curious and dreading.
//There's a pony walking right where Herr Yyz is falling!
Spike: Left!! Fall to the left!!
//Herr Yyz tumbles downwards towards the unsuspecting pony!
Spike: Watch out!!
\Oh no, it's the secretary!

Herr Yyz slams into The Secretary!
The Secretary slams into the ground!
The Secretary's right rear leg takes the full force of the impact, tearing the skin, bruising the muscle and shattering the bone!
The Secretary's lower body takes the full force of the impact, tearing the skin, bruising the muscle and tearing apart the guts!
The Secretary's upper body takes the full force of the impact, bruising the muscle, jamming the right false ribs through the right lung and tearing apart the right lung!
Herr Yyz strikes The Secretary in the head with her left front hoof, bruising the muscle, shattering the skull, jamming the skull through the brain and tearing apart the brain!
The Secretary has been struck down!
Herr Yyz slams into the ground!
Herr Yyz's upper body takes the full force of the impact, and it collapses into a lump of gore!
Herr Yyz has been struck down!

Herr Yyz was defeated!
Spike earned 11000 experience points!
Spike is now level 30!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//Damnit damnit damnit damnit damnit!!
Spike: _No_!
//HAHAHAHAHA SHE WAS ANNOYING ANYWAY
//I killed a person! I mean, two! But one was an accident!
//IF YOU DIDN'T WANT KARMIC JUSTICE RAINING FROM THE SKIES, WHY THE HELL DID YOU DECIDE TO THROW THE BITCH OUT A WINDOW INSTEAD OF BITING HER NECK OFF?
//Nothing about this is karmic! Shit, this is terrible! An innocent person's dead because I'm an idiot!
//ADD HER TO THE LIST, THEN.
//Voices start to come from beyond the flames. It looks like neither of the guards are able to move yet. The paralyzed one's back is to me.
//Feel guilty later. Escape now.
//Well, there's sixty-seven floors of pony to go if I take the normal route down the tower; doubt they're willing to lower the dumbwaiter for me... but I didn't use much Walk of the Third during that fight. Maybe...
Spike: Worth a try, I suppose.
//I put the displacement cape back on, dismiss the flames, and use Walk of the Third to glide down to the ground before police arrive. I run past the two bodies, and for as long as I can.
//You know, with a cutie mark like that, she must have been a lawyer.

T: (_Ice cream_)
Spike: (And?)
T: (Two people are dead at your hands and you're eating _ice cream_?!) 
//It's a small village on the outskirts of what's technically still considered Canterlot, whose claim to fame is hoof-made ice cream. And it's nine thirty at night, I won't spoil my dinner.
Spike: (What, is sherbet more appropriate for the situation?)
Twilight and I are in the village's ice cream parlor. I think it's called Ice Cream Parlor. No, I'm not joking.

T: (Why would you do this? It's not like you!)

ARE YOU KIDDING IT'S EXACTLY LIKE THE CHUCKLEFUCK

...To be honest, it is like me. The secretary, Kezno's sickness, the Valley of Death... everywhere I go, innocent and well-meaning people end up getting hurt around me as I try to fight off evil. But I know that my absence would be worse than the collateral damage.

Spike: (...Celestia told me to.)

A dull silence follows, in which I finish my ice cream. I swear, she must practice these looks, because damn...

T: (Firstly: no. No, she didn't. Celestia does not tell you to kill people. She is not that type of goddess.)

Uh... there are exactly two occurrences of that very thing happening that come to mind. But Twilight won't believe me.

T: (And secondly, even if a goddess did tell you to do something which is wrong, you don't. Spike is responsible for Spike's actions, not whoever put the idea in his head.)

The shop owner comes to take my dish away. She greets me with an innocent smile.

Shop Owner: Was everything alright?

Spike: Why, it was marvelous. It's a good thing your bowls are small, this vanille fancaise was so delectable I simply couldn't help myself!

SO: Of course! Couldn't have our customers leaving with a tummyache!

She laughs, and it doesn't seem fake. I start counting out coins (a few fell to the bottom of my bag earlier) as Twilight's lips form half a word and then abandon it.

T: (I'm not even going to ask.)

It is really strange how I can do voice impersonations so well.

Spike: (It's a natural talent.)

The tall shop owner takes her coins into a small purse and waves us goodbye as we leave.

SO: You two girls enjoy the rest of your night, okay?

Spike: I always do~, hohoho.

T: (Oh Celestia.)

As we step outside, a night breeze grabs my displacement cape and clings it to my tail. Man, that is annoying.

Twilight huffs.

T: Great. Now they think we're a couple.

Spike: We're not?

Twilight gives me a strange look.

I roll my eyes.

Spike: Sarcasm, Twilight.

T: It seems like you say things and do things that you want to do without considering how it impacts other ponies. How do you think Rarity feels about you using her voice? She's one of my best friends, how do you think I feel?

Spike: (I'm not going to risk using my own voice right now. They might be able to connect me to the crime.)

In the full moonlight (it's almost like day), Twilight gets angry and rears back a little.

T: (_That_ is what you think? It's okay to disregard others for your own needs when things get difficult?!) Spike: (Wha-- ...no, Twilight, I didn't say--) T: (Well you've certainly done it, said or not!)

Spike: ...

I suck a drop of hot fudge off my thumb, feeling guilty. It's kind of true...

T: (You _killed_ someone because they said something you disagreed with today. That's not the Spike I know and love.)
//Uh... I guess she means as a friend.
T: (She told both of us her entire plans. It took me five minutes to look up a way to stop them! I know you don't trust me, but at least give me some credit!)
//...There must be a reason Celestia told me to kill Herr Yyz, I know there must be...
Spike: (One way or the other the threat is over now. And I never told the Faceless my name. There's not much evidence to implicate me besides the fact I'm purple.)
T: (Really? What happened to the secretary's keycard?)
//...Oh, right, that's still in the bag. Whoops.
T: (The forest fire could have been an accident. But this screwup is wholly yours to own.)
//Ending the conversation, Twilight spits:
T: (There's a warrant out for your arrest. Double ponicide. And right now I don't know if I want you to get away.)
//Twilight disappears in an angry burst of air.
//...I feel like that goodbye's mood was ruined by the word 'ponicide'.
//Sitting down on the curb, I hold my head up with a hand, watching the stars.

Spike: Sigh...
//Twilight's really angry. You know, again. I really did mess up this time.
//I wonder if she really meant that, the part about me getting caught. I mean... I try my best to do what I think is right. For normal people, that's enough. But a Hero... a Hero has to _be_ right, not just think he is. Because if a Hero isn't right, things like this happen...
//Wide fields of grain wave under the full moon, beating against occasional trees. It's actually very peaceful out here.
//How do I make sure, as a Hero, that I'm always right? I feel destroying that vine creature and ending the threat of Herr Yyz were both necessary, but the way they happened caused other people to get hurt. As a Hero, I can't stand for that. There's an entire class of Heroism dedicated to stopping those who don't care for others hurt in pursuit of schemes; am I a villain?

//YOU'RE WHATEVER I WANT YOU TO BE.

//Ugh. This guy again. Stop talking.
//Two ponies trot by. A young stallion and a young mare. He looks nervous and energetic. On closer inspection, she also looks nervous. It must be a date.
\Few people in the world set out to be a bad person. Most are misguided, they are blinded in some way. Have you been blind to the people you hurt?
//Kezno... and Celel... even just getting involved in their lives I hurt them. Kezno with his sickness, Celel watching Kezno rot and being played with in Fluttershy's test.
\But if you didn't intervene, both of them would be dead or worse.
//The people of the Valley, they had fields of beautiful flowers and great stone walls you could stand on and see into the distance... even the shanty town of lackluster carpentry was uniquely theirs. I took that all away from them.
\If you hadn't have stopped Osto Bacchus, they'd all be her eternal slaves.
//And the secretary? What did she do to me? She lent me a security card, for Celestia's sake, just so I could see the people I thought I could trust. And it killed her.
\True. But without your intervention, not only she, but everyone she knew and loved, would have starved to death.
//A jingle comes from a little ways away. The Shop Owner is locking up Ice Cream Parlor (seriously, not joking) for the night.
\You're not blind to the people you hurt after it happens. This is a fixable problem. Making amends, learning from your mistakes, those you could be doing more. But the most important part is to start planning ahead. You're strong now, or starting to be. Your fights don't have to be races for survival anymore, you can start to make concessions. Like... 'don't let others be hurt'.
//...Was I so frantic to kill Herr Yyz and in the process hurt the secretary simply because Celestia told me to?
//The Shop Owner looks over towards where I'm sitting. My arms are folded on top of my knees;
I'm staring into the dirty water trapped between cobblestones.

Shop Owner: Is something wrong, hun?

Spike: ...Yes.

//USING THAT VOICE IS SO INCREDIBLY FUCKED UP I FUCKING LOVE IT

Shop Owner: What is it?

//The tall mare walks over to me, looking worried. It warms my heart to know there is still some good in a world with people like me in it.

//QUIT WITH THE EXAGGERATION, ASSHOLE.

//...Really?

//YEAH THERE IS NO GOOD IN THIS WORLD

Spike: Have you ever... have you ever disappointed someone who was close to you? Someone you cared for?

//The shop owner raises her eyebrows, then exclaims:

SO: Oh, hun...

//And sits down next to me.

SO: ...Is that where your friend went?

Spike: I try, I really do, to be the best I can, but I'm not perfect! No one's perfect!

//She responds by nosing my shoulder and listening.

Spike: But I have to be perfect! I _must_ be perfect!

SO: No one's perfect.

Spike: Celestia is.

//A bit taken aback, the shop owner then says:

SO: Are you Celestia?

//A long silence from the both of us. Eventually, I figure out it was a rhetorical question, and stop playing games in my head.

Spike: ...No.

SO: Then you're not perfect.

Spike: Every time, I mess up, and I see the disappointment in her eyes... she forgives me every time, but...

SO: ...Hun, no one wins every battle.

//Heroes do.

SO: Be happy for what successes you have, for yourself. If she really cares for you, she'll be happy for them too.

//...I don't know if I've ever seen Twilight really be happy like that. There's always something I could be doing better.

Spike: ...She just wants me to be the best I can be. I want to be that.

SO: Hun, no one in the world is that way. There's a thin line between wanting you to be better, and disapproving of who you are now.

//It's not that Twilight and all the Avatars want me to be better, it's that if I'm not, people start dying...

SO: Do the best that you can, as you are now. If she's really worth keeping, she'll understand. Otherwise, she's not worth worrying about.

//I spend a long time on the curb, lost in my own thoughts.

//Why am I being a Hero anyway? Is it for Twilight? Of course not. Myself? ...Maybe, I do like it. Celestia? ...

\Following Celestia led you to kill an innocent person. How many do you think will perish as a result of regicide? Following her unspoken beliefs about dragons? Is it worth it?

//...I don't want to be a Hero for Celestia any more, whether or not I started as one. If I think that way, I do get blinded, and others start to get hurt. I'm a Hero partly because I want to be, but the true reason is because I know a Hero is truly what is needed to help others, to save them from strange threats like Osto Bacchus and Herr Yyz. I'm not a Hero because it's a title given by Celestia, for me to obey without thinking -- I don't want to do anything anymore without thinking.
I'm a Hero because I want to live in a world where people are happy, and I don't yet.

So what will you do, then? What changes as a result of this?

Spike: ...

//I'm powerful and there are problems in the world. They come before my quest to get my memories back by confronting Twi-- ...Hazel. I can't let the lives of others stay in peril for myself - or for a pony whose only significant contributions have been to tell me to kill two people! Even if she is a goddess!

//Pinkie Pie: So long as my friends aren't happy, I'm not happy.' That's what you're going with? //Not just my friends. I can't fight their personal demons, like Pinkie Pie thinks she can. But I can fight their external ones. From now on, if there's something in the world only a Hero can solve, I'll do it! Even if I have to delay confronting Hazel because of it!

//And think of the sidequest EXP!

Spike: ...Honestly, thank you. I think I've figured out what to do now.

//In the moonlight, the shop owner gives a sweet smile.

//What's the biggest issue in Equestria right now? Now that I'm almost powerful enough to make a difference? ...

SO: I'm glad I could help, hun. What did you decide?

//I stand up.

Spike: I'm going to end the Aquinatic Conflict!

//That sounds strange in Rarity's voice.

//Confusion spreads across the mare's face for a few seconds, and then she stands up. She chuckles in a way where nothing's funny, and then says:

SO: Uh... well, best of luck to you.

//Hooves on cobblestone approach from the north. I stand away from the shop owner, tensing.

Shop Owner: Wh-- Yesler? Why are you running? Where's my daughter?

//The young stallion I saw earlier stops only enough to get out:

Young Stallion: I'm sorry, Mrs. Solon, but there's another fire on the farms!

//He then dashes off.

Solon: What? That's the third fire this week!

//She chases off after him, faster on her longer legs.

Spike: Three fires in a week doesn't seem natural.

//I chase off after them, slower.

//Three ponies are standing about on an incline, looking up towards a raging fire in their dry fields of grain. It's spreading fast, throwing up thick clouds of smoke to hide the speckled night sky.

//OH HEY YOU DIDN'T CAUSE THIS ONE

Solon: What do you mean? There has to be something I can do!

Old Farmer: Yesler, go to the Murrays! Tell them the fire's heading their way, and to clear out!

Yesler: On it, pop!

//He runs off as fast as he can.

SO: We shouldn't just stand here and watch!

Old Farmer: Are you any good with animals?

//The tall pony pauses, and then shakes her head.

Old Farmer: Then I'm sorry. I have to go help Mrs. Olfrus to calm the animals and get them out of here. And then I have to find Croesa!

//He runs off into the distance as soon as I get within speaking range.

Spike: What's happening? What's going on?

SO: Who--

//She lifts a hoof and then looks at me. Right, I didn't use the voice, drat--

The Drakeling takes off the displacement cape.
Spike: I'm here to help. What's the situation?
//For a short second, Mrs. Solon stares at me, then points to the burning fields and says:
SO: The Olfrus's fields are on fire, third family this has happened to this week. You wouldn't know anything about it?
Spike: It sounds like arson. Who would do such a thing?
//To farmers, it would put them out of both house and livelihood, not to mention someone might be burned...
SO: No one from this town. Mr. Olfrus sent Yesler to warn the Murrays, but the fire's going to reach them soon! We should go!
Spike: Wait, there's a gap!
//I point off into the distance, seeing how the clay brick walls line up.
Spike: The fields are connected by only a small gap in the walls! We can stop it there!
//I rush off into the fields!
SO: Wait! No! What are you doing?!
//Man, is it hard to see through all these plants! I'm just glad they're not on fire, that would be even worse.
SO: Hello? Drakeling? I can't see you in there anymore!
Spike: I'm still here! Watch the top of the grain! Am I going in the right direction?
//I really, really hope so.
//Through a short pause I keep running. Up in the sky, the stars blink out in a blob, moving north. Clouds! Hopefully it rains.
SO: Almost there! A little to the left!
//I hop to the left and smack face first into the clay wall. With a little embarrassed climbing I'm on top of it, overlooking the gap leading between the fields.

The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Lake of Fire! Bouts of flame coat the ground!
The grain has caught flame!

SO: What the hell are you doing?!
Spike: If we take out the connection, these other fields won't be endangered! There will be no way for the fire to pass!
SO: Except you just lit them--
Spike: Trust me! I know what I'm doing!
//Most -- ...some -- ...a non-zero portion of the time!
//The fire has burnt away the connection in a few seconds. Here's hoping this puts out all the flames created by my Lake of Fire, not just the initial ones...
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and dismisses the fires!
//The grain all around me is put out completely. My eyes have to adjust to the sudden darkness.
Spike: There, that seemed to work.
//The old farmer, Mr. Olfrus, gallops back to where Mrs. Solon is standing.
Olfrus: Croesa! Has she come here? Mrs. Solon, have you seen her?!
SO: No, I haven't!
OF: Damnations! That means she's in the barn!
//They look to the northeast, towards a large paint-flaked barn. Between the two ponies and the barn is a growing sea of flame.
SO: We'll never get there in time!
OF: Croesa!
//If there was ever a time, it's time...
Spike: I'm on it!
//I jump into the grain and make a mad dash for the barn, ignoring the flames in my way!
OF: Solon, who is that?!
SO: I don't know!

//The barn is in flames by the time I reach it. These things really go up quick, wow...
//NOW YOU SEE WHY DRAGONS LIVE IN ROCK CAVES.
Spike: Croesa!
//I hope that's how you pronounce her name.
Spike: Are you here? I'm here to rescue you! We need to get out of here!
//There's no response but the audible cracking of the wood, bowing under new strains as other
supports burn away. Hay and spiderwebs crackle and support powerful flames that reach up
through the second level. A great ball of smoke is forming below the roof, getting angrier with
time.
//It's times like these when I really appreciate that dragons are immune to fire.
Spike: Croesa!! Can you hear me?!
//Nothing. Incidentally, though I am unharmed by fire, the same cannot be said of collapsing
buildings.
Spike: Shout, move, anything! I don't know where you are!
//Still nothing. I look desperately through the barn, finding a small mare (large filly?) under a pile
of burning hay, unconscious. She's burned but still breathing.
Spike: Hold on!
//I try to pick the pony up and her skin slides off in my hands. All her fur has been completely burnt
off. Maybe if I put my arms below her stomach, and brace her against my waist...
//You know, strangely, that actually works. I just hope no one sees me like this. And the awkward
steps I have to take side to side in order to move forward could use some improvement. Next time I
plan on rescuing someone from a burning building, I'll develop some other method.
//HERE'S A TIP: BREATHE IN THROUGH YOUR NOSE.
//I breathe in through my nose, and...
Spike: ...You're sick.
//That smells _delicious_.
//THIS IS THE SMELL THAT DRAGONS FUCKING LIVE FOR. THE ROASTED FLESH OF
LESSER BEINGS, SERVED UP HELPLESS. TAKE A BITE; NO ONE WILL NOTICE.
//No.
\\...Even if it does smell delicious.
//THEY THINK YOU STARTED THE FIRES, FUCKHAT. ALL THREE OF THEM: TODAY,
AND MONDAY AND SUNDAY AS WELL. THEY'RE GOING TO BLAME YOU AND FOR
ALL YOUR SHITTLY LITTLE 'GOOD DEEDS', YOU'LL GET NOTHING BUT
PUNISHMENT.
//I don't believe people are that blind. I didn't do it, and why would they chose the person who
helped them as their scapegoat?
//THEN THE FUCKS WILL HOLD YOU LONG ENOUGH FOR SOMEONE TO REALIZE
YOU'RE A DOUBLE MURDERER. YOU NEED TO RUN SO TAKE A CHUNK OUT OF
THAT ASS AND GET FUCKING GOING!
Spike: No!
//I stumble out of the barn to a small oasis, free of grain, surrounded by rocks. It's a good thing this
was here...
//Croesa is burned badly and has lost some of her skin on her back, rear legs, and stomach. But
she's still breathing; there's a chance.
//A great wall of flaming grain separates me from Solon and Olfrus, so we can't even see each
other. There's no way Croesa will survive through those fires, never mind to the nearest hospital
after that...
//I take off my ankh and start speaking into it.
Spike: Is anyone out there? Anyone who can hear me? I need help!
//With the flames in front of me and a pony with third degree burns on a lot of her body, there's no
I can do anything on my own. I have to be brave enough to admit that.
//A stuttering voice comes from the ankh.

Stutterer: Th-this voice I hear seems y--y-- not old. What is y-- the problem, m-master drakeling?

Spike: Are you near Canterlot?
ST: Above it. Flying t-towards the famous d-d-dojo in Gloucester--
Spike: I don't need a ride! Someone is hurt, she needs to get to a hospital!
//The barn cracks dangerously behind me. But if I drag Croesa further from it, she'll be hurt even worse...
ST: Are y--y-- we talking about th-the great plumes of smoke coming up?
Spike: Yes!
ST: I s-suppose a drakeling with an ankh is w-w-worth meeting. I'll be there in a--

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

The Red Dragon strikes the barn in the supports, and the severed part flies off in an arc!
The Drakeling dodges away from the spinning support!
The support slams into the ground! The !!wood!! takes the full force of the impact, and the severed parts fly off in arcs!
//What the hell?!

Red Dragon: Hee hee hee, bouncy bounce away little guy!
//A red dragon, just getting too large to be bipedal anymore, is prowling around on top of the barn. Where she tore the support beam out, smoke and a roaring fire are pouring into the night.
Spike: What are you doing?!
//That wasn't a cloud obscuring the stars earlier, it must have been...
Red Dragon: You shouldn't stand here all asky! You just might... burny burny burn!!
//With a great heave she shoves the barn towards us, and the burnt bottom starts to give way!

The Drakeling breathes in and focuses, casting Terrae Corpus! The Drakeling's scales become as hard as rock!
//She must be the arsonist! The person who started this fire!
//SO YOU FUCKS WILL BOND IN MORE THAN ONE WAY?
//The barn collapses, sending out clouds of hot ash and soot!
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Walk of the Third!
//I have to get in the way!

The Drakeling leaps towards Croesa!
The swirling cloud of ash lands on The Drakeling's left upper arm! The Drakeling's scales are unharmed!
The swirling cloud of ash lands on The Drakeling's head! The Drakeling's scales are unharmed! The Drakeling's eyes are unharmed!
//Gah, my eyes! Unharmed nothing; that stings!
The swirling cloud of ash lands on The Drakeling's upper body! The Drakeling's scales are unharmed!
The swirling cloud of ash lands on Croesa's right front hoof! The hoof is badly singed!
//With the rest of the Walk of the Third, I try to blink burning ash out of my watery eyes, and find a pocket of air to breathe. I fail at both.

The Drakeling's Walk of the Third ends.

Solon: Drakeling!
Olfrus: Croesa!
//ASSHOLE!
Spike: You're a worthless criminal!

// POT KETTLE ETC.
// I take a fighting stance in front of (what used to be) the bare patch of grass, eyes leaking. The red dragon is circling, low in the sky.
\If you move too far away from Croesa she'll die. But how are you supposed to fight this person without moving?

RD: Criminal? Oh, no no no, I'm not a bad person. He tells me so!
// If she's talking she's not fighting.

Spike: He? Who's that?

RD: Wouldn't you like to know!

Spike: Yes, that's why I asked! Are you an idiot? Or just a child?
// She lands, and curls up in the wreckage of the barn.

RD: That's mean. Meany!

The Red Dragon breathes fire!
The Drakeling stands in front of the flames!
The Drakeling's right lower arm is caught in the dragonfire! The right lower arm is singed! The Drakeling's left lower arm is caught in the dragonfire! The left lower arm is signed!
\Ow ow ow ow ow
// I swing my arms about to cool them down.

// Swings, the last time I was hurt at all by fire was when Twilight cast her spell at Na-Mira... this will be a tough fight if she's smart.
\Luckily, chances are...

Spike: Why are you doing this?!

RD: He said so!
// I look a little closer at this dragon, almost too large to stand bipedal. Patterned onto her back is a singular line of colored white scales... that form the perimeter of a red helm.

Spike: What else does he say?

RD: He says, I should make it all go 'burny burny burn'! Isn't that great, hee hee hee?!

Spike: No! You can't do that! It's awful!
// First the squad of griffons trying to track down a drakeling, then an arsonist dragon... whoever this person of the red helm is, he has dangerous and powerful followers.
// Disapproving, the red dragon rears up on her back legs, balancing. She aims her mouth at me.

RD: I get to do whatever I want to who I want if I help him! So you're going to go 'fucky fucky fuck'! And then your friend, 'crunchy crunchy crunch'!!

The Red Dragon breathes fire!
// I want to know if my Lake of Fire dismissal will put out her flames, but if I move an inch some of the fire will get past me!
The Drakeling's right lower arm is caught in the dragonfire! The right lower arm is singed! The Drakeling's left lower arm is caught in the dragonfire! The left lower arm is signed!
The Drakeling's tail is caught in the dragonfire! The Drakeling's tail is badly singed!
The Drakeling's right upper leg is caught in the dragonfire! The Drakeling's right upper leg is badly singed!
Croesa's mane is caught in the dragonfire! Croesa's mane has been singed!
// And it was such a nice puce... if there's such a thing.

RD: Hee hee, a little boy is my plaything now--
The Sepia Tone Dragon charges at The Red Dragon!
// Did that seriously say 'Sepia Tone'?
The Sepia Tone Dragon bites The Red Dragon in the right wing, tearing apart the scale and tearing
apart the muscle! The Sepia Tone Dragon latches on firmly!
The Sepia Tone Dragon rushes by The Red Dragon! The Red Dragon's right wing is torn off and remains in The Sepia Tone Dragon's grip!
//She lets out a bloodcurdling scream! Blood spurts out from her side!
Spike: 'Swings!
The Red Dragon breathes fire!
//She breathes fire into the air, lighting up the night!
Solon: No!
Olfrus: Hold on! Croesa, I'm coming!
//Over the dragon roars I shout:
Spike: No! Stay back! It's too dangerous!
//Who is this new dragon?! He's bigger than the arsonist!
The Red Dragon charges at The Sepia Tone Dragon!
The Sepia Tone Dragon flies above The Red Dragon! The Red Dragon rushes by!
The Sepia Tone Dragon counterattacks! The Sepia Tone Dragon bites The Red Dragon in the neck from behind, tearing apart the scale, tearing apart the muscle, shattering the upper spine's bone and tearing the upper spine's nervous tissue!
The Red Dragon collapses!
//With an adept movement, the Sepia Tone dragon circles around and lands near me, blowing up ash and soot.
Sepia Tone: Y--y-- ...someone called?
The Red Dragon was defeated!
Spike earned 10000 experience points!
Spike is now level 31!
[[SAVE LOCATION]]
//Crazy red bint...
//You know, that would have been pretty slick if he hadn't...
\...stuttered...
Spike: Are you the person I spoke with over the ankh?
//Why are you asking? You're going to ask him to help anyway.
Sepia Tone: Indeed, I am.
Spike: The pony behind me is badly burnt! Can you do anything for her?
//He stretches his long neck up and over me, inspecting Croesa and muttering while he does it.
ST: Hm, here I am t-trying to meet the famous Avatar of S-Speed, and I meet o-o-one of her H-Heroes. Interesting.
//I know he's working but I blurt out:
Spike: Why would anyone want to meet Rainbow Dash?
//He flicks out his tongue a few times, to taste the air around Croesa. It makes me a bit nervous.
ST: An o-old dragon's got to have s-s-ome hobbies. Didn't g-g-get to see the world for the last nine hundred y--y-- ...long time.
//No, that can't be right, he's far too small for a nine-hundred year old dragon.
Spike: But you're a lot smaller than Quine, and he's only seven hundred fifty.
//The sepia dragon closes his eyes and sniffs over Croesa. Her burnt hair lifts slightly each time.
ST: Quine was not k-kept as a drakeling by magic for the greater p-p-part of a millennium. Damn aristoc-cratic y--y-- ... snot-nosed bastards.
//Oh Celestia. Is that really what's in store for me if I get defeated? Nine hundred years of total slavery, having to carry that around with me until I die?
//OR UNTIL JEBED SAVES YOU. SHIT, IT'S ALMOST LIKE SHE ACTUALLY FUCKING
CARES FOR OTHER PEOPLE, MAYBE YOU SHOULD TRY IT OUT SOMETIME.

The Red Dragon suffocates.

//Wait, you're saying Jebed saved this--
ST: I can't help th-the pony myself. S-sorry.
//No! That can't be!
Spike: There has to be something you can do! Anything!
//SWINGS, STOP FUCKING YELLING
//He thinks for a moment, eying the stars (the ones not blocked by smoke).
ST: ...If she can make it to the C-City on the H-Hill Hospital, sh-she'll have a better chance than I
can give her.
Spike: She can't make it. Half her skin is burnt off, she can't be carried.
//After mulling the problem over for a second, the old dragon puts his head next to Croesa and
opens his jaw wide.
ST: In mah mouf.
//...What?
Spike: You've got to be--
//He snaps his teeth together and says:
Spike: The plan is to drool on her.
ST: I'll ch-check her into COTHH un-un-under the name Star. Because it's m-my name.
Spike: I don't know if carrying a burnt pony in your mouth while flying is the best idea...
//What if he gets hungry?
ST: Do y--y-- is there any other way?
//He opens his mouth again.
\\Well, if you look at it, he's right...
//Reluctantly, I roll Croesa onto his tongue. She fits snugly inside, head sticking back into his
throat. Hopefully he doesn't have to cough...
//With the greatest care, he lifts his head up, and then begins to flap his wings.
Spike: Best of luck.
ST: Hhhhh.
//Why did I think he'd be able to respond?
//Keeping his head gyroscopically stable, he lifts off into the sky, speeding off to Canterlot.
//From across the lessening wall of flame, I hear a voice cry out:
Olfrus: No! No, where are you going?! Croesa!
Spike: It's okay!
Solon: Drakeling, is that you? You lived?
//Of course I lived, who do you take me for? A pony?
Spike: He's taking her to City on the Hill Hospital! Under the name Star! Solon, can you get him
there? I need to go!
SO: ...Because you're wanted for two murders?
//What?!
Olfrus: What?! You bastard, if you hurt my--
SO: Olfrus, be quiet! We need to get going!
//How did Solon recognize me so fast? I only was around her for a few seconds, and the crime
happened today.
SO: Drakeling, you should be gone by the time the police arrive here. We'll leave you be --
protecting Croesa like that is worth at least benefit of the doubt. Now Olfrus, come on!
//I hear one quad of hooves galloping beyond the flames, and then a second, heavier quad to follow
it.
\\Guess this is one of those adventures where you don't find out the end. I turn and run, as fast as
far as I can. I hope it turns out alright.
//FUCKING UP THE AQUINATIC CONFLICT IT IS, LET'S DO THIS.

Chapter End Notes

With apologies to Tarn Adams.
T: So.
//It's been about five days since Canterlot. Considering how long it took me to get to the Aquinatics before, I've made really good time. Gliding over rivers and obstacles helped with that... as did only stopping to sleep once.
\How are you still standing again?
//Who knows; maybe I thrive on abuse.
Spike: So?
//Twilight is standing next to me. She started off happier than normal, then noticed where we are.
//The crest of a red, cracked hill conceals the greatest pony stronghold in all of the Aquinatics: the prison and mine known as Gorge Coltiers. I peek over it, watching guards patrol in the midday sun.
T: I did mention the warrant out for your arrest, didn't I?
Spike: It might have come up, yeah.
//A unicorn smartly turns around, scans the area, and continues on his walk. Hidden behind this hill far away, I'm not likely to be seen.
Spike: You said something about wanting me to be caught.
//She brushes her mane away with a hoof.
T: ...I was just angry.
//...But you're still not saying 'sorry'.
T: Of all the places to go when you're wanted by the police, why Gorge Coltiers? I don't get it.
Spike: Maybe, because I'm not a selfish prick and I think about others sometimes?
//Step, step, step, turn... I think I have the pattern down. Must be boring standing guard out here every day; he's developed a pattern. Is that to the beat of 'My Mother Was a Mule'?
T: What do you mean, Spike?
//Is it really that hard to see what I'm doing?
Spike: Twilight, answer me this: what's in the G.C.?
//Galena, imprisoned dragons, and Applejack. All guarded by the Equestrian Cavalry, as I see it.
T: Silver, lead, and people about as dense.
//Step, step, step... I want to time it so he turns around before I start.
Spike: Applejack's there. If I can talk to her, I'm sure we can resolve the Conflict.
//A bit of silence from Twilight. The wind's in my face, I might not run as fast as planned...
T: The Conflict is bigger than just one person, whether it be Applejack or you or me. I'm not sure what you're going to do.
Spike: I have a plan.
//Not just 'a' plan, either; A through F is filled up with contingencies. Applejack's the more difficult person to get through to; Quine should be much more reasonable.
//I FUCKING DOUBT THAT
Spike: Besides, the Conflict drags down you and Applejack, mentally and physically. What kind of person would I be if I didn't at least try to help my friends with their burdens?
//Step, step... here we go, get ready...
T: ...Spike, while that's sweet of--
//I take off running, displacement cape flapping in the wind behind me!
The Drakeling starts to run!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//Step, step, step... come on, don't look at the only cactus on the entire horizon--
The Drakeling leaps over the obstacle!
The Drakeling's displacement cape has been caught on the obstacle!
//My displacement cape snagged on it and I trip!
The Drakeling takes off the displacement cape.
The Drakeling falls over!
//A cloud of dust billows out from where I fell. The patrolling pony turns his head, sees it, and casts
a colored mark in the sky.
Spike: Ah. Great.
//Well, technically, this _was_ plan E.
//As the unicorn in armor rushes over, I calmly stand up. Removing the cape from the cactus takes
some work but not too much, and I sit down with it folded in my lap. Pegasi come in from different
parts of the sky and start swirling overhead.
//When he's fifty feet away from me, the unicorn stops and shouts:
Shouting Unicorn: Stay where you are!
//I shrug. Sitting down like this, what else is there to do?
//He looks at me for a short time. I see other unicorns start to converge on the area, from around
the lips of Gorge Coltiers.
SU: This place is off-limits to civilians. Leave immediately!
//I yell back:
Spike: Can you take a message to Lieutenant General Applejack for me?
//He pauses. Is it because he's perplexed, or wants to see if I'll say something more?
SU: No.
//...Huh.
//Continuing anyway, I yell:
Spike: Tell her Spike wants to talk with her. I'm a Hero.
SU: Fine, I will! But first, you need to leave! Now, civilian!
Flying Pegasus: Hold on a minute...
//A pegasus behind me swoops off as I turn my head. She must have had a pretty good look,
though...
FP: Comms, this is Filipe, come in, over.
Spike: I'll leave when I hear Applejack's response.
//If she won't meet with me... well, that's worst case scenario. But it's plan F. It's the plan where the
most people will be hurt, though...
//The unicorn shakes his head as wind drowns out the flying pegasus's words.
SU: If you don't move I'm cleared to use force to remove you!
//Slowly, deliberately, I stand up.
Spike: ...Fine. But do promise me you'll get the Lieutenant General my message?
//I'll sneak in some later time.
//Fifty feet ahead of me, the unicorn (now flanked by two more Cavalry) puts a hoof in his ear.
Spike: (...Is he trying to be silly?)
//Overhead, the wind dies down as a pegasus speaks:
Other Pegasus: ...double mareslaughter, ignigenic and extremely dangerous...
//I WOULDN'T SAY EXTREMELY, THERE AREN'T ANY FUCKING TREES OR
INNOCENTS AROUND THIS SHITHOLE.
SU: ...The Lieutenant General has agreed to see you. Come with me.
//...This is a complete trap. But with three (now five) unicorns ready and pegasi circling overhead,
maybe it's best if I start trouble some other time.
Spike: (I'll pass on that.) Where are we going?

//...I am very surprised this wasn't a trap.
//Applejack's tent. It's bare, there's only a wooden table and a lamp in here. And the chair I'm
sitting in. Does she sleep on the ground?
Why are you wondering about the sleeping habits of ponies when you're in the rock bottom of a stronghold of ponies who consider you irreconcilably hostile because of your scales? Pay attention!

THIS IS THE WORST FUCKING IDEA YOU HAVE EVER FUCKING HAD AND HAS EVER EXISTED IN THE HISTORY OF EXTRAORDINARILY SHITTY IDEAS

I haven't told anyone what I'm doing. You don't know the plan yet.

WRONG, I DO. I KNOW EVERY SINGLE GODDESS-DAMN THING EVERY ASSHOLE OF A DRAGON HAS EVER THOUGHT IN THE HISTORY OF EXISTENCE, AND OF ALL OF THEM THIS IS THE WORST PLAN I HAVE EVER ENCOUNTERED.

Why, then? Why is trying to find a peaceful solution to this horrible situation the wrong plan?

BECAUSE YOUR PLAN IS BASED ON THE IDEA THAT QUINE IS REASONABLE

The tent flap behind me opens a crack. Half a second later, before I can look, it closes again.

You had only praise for him before. What's changed?

HE WASN'T THREATENING THE EXISTENCE OF ALL OF DRAGONKIND WITH HIS BULLSHIT

Outside, ponies mutter something, but I can't hear it clearly.

That's exactly what I think! The Aquinatic Conflict lessens the welfare of both dragons and ponies and if both Quine and Applejack would--

AAAGH NO YOU'RE SUCH A FUCKING IDIOT, WHY ARE YOU GOOD AT PATTERN RECOGNITION WHEN IT COMES TO WHAT BITCHY PONY BOUNCED UP AND DOWN ON YOU BUT NOT THINGS THAT MATTER

The tent flap opens. Applejack, with a general's cape and a map of the Aquinatics in her mouth, steps in and moves to the other side of the table. She gives me a wide berth.

Excuse me?

FUCK IT NEVERMIND JUST DO THIS SHIT SO YOUR PLAN CAN BE STYMIED BY HOW MUCH OF A GREEDY PRICK QUINE IS

Applejack drops the map on the table, and a saddlebag next to her.

Howdy, Spike.

Hello.

AJ: ...I'm told you came here to turn yourself in. Is that true?

Spike: Not exactly. I came here because you need help.

AJ: Is that a 'you need help', or a 'y'all need help'?

What the hell is a 'y'all'?

Spike: Uh... I'm here to solve the Aquinatic Conflict. That helps everyone.

Looking at me for quite some time, she sits down.

AJ: ...You don't trust me.

Spike: ...You don't trust me.

AJ: 'Course I trust you, Spike.

Spike: Then why them?

AJ: Cautionary measures. Y'all hold two Elements of Harmony. I reckon that gets some people right scared.

I am convinced 'y'all' is not an actual word.

AJ: ...And then there's the double murder.

Spike: (Mareslaughter, technically.)

AJ: Y'all threw her out a building!

shrug.

Spike: Couldn't be helped.

Are they casting something outside? Get ready for plan F, it looks like this may not be
AJ: So you should start talkin' about how you bein' here is makin' progress on the war.
//Well, here goes nothing...
//I'LL SAY
Spike: I'm going to help you win the war. In exchange, I want total amnesty and a pegasus to fly me out of the region.
//Spell sounds stop around the tent as Applejack stands up. She looks over me a long time.
AJ: Mind repeatin' that?
Spike: I have information that will win you the war. And I'm selling it for amnesty, and a pegasus ride out of here.
//Applejack fiddles with something in the saddlebag next to her, then gives one glance to the map.
AJ: A Hero of the Land, sellin' out his own kind for... self-interest and transportation? Excuse me if I think it seems a little suspicious.
Spike: This isn't about me. The war needs to end.
AJ: And you're choosin' us to be the victor?
Spike: You're the only ones who can win, Applejack. Dragons can't defeat Princess Hazel.
//Except, you know, me. Considering I have to defeat her to get my memories back, I have to believe that's possible.
//NO, KILL. YOU HAVE TO KILL HER.
//I don't want to say that about someone who might be Twilight.
AJ: 'Throwin' in my lot with the winnin' side' doesn't sound like any Spike I know. Before or after the, y'know, accident.
//...She's really grilling me. I have to get her to believe I'm telling the truth!
Spike: I'm not! This isn't about me!
//I stand up, knocking the chair over behind me. Several horns glow in a circle around the tent.
AJ: Sudden movements may not be your wisest option.
Spike: This war is a leech on the well-being of pony and dragon kind alike. And the fastest way to end a war is to lose it. I'm willing to do that, if it means the little people -- who have no stake besides not getting their villages torched to the ground, or children sold into sex slavery -- don't suffer!
//Is it better to have an unjust war, or an unjust peace?
\You're not planning on either; who cares?
//Stone-faced, Applejack cocks her head to the side, and nods once.
AJ: ...Alright. I can respect that. But before I go and agree to anythin', I want to know what this information is you're givin' me.
//I hear a whisper on the air, nothing more than a dream.
But the words are meaningless.
T: (Halbrecht's Honesty Triangle, I haven't seen that since undergraduate...) Spike: I can tell you where Quine's Lair is.
//THIS WON'T WORK, I'M FUCKING TELLING YOU.
//No, it will. It has to.
//Applejack puts a hoof on her chin.
AJ: ...With Quine gone, no dragon will be powerful enough to pose a threat to the Cavalry. That... yeah, I'm willin' to agree to that. Under one condition.
Spike: And that would be?
//She points at me with the same hoof. I can see cracks and chips from heavy running.
AJ: Y'all take your flight out of the Aquinatics, and stay out. Until Quine's defeated, and the war's over. If not, I make no promises about amnesty or forgiveness.
Spike: ...I'm willing to accept that.
//Phrasing things in technically true ways is probably wise, given I don't know what 'Halbrecht's Honesty Triangle' is...
AJ: Alright, then, pony up.
//Applejack is simple, and honest. She will hold herself to her word.
//I spread out the map on the table. Let's see, here's Hole Five, so...
Spike: Here. This mountain. It has a permanent blizzard on top of it, but you'll find the entrance to
the lair under the snow on the south side.
//Applejack raises her head, eyes looking nowhere. It seems like she's trying to listen to something.
AJ: Commander!
Spike: (What, he doesn't have a name?)
//Within a tenth of a second, a broad stallion with a brown mane pokes his head into the tent
through the tent flap.
Commander Without Name: Yes, General?
//I suppose she's been upgraded to General now. Wait, is it a downgrade from Lieutenant General
to General? Or whatever she was?
//DOES IT FUCKING MATTER THIS ENTIRE SHITTY PLAN IS A DEAD END
AJ: Bring me your fastest flying pegasus, Commander. One who can take a rider.
Commander Without Name: Yes, ma'am.
//He leaves quickly. Applejack rolls up the map, and puts it in a saddlebag.
Spike: Okay, so, it's a deal. I'll leave as soon as the pegasus arrives.
//From what I know of Applejack, she'll go alone to Quine so she isn't dragged down by anyone
else, and also for stealth. If she does bring a few ponies with her... I'll figure something out.
\And what if she sends a scouting party?
//...No one else can defeat Quine, and it'd be foolish to risk Quine finding them and moving. And
she can't risk letting everyone down when victory could be so close. This is the only thing she can
do, with both heart and brain.
\Quine: The best Strategists hardly play the game as much as they do their opponents. A rare few,
who are the best, will create a situation where they win because the opponent made a correct
decision.
//She takes a straw hat out of the saddlebag, and roots around in it. She pulls out--
Spike: What the hell?!
//Applejack puts the Element of Honesty on the table.
AJ: You'll have to excuse me for makin' this quick, Spike. I do have a dragon to kill, huh-huh.
//IF KILLING HIM WOULD SOLVE ANYTHING WHY WOULDN'T -- FUCK MY FUCKING
FUCK HOW ARE YOUR FRIENDS SO DUMB?
//They're friends with me, for starters.
Spike: Why? I didn't do anything to deserve this.
AJ: I reckon you did. There are times when it's better for yourself or your kin to lie, or deceive
others, even though it's always best for everyone if you tell the truth. But y'all didn't lie. Not only
were you honest by tellin' me all this, but honest with yourself by even bein' here. 'Cause you
admitted this problem is too big for just you alone, even if you are a Hero. And, in my books, that's
a mighty hard way to be.
//Except the entirety of this conversation is based around deceit. Will the Element of Honesty reject
me? It'd be hard to explain that...
AJ: So, go on. Take it. You earned it.
Spike: Uh, okay...
//I reach out for the Element of Honesty, and...

Spike has acquired The Element of Honesty!
[3/5] Elements acquired!
Congratulations!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//I guess it didn't reject me... I put the Element of Honesty around my neck. It has dirt in the
grooves, that looks terrible...
AJ: Now you've got no excuses for bein' in the region anymore, either. One last thing--

Applejack pokes The Drakeling in the upper body with her right front hoof!
A power surges through The Drakeling, like fire through his blood!
[Blood of the Earth] was learned!

//Instinctively, I step back, and end up falling down.
AJ: Huh-huh, see you around, Spike. Thanks for doin' what's right.
//She leaves, galloping with the saddlebag and general's cape on. Seconds later, Commander ???
pokes his head in.
Commander Without Name: I have a bag of gold and a pegasus ready to take you wherever you
want to go, dragon. Provided it's not here.
Spike: I have a name, even if you don't. It's 'Spike', not dragon.
//He glares at me.
//...Strangely enough, I think Plan E worked. That spell must detect dishonesty, not general
deception. Applejack must be running off into the distance by now.
\Enter phase two.
//IN WHICH YOU REALIZED HOW FUCKED UP YOU JUST MADE THINGS
//...Shove it.

//Phase two has more wind up here than I thought.
Twilight: Do you realize how messed up you just made things?!
Spike: Yes! I know!
Steed Pegasus: Who are you talking to?!
//A steed pegasus is flying underneath me, high up in the air above the clouds. I have to cling to his
back just to avoid being torn off. We're flying out of the Aquinatics. That is, he's flying and I'm
holding on for dear life out of the Aquinatics.
T: The death of Quine won't end the conflict! Just postpone it for twenty years!
Spike: I'm agreeing with you, quit yelling at--
SP: Are all Heroes this odd? Or just you?
//He needs to stop interrupting me.
Spike: Listen! I'm having a conversation with the ghost of the dead old Princess! I'd appreciate it if
you didn't interrupt me!
SP: What could you possibly be talking about with a ghost?!
//Telling her to stick her head in a beehive comes to mind.
T: Dragons will be forced to surrender their lands. Ponies, in private and with military and
legislative action, will punish far too many dragons for perceived misdeeds and for revenge!
Resentment won't decrease between the two, but grow, with dragons as prisoners in their own
lands! Don't you see? When dragons are grown who don't remember the horror of war, some spark
will ignite conflict again!
//The pegasus must not be able to hear Twilight. I wish I was in the same boat.
Spike: I know, I get it! Quine's death won't end the conflict, just the war!
SP: What do you mean?!
Spike: Quine's not the underlying cause of conflict! It's land disagreements and distrust of Princess
Hazel!
SP: How would taking away one side's source of fighting power not end a conflict?
//A violent burst of air causes us to roll sideways. I cling on tight and pray to... pray, but the
pegasus rights himself.
Spike: Pay attention!
SP: I am!
Spike: Dragonkind's source of power isn't Quine, it's dragons themselves! Time gives us strength
as we grow bigger! But the pony source of strength is very specific people, like -- like the Avatars
and Hazel! When time causes them to fade and dragons to grow wings, this will happen all over again!

//There's a difference between a war and a conflict. War is one stage of a conflict, but ponies and dragons are so wrapped up in it that nopony would accept a fair resolution if they were to win. Even with people like Twilight who see that, it's hard to stop the cycle.

T: If you know all that then _why the heck did you tell Applejack where Quine's lair is_?!
SP: Then why are you doing this? If you don't believe in it?
Spike: I have a plan!
//I look up to the sun. It's a few minutes later than I wanted it to be, but chances are Applejack hasn't gone far. We're flying east... we need to be northwest, at the very least.
Spike: I need to talk to Applejack, again! When she's not bound by the chains of command, away from the camp!

T: She's not like that! Applejack's service is her life!
SP: Are you going to fight her?!
Spike: She's a person before she's a solider! It won't come to that!

//IT WILL TOTALLY FUCKING COME TO THAT
Spike: I know both Applejack and Quine! And I'm sure I can get them both to see reason!

T: What would that reason be?
Spike: Any compromise would be better than the current suffering of both sides! And only some sort of agreement could prevent all of this from returning later on, and hurting someone else!

//Twilight rolls her eyes.
T: You think it's going to be that easy? 'Hi, have you considered compromise'?
Spike: If it doesn't work, then, fine! We'll tear each other to shreds having tried!

//The longer this conversation goes on, the further east we go, the less time I have to catch Applejack and talk to her...
SP: And how do you plan on catching up with the General for this meeting with her?
Spike: Uh, yeah! So! Change of flight plans!
//The steed pegasus shakes his head, diving down through the clouds. Beads of water form on my scales and stream backwards.

SP: What am I going to say when they're charging me with _treason_?!

//I did the right thing'? I don't know if I can get that maternal tone Jebed has...
Spike: Tell them I threatened to kill you! Or that I cast a spell! Whatever!
T: (No one would believe something like that. Well, maybe a fanfiction reader...)

//For several seconds we continue flying in the same direction, at level altitude. I pound my fist weakly against the pegasus.
Spike: We need to turn back! Do you want your children to be fighting this war?!

//He banks sharply, to the right, almost throwing me off as he does a half-circle. I grab on with my hand again and try to look at the sun. West...
SP: If anyone asks, you threatened to kill me!
Spike: Understood!

T: (I'm sure his browser history is interesting.)
SP: I'm not seeing my foals go through what I've gone through...
Spike: A parent should seek a better life for their children! You're doing the right thing!
SP: Where to, Hero?!!

//I try to point, but the wind pushes my hand out.
Spike: Uh, northwest! I know a place near Quine's lair you can set me down!
SP: If I can get you there without being torn to shreds!
Spike: Quine told me all of the dragon patrol routes! I can guide you through!
SP: These wings have never let me down before, kid, and... and if the dead Princess Celestia trusts you, then so do I!

//WHY DO PEOPLE LIKE HER, SHE WAS A TOTAL BITCH
SP: Hang on!!
We speed northwest, as fast as can be.

Southwest of Quine's Lair. It's not snowing here, but it is cold. We're above the treeline; there's nothing green for miles.

Spike: I hope the pegasus makes it out alive. I hope he's not punished.

Twilight: If he dies, is it your fault?

I'm hanging behind a craggy boulder overlooking the only trail up to the top of the mountain. It's steep here, so I can see quite far away. Applejack has been climbing the mountain for the last ten minutes.

Does she ever slow down? Or are her legs made of trains?

Spike: 'Swings, where did that come from?

T: Just asking if you think you're responsible for whatever happens to him.

Spike: Uh, no. Even someone who's ordered to do something makes their own decisions. It's an insult to him if I take responsibility for his actions.

T: ...Sounds like a convenient philosophy.

Spike: I'm not saying I won't make amends or feel bad. But if he dies, wouldn't it be the fault of whoever killed him?

Applejack's rounding the corner to come up this way... I suppose I should prepare for battle, just in case.

The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Blood of the Earth!

The Drakeling's veins flow like thick mud!

Wh...

Spike: What? 'Flow like thick mud'?

T: Huh?

Spike: What the hell is that supposed to mean?

Twilight inspects me once over, lifting up my arm, and then sniffs my head a few times.

Spike: Again with the nose.

T: ...Generation, healing, volume displacement... increased platelet count?

Uh, meaning?

Twilight pokes me in the head with her horn!

Spike: Watch it!

T: Yes, that's it! Your blood will clot faster. I'm sure of it.

Is she serious? Terrae Corpus was a better move in every way! Instead of complete body armor, now cuts are slightly less threatening? Can I have the old move back?

Spike: So it's a watered-down version of the move it replaced?

T: Not exactly. You're at a higher stroke risk.

As if I weren't worried enough.

YOU FINALLY WANT TO JOIN ME IN THROTTLING YOUR OWN FUCKING BRAIN HOW SWEET

Spike: (She's coming nearer, I'm gonna step out now.)

T: (And do what?)

Twilight disappears with a burst of air. I put on the displacement cape and step into the path from behind the boulder.

Applejack's galloping turns to a trot, and she stops twenty feet in front of me. Orange war paint covers the apples on her flank, and she doesn't have a hat on.

Also, it looks like she wants to murder me, but why mention that?

Applejack: Name and reason for bein' here.

The Drakeling takes off the displacement cape.

I throw the cape to the side of the road.
Spike: Spike. Hero.
//I WOULD HAVE GONE WITH 'LACK OF UNDERSTANDING ABOUT THE WORLD'
AJ: Tell me why in the name of Celestia I shouldn't put a hoof in your ass for even bein' here?!
//Uh, consent?
\Like it's stopped anyone before.
Spike: Yeah, no amnesty and no forgiveness. I got it. But you need to listen to me.
AJ: I don't have _time_ for chit-chat, Spike. Even if you regret your decision, what's done is done.
//Regret? She's not giving me enough credit.
Spike: I'm here because I'm a Hero, not because--
AJ: Then pardon, Hero, but us real folk have a war to end.
//Applejack starts galloping again. She doesn't see me as credible...

The Drakeling breathes fire!
Applejack leaps backwards, away from the flames!
AJ: Whoa nelly!
//She digs her hooves into the dirt and glares at me.

//If I'm not a credible speaker, then at least let me be a credible threat.
AJ: Just what in tarnation do you think you're doin'?!
Spike: I already told you, I'm ending the war. Stop and listen to me.
AJ: Spike, friend of mine or not and Hero or not, if you try to stop me for even one more second
I'm gonna have to kill you. Do you understand?
/YYYYOU COULD TALK WHILE DOING FUCKING ANYTHING/YYYY
//Put my fists up and change to a fighting stance. It did come to this.
Spike: I understand.
/YYYYOU COULD TALK WHILE DOING FUCKING ANYTHING/YYYY
//I need to get her to listen!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//Applejack stares daggers at me.
AJ: ...You cocky son of a bitch.
Spike: I have the strength of someone who's doing the right thing. If you'd listen--

Applejack charges at The Drakeling!
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Lake of Fire! Bouts of flame coat the ground!
Applejack leaps over the flames!
Applejack kicks The Drakeling in the left upper arm with her right front hoof, bruising the scale, bruising the muscle and bruising the bone!
Applejack rushers by The Drakeling!
The Drakeling's bruises begin to heal!

//Gah! Without my Dashing Rogue Punch or Terrae Corpus, I can't last long in a standing fight with
someone on Applejack's level!
The Drakeling leaps backwards, into the flames!

Spike: Do you really think killing Quine will end the war? That people's hatred will just _go away_?!
//Applejack looks at me for only a second, then turns and gallops.
Spike: Hey!
//I need to get her to listen!
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Walk of the Third!
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and dismisses the fires!
//I rush towards Applejack as the Walk's silence continues.
The Drakeling breathes fire! The Drakeling breathes fire!
Spike: Rash violent action will solve nothing. I must stop you.
The Drakeling's Walk of the Third ends.

Applejack kicks The Drakeling in the right lower arm with her right rear hoof, bruising the muscle, shattering the bone, jamming the bone through the right wrist and shattering the right wrist's bone! An artery has been opened by the attack, and a sensory nerve has been severed!
The Drakeling strikes Applejack in the right rear leg with his Fist of Justice, but the attack glances away!
//My hand falls limply against her side!
Applejack leaps away from the dragonfire!
Applejack rolls away from the dragonfire!
//Justice... woo...

//Applejack stands up. She's downhill from me now, which means I'm at the advantage.
\Oh, hey, my wrist is broken. When did that happen?
AJ: Spike, get out of the way!
Spike: You want an easy way out. You want to feel like the victor. It's blinding you to how stupid this is!
AJ: That's it!

Applejack rears back, then stomps on the ground!
A jagged shelf of microcline breaks up from the ground!
//What the hell?!
The Drakeling dodges away from the flying shelf of microcline!
//I trip and fall on my right arm, hard.
Spike: Ow ow ow damn aaaaagghh...
//Strangely enough, it's not bleeding. Even if it hurts so much; the bone under the scales juts out like a frayed knot...
The Drakeling's bruises begin to heal!
AJ: I told you not to do this, Spike!
Spike: You know, I'm not going to ask how this is possible. If just for my sanity's sake.
The Drakeling stands up.
//Although that battle might have been decided a long time ago.
//WHEN YOU CHOSE TO BE A HERO?

Applejack rears back, then stomps on the ground!
A jagged shelf of microcline breaks up from the ground!
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Walk of the Third!
The Drakeling leaps towards Applejack!
The Drakeling breathes fire!
//Maybe if she can't fight, she'll listen to me.
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Touch of Grisly Terror!
The Drakeling charges at Applejack!
The Drakeling kicks Applejack in the left front hoof with his right foot, bruising the skin! It becomes limp and useless!

The Drakeling's Walk of the Third ends.
//Applejack flinches from the burst of motion!
AJ: Whoa!
Applejack is caught in the dragonfire! Applejack's war paint runs!
//Her front hooves hit the ground, and it shakes violently!
Spike: Waa--
AJ: My leg!--
The Drakeling slams into the ground! The Drakeling's left lower leg takes the full force of the impact, tearing apart the scale and bruising the muscle!
Applejack slams into the ground! Applejack's left front leg takes the full force of the impact, tearing apart the skin and bruising the muscle!
//Was that an earthquake? How does she have that type of power?!

Spike: Now would you--
Applejack bites The Drakeling in the tail, tearing apart the scale! Applejack throws The Drakeling by the tail with her mouth!
//Ow, I think I got whiplash! I'll sue!!
The Drakeling's head skids along the ground, tearing apart the scale!
The Drakeling slams into the ground! The Drakeling's tail takes the full force of the impact, bruising the muscle and bruising the bone!
Applejack stands up.
The Drakeling's bruises begin to heal!

//For a second, lying on my back, I can only catch my breath and watch Applejack. It's desperately clear she's just a better fighter.
//She shakes out her left front leg, tutting at it.
AJ: Right freaky, this is. I ain't a fan of mumbo-jumbo, and nothin' like it.
//Okay, what are my options... I don't have any ranged attack because she's able to dodge away from all my flames, and she can throw slabs of sharp rock at me. But if I close in, I can't last long blow for blow because I don't have any of my old moves... how do I stop her from hitting me?
The Drakeling stands up.
Spike: This won't bring peace. It's only revenge at this point.
AJ: 'Revenge'?! This is justice!
//LIKE THERE'S A DIFFERENCE.
AJ: I know that killin' Quine won't bring back nobody! But criminals have to be punished to prevent crime from spreading!
\\Well, Jebed said the same thing.
//The -- no! Hazel _killed a bunch of dragons_ to preserve her power over her lands and defend her people in them, while Quine killed a bunch of ponies _to preserve his power over his lands and defend his people in them_. The situations are totally different!
Spike: ...

Applejack rears back, then stomps on the ground!
A jagged shelf of microcline breaks up from the ground!
///I can't even get Walk of the Third in time!
The Drakeling leaps away from the flying shelf of microcline!
The flying shelf of microcline strikes The Drakeling in the right hand, bruising the muscle and shattering the bone!
A sensory nerve has been severed by the attack!
///I stop feeling from the elbow down, and man, am I glad for it.
\\You moron; that's not good! You're dying here!
Spike: Punishment for a crime is to increase its costs! Dragons are willing to take any costs because they think they're fighting for their families' lives! Punishment won't work, because this isn't about self-interest!

Applejack rears back, then stomps on the ground!
//To hell with this!
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Walk of the Third!
A jagged shelf of microcline breaks up from the ground!
//I don't plan on being anywhere near that one.
The Drakeling leaps towards Applejack!
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Lake of Fire! Bouts of flame coat The Drakeling!
//Surprisingly less distracting than I'd imagined.
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Touch of Grisly Terror!
//If this doesn't work, there's nothing left for me.
The Drakeling leaps towards Applejack!

Spike: It is a duty of all peoples to resist illegitimate authority.
The Drakeling's Walk of the Third ends.
//Applejack spins around!
The Drakeling strikes at Applejack with his Fist of Justice, but the attack is batted away by Applejack's tail! It becomes limp and useless!
Applejack's tail has been badly singed!
//How does she turn around that fast?!
Applejack kicks The Drakeling in the upper body with her right rear hoof, bruising the muscle, shattering the left true ribs, jamming the left true ribs through the heart and tearing apart the heart!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//Wha...
The Drakeling falls over.
//It hurts, it hurts it hurts so much...
//NO WAY. SHE ACTUALLY DID IT.
//...You know, very quickly, it stopped hurting so much...
//From behind a rock up the trail, I hear a faint scream.
T: Spike!
//But it fades away. The world around me is receding quickly, fading into grey dust. I'm on one knee and an elbow and it takes all of my concentration just to notice that fact. A dull void is growing in my chest, and in my head.
//I hear words from other worlds.
AJ: ...Damnit, Spike. I didn't want to do this! But you made me.
//THAT DOESN'T SOUND LIKE ABUSE.
//Even the instinct's bite is less sharp... it's cold, cold, and I'm losing my fire.
The flames are dismissed.
AJ: You did what you thought was right. 'Course, that doesn' mean much when you're wrong.
//My arm fails and I sprawl out on my side. There's not enough left to keep my lips closed. I taste dirt.
AJ: ...Then again, I hate to see such a well-meanin' warrior end up like this. 'Specially a friend of mine. And, I -- reckonin' there's a way to save y'all's life, I figure... with the immortality and whatnot...
//Oh, great, this again. A tiny surge of emotion does come back as a hoof rolls me over.
AJ: 'Swings, I hope this don't get too weird...
//The world consists of a bruised tail at the end of something I can't feel, and a pained orange face in front of me. My last foray into it takes a strange form:
Spike: That's who your family raised you to be? A rapist?
AJ: ...Then again, everyone's time comes sometime. Goodbye, Spike.
//With those last words, the orange face fades, as does the rest of the world.
//FUCKING WHAT DID I FUCKING TELL YOU. 
//Blood tears a path through my head, not pumped by anything I can tell. 
//YOU DO WHAT I FUCKING SAY WHEN I FUCKING SAY IT BECAUSE YOU ARE MY 
//FUCKING PAWN, UNDERSTAND SHITHEAD? YOU DO NOT FUCKING DIE UNTIL I 
//GIVE YOU PERMISSION TO DIE! 
//It's not blood, that's... spite. Pure, hateful spite. It still gives me one last breath. 
//CLICK. 

The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Blood of the Earth! 
Snaking through the dirt, streams of magma flow around The Drakeling's scales and into his veins! 
//Traveling up from my feet, feeling comes back in waves. Muscles convulse as they start 
responding again. It's hard to control them; a vibrant energy is inching through my chest, 
tumultuous but not impulsive. The energy isn't twitchy, it's powerful and domineering, like the 
confident advance of a glacier. This is the power of the gods. With sheer force of will and time I 
can only win. 
//I open my eyes. Crusted slabs of rock slam back in front of me. 

The Drakeling's wounds have healed! 
The Drakeling stands up. 
//I feel much heavier than normal. Standing up is a task. 

//Twilight and Applejack are having a quiet conversation up the path. Were. Now they're just 
staring at me. 
//Twilight disappears. 
Spike: What are you waiting for? 
//Dark grey clouds advance above us, signaling another snowstorm. Biting winds blow into my 
eyes, but for some reason I can't feel them. 
//Applejack, with no great hurry, asks: 
AJ: ...What do you mean? 
Spike: You said you'd kill me if I got in the way. And I'm not dead yet. 
//'Yet', he says. Real motivational speaker, you are. 
//A stream of lava rolls out from between the scales of my right wrist. It drips off my fingers onto 
the dirt, slowly melting a hole and giving out acrid smoke. 
AJ: ...Mind explaining what y'all did to yourself first? 
Spike: This fight's not over! 

The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Walk of the Third! 
The Drakeling's Walk of the Third ends. 
//What? Am I out already? 

//SO THERE ARE JUST A FEW THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THIS MOVE 
//Oh, great! 
//Applejack takes a few tentative steps towards me. 
AJ: Spike... I don't know how you're still kickin' after that, but I don't want to hurt you again. Time 
to cut your losses, hear what I'm sayin'? 
The Drakeling charges at Applejack! 
//I take a step forward. A, as in singular one. It requires a titan's effort. 
Spike: (What is this?) 
//I can hardly move! 
//YEAH SHITHEAD BEING MADE OF FUCKING MOLTEN ROCK DOES THAT 
//The dirt my foot was just on is packed down, with a small coin-sized pool of lava where my heel 
was. Applejack still stares at me. 
//EVERYTHING FROM THE SCALE IN BECOMES LAVA WITH THIS MOVE. EVEN YOUR
HEAD, WHICH WAS ALWAYS FUCKING ROCK IN THE FIRST PLACE.
The Drakeling breathes fire! But nothing comes out!
//AS DEMONSTRATED. SHITASS MORON.
Spike: Why can't I breathe fire?
//WHY WOULD YOU STILL HAVE THE GLANDS FOR THAT?
AJ: Was that what y'all were goin' for?
Spike: What, were you hoping for a mating call?
//EVERYTHING FOR YOU IS A FUCKING DESPERATE MATING CALL, INCLUDING THE
HEROISM
//Applejack takes a few more steps forward, eying me.
AJ: 'Y'know, I don't think blood is supposed to be so bright...
//With tremendous effort I take two more steps forward. Applejack is within spitting distance.

Applejack's mane has been singed!
AJ: Woah nelly!
//She covers her face with a hoof, then leaps away!
Applejack leaps away from The Drakeling!

AJ: Wings of Celestia, Spike! What's happenin' to you?!
Spike: I don't know. But if you can't see why killing Quine is the wrong thing to do, I have to
defeat you!
//BLOOD OF THE EARTH IS SHIT. A FUCKING TERRIBLE MOVE USED BY WORTHLESS
ASSHOLES WHO CAN'T FIGHT AND PUSSIES WHO DON'T WANT TO. I THOUGHT IT
WAS APPROPRIATE HERE.
//It seems my body really is filled with magma when I use this move... the heat radiating from me
made Applejack retreat.
AJ: Sorry if I disagree.
Applejack rears back, then stomps on the ground!
A jagged shelf of microcline breaks up from the ground!

//With my limbs like continents, I can't possibly hope to dodge this!
//TOTALLY OKAY
The flying shelf of microline strikes The Drakeling in the head, but the attack is absorbed by The
Drakeling's magma!
//I stumble backwards a few feet, momentum getting the better of me. Stay upright, Spike...
//Behind me, two spinning halves of a microcline shelf tumble down the mountain. Each has a
molten side.
Spike: ...Woah. Hahahaha! I am made of lava!
//Applejack's eyes grow a little wider.
//FUCKING INVULNERABLE, RIGHT? WRONG, DICKSNORTER. IT LOCKS UP YOUR
METABOLISM AS HARD AS YOU LOCK UP YOUR SEXUALITY. YOU CAN'T USE ANY
OTHER MOVE DURING OR AFTER BLOOD OF THE EARTH UNTIL YOU EAT SOME
SHIT -- BY WHICH I MEAN A PONY, NOT A PONY'S ASSCUNT -- AND IF IT GOES TOO
LONG YOU'LL STARVE YOURSELF TO DEATH.
//What?! That, and the slow movement?! Even if it did heal all my wounds, why would I ever use
this move?!
//I GUESS YOU HAVE ABOUT THREE MINUTES TO FIGURE THAT OUT
AJ: ...Guess you're right, Spike. I did say I'd kill you if you got in my way, and now I can't.
Congratulations.
//I didn't choose to use it! You did!!
//SO THE REASON SHOULD BE INTELLIGENT
Spike: Why is it that you only stop to talk to someone when it's impossible for you to beat them
into submission? This is exactly the mentality that will keep the conflict going even if you kill Quine!

//Shaking her head, Applejack smiles.
AJ: But it looks like now you're not in my way. I don't have to kill you.
//Damnit, she's uphill, I can't reach her, and she's faster than me even when I'm not like this...
AJ: See you 'round, Spike. Reckon I'll put in a good word at your trial, in spite of all this.
//She runs uphill, towards Quine's lair.
//Damn it all! 'Swings, this didn't work out; I've failed as a Hero, what can I do now to fix this... if I tell Quine Applejack's coming with the ankh, the Aquinatic Conflict just continues with the addition of me failing my plan; why oh why am I this slow, if only I could be faster with all this power...
\\...Hold on. Wait.
//Quine: It would behoove you to know Strategy. It is a game with which nobles teach their young and the Cavalry sharpens their officers. I will teach you many of the things you must know through this game.
//Spike: Why a game? Can't you just tell me?
//Quine: Yes. But then you would not learn.
\\...This is exactly like a Strategy game.
//Applejack has rounded a bend already, and is looping back on the path far above me. My only attack from here is harsh language.
Spike: Let's see if you have anything to return to!
//I turn and start trudging down the mountain. The first few steps are slow going, but gravity helps me along.
//Come on, come on...
//Echoing down the mountain, from a cliff above, a shout comes:
AJ: What do y'all mean by that?!
//Success.
//I don't stop walking as I yell back:
Spike: You heard me! If I can defeat you, all of Gorge Coltiers will be no threat! They won't see me coming!
//A smirk, to try to sell this. Destroying Gorge Coltiers wouldn't do anything but make the situation worse, but I can't let her catch on.
Spike: And hey, if you're not quick enough, I could probably hit Detrot before it's fully evacuated. Those stone walls and iron spears won't hold me.
//After just a moment, hooves scrape against rock and dirt, sliding downhill behind me. Applejack's voice comes from an even elevation.
AJ: ...You wouldn't do that.
Spike: I promise to do it if you kill Quine. A Hero is a dragon of his word, Avatar.
//I stop to turn my head. Not dramatically. It actually takes that much effort to look behind me.
AJ: ...You're not the old Spike. The old Spike would never do somethin' like this.
//I speak in as booming a voice I can muster:
Spike: This is how dragons feel, General. A monster of a foe stalks their lands, killing wherever she can find victims. In direct combat they are powerless to stop her. The only recourse is to run around, distract and mislead this titan. Keep her defensive, running about elsewhere, just so their families aren't slaughtered and drakelings and eggs sold off.
//A few moments pass as Applejack digests (and worryingly, so do I). Eventually, she narrows her eyes and says:
AJ: I wasn't here when they started burnin' and killin' first.
Spike: No. But like it or not, General, you are here now. One of the most significant players in the region is you, and you've failed to take into account yourself. This conflict continues because dragons are scared of you, so you can never be allowed breathing room.
//Applejack is totally silent. She looks like she's thinking.
Spike: If you are the one to extend the olive branch... we can at least focus on why the war started. Instead of why it's still going on.

//Thunder comes from the blizzard on top of Quine's lair. It echoes down the mountain, causing waves through the shrubbery further down. My scales stand on end for a second, and a bright orange glow shines out.

//The Avatar of Strength paws the ground with a hoof.

Spike: Listen to me. I have a plan.

//A great knawing digs into my stomach and up my spine. It takes strength from my legs, quickly.

AJ: ...I'll listen. But, just a warnin', I might disagree.

Applejack was defeated!
Spike earned 15000 experience points!
Spike is now level 32!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//Finally! Crazy brutish bint!

The Drakeling's Blood of the Earth ends.
//I collapse, falling to one knee as the orange glow fades. A zippiness finds place in my limbs, one I never knew was there until it was gone.

//Applejack coughs politely.

AJ: Y'all alright?

Spike: Hoo... yeah. Fine. Got anything to eat?

AJ: Uh...

//Applejack thinks for a minute, then walks over and empties her saddlebag. It's full of rations.

//I sift through them, disappointed.

Spike: What, no meat?

//She chuckles.

AJ: Here's hopin' this plan of yours is better thought out than that comment.

//I rip open a bag of nuts and shove a fistful in my mouth.

Spike: Okay, sho, Plan.

AJ: Does the Plan have to include you destroyin' my favorite snack?

Spike: Id doesh include me nod sdarving to deaff, sho yesh. Plan.

//I swallow.

Spike: You give me fifteen minutes' head start. I talk to Quine about ending the conflict -- not telling him you're coming, that is. If he agrees, everything's hunky dory and you come in and it ends. Happy ever after.

//Another handful. These taste like dried dirt and bugs, but I don't care.

AJ: And when he doesn't?

Spike: I fink--

//I give myself a second to eat.

Spike: I think he will, but I've prepared for that. He doesn't, I challenge him as a dragon for the rights to his land and clan. You come in, we both fight him. (And then obviously I can negotiate a peace myself.)

//A cracked hoof points at me.

AJ: So... you're sayin', either the Aquinatic Conflict is ended peacefully, or I get an ally to take down Quine with me?

//That's an accurate summary.

Spike: ...Yeah.

AJ: And why the hell didn't you just tell me that in the first place?!

//Woah! I choke down another handful to stave off her rage.

Spike: Hhe--
//I cough up a shell.
Spike: Here's the kicker: if you're offered peace, take it. No matter what. If it means... Quine getting away, all dragons getting away, ponies leaving the area, whatever. He's not told that, of course. But let go of vengeance and justice if it means we can stop innocent people from dying. //Applejack stares at me for a long time. She throws another bag of nuts at me, lays down, and watches the sky.
AJ: Fifteen minutes.

//Quine's Lair. The same cave.
Spike: Hello-oo? Anyone home?
//That would be just my luck, for Quine to be somewhere else right now.
T: (You think your plan will work?)
Spike: (It has to. I've prepared for everything.)
//I KEEP FUCKING TELLING YOU YOU HAVEN'T JUST ASK YOUR RIGHT-HOOF COCKHANDLER
Spike: (...Right?)
//Silence.
//I knock on the cave wall.
Spike: Quine! It's Spike! The Hero, remember?
//That would be just my luck, for Quine to be somewhere else right now.
T: (You think your plan will work?)
Spike: (It has to. I've prepared for everything.)
//I KEEP FUCKING TELLING YOU YOU HAVEN'T JUST ASK YOUR RIGHT-HOOF COCKHANDLER
Spike: (...Right?)
//Silence.
//I knock on the cave wall.
Spike: Quine! It's Spike! The Hero, remember?
//Something echoes up from below that sounds like a grunt. In a moment, a gigantic silver head emerges from the darkness.
//Quine looks, recognizes me, and then gives a sheepish smile.
Quine: Oh. Hello. Would you mind? I'm in the middle of something.
T: (Not literally, I hope.)
Spike: This is important.
QN: I'm sure, but you have to understand--
//For the love of--
Spike: Applejack's coming to kill you; we don't have time to argue!
T: (So you lied to Applejack about telling him?)
//Quine's neck snakes back and forth in idleness. He looks down for a moment, then back up at me.
Quine: Who is that, again?
Spike: The Avatar of Strength!
//For the briefest moment, Quine raises an eyebrow as large as my arm. He then chuckles and shrugs.
Quine: Don't worry about such things.
//...Huh?
//I stand in the drafty hallway, snow swirling about my feet. How can Quine be dismissive of an Avatar like that? Shouldn't he be flying away or towards her, depending on how strong he thinks he is? My hands are fists and I don't know why.
T: (Spike... this was never going to work.)
//It's like everyone knows something I don't know and no one will tell me.
Spike: ...I don't get it. How can you be so calm about this?
//Quine nods. The winds lessen outside, and the howl coming from behind me is quieter.
Quine: Jebed tells me you met again, near Forlegsandria. She must have given you her famous lecture. 'I would die for any'?
//What does that have to do with the Avatar of Strength?
Quine: You must have heard the list of dragons Hazel defeated. (Unless Jebed's shortened the speech, one can always hope.) You must know of her power.
//Powerful or not she has a lot to answer for... the world's poor maintenance has to be explained.
Quine: I declared war on her kingdom. Ask the obvious question.
Spike: If she's so powerful, why aren't you already dead...?
//A nod. Quine flicks out his tongue, tasting the air with a forked tongue.
Quine: Your friend should tell you why I will not die this day. Tell her to disguise her scent next time as well. Please excuse me.
//He begins to retreat downwards. I can almost feel Twilight blushing next to me.
Spike: Wait! That's not it!
//Frozen in place, the great silver head listens. He mutters a quick apology, and comes back up.
Spike: I didn't come to warn you. I'm here so you'll both see reason!
Quine: ...Is this the self-insert fanfiction wherein by sheer force of will you stop the conflict?
//QUINE IS WAY TOO MUCH A DICK TO LET ANYONE ELSE STEAL THE SHITSHOW
Spike: Dragons are _dying_. Not just because ponies are killing them! They're starving to death in holes in the ground, afraid that if they try to escape the Cavalry _will_ kill them!
Quine: Have I told you how dragon disputes are solved?
Spike: By the two people involved personally ripping each other to shreds, yeah. I got it.
Quine: Anyone who fights this war does so without my blessing or order. I refuse to take responsibility for the actions of another. And yet, I am blamed.
Spike: Blamed? I'm not blaming you. But you have the power to stop this.
//He turns his gaze next to me.
Quine: Mare, reveal yourself. I will not talk to she whose own face is not behind her words.
//The howling increases, echoing down the short tunnel. Snowflakes bounce off Twilight's invisible frame as they stream into the open, bottomless cavern. She fades into view.
Twilight: Can I help you with something?
Quine: Are you bound to this drakeling?
T: Only by friendship.
Spike: Applejack is willing to talk. The continuation of the Aquinatic Conflict means dragons -- dragons under _your_ protection -- get attacked and killed and enslaved wherever ponies can find them here! You can't be ignorant of the effects your actions have on others!
//Quine shakes his head.
Quine: No peace treaty will bring me what I am owed.
//I didn't want to tell him this, but...
Spike: Quine, I've convinced Applejack to take any terms that are demanded of her. You can have _anything_, at the 'cost' of people not dying. Take it! Forget the past! It's a lesson, not a duty!
//A snort of smoke washes over the both of us, pulling my cape back and melting snow.
Quine: War _is_ my terms. I have no reason to pursue anything else.
Spike: How can that be?!
//A toothy grin, and:
Quine: I am a dragon.
//Very well... I suppose, just like the dragon instinct said, it did come to this... if Princess Hazel isn't willing to defeat Quine to end the Aquinatic Conflict, it's up to me and Applejack!
//As I enter a fighting stance, Twilight puts a hoof on my arm.
T: Sorry, Spike.

Twilight Sparkle speaks a word of power, forming symbols in the air! A Force Wall appears before The Silver Wyrm!

//A shimmering plate splits the air between us and the cavern, allowing nothing through. Snowflakes bounce off it and fall to the rock floor, forming droplets.
Spike: ...What?
//YOU FUCKING IDIOT DID YOU FORGET TO ASK WHY HE WASN'T DEAD YET
//I did. I just... never got an answer.
//Quine keeps smiling, without any eyes in it, just all teeth.
T: ...He's not allowed to die. Not yet.
Spike: Why not?
Quine: Yes, as I told you many months ago. The Thirty will avenge me if I die.
The Thirty? Who are they?
T: You're not a justice-bringer. You're just an idiot with a suicide vest.
Quine: You speak of justice as if it were different from revenge. This Conflict--
Spike: Thirty, Conflict, Celestia, who cares?! Can't you idiots see what's going on here?!
//They stop and look at me. I swear, you have to yell before you get heard with these people...
T: What do you mean, Spike?
Spike: The Thirty -- or whatever -- are threatening Equestria. The Conflict's going to tear it apart along racial lines. Buffalo are committing terrorist attacks on innocent ponies, cultists are trying to bring about doomsday, kelpies and other monsters are wandering the countryside attacking as they please!
//WHERE ARE YOU GOING WITH THIS
//I continue, now that I have their attention:
Spike: It's obvious that Princess Hazel is a poor steward of her lands. If we're going to not only clean them up to protect her people, but ensure better stewardship in the future, we can't be tearing each other's throats out. A paramilitary organization, badged with red helms, tried to abduct me and is recruiting dragons to burn down farms near Canterlot.
//Twilight's eyes widen a little bit, but she says nothing.
Spike: I fought off a terrible monster trying to raise an army of the undead from the Valley. Whatever this red helm stuff is about, I have a feeling in my gut it's stronger than that. It's something we should take care of before arguing with each other.
//I can't fight all of these threats by my own, and Hazel can't be trusted or she would have seen them coming.
Spike: And _she_ had the R--
//STOP. YOU'RE NOT SAYING ANY MORE.
//A bolt of heat strikes through my head, and my mouth goes limp.
//THIS IS A DELICATE FUCKING SITUATION AND YOU NEED TO FUCKING SHUT THE FUCK UP BEFORE YOU GO TOO FAR.
//Silence passes.
T: Spike?
Quine: You were saying something, Hero?
Spike: I'm...
//NOT TALKING RIGHT NOW.
//I stay silent.
//...Twilight speaks first.
T: There are problems in Equestria. You're one of them, Quine. If you would only cooperate, we could do so much! Consider what others--
Quine: _I_ will consider what is rightfully _mine_, little pony, and exactly zero less or more.
Spike: You can't keep death and slavery--
//NO NO NO NO NO WHY DOES NO ONE FUCKING LISTEN TO ME
//I grab my head as a splitting rage washes over me. The dragon instinct is louder than I've ever heard him.
//Quine's eyes flicker.
T: You're going to talk about _right_? When you're threatening all of Equestria in order to continue your land war?
//YOU SHITTING IDIOTS QUINE IS A REAL DRAGON
//Involuntarily, hot words spill out of my mouth:
Spike: Quine is a real dragon--
//HE'S GREEDY AND NASTY AND A FUCKING BLOODY MENACE TO REASON AND RIGHTEOUSNESS
Spike: --he's a prick--
//AND MORE THAN THAT HE'S OLD.
Quine: I am old. I have survived your predecessor, young mage, and I will survive you.
EVER HEARD OF 'THE GOOD DIE YOUNG'? BRILLIANT FUCKING EXAMPLE HERE.
I lean against the cavern wall, head pounding with heat. The dragon instinct won't shut up.
Spike: Evil, he can't be...

HE WON'T CARE ABOUT ANY-FUCKING-THING YOU SAY, OR ANY-FUCKING-ONE
BUT HIMSELF
T: I don't know how you're holding back the Thirty from Equestria, but I swear, one day, I'm going
to find out. If there's one thing I'm good at it's research.
Quine: I am not evil.
YOU'RE OLD AND WRETCHED AND YOUR WAYS WILL BE OUR DEATH
Quine's mouth twitches.
Spike: Stop... you need to stop...
That was to both the dragon instinct and Quine. My knee has given way because I can't even
concentrate on standing, his words are burning through my head--
T: Oh, excuse me. The _Twenty-Nine_.
I'M THINKING OF TAKING BACK THEIR OFFER OF PROTECTION, QUINE.
With the greatest burst of sound, Quine shouts:
Quine: Liar!!
The sound puts me on the ground, and Twilight's mane flies back despite the Force Wall. Did she
even blink?
T: Yes. I was there. It was me.
TELL THAT BITCH TO SHUT HER FUCKING MURDERHOLE. SPIKE, DO IT. I'M
TALKING NOW.
Spike: Twilight, the dragon instinct is, uh...
MORE IMPORTANT THAN YOUR CUNTITCH OF A CONFLICT IS EVER GOING TO BE
Quine: Subject to me. This is _my_ lair, and this is _my_ land. You are not welcome here.
WRONG. YOU ARE MY FUCKING PUPPET AND YOU WILL DO AS I FUCKING SAY.
T: Geography-level stretches of land are under collective ownership. You are not sovereign! How
can you claim to rule in the interests of those you claim rule over?!
The knights serve their king, but the king serves his knights...
DO YOU GET IT? I OWN YOU. I OWN YOU. I OWN YOU. I OWN YOU.
Quine lifts his head up, looking nowhere, and snarls.
Quine: Silence. Begone.
T: I am not leaving.
It feels like blood is pushing out from behind my eyes, my brain is melting...
I OWN YOU. I OWN YOU. I OWN YOU. I OWN YOU.
Quine: I will not give you what you seek....
He squeezes his eyes shut and curls his neck down.
I OWN YOU. I OWN YOU. I OWN YOU. I OWN YOU.
Words spill out like acid, I have to let them out, drop them from my brain before they start to
burn:
Spike: I own you, I own you, I own you, I own you...
 Twilight, having noticed Quine's troubled silence, turns to me and mutters:
T: ...Spike? What are you saying?
I OWN YOU. I OWN YOU. I OWN YOU. I OWN YOU.
The last two chants slip loose from Quine's pursed lips, and then--
The Silver Wyrm breathes fire!
The dragonfire strikes the ceiling in the stone! The stone has melted away!
Orange, liquid stone falls from the ceiling where Quine torched it. He lets loose a terrible cry.
The Silver Wyrm slams the stone with his head, and the severed parts fly off in arcs!
The Silver Wyrm slams the stone with his head, and the severed parts fly off in arcs!
The Silver Wyrm slams the stone with his head, and the severed parts fly off in arcs!
//The words echo through the chamber in time. The source could be me, or Quine, or everything -- only Twilight is silent among the stone shouting back at us.
Spike: I own you, I own you, I own you, I...
//...It fades away, like it never was there. Dead, cold silence fills the chamber and my mind again.
//Clatterings of broken stone descend the cavern walls. I hear a small, feminine gasp, and then the beating of wings.
//Twilight visibly pretends not to have heard it. Quine shakes his head, spilling rubble everywhere.
//DO YOU FUCKING UNDERSTAND
Spike: Hhck!
//We both cringe as the voice returns again.
//Twilight stays silent, watching both of us. The dragon instinct speaks again, a little less harsh.
//YOU'RE AN OLD DRAGON. THAT MEANS YOU'LL UNDERSTAND WHAT I'M ABOUT TO TELL YOU. BUT THIS YOUNGLING, HE WON'T.
Spike: I... what do you mean?
Quine: Quiet. Not out loud.
T: Is it the dragon instinct? What is he saying?
//IF YOU TELL HER, OR ANYONE ELSE, ANYTHING I'M ABOUT TO SAY I WILL KILL YOU. THAT'S NOT AN EMPTY THREAT; I WILL TEAR OUT EVERY GODDESS-DAMNED NERVE I CAN GET MY HANDS ON AND YOU WILL BE FUCKING DEAD BEFORE YOU HIT THE FUCKING GROUND, HEAR ME? DEAD!!
Quine: Dead!
Spike: Dead!!
//The last word is so powerful it slips out of both of us. Twilight stands still, trying to puzzle it together.
//THE AQUINATIC CONFLICT ENDS. AS IN, RIGHT FUCKING NOW. BECAUSE I SAY SO.
//...The dragon instinct is an ass, but I sincerely doubt his level of assery is strong enough to solve geopolitical conflicts.
Quine: There is no threat to me--
//AND THAT'S WHERE YOU'RE WRONG, SHITSCALES. LISTEN UP YOUNG CELIDONIUS BECAUSE I'M ONLY SAYING THIS ONCE.
//Crumpled against the wall, I put a hand on my cheek. My entire head is burning like an iron.
//Quine hangs his head in front of the cave opening, looking vaguely towards Twilight.
//IF YOU DON'T END THIS CONFLICT CELESTIA WILL.
//I fall over onto the cavern floor, face down. My head is too hot to comprehend anything now.
//Quine looks up, blinks once, opens his eyes wide and says:
Quine: I'm willing to negotiate a ceasefire between my people and yours.
//...

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

>>LAY THERE
>>LAY THERE IN PAIN

//Twilight, undoubtedly perplexed but not showing it, responds:
T: Uh... great!
With apologies to Tarn Adams.
T: Okay, let's start. 'On the twenty-third day of the month of'... hey, it's Canterlot's heptcentennial today!
Spike: Uh... so?
//Applejack and I are sitting down in a short cave that connects the snowy mountaintop to Quine's underground lair. Twilight is here with us, levitating a quill and parchment. Quine is looking on from the greater cavern.
//Quine dealt with 'a potential distraction' in the darkness below shortly before Applejack arrived. I guess he doesn't like the idea of dealing with two Avatars.
T: Hah, sorry, got distracted. Ahem. 'We, the parties identified as the following':
Applejack: General Applejack, Equestrian Cavalry.
Quine: Quine.
T: 'Under the authority given to us by our peoples and in pursuit of the general interest of such peoples, as witnessed by':
Spike: Hero of the Land.
//SHOULD HAVE GONE WITH FUCKWIT
T: 'Agree to the following cessation of hostile action upon the other party and previously-mentioned peoples':...

//Treaty-making is long and boring and there's a lot of arguing back and forth. Applejack swore she would agree to any peace treaty, but she refuses to be cheated. From Quine comes a sense of outrage that this has to happen at all, and at many points in the negotiation he bites his tongue. Twilight spends more time trying to reason with each of them than actually writing things down. I think about what the dragon instinct said.
//Eventually, the final agreement is reached. Dragons in the Aquinatics will be absolved of all attacks committed as acts of war if they accept Equestrian citizenship and swear fealty to the crown. Otherwise, they may not enter Equestria, now or for the next fifty years (it was 'ever' until Quine reminded us how long dragons lived). Quine himself is banished from Equestria under pain of death, a fate he finds just fine.
//The Cavalry will be tasked with processing refugees in the area and helping them find a place in Equestria, here or anywhere. An explicit mention of cleaning up and restoring the Valley is made, but the rest is left vague, which no one is happy about (there wasn't enough room left on the paper). Princess Hazel will agree to halve her initial land claim (giving up 'unoccupied' regions), and that will be divided among dragons as dragons see fit.
//It's a forced compromise and everyone is left unhappy, but I know it's for the best.

T: Okay, it looks like everything is taken care of.
//She rolls up the parchment and ties it with a ribbon.
Quine: Good. Leave.
AJ: Uh, yeah, I'd like to make it back to Gorge Coltiers before it gets dark. If you don't mind.
T: Don't worry, I can teleport you there.
//But she couldn't teleport me here?
AJ: Mighty generous of you, Twilight.
T: I have to run this by Princess Hazel, anyway. It's technically meaningless without her signature. I'll just wrap you into the spell.
//How is she so confident Hazel will sign it? Unless what Na-Mira said really is true...
T: What about you, Spike?
Spike: Huh?
//Twilight points her hoof at me. There's a small smudge of ink on it.
T: Where do you want to go? A three-way's not hard. At least, any more than it is with two ponies.
AJ: (She means teleportin'.)
Spike: (I got that, thanks.)
//Where to be teleported to? That's a good question... Quine, Applejack and Twilight don't have to
deal with this war now. It's all over. There's no reason for me to be here.
//Who else needs my help? Jebed, Celel and Kezno would love to see me, and they could use help
assimilating the refugees from the Aquinatics, but I don't know if that's the place for a Hero.
Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie I've already defeated, and they're doing well enough; Rarity... if Rarity
wanted to speak with me then by now she would have. Rainbow Dash, I'm still waiting on the
information from Na-Mira, I don't want to charge in blindly...
//EVEN THOUGH THAT'S YOUR FUCKING STYLE IN EVERY SHITFEST OF AN
ADVENTURE YOU HAVE?
//Wait, what did I even ask Na-Mira to find out anyway? Damn, did I completely forget?
Spike: There's an ice cream parlor in a village on the outskirts of Canterlot. It's--
T: Called 'Ice Cream Parlor'. (I noticed that too.) Do you want to go there?
//Honestly, no. I want to go to Canterlot and see the heptcentennial celebrations so I can catch a
glimpse of Hazel and gauge her power a little bit. But somehow I think saying that would be the
wrong choice.
Spike: Yes.
//I shift my displacement cape, making sure it's on correctly. Twilight points her horn between
Applejack and me, and casts a spell.

Twilight Sparkle speaks words of power, forming symbols in the air!
The Drakeling is Teleported!
Applejack is Teleported!
Twilight Sparkle is Teleported!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//Canterlot. It's packed like sardines, and smells like it.
//Every building has been scrubbed down to a raw white along the parade's route, and as far as can
be seen away from it. There's not a cloud in the sky, which means the pegasi flying about
organizing the aerial show can't hide. But, like the busy police hustling about keeping barriers and
taking orders from a stallion with a shield on his flank, it's polite to overlook them.
//I take an inadvertent hoof to the face and hardly get an apology.
//The constant roar of the crowd betrays an excitement, giddy expectation for a spectacle. It also
betrays how many people there are. Most of them are ponies of assorted shapes, colors and sizes,
but I see a few griffons and bison and shapeless displacements and even dragons... no drakelings.
//A burst of trumpets from the south drives a cheer through the crowd, followed by quiet.
Filly: Ohmiskies it's starting!
Stallion: Remember when Celestia brought the sun up that one time? This is going to be better!
Old Pony: Celestia brought up the sun everyday, y'little hooligan. T ain't nothing special 'bout it.
Young Mare: Hush, Dad, let's just enjoy the parade.
Mare: What, the time with the chariot?
Old Pony: Humph.
Stallion: No, before her student; the dance she did!
Filly: I wonder if they're throwing out candy like they do at parades in Manehattan?
//Well, almost quiet.
//The first parade float, carried by magic, slides down the street. Glittered streamers in groups of
five and tasteful paper-mache musical notes line the sides. It carries the trumpeters and is directed
by two marchers twirling batons.
Filly: Why are they playing so loud?!
Mare: They have to play loud. Everyone needs to hear them coming!
Foal: Where are they going, Dad?
Other Stallion: All the way to City Hall! The Princess is going to give a speech there!
//She is? I should get to City Hall instead of being here...
Foal: Oh! Oh! Can we watch the speech, Dad? Can we?
OS: Well, I don't know if we'll make it in time...
//The foal looks crestfallen.
OS: But we'll try!
//The second parade float rounds the corner. On it, Pinkie Pie, though thankfully the float wasn't designed by her; it looks like a sleek train car. She and two others, dressed halfway between modesty and debauchery (hold on, is that Lilith and Lilin?), are tossing out candies into the crowd to make the children go wild. Two bipedal dragons are hanging off tall poles, every so often lighting a sparkler to wave in the air.
Old Pony: Bah! Dragons in Canterlot? By Celestia, how I wished such a thing were unthinkable.
Mare: Dad, come on. Dragons are people too.
Old Pony: Back in my day those savages would be scared to come within a hundred miles of this place!
Mare: Times have changed. Society's grown, for the better.
Old Pony: I don't want to be part of any society with those meat-eaters in it.
//...
//The third float is carried by ponies, unlike the others. Everypony around and on it is in uniform, marching in step with the music. The Canterlot flag waves high, attached to a pole at the center, with four smaller and lower flags on each corner. I see Cavalry, Neighvy, Magic Corps, Air Patrol--
//A huge boom breaks above us like thunder, and a rainbow circle expands in the sky!
Filly: Woah!
Stallion: Look at that!
Old Pony: A Sonic Rainboom, at least that's something...
//Three teams of pegasi fly in formation through the ring before it dissipates. They're all in blue uniforms; I can't tell who's leading them.
Mare: Here she comes!
Old Mare: By heavens, the Princess! Egbert, look your best!
Foal: Grandma, stop it!
Stallion: The Princess is coming! Get on my back so you can see!
//Her float should be rounding the corner...
//Three spheres of rolling silver mist carry the royal float, spinning mechanically beneath it though they have no substance. Suspended in the air and lacking sides is the float, a simple slab of wood painted green. Two guards in full armor stand to the rear corners, and a University mage at front to control the wheel...-like thing in front of him.
//Princess Hazel stands in the middle, waving a hoof with a gentle smile. Her fur is white, her mane is brown and cut male-short. She stares into the crowd with dark blue eyes, great feathery wings spread open.
//...
\Were you seriously expecting a snarling beast?
Filly: Wow, she's so big!
Stallion: It's because she's an alicorn! See her wings? And her horn? Only alicorns get that big!
//She is taller and longer than the ponies around her... but I need to get a closer look.
\Why?
//...Something doesn't seem right.
Filly: Am I going to be that big someday? Can I be an alicorn, too?
//The stallion chuckles.
Stallion: Maybe someday, sweetie. 

//I should get to the other side of the road to follow this to City Hall anyway.
\The Princess has killed hundreds of dragons, according to Jebed. Don't make one of them you.
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Walk of the Third!
//The crowd and music dulls around me, in a lower register and stretched out. The smell of pony doesn't permeate everything as strongly now. Even the sun beats with less intensity.

The Drakeling leaps over the barrier!
The Drakeling leaps towards the float!

//The float looks as it did, just slowed down. Balls of silver magic rolling beneath, mage furiously concentrating despite the crowd, guards rigid at attention... all looks the same but Hazel.
//In a slow pulse about as quick as my heartbeat, the wings coming out of Hazel's sides fade and become invisible, then reverse and return to full opacity. In between they are transparent, so I can see buildings behind her. The rest of her body stays as it should.

//WATCH OUT FOR THE FLOAT SHITHEAD
The Drakeling leaps away from the float!
The Drakeling leaps towards the barrier!
The Drakeling climbs over the barrier!

The Drakeling's Walk of the Third ends.

//Ponies flinch away from my sudden appearance--
Pony: Hey!
Older Pony: Don't shove!
Child: I can't see!
//But I look around and nothing else seems wrong. No one's reacting. Thank you, displacement cape!
//Hmm... Hazel's wings are magic, not real. I didn't smell any burning rubber, but someone as smart as her wouldn't overlook something as simple as that... and I'm sure the pulsing was to throw off some other method of detection. But why would she pretend to be an alicorn? Just to look more like Celestia, look more legitimate in the eyes of the people?
//Puzzled, I turn and wade through the crowd, aiming for City Hall. Maybe some answers can be found there.

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//Answers or not, this place is worse than the streets!
//I am literally hanging off a lamppost to have a place for myself here. Beneath me, a sea of pony flesh spreads out as far as the eye can see. Police are working their way through the crowd, 'asking' pegasi on the ground to make some room by taking to the air.
//The mayor of Canterlot, a plump stallion past middle age with a bright orange tail and no mane, waits near a gilded podium in the sun. Banners that say 'Happy Heptcentennial!' and 'Seven Centuries for the City on the Hill!' hang around City Hall. He dabs his head with a kerchief, still waiting.
//The sun falls a few notches in the sky while I wait, motionless. Dozing off, I'm only awakened by a bad pun Pinkie Pie makes about a hazelnut-flavored dessert. It booms across half of Canterlot, amplified by magic and architecture.
Pinkie Pie: And now! The Princess you've all been waiting for! It's my pleasure to introduce the Princess of Equestria, Hazel!!
//A mutter next to me:
Veiled Pony: The Princess of a Thousand Enemies isn't who I've been waiting for.
Is drowned out by the maddened stomp of hooves on cobblestone and dirt. Hazel, without her smile, takes the podium from Pinkie Pie.
Princess Hazel: Thank you, Mister Mayor, Miss Pie, thank you Canterlot. It's good to see you so well.
//Her voice is... uh...
//FUCKING ANNOYING AS SHIT I KNOW RIGHT
//...I'm gonna go with 'monotonous'. Here's hoping it's a short speech.
PH: I want to greet everyone who is here from outside of Canterlot to celebrate the city today--
//An obvious cheer.
PH: --and I want to thank all of you from our wonderful city who came out for the occasion.
//An obvious, much stronger cheer.
PH: I... should have quite a bit to say today on the city's history--
//She holds up a stack of papers. The crowd nervously laughs.
//...You know, it's not that bad once you get used to it. Her speaking is very simple.
PH: But I'm afraid our time has to be cut short.
//She levitates the papers back into the podium as mutterings start amongst the crowd.
Leaning forward, she spreads her wings and finishes:
PH: As of today, I am in negotiations that may lead to a deal to bring peace to the Aquinatic Region. These talks are time-sensitive and require my urgent attention. Please accept my apologies.
Mayor Ruttiger will be reading a speech in my place.
//...Huh.
//Princess Hazel turns and walks off the stage, nodding to the Mayor. Confusion sets in throughout the crowd.
//She said she was in negotiations and talks. But the deal itself is done; all she has to do is sign it. Were there other complications? Is there renegotiation?
//The Mayor approaches the stage and announces:
Mayor Ruttiger: Er... erm... that is, thank you, Princess Hazel, I, erm...
//Or is this what a savvy statesmare does? Only when a deal is assured offer its possibility to the public, so those who hope are rewarded and those who doubt are proven wrong. And she even took credit, when she did nothing at all to stop the war...
//The Mayor starts his speech as Princess Hazel exits into City Hall.
//What kind of person has fake wings to look more like a Princess 'should', tells half-lies to the public to look busy, and takes credit for something she had no hoof in, all to make herself look better?
\..Do you think Twilight would have time for a two-hour speech?
Veiled Pony: I suppose prey will run and hide in their holes.
//Seriously, who is that?
//I want to follow Princess Hazel to find out more. But there's a sea of flesh between me and City Hall, not to mention all the guards surrounding her.
//Quine: When primary assets are threatened, or vulnerable, they will be protected at dire cost. This cost oftentimes includes secondary assets, even those without whom the primary would fall. To put it simply, threaten a life to take a wallet.
//...With all the guards around Princess Hazel, Pinkie Pie looks left alone... I see her trot off in a minute, and do my best to follow.

//What I find out from following Pinkie Pie: Pinkie Pie gets lost. A lot.
//It takes us an hour before we're in a region of Canterlot she recognizes at all. At times she actually closes her eyes and wanders. Throng of ponies separate us at all times, but I make sure not to lose her (even if she's lost herself). Halfway through, she puts a dark grey cloak, and starts looking over her shoulder.
//It takes another hour for her to find the destination, a hole-in-the-wall bar six blocks from the train station. In decreasing modesty: the number of people here, the coat of grime on every surface,
and ponies' clothing. Surly barmaids and a gruff, rail-thin bartender with a milky eye serve what could almost be called drinks.

Pinkie Pie: One Canterlot Special, please!
//Like that.
//Drink balanced on her nose, Pinkie Pie meanders over to a table with three others in grey cloaks, hoods up.
Rainbow Dash: Finally.
Applejack: Howdy, Pinkie Pie, I'm glad you made it.
Pinkie Pie: Me too! I got lucky this time, it only took me two hours to get here!
Fluttershy: Wouldn't it be wise to invest in a map?
PP: Hehehaha, where's the fun in that?
//She sets her drink down. Fluttershy quietly sips at apple juice as boisterous bar conversations continue outside the table. Applejack doesn't have a glass in front of her. Rainbow Dash has six empty ones.
//I take a seat along the bar, next to the door. Here's hoping I won't need this quick exit.
PP: What are we waiting for?
RBD: Who do you think?
AJ: Well, Pinkie's usually the late one, but she's here. Maybe Hazel got bogged down somewhere. Reckon there's a lot of traffic today.
//I knew this would work; they are seeing Princess Hazel...
FS: There is a lot of traffic. I even had to fly.
AJ: No Rarity today, Fluttershy?
//Fluttershy shakes her head. Stray pink hairs are caught on the grey cloak.
FS: She mentioned a family situation. I... tend not to probe about her sister.
AJ: You, probe?
//Fluttershy looks sheepish.
FS: Not as much as I normally do...
//Laughter. Rainbow Dash bops Fluttershy on the shoulder.
RBD: Face it, 'Shy. You'd be the worst alien invader ever.
PP: Hehehaha, you couldn't be nosy if you were a booger!
//Are they going to ask the same thing about Twilight, or...
Milky-Eyed Barkeep: Hey, buddy. You gonna order a drink?
//That breaks me out of eavesdropping. After a moment I put a few coins on the bar and order:
Spike: Two rounds of I was never here.
MEB: Coming right up.
//I can't tell if that was sarcastic.
A taller pony, in a dark green cloak that conceals her face, is putting a manicured hoof on the Avatars' table. The new pony is humming something with her tongue out.
Pony Humming: Avatars.
//They all nod their heads, and the hooded pony takes her hoof off the table.
//Seriously, that's just unsanitary.
AJ: An honor as always, ma'am.
//Only one pony I know of is able to command the immediate respect of the Avatars like that...
PH: I see you're here now, Pinkie.
//Pinkie fishes the umbrella out of her still full glass and starts twirling it between her teeth.
PP: Thorry! Canterlot wath packed today!
PH: Haha, crowded as shit, right?
//Is that really Princess Hazel? The tone of her voice is significantly different...
RBD: So why an emergency meeting today? I'm supposed to be schmoozing with the Air Patrol right now.
PH: You'll get back to schmoozing quickly enough. I called you here because the Aquinatic Conflict has been ended.
A short pause from the whole table, then:

PP: Oh.

PH: Kind of important to know, right?

//Nervously, Fluttershy raises a hoof. Applejack stares at her.

AJ: ...Really?

FS: Uh-huhu-uuhm, e-excuse me, Princess... I -- well -- if I could -- oh dear.

//She shrinks away from everyone looking at her.

PH: Please, Fluttershy, you're far more important than I'm ever going to be. Why are you nervous?

FS: I... may have forgotten your nickname, and I h-had a question...

RBD: It's 'Garnet'. Same as it's always been. I'm half drunk and I can remember that.

PH: That's because I told you the story of how much a crazy bitch she was. 'Swings, the day she couldn't make bail again was a sad day for the whole college, I'm telling you.

AJ: Is this the pony who cut off all her hair over some monkey?

//When Fluttershy speaks in her assertive tone, ponies stop and take notice. Attention is even pulled from neighboring tables, for a short moment.

FS: Excuse me, but I did have a question.

//The table hushes, and everyone looks at her. She lowers her head a little and squeaks:

FS: Sorry... Didn't you say the Conflict was over in front of City Hall?

PH: Oh, well, I might have implied there was a chance of progressing towards...

//Hazel waves her hoof vaguely.

PH: But it's totally over, if what I understand from General Applejack is correct. She deserves all the credit.

//Immediately, Applejack mutters:

AJ: Much less than all of the credit, ma'am, you're flatterin' me...

//...Which is totally true. Applejack and Quine were both obstacles to peace that I overcame! I did most of the hard work!

//UH, FUCKING HELLO

PH: Equestria isn't at war anymore. Which means, put on your best face for the public, all of you. Any fights, take them under the radar or not at all if possible.

RBD: You'reeeeeeerp! I mean -- 'scuse me -- you're mostly talking to me anyway, why not just say it?

PP: Dashie, no one else gets in fights above Forlegsandria with dragons in broad daylight.

RBD: Hey, I won!

//Like that makes it any better!

RBD: War's over, so Applejack's not running about like molasses with its head cut off.

PH: No, but she still has work to do. You're not the only one I'm talking about. The more we make it look like an abrupt end to dragon and pony species tension, the more it will actually be just that.

AJ: But there's always the chance Quine won't honor his deal. And then there's worryin' about dragons gone rogue, lashin' out on their own. And then__, I have to get all the critters who want out rounded up, documented and elsewheres without lettin' any abuse slip out from the Cavalry.

PP: Wow, would they really do that?

FS: ...Nineteen months straight of awful sights can make anypony change.

//Dash snorts.

RBD: 'Change'? Half the Cavalry joined it to kill anyway.

//Applejack kicks the floorboard with her hoof, cracking it. The sound shoots through the room, drawing attention from everyone. A mare gasps.

AJ: I'd like you to reconsider those words.

RBD: Come on. Take any Cavalry officer and give 'em a choice: left, orphanage starting to burn, ahead, mission objective. They wouldn't do the right thing unless they were ordered to do it! Even the so-called 'best' are mindless thugs.

//The Avatar of Strength shifts her footing, standing a little closer to Rainbow Dash. She becomes very, very quiet.
AJ: (Dash, you're my friend. If y'all decide to blame your little comments on the alcohol, I trust we'll continue to be good friends.)
RBD: (Oh yeah, what's the story of you and this peace treaty again? I can tell _that_ wasn't your idea; where are the whip marks? You're no different.)

//This entire time, Princess Hazel has been tapping her forehead with a hoof and humming. She lets out, so quickly it barely sounds like her:
PH: Like I didn't have other shit to do today girls.

//The Avatars of Speed and Strength stay next to each other, brushing fur, staring each other down. A few conversations start up again throughout the bar. It's a little more crowded than when we first came in.

//Rainbow Dash tickles Applejack's belly with her wingtip and gives a wink. Applejack steps away.

Milky-Eyed Barkeep: Two rounds of Iva's Neder Beer for you sah!

//Two frothing mugs of something yellow-green slam down in front of me. I jolt out of eavesdropping and almost knock one over.

Spike: Are those... little prickers?

//Orange spiny balls are floating in the drink.

MEB: S'posed to be suns, sah. Catch 'em on the lip and make a promise, they say!

Spike: I'll uh... pass.

//If I ever need to do something monumentally stupid I know what the appropriate drink is for the moment.

//CAN WE GET A BARREL TO FUCKING GO?

PH: Yes, actually, you two would be perfect to cooperate on rehabilitation for long-term veterans. I'll find you a budget for it somewhere. Mental health is still health, right?

//Pinkie Pie and Fluttershy beam. Well, Fluttershy about as much as she can, but I can tell she's happy.

PH: Damnit, I need to get back to the point. Right. So, remember our little murderer?

//Our little... what?

//...Oh. They must be talking about me. I lean a little closer in.

PP: Oooh, what happened now? I love these stories!

//These stories?!! What?? How often does this happen?!

\Why in the world wouldn't the people who were your best friends try to keep up with your life?

//But that means... Hazel has been telling... so, she has to know...

PH: The peace treaty lists him. Not by name, but by Applejack's lack of Element I'm guessing he had something to do with it. And there isn't anyone else who calls herself a Hero.

//...If Hazel really is Twilight in disguise like Na-Mira said, she's going far enough to even pretend to her own Avatars... which is exactly what Twilight would do if she planned out an in-depth disguise! Gah, that doesn't mean anything!

RBD: I got a student named Jeff, but he's not gonna get very far.

PH: Will the full debriefing I'm going to get correct me about the Hero's involvement, General?

//After a moment, Applejack shakes her head.

AJ: You have it right, ma'am.

PH: Good. So.

//She sips at water, and then decides that was a terrible decision.

PH: ('Swings, I've seen sewers cleaner than this. Why do we come here?)

AJ: (Because it's terrible. So nopony actually drinks.)

//Pinkie Pie noses her full drink sans umbrella and mutters:

PP: (I keep on forgetting that.)

PH: On the advice of a close friend, paperwork's been filed to declare Spike a legal Hero of the Land.

FS: What?!

RBD: No way!
PP: Already?
AJ: Wow.
//A legal Hero of the Land? How's that different? I thought it was a title I got when all the Elements were mine.
//I take a sip of beer and decide the spikeball was the most pleasant part of the mouthful.
RBD: You can't just \_give\_ him amnesty!
AJ: I was willin' to do it for endin' the war. And, however he did it, he ended the war. But full on Hero of the Land?
FS: Ha-- Garnet, Spike isn't close enough to others yet to be a Hero. He's less than a year old, he hasn't shared the pain of others. Isn't this a little fast?
//I watched Kezno and Celel suffer beyond measure. I saw the hate in Galsid's, Pitaya's eyes because of me. I know what effects I can have on others, for better or worse.
PP: Yeah! And he wanted to be a great big old champion of dragon/pony equality, but no one knows him yet! Whoever heard of an unknown famous person?
//That's... totally true. But fame must follow power, the other way around is useless...
AJ: Ma'am, if I may speak out of line, this is a mistake. Y'all don't have any idea what the varmint believes in. 'Cause -- 'cause he doesn't really know what he believes in! Spike is a mess!
//I believe in myself. I believe in my friends. And we can fix this mess of a world.
\That Hazel created.
RBD: ...He's not strong enough yet to be a Hero. Some mare's just going to make him into a toy. Like an ornament, 'the boy who was Hero but now goes in my--'
//That won't happen.
PH: No more Hearth's Eve at your house.
//Laughs from around the table, breaking some of the tension.
PH: All this means is his arrest warrant, if they connect him to Herr Yyz, needs to be signed by me. Unless it's somehow for treason.
AJ: Are you sure he won't abuse the privilege?
PH: How? He doesn't know about it, right?
\HELL YEAH NOW WE CAN FUCKING KILL EVERYONE LET'S FUCKING DO THIS\n//I sincerely wish \_he\_ didn't know about it...
PH: He still needs to gather the last two Elements of Harmony -- fairly -- to meet with me. And if what I'm told is correct, I think it'll be a just wonderful meeting. We could definitely use some more help as it is, and the little drakeling is so motivated.
//...
PH: It also means killing him is punishable as treason. Which, may I remind you, is the only crime you lot can be convicted of. So, be careful.
RBD: You're still just talking to me.
//Of all the things Rainbow Dash is planning on doing to me, I think killing me is the last on her mind...
FS: I don't know if I'm powerful enough to put a line between self-defense and lethality.
PP: Hehehaha *snort* hehehaha! Fluttershy, she didn't say anything about tempting him! Who says we have to use our bodies to \_fight\_?
//A surly waitress comes over, and Hazel disappears into the bathroom. For a few minutes they have to balance ordering another round with getting kicked out. It's a tough choice.
//I very carefully make sure my displacement cape is on (and has been the whole time), then put bodies between us as I walk out of the bar. This is not the time to take risky chances.
//So, it's time to see Rainbow Dash.
//The overnight train to Fillydelphia runs at full speed over the desert; we should be there before the heptcentennial celebrations are finished. All the magic makes the City on the Hill glow like a lamp in the night, jutting out from the cloudless sky.
//It's dry here. The paint on the train is pitted after hundreds of journeys across this wasteland, and
every turn of the train's wheels comes with the faint crunch of sand. No wonder there's no towns between Canterlot and Fillydelphia. Was it like this when Celestia helped ponies control the weather?

//Although, even if the lack of rainfall means no permanent settlements are possible, it's an excellent hideout for predators of all kinds...
//I sip water to keep myself cool. Also because it helps me avoid talking to the person next to me, an awkward puberty-mangled colt. Staring out the window into hurtling darkness hasn't helped me sleep any.

Awkward Colt: *Snort*, I, uh, wonder if we'll ever get to sleep.

Spike: Mmm.

//I'm going to see Rainbow Dash to have a heart-to-- well, a heart-to-something, and try to convince her to leave me alone. None of my other friends are in danger or need help now, and I want to do this so I don't have to worry about it in the future.

AC: Oh man, this reminds me of the time at my Aunt Blossom's house. But now goats won't kick over the cheese.

//He laughs to himself. I try to sigh, but I don't have the heart.

AC: Have you ever seen a goat angry? Not like, angry, but totally furious?

Spike: ...No.

AC: Let me tell you, man, it is a sight to see.

//He stretches, nearly knocking over my water, and yawns.

AC: Oh, sorry. Last time I was this sleepy but couldn't go to sleep was when my grandpa told me about demons. You know, back when I was a kid.

Spike: Really.

//I take a sip of water and ask the steward for more. Somehow, I wish griffons would attack this train too...

AC: 'Cause, like, those things are terrifying! When they chase you, they're able to run for longer than anything else in the world. It doesn't matter if you're faster, 'cause you can't sweat like they do. You'll run and run but never get away until you die of heatstroke from running so much. As soon as one decides it wants to eat you, it's just a matter of time. Crazy, man.

//Is this seriously what prey animals do? Make up predators, because the world didn't already have enough?

Spike: Unless you can fly or cast magic or breathe fire.

//It's a particularly bad metaphor for inevitable doom when being born a certain way prevents it. I take another glass of water from the stewardess (was she always a mare, or am I seeing things?).

//The colt ogles the stewardess as she walks away.

AC: Hey, dude, can I ask you a question? Does being a drakeling get you, like, all the girls?

//He didn't give me enough time to say 'no' to the first part.

Spike: You have no idea.

AC: Wow, that must be totally sweet.

//Sweet is not an adjective I would use to describe my life so far.

Spike: Uh, hey, I have to go, would you mind?

//He looks at me funny.

AC: Stop's not for another three hours.

Spike: I have to piss. Let me by.

AC: Oh! Sorry, I didn't -- yeah.

//He stands with a freakish gait and I move past him. Maybe I'll lose consciousness in the bathroom.

//Honestly this bathroom is much cleaner than I expected.

//It's been too long of a day and I haven't had a decent sleep in about a week and I'm not looking forward to meeting Dash even though I have to because responsible people talk out their issues instead of pretending they don't exist. I slump against the wall and groan before doing anything.
Movement versus staying near that annoying colt is the worst dilemma in the world.
Spike: Why, can't I just outsource the whole life thing, pretend my issues don't exist, and go eat grossulars, on a beach...
//Though seriously this bathroom is way too clean. And the toilet paper's stacked six high, that must be a mistake.
//In a minute I finish and start washing my hands. Damn, the soap even smells like vanilla. With a little spice in it. Layers of dirt slide off my hands, and specks of ??? float out from underneath the scalefeathers. It's actually kind of embarrassing how dirty I am. Have I ever had a bath?
Voice From Below: It is you, hck!
Spike: Wah!
//I fall backwards on my tail and bang my arm on the toilet. They both smart.
//A cracked door in the supply closet below the sink reveals cleaning chemicals, extra toilet paper and piping crammed in with a snake-headed pony.
Spike: Na-Mira?!
Na-Mira: Yeah, hihiii!
Spike: What are you doing there?!
Na-Mira: I'm a stowaway!
//She... that's... I...
Spike: Were you watching me pee?
Na-Mira: What?! No! That would be weird!
//So is hiding in the bathroom supply closet and talking to me from it!
Spike: Why are you stowing away?
N-M: Ever since I left my job at the Snaffler, I don't have any money. But you're on this train! And Information Gatherer Na-Mira knows no boundaries when it comes to her Hero!
//Yeah, I got that.
Spike: ...You cleaned the bathroom really well so the staff wouldn't have to get out the supplies. Clever.
N-M: Hihiii, it was nothing compared to what you've done.
Spike: Thanks. So what did you find out? Scratch that, first, what did I ask you to find out again?
N-M: You asked me to look into the Thirty! I know all about them now!
//I stand up in amazement.
Spike: You do?!
//The Thirty were mentioned by Twilight and Quine, and sound powerful enough to threaten both them and Equestria itself, but I have no clue who or what they even are...
N-M: Yeah! But I can't tell you here!
Spike: Why not?
//She snorts. Or, whatever.
N-M: It'd look really suspicious if two people talked in the bathroom for a real long time and only one came out!
//...Right. Plus, someone else may need to use it.
Spike: Okay. I was planning on getting a room at an inn once we arrive in Fillydelphia. Will you be able to find me there?
N-M: Oh, Spike, yes! The stars will guide my hck! I mean, heart!
//...Sure.
Spike: Great.
//I turn to leave. Wait...
Spike: Uh, Na-Mira... how are you going to get out?
//Quite a long pause from the supply closet under the sink. A slight shuffling of limbs is followed meekly by:
N-M: I'll... figure something out.
Spike: ...Okay.
//I return to my seat, completely unable to sleep now. What really are the Thirty?
//Fillydelphia. The inn.
//Na-Mira holds a pointer with her fangs. It's not working.
Na-Mira: So!
//She tries to point at a map on the bed with the pointer. A gust of wind from the open window
pushes it further away, so she turns her head more and leans.
N-M: This is where the tundra begins, and it's the old border of the Crystal Empire's lands about a
thousand years ago.
Spike: Uh, is the pointer necessary?
//Her eyes are like a cat's. I notice that as she stares at me.
Spike: You're drooling on the map.
//Wiping the corner of her mouth, she continues.
N-M: Ponies were fragmented into city states at the time, ruled by various dragons, or small
armies with the implicit backing of Celestia. One day, the capital of the Crystal Empire
disappeared. (The city's name was also 'The Crystal Empire', which I never understood...)
Spike: Like, how? It got razed?
//Na-Mira shrugs. This knocks the pointer out of her mouth to the floor.
N-M: ... Spike: So what happened next?
//Please leave the bloody thing where it is.
N-M: The Crystal Empire was the most powerful country of the time, the only one to escape
dragon rule without Celestia's help. After the capital suddenly disappeared, dragons started
dividing up the remains.
\By which she means burning, pillaging, destroying, terrorizing...
//More warm night wind drags the map over the foot of the bed. I close the window while Na-Mira
gathers it up.
N-M: And no one could help them.
Spike: To get there you'd have to either sail the Boxing Sea or go all the way through the pass of
Stalliongrad.
//Stalliongrad'? Who names these places?
N-M: Yes! The fall -- or, I should say, first fall -- caused the city states to panic. Secretly or openly,
those who were ruled by dragons petitioned Celestia to offer her protection to all ponies. And an
overwhelming majority of free city states agreed to unite under her.
//Free' meaning ruled by a pony, not a dragon, I suppose. But tyranny can come from any sort of
power. Unless Celestia herself ruled something then...
//Na-Mira draws a perimeter around most of the map, excluding the Boxing Sea and all the tundra.
N-M: Celestia, at some urging, declared herself monarch over pretty much all of what's known as
Equestria today, and had other dragon leaders ousted or subjugated.
Spike: I'm guessing they didn't appreciate that?
N-M: Hihiihi!
//She crosses her front legs when she giggles. I never noticed that.
N-M: Hck, they couldn't do anything about it. But a very powerful, very old group of dragons
heard what was happening. They thought only dragons had the power or right to claim that kind of
land. Attacking Equestria was their way of punishing her arrogance.
//I get it now!
Spike: Oh, and they were the Thirty!
N-M: _They_ were the _Forty-Six_. After Celestia killed sixteen of them, they fled to beyond the
Boxing Sea.
//These dragons threaten Twilight, all of Equestria, and Quine bows to them somehow, but...
Celestia can just up and beat a third of them? They don't call her a goddess for nothing.
N-M: Princess Celestia, as she had just been crowned, said all ponies were under her protection,
and the Thirty would best stay in the frozen wastes if they didn't wish to be hunted down. Even the
Crystal Empire, should it somehow rise again, was part of her charge...
Spike: And when Celestia disappeared, they attacked it. They're still fighting a battle decided a millennium ago.

//I THINK THE SCOREBOARD READS DRAGONS ONE, CRYSTAL EMPIRE FUCKING ZERO

N-M: The Thirty were known for their age and terribleness, even in their day. After a thousand years of being forced into a frozen hell, with ice covering their scales, they learned to breathe it -- a reverse flame, so cold it slowed magic down or stopped it completely.

Spike: ...

//That kind of power is beyond even imagination... I see how a dragon like that, even one, couldn't be stopped by anything in the world. But thirty of them?

Spike: Old in their day, spent a thousand years in the snow... they must be the hugest, meanest, nastiest, strongest dragons in existence...

//OH WELL FUCKING SHIT IF WE'RE SAYING OBVIOUS THINGS THEN YOU'RE SO AFRAID OF RAINBOW DASH KILLING YOU OR FUCKING YOUR ASS YOU'VE SERIOUSLY CONSIDERED RUNNING AWAY INSTEAD OF CONFRONTING HER

//No! That's not--...

//FUCKING COWARD, YOU'RE WORSE THAN HER

Na-Mira: Hck, legend says their hearts are made of black ice...

//THEY ARE _ANCIENT_. WITH THE FULL POWER AND WICKEDNESS THAT SUCH A WORD DESERVES.

//After a thousand years, they destroyed an entire city and killed everyone in it just to get back at Celestia... just over a matter of pride and having lost once.

Spike: They slaughtered thousands... over a petty grudge.

//I don't know how, I don't know when, I don't know who, but in my own heart, I know... someone has to make these dragons pay.

//THE THIRTY DON'T PAY, THEY LOOT AND PILLAGE SHIT. PAYING IS FOR CHUCKLEFUCKS LIKE YOU.

//As a Hero, I have to bring to justice to those who deserve it... and if I'm going to do that, I can't fail now.

\Hold on. If they caused the Fall of the Crystal Empire, then both Twilight and Rainbow Dash should know about them...

Spike: Rainbow Dash...

//Na-Mira cocks her head and looks at me, wiggling her fangs once.

N-M: What?

Spike: Rainbow Dash might have seen the Thirty. I want to talk to her.

//She might be able to give me information about how they fight.

N-M: Hck, what's stopping you?

//...Also not wanting to talk to her?

Spike: Rainbow Dash is a particularly strong Avatar. She's attacked me three times, almost killed or enslaved or done both to me every time, and her temper is just erratic.

\Also openly discussing with the other Avatars your murder or assault. Even if Princess Hazel forbid one, that just makes the other option that much more likely.

//I can't go up against Rainbow Dash without some sort of trump card. I need... something.

Spike: One day I want to bring justice to those terrors, because -- because you can see the pain so easily, in Twilight's eyes and Dash's eyes, they inflicted on just the living. I'm sure there are also thousands of bloody spots on the snow beyond just the Crystal Empire they're responsible for, and... I can't overlook that.

//YOU'LL KEEP CHASING PONYCUNT UNTIL I TELL YOUR ASS NOT TO.

//No. I refuse to let something like that go--

//THERE ARE BIGGER FUCKING PROBLEMS YOU SHITHEAD SO LET THE SMALL SHIT SLIDE AND DO YOUR GODDESS-DAMNED JOB HERO

Spike: But that means tomorrow I have to see Rainbow Dash. And she's not keen on me, if I can
understate, so that brings up issues of its own.
//I put my hands on the bed and sigh. My path just got a whole lot less clear. I was going to meet
with Rainbow Dash to try to make my own life easier -- whether she would listen to reason before
being bested in a fight is a separate issue. Now, there are thirty dangerous dragons that could and
would cause total destruction in Equestria, have done so in the past, and neither Twilight nor Hazel
are capable of handling...
\\Hold up. Twilight said it was the Twenty-Nine now. Does that mean... it's possible for mere
mortals to defeat them? Facing them isn't certain death?
//Na-Mira raises my chin with a cold hoof, and looks into my eyes.
N-M: ...What are you going to do, Sir Spike?
//What am I going to do... that's a good question. What _am_ I going to do?
\\...
//...
Spike: ...I have a plan.

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//They say it rains on this mountain all the time, and it never lets up even though we're in the
middle of the desert. Then again, they say Twilight Sparkle is dead. So I guess 'they' aren't that
reliable of a source.
//Rainy Mountain. About ten thirty in the morning, not that you could tell by looking up. Short
grasses and bushes are common here, with the occasional sapling, nothing too dense. Must be
something in the soil. Horthwick Water, the river running through Fillydelphia, creates great
floodplains that feed the greater Gloucester region and much of Equestria, but it doesn't seem to be
sourced here. What does seem to be sourced here is something more interesting, if the abandoned
rock climbing equipment is any note.
//It's strange here, like the opposite of Everfree Forest. That thickly grown, wearily old forest stood
silent, still, nonthreatening. Because it wanted nothing more than you out of its known world. This
is a new growth, a bold green step into arid wasteland, and the weather assaults it to prove it is
special. It howls and glares, just so you'll take notice.
//I am aware of the metaphor.
//Mud clings to my legs and tail as I walk. It encourages me. Anywhere the world doesn't want me
to go is where I should be. That, and the complete lack of predators in the area signifies an ultra-
apex. So does the carved building reading 'dojo' at the top of the mountain.
//...Sorry, but would you really have listened if I mentioned that first?
Spike: You know, the rain's not all that bad.
Twilight: I'm glad you think so, it's ruining my hair!
//I pause in climbing over a boulder and look.
Spike: ...It's not that bad...
//I hear the 'drowning victim' look is in these days.
T: This is all because Rainbow Dash couldn't have the courtesy to live in a normal location.
Spike: Like Mountainville or Gorge Coltiers, you mean?
//Twilight huffs and tries to zap mud off her tail.
T: This is the worst.
Spike: Compared to what's waiting for me at the top? I'd take this any day.
//I take advantage of some climber's hooks to skip a long detour and climb up a cliff face. Twilight
teleports to the top and offers me a hoof.
Spike: Thanks.
T: Don't mention it.
//She tries to flip her mane out of the way, and it ends up entirely in her face.
\\Feathers are much better in this situation than fur and hair.
Spike: This rain is really getting the better of you, huh?
T: Ppbbth. Are you going to stand there and laugh at me, or help?
//I'm not much better off than she is. New history books from Fillydelphia are in the waterproof bag. I'm just suffering through it (pony raincoats don't fit me). (And galoshes are stupid.)
Spike: What do you want me to do, breathe fire?
T: Spike -- my hooves are covered in mud. You have claws. Could you get it out of my eyes?
//Well, my claws aren't that much better, but...
Spike: Couldn't you do something with magic? Like, I don't know, turn into a duck?
//I draw my finger along Twilight's forehead. Her hair is stuck to her cheek now, but she can see.
T: ...Are you the spellcaster of the two of us?
Spike: Hey, just saying. You don't have to be here for me.
//Uh... somehow that came out wrong. Not the words, but the way they were said.
//I move past Twilight and further up the mountain, up a shallow slope. To my right, not far off, I hear the rain hitting a pool of water. The dojo is still far up the mountain, but closer.
T: ...Okay. I understand. Best of luck, Spike.
Spike: Oh, Twilight, I--
//In a sphere of shock, droplets are pushed away from Twilight's disappearance. They fall quickly.
//...Only the sound of the rain on mud and water.

Spike: Twilight?
//I say, a little bit louder, to be met with silence.
Spike: I didn't mean it like that...
//From the direction of the water comes a voice from somepony listening in.
Listening In: My, did you hear that, sister? It sounds like an intruder in our bath.
Bathing Other: Why, Linnaea, I think you're right. An uninvited witness to our skinny dipping.
//Don't ponies always skinny dip?
//Two pegasi spiral up into the air. One is the color of ink with pearl eyes, the other has pearl fur with ink-black irises. Water trails their wingtips and bursts with every wingbeat. They spot me immediately.
Linnaea: How rude. Wouldn't you say so, Boreali?
Boreali: Beyond rude. I think you owe us an apology.
//I scratch my neck. Didn't mean to sneak up on them, but there's no harm in saying sorry...
Spike: Uh, sorry for interrupting. I didn't mean to, honest mistake. Excuse me.
//The twins (they must be twins) fly in a wide arc, exchanging glances and hovering above my path up the mountain.
LI: A proper apology is more than just words, if you ask me.
BO: You should find a way to make amends as well.
Spike: So I'm going away as quickly as I can. How is that not the best amends I can make?
//The twins hover in the air, staying aloft easily in the rain.
BO: I don't know.
LI: A little flimsy.
//Do they always do this?
BO: Our Sensei has us escort lost travelers off of the mountain.
LI: It's our task to steer the misguided, with no expectation of reward.
BO: But I think you need to be more sorry if we're going to help you.
LI: It's not unrea--
//I interrupt the other twin with:
Spike: Why do you do the double-talking thing?
//They both stay silent, sharing a look.
LI: What?
BO: I don't understand.
Spike: Never mind. I have to see Rainbow Dash, and it's most thematically appropriate for her to be at the top, so I have a lot of walking to do. Bye.
Also, the 'above everyone else' metaphor suits her perfectly.
I trudge further up the trail, under the color-inverted twins.
LI: ...My, my, did you hear that, Boreali?
BO: Linnaea, I heard what you heard, dear sister.
Both nod sagely.
LI: A competitor to us should never be allowed such arrogance.
BO: He must be humbled before meeting with the honored sensei.
Spike: (What the heck is a sensei? A squid dish?)
T: (...Spike, why would ponies honor a cooked squid?)
Spike: (Is... is that a setup for a joke? It sounds like the setup for a joke. I don't know, what?)
Behind me, the twins say in unison:
LI: Your punishment will be fun for the both of us...
BO: I'm going to pin you down and pee in your face!
The pegasi attack!
[[SAVE LOCATION]]

Chapter End Notes

With apologies to Tarn Adams.
Spike: That-- that's a terrible joke!
//The inky pegasus, Linnaea, flares her wings and pulls up short.
Linnaea: Uh, what?
//Ignoring her, Boreali rises into the sky. I lose sight of her because of the rain and dark grey skies.
Spike: How does squid lead into sexual assault? I'm not seeing it. It doesn't make sense!
//Pearled eyes stare at me from a dozen feet away.
LI: ..._What_ are you talking about?
//I keep an eye on the talking twin as I search the skies.
Spike: I mean, even with my history of sexual assault I'd remember if there were any tentacles involved. (Or peeing on my face. How would that work underwater, anyway?)
//Fumbling desperately for understanding, the pony in the air grabs on to:
LI: 'History'? How often does this happen to you?
Spike: 'Far, far too'.
//Is there preparation to do before this battle gets underway? ...Touch of Grisly Terror, Fist of Justice, Blood of the Earth, Walk of the Third, Lake of Fire... I don't think I have automatic moves anymore.
\\Keep sharp, the talker is a distraction.
LI: I'm disappointed to hear that; I thought we had a niche with the whole 'sexual punishment' deal. It's our calling card.
Spike: I thought it was squid.
LI: I'm still not getting that.
Spike: Neither am I!
//Are these the types of ponies Rainbow Dash mentors? Are they this way because of it?
LI: I just want to have you know, this isn't because you're a drakeling. That would be prejudiced. We do this to all the other students as well.
\\'My crimes are indiscriminate, so they're more palatable'?
//Watch out--
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Walk of the Third!
The Elder Twin attacks The Drakeling with her Peregrine Dive!
The Drakeling leaps away from the falling Elder Twin!

//I barely made it out, even in the Third's power!
The Elder Twin strikes the ground with her Peregrine Dive!
//Boreali dives, hooves outstretched, into the mud where I stood. Immediately after finding purchase with her front hooves, she kicks down with her back legs... right where my knees would be, if she had grabbed me.
The Elder Twin's right rear hoof takes the full force of the impact, bruising the bone! The Elder Twin's left rear hoof takes the full force of the impact, bruising the bone!
\\But look at the way her body contorts, that strong a move has to hurt her legs if she doesn't hit with it!
\\...Where did the younger twin go?

The Drakeling's Walk of the Third ends.
The Younger Twin charges at The Drakeling!
The Drakeling breathes fire! The Younger Twin is caught in the dragonfire! But the Younger Twin is unharmed!
//The rain and a cone of wind around her outstretched hoof shield her from the flames!
The Younger Twin strikes The Drakeling in the lower body with her Wind Drill, bruising the scale,
bruising the muscle and bruising the left kidney!
The Younger Twin collides with The Drakeling! The Drakeling is knocked over and tumbles
backward!
//I faceplant into the mud as Linnaea flies past and over me.

The Drakeling stands up.
BO: Don't make us do this the hard way!
LI: It's a lot simpler if you just give in!

//The pearl pegasus leaps into the air. Her kickoff wasn't that strong...
Spike: You're attacking me for no reason! Why should I surrender?!
//I see Linnaea arcing up into the air. Is their strategy switching off?
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Walk of the Third!
//Hmmm... now that I cast it a little earlier, I can already see Boreali preparing for a follow-up
attack... let's subvert that.
The Younger Twin attacks The Drakeling with her Peregrine Dive!
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Lake of Fire!
//A wall of flame rises that Boreali will run right into if she charges me.
The Drakeling leaps away from the falling Younger Twin!
The Younger Twin strikes the ground with her Peregrine Dive!
Spike: It doesn't matter why you're doing this, because there is no excuse for such a vile deed.
The Drakeling strikes the mud with his Fist of Justice, and the splattered part flies up in a wave!
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Touch of Grisly Terror!
The Drakeling's Walk of the Third ends.
LI: Where did he--
The wave of mud strikes the Younger Twin in the left wing, covering it! The wave of mud strikes the Younger Twin in the right wing, covering it! The wave of mud strikes the Younger Twin in the upper body, covering it!
BO: Yaaaaaagh!--
//Boreali pulls sharply up to avoid the flames, losing control for a second in the rain. I dive at
Linnaea!
The Drakeling charges at the Younger Twin!
The Drakeling punches the Younger Twin in the throat with his right hand, bruising the skin and
bruising the muscle! The Younger Twin's neck becomes limp and useless!
The Drakeling collides with the Younger Twin! The Drakeling bounces backwards!

//Her head hangs low. She's unable to hold it up because of the Touch, and she can't fly because of
the mud on her wings. This twin, Linnaea, isn't a threat right now.
The Drakeling grabs the Younger Twin by the left rear leg with his right hand!
LI: Aaa! Stop!
The Younger Twin kicks The Drakeling in the upper body with her right rear hoof, shattering the
scale, bruising the muscle and bruising the left true ribs!
//Oof!
The Drakeling takes down the Younger Twin by the left rear leg with his right hand!
//She falls into the mud!

//The rain and heavy breathing stop me from hearing where the older twin is. But she's the
brightest thing in the sky, it won't be hard to find her.
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and dismisses the fires!
LI: You can't do this to me! J-- Just because we were threatening to do it to you!
Spike: Does Rainbow Dash teach this to all her students, or are you two just really messed up?
Because this isn't normal. (I mean, neither is being a Hero, but still...) //Boreali is preparing to charge with a Wind Drill some ways behind me. I glance again to confirm. //Half able to move her jaw, Linnaea sputters:
LI: It -- it's what happens to female Heroes when they lose. That's how the world is! Spike: This isn't the world and you're not a Hero. You're a student, in a dojo. //I need to defeat these two, it's evident I'm stronger than them... and since their time spent here at the dojo has taught them wrongly, it doesn't look like either of them are truly evil. All of which means I can't hurt them badly. Spike: You will be disciplined correctly, not how you think discipline should be. //Here's hoping the Justfist doesn't do too much damage!

The Elder Twin charges at The Drakeling! The Drakeling strikes at the Elder Twin with his Fist of Justice! But the Elder Twin dodges away! The Elder Twin grabs The Drakeling by the right lower leg with her right front hoof! The Elder Twin grabs The Drakeling by the right lower leg with her left front hoof! The Elder Twin drags the Drakeling into the air!

Spike: Wyaaugh, let go of me! The Drakeling struggles in vain against the grip of the Elder Twin's right front hoof on The Drakeling's right lower leg! //WOW YOU ARE FUCKING PATHETIC //Boreali laughs as she carries me by the leg up into the sky. Rain gets in my eyes and goes up my nose. BO: Look down. What are you going to do now? //I turn my head. 'Swings, we're almost two hundred feet up already... I wouldn't survive the fall. Spike: Uh... //What do I do? //ARE YOU FUCKING KIDDING ME BO: Surrender. You're a strong fighter, but our training is the world's best. Spike: If it comes from Rainbow Dash, I sincerely doubt that. //What are my options... Touch of Grisly Terror, she drops me, Fist of Justice, the same... BO: Linnaea, dear sister, I'm glad you're not hurt. //Linnaea, wingfeathers mostly clear of mud, speeds up to us. We're still rising in the air. LI: Of course not, Boreali. Your catch is not very strong. //Of all the indignities, hanging here and being insulted... BO: Why do you hold your head like that? LI: A trick by this one stunned my neck. //Boreali shakes me up and down by the leg. How can she hold on to wet feathers with hooves like that? BO: Be grateful she can still breathe, or you wouldn't be. Why is your flying so erratic? LI: I had to clear the mud from my wings in the bath. And I cannot see where I am flying. //Lake of Fire, I don't see how that can help, Blood of the Earth would fry them both-- //SO GOOD FUCKING DO IT. OH WAIT, YOU NEED A CONNECTION TO SOLID GROUND, ALSO KNOWN AS ROCKS LIKE THE ONES IN YOUR MORONIC EMPTY USELESS SKULL. BO: Would you be more stable if you had... something to hold on to? LI: You know, my dear sister... that may very well be the case. //Linnaea flies closer to us.

The Younger Twin grabs The Drakeling by the left upper leg with her left front leg! The Younger Twin grabs The Drakeling by the tail with her upper body! //She bumps into my back, flinging her head over my waist!
Spike: Get away from me!
The Drakeling punches at the Younger Twin's right rear leg! But the Younger Twin is out of reach!
Bo: See, this wouldn't need to happen at all if you had apologized to us earlier.
Spike: I did!
The Younger Twin grabs The Drakeling by the waist with her mouth!
//Linnaea mumbles her assent through my waist.

The Younger Twin assaults The Drakeling with her mouth! The Drakeling's resistance is lowered!
Spike: Gyuh! Stop it!
//Screw holding back! I have to do something or I'll end up a brainwashed zombie!
//LIKE YOU AREN'T ALREADY
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, but the spell is disrupted!
//What?!
Bo: I'll have you know I'm a mare of my word. I'm looking forward to when we get back to the ground.
:\Concentrate and focus as much as you can. The longer this goes on, the less chance you'll break out of it.
//Rain pours off Linnaea's bangs and onto my stomach.

The Younger Twin assaults The Drakeling with her mouth! The Drakeling's resistance is lowered further!
The Drakeling struggles in vain against the grip of the Elder Twin's front right hoof on The Drakeling's right lower leg!
Bo: My, my, what a feisty one...
Li: Mmmmm mm m mmmmmmm mmmm!
//Don't do that!
Spike: Time to end this!
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Walk of the Third!

//Okay, okay, now we're not being assaulted and there's enough time to think. We're stuck high up in the air with two pegasi who want to assault us. What now?
//WHAT WAS THE FIRST FUCKING THING I DID FOR YOUR SORRY ASS
//Insult me?
//OTHER THAN THAT, SHITHEAD.
//...Right, the Third! I can glide to the ground with it!
:\That would just mean they do this tactic again, until you're out of it, like with Rainbow Dash.
Take them out now.

The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Touch of Grisly Terror!
The Drakeling touches the Elder Twin in the right front hoof with his right lower leg! The Drakeling touches the Elder Twin in the left front hoof with his right lower leg! They become limp and useless!
The Drakeling touches the Younger Twin in the left front leg with his left upper leg! The Drakeling touches the Younger Twin in the upper body with his tail! The Drakeling touches the Younger Twin in the mouth with his waist! They become limp and useless!
//Right! No more assault. But if I can stop them from flying...
//I try to pull myself up to grab Boreali's hoof. My stomach muscles scream in pain, but I do it anyway and climb halfway up her.

The Drakeling grabs the Elder Twin by the right wing with his right hand!
The Drakeling grabs the Younger Twin by the left wing with his first toe, left foot!
/Not the most graceful, but it'll work.
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Touch of Grisly Terror!
The Drakeling touches the Elder Twin in the right wing with his right hand! It becomes limp and useless!
The Drakeling touches the Younger Twin in the left wing with his first toe, left foot! It becomes limp and useless!
The Drakeling's Walk of the Third ends.
BO: Wh-- aaaaah!
LI: Nnnn nn nnnnn!
The Twins release their grips on The Drakeling!
The Drakeling releases his grip on The Twins!
//We start dropping out of the sky!
BO: What did you do? _What did you do_?!
The Elder Twin kicks The Drakeling in the head with her left rear hoof, bruising the muscle and bruising the jaw!
Spike: You idiot, stop! We're falling!
LI: NnnnnnnnnnnN!
BO: Why doesn't my wing work?!
//The wind from falling starts to whip the end of my tail painfully, and stings my cheeks.
Spike: I paralyzed it! Give me your hoof! We don't have much time!
BO: You're trying to kill us!
Spike: I'm trying the opposite!
//Falling as fast as the rain now, it's only a few seconds to the ground--
BO: There's no soft ground for miles out, we're going to die!
Spike: You dense bint--
The Drakeling grabs the Elder Twin by the left front hoof with his left hand!
The Drakeling grabs the Younger Twin by the right rear hoof with his right hand!
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Walk of the Third!
//Even as time slows, the body weight of Boreali and Linnaea drags me down. The Third force pushing me up against it makes my shoulders want to pop, but through the wet fur I squeeze tighter and hold on. Trees and slopes get a lot closer, the landscape much less bird's-eye-view.
//I won't lie and tell you we barely make it by a hair. I stop at a fifteen-foot drop into mud, and can't figure out how to descend.
The Drakeling's Walk of the Third ends.
The Elder Twin slams into the ground!
The Younger Twin slams into the ground!
The Drakeling slams into the ground!
//SPLAT! SPLAT! SPLAT!
//I sit up first. It looks like the twins are going to be okay; they're blinking and moving the limbs that still work. I'm covered in mud, wet to the core, almost defeated or killed by my own selflessness, delayed from my real quest over a stupid misunder--...
The Drakeling stands up.
\.\.What is that noise?
//Twenty yards ahead of us, hovering next to my bag, the bright blue Avatar of Speed slowly claps her front hooves together.
The Student Twins were defeated!
Spike earned 15000 experience points!
Spike is now level 33!
Spike: Slow clapping.
//I wasn't aware people really did that.

//On spotting their sensei, the twins around me hurriedly try to stand up.
Rainbow Dash: Don't bother. You two lost pretty hard up there.

BO: S-Sensei, I--

RBD: I knew it had to be Spike. Your style is all over this fight.

//I COUNT TWO PEOPLE ALIVE AND ZERO TREES BURNT DOWN HOW THE FUCK IS SHE DECIDING THAT
Spike: (Did they just call her a squid?)
//Twilight sighs.

Spike: Of all people you've had the most firsthand experience.

RBD: So, Spike, how've you been? Haven't seen you in a while.

Spike: Yeah, what was it last time? Oh, right, you tried to kill and/or enslave me outside Mountainville. Which is funny, because you tried the same thing in the Aquinatics a month or so before that. Hey, do you remember the time we first met in Forlegsandria?

//Three is a big enough sample size to establish a clear pattern.
RBD: Okay, sheesh, I get it! All that stuff was, like, a million years ago. Things have changed.

Spike: Like what?!
//I step out of the mud and scrape my feet against a tree root.

RBD: You're a Hero now.

Spike: I was always a Hero!

T: (I think she's talking about the Aquinatic Treaty.)

RBD: You were always a wannabe. Now, you've done something. You've proven you can be trusted with the power you have.

Spike: If you're the one to decide who's trusted with power, why do you let these two assault people for nonexistent slights?

//The twins groan, still laying down in the mud. Rainbow Dash looks over them, disappointed.

RBD: Again? You girls have _serious_ problems.

Spike: I'll say. Especially with that squid thing.

//Not too much of a surprise to learn someone in this world is reasonable about this sort of thing. Very surprised that it happens to be Rainbow Dash.

RBD: Squid thing? ...I get the feeling I don't want to know.

//Wind picks up, coming from the south. It drives the rain against the tree next to me.

RBD: Wow, are you ever not a mess?

T: (The queen of tact, mares and gentlestallions...)

//SORRY, I DON'T RUN AWAY FROM BATTLES WHEN IT'LL CHIP A HOOF.

Spike: ...Sorry.

RBD: I mean, a Hero's gotta do what a Hero's gotta do, but some days you have to look good or people won't take you seriously.

T: (She's not wrong. For example, when was the last time you had a bath?)

Spike: (Yesterday, actually, it was a bubble bath.)
T: (Really? 'Cause you smell like--)  
Spike: You don't take me seriously anyway, why should I bother?  
RBD: Hey, that's not true.  
Spike: Oh really? So what's happened every single time we've met so far?  
T: (Besides a deus ex machina saving your butt?)  
//I still don't understand how Twilight isn't outlined by the rain...  
RBD: ...Listen, I don't need a lecture on my own rash behavior in the past. I'm not here to fight you this time. Don't look a gift horse in the mouth!  
Spike: You're not here to fight? ...  
//The reason I came here was to convince Rainbow Dash not to assault me from now on. Is that already so?  
//Rainbow Dash nods. Suddenly I find it strange we're having this conversation at fifty paces, then it fades as I remember our history.  
RBD: Well, duh. We only fight if you fail the test, or, if you decide you want to lose.  
Spike: Test? What test?  
//Seconds pass as Rainbow Dash looks at me.  
RBD: For the Element of Loyalty, duh! Why else would you be here?  
//...Oh, right. She thinks that's still what I'm doing. Hah.  
Spike: I, uh... I came here to convince you to stop attacking me.  
//Rainbow Dash rolls her eyes.  
RBD: That's not a thing! Those were three isolated incidents! It's not a pattern! (And at _least_ two of those were totally justified...)  
Spike: Why don't I believe you?!  
RBD: Hey, am I the one looking angry and shouting? Calm down already!  
//Suddenly I realize all this time I've been in a fighting stance... I guess body language really does tell the truth.  
Spike: ...Fine. What are you going to do about these two?  
//The twins are standing up now, leaning against each other. With the mud and the rain and the wind... they look cold.  
RBD: Dunno. But I figure I have some time to think of punishment while they walk back to the dojo.  
//Finally in control of her tongue, the ink pony mumbles:  
LI: Walk, Sensei...?  
RBD: Don't let me catch you flying.  
//The elder twin, Boreali, shuts her eyes. It really is a long walk up the mountain to the dojo, but maybe I'll enjoy the company.  
T: (Huh. Not 'don't fly', but 'don't get caught'... I suppose that is a lesson to teach someone who wants to be a Hero.)  
RBD: So, what now?  
Spike: I, uh, mentioned how you were constantly attacking me?  
//Rainbow Dash rolls her eyes and snorts.  
RBD: _No_, _never_.  
Spike: I'm planning an important journey after all this is over, and I don't want to look over my shoulder every step of the way just to make sure nothing is chasing me.  
RBD: 'All over'?  
//After talking about it with Na-Mira... the Thirty are a threat to existence, life, and civilization as we know it. As a Hero, I can't accept that. Destroying them won't bring back anyone who was killed, but if I can prevent more people from dying--  
Spike: After I talk to Hazel, I want her and your help chasing down the Thirty.  
//Stunned silence and narrowed eyes. The twins start walking up the mountain, heads hanging low.  
Spike: So?  
T: (...It's best to dream big?)
RBD: ...You need _some_ sort of help.
Spike: I'm a Hero! This entire goddess-damned time I've been doing things which are by any reasonable definition strictly impossible; the laws of statistics have either decided to bend over backwards for me or never existed! My _life_ is doing things that will most likely kill me, as long as they're the right thing to do!
RBD: You don't _get_ it; they're not _enemies_ to people like us. They're forces of nature! You can't defeat the gods themselves!
//I CAN AND I WILL
Spike: I can and I will!
//Rainbow Dash stands still in the downpour, wet mane clinging to her forehead and nose. I shift the bag over my head and a pool of water dumps down my arm.
RBD: ...I'll train you. But no promises.
Spike: You mean, besides the--
RBD: Yes! I get it, okay?!
//The Avatar of Speed is beside me before I know it. Water bounces off her back onto my stomach.
//Quine trained me for a month or so. But more wouldn't be bad... maybe I shouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth.
RBD: I'll set up the test, too. If you really want to do this, you should see Princess Hazel.
Spike: I was planning on it.
//I still need to convince her to pass equality legislation and offer reparations to dragons unfairly hurt. There's no sense defending somewhere if it's not a place you want to come back to.
RBD: Hop on; I'll fly you to the top.
Spike: Is the test up there?
//A dragon could hope for sunnier weather.
RBD: Nah, that won't be set up for another few days with how Twilight has me running around. Thanks and all for solving the Aquinatic Conflict, but seriously... it's a lot of work. The dojo has extra space, you'll be fine.
//I use the tree to hop on her back, and she gets ready to take off.
RBD: Ready?
//I think of something and suddenly laugh.
RBD: Huh? What's so funny?
Spike: Hahaha, I just thought of what I'm going to tell Twilight.
RBD: Yeah?
T: (What are you going to tell me?)
Spike: 'I met up with Rainbow Dash, and this time, _I_ was the one on top of _her_!'
//Rainbow Dash almost can't take off from laughing so hard.

//On the flight to her dojo, Rainbow Dash suddenly pulls up. Rain blasts us.
Spike: What are you doing?!
//I cover my face with an arm. She's rising straight towards the clouds.
RBD: I just thought of something!
//Well unthink of it!
Spike: Was it all just a lie to get me up here?!
//I don't know if I can fight Rainbow Dash this high up in the sky on her back...
RBD: Hey! What do you take me for?
Spike: Someone who attacked me three times!
//She speeds up. We're miles above the surrounding desert now, flying higher. Out of necessity I lay flat on her back to avoid the rain, like bullets.
RBD: 'Swings, quit being such a baby!
//The clouds above us are rapidly approaching. In five seconds I won't be able to see anything, I have to do something!
Spike: It's not -- pthoo --
//Her hair gets in my mouth. //Wind and rain drive my limbs down, lock them in place. The rapid motion means I can't even breathe fire. If Rainbow Dash has a technique to assault me at these velocities, there's really nothing I can do. //A thick layer of cloud drenches us as we punch through it, leaving a hole which quickly fills in. RBD: Pretty cool, huh? //She stops rising. Above the clouds, the sun beams down from a bright blue sky. A white topmost layer of cloud dominates the landscape until the horizon hits, a strange solar effect of stray pink and orange. With the yellow sun, it's a five-color world. //We bob up and down, looking at the scenery. It's breathtaking. My feathers start to dry. RBD: Thought you'd like it. Nopony's been up this high since Cloudsdale. //Maybe it's the altitude (or the trauma my lungs went through on that ascent), but I find it hard to squeak out anything. Spike: Cloudsdale? RBD: Pegasus city in the sky. It... sank. T: (Celestia had enchanted the clouds to support weight.) //How-- what-- she's all the way-- RBD: But that's okay. Coming up here reminds me of something. //An entire pegasus city lived on the clouds? I find that hard to believe. It's also hard to believe Celestia would let an entire city crumble to the ground... Spike: What? //Rainbow Dash points at the sun. Her mane is starting to dry. RBD: There's always sun behind the rainclouds.

[SAVE LOCATION]

Training Assistant: Do you understand the Challenge? Spike: Uh, no. No I do not. TA: What don't you understand about it? Spike: The part where you hit me with a tree trunk. //A dry spot underneath one of the mountain cliffs. How the ponies managed to tie up a logged tree trunk with rope to another pair of trees and make a complex mechanism for it to swing and reset... is beyond me. It would take magic, or hands, and there are only pegasi or earth ponies here. TA: This Challenge is designed to test your ability to take a hit and recover. Since anyone would be a fool to try to brace themselves, you have to take the hit and get back up quickly. Spike: But score's measured in distance. TA: Right, the time it takes you to stand is penalized in feet. Spike: So you're saying, the closer to my original position I am, the better my score? //The frail pegasus puts his hoof on the lever. TA: Yes. Are you ready? //Well this is easy. Spike: Hit me.

The Training Assistant triggers the +gabbro mechanism+!
The log trap swings towards The Drakeling! The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Blood of the Earth! Snaking through the dirt, streams of magma flow around The Drakeling's scales and into his veins! The log trap strikes The Drakeling! //Momentum pushes the entire log into me as it incinerates, letting off a steam hiss and a flurry of ash that piles in front of me. The ropes of the mechanism catch fire, and grass around me shrivels from the proximity. The Drakeling's Blood of the Earth ends. //Glad I can do that on command.
//I look down at my feet. Haven't exactly moved, in the usual sense of the word, but the orange glow is fading.
Spike: So I guess that's a pretty good score.
//The pegasus has a look on his face that is a mixture of regret and terror.
Spike: Got anything to eat?

//The Avatar of Speed plays Strategy dizzyingly fast to disguise the fact she's not that great at it. Why is this her training?
Rainbow Dash: You destroyed the Challenge? Go!
//I turn the clock over and move my pieces to defend.
Spike: In more than one sense. Go!
//She flips the clock and starts surrounding one of my bases.
RBD: That took us six weeks to make! Go!
//I take a decent trade with one hand and flip the clock with the other.
Spike: Maybe it shouldn't have been vulnerable to magma! Go!
//Damn it, I didn't even notice those units harassing my other base, she moved them too quickly...
RBD: What kind of featherbrained comment is that? Go!
//I can't divide up my forces or I'll lose the westward expansion, this quick pace is really taking its toll. Reinforcements can take care of my main operations.
Spike: Why do you play this fast? Go!
//She destroys even more with a small harassment group and sends units to a third location, easily stalling my counterattack.
RBD: In combat you have to make snap decisions. Go!
//My reinforcements, they aren't -- damnit I forgot to make them! Supply lines will crumble by the time it takes to make them!
Spike: So why aren't we fighting? Go!
//Rainbow Dash crushes the counterattack and finishes any remnant of hope for the center of operations. My reinforcements will arrive to a dead shell of a base.
RBD: The Challenges are for your body, I train your mind! Go!
//Looking for something to roll my way, I push out with my army on the west. That's not the kind of trade I need...
Spike: Rainbow Dash teaching people how to think? Go!
//With little hesitation all the troops on the west are crushed.
RBD: Hey! If there's one thing I understand, it's fighting!
//I look over my situation and then concede the game. That's another...
Spike: ...Well, I also need information about the Thirty, and potential allies. Can I ask you a few questions?
//Starting with: could you not slobber on the timepiece?

Training Assistant: I'm going to ask you not to destroy this Challenge.
Spike: Right.
TA: 'Specially because this Challenge is a person.
//There's an advanced student standing in the middle of a dirt circle. Mud circle, it's always raining here. He has an apple on his head, eyes closed and wings out.
Spike: Yeah, I got that. Do I aim for the apple?
//I'm not sure fire breath is that accurate, if just by nature of it being fire.
TA: Take the apple off his head without him kicking you. The key is to be stealthy and quiet at first, then quick.
//Right, this will be easy. Guess these tests aren't meant for someone like me.
Spike: Cool, let's do it.
TA: Stand outside the circle. When I say 'go', grab the apple. If you make it out, I'll stop the timer and we'll figure out your score.
Spike: Shorter time is better score?
TA: Right. Go!
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Walk of the Third!
//Stopped in time and undetectable, the best of both worlds.
The Drakeling leaps towards the Advanced Student!
The Drakeling picks up the apple.
//I burble his lips just to be silly.
The Drakeling leaps away from the Advanced Student!
//Out of the circle, I take the timer out of the Training Assistant's mouth, put the apple there, and
put the full timer on the ground.
The Drakeling's Walk of the Third ends.
TA: Mmhp-haaa!
//He spits the apple out and the pegasus kicks. I point to the full timer.
Spike: Spitting out food is rude, you know.

//Rainbow Dash's quarters in the dojo are very sparse. It looks like she doesn't spend a lot of time
here.
Spike: Is this the only place we can play Strategy?
//I'm still stewing in the dismay of my last loss. It's terrible, because I know exactly what I should
have done, and why I shouldn't have done what I did. But the game's being played too fast.
RBD: The students are sleeping, it's after midnight.
Spike: Sleep? Bah, who needs it!
//She swipes the board with a leg and starts preparing for another game.
RBD: Heh-heh, heroism does weird things to your sleep schedule.
//Twilight must really have Rainbow Dash flying hard doing Aquinatic cleanup. When she gets
back to the dojo each night, the Avatar of Speed slowly ambles.
Spike: And your head. Here's a question: why are all the Avatars messed up?
T: (They're not that bad.)
//NOT COMPARED TO YOU
//Rainbow Dash puts her starting pieces on the board. I think she just scatters them randomly...
RBD: Good question. Who first?
//I put my pieces on the board. This is the only time in the entire game I get to spend time to think,
so I do.
Spike: Let's say... Fluttershy.
RBD: Fluttershy, okay...
//She leans her head to the side and stares off into blankness, trying to remember. Well, technically
she's staring at my knee, but that's just the angle.
Spike: She said a person could choose two of Hero, helping others, and health. My test was to give
up Heroism.
//Rainbow Dash chooses her words carefully. Since it's a first for her, I stay patient.
RBD: Fluttershy, like all of us, was given tasks to complete after the disappearance of Princess
Celestia. Sixty percent of the time, the tasks were obviously for the benefit of Equestrians, but...
the last time Fluttershy followed orders, it was one of those forty percent. And people got hurt that
didn't need to get hurt.
//RBD: ...Take any Cavalry officer and give 'em a choice: left, orphanage starting to burn, ahead,
mission objective. They wouldn't do the right thing unless they were ordered to do it!
Spike: Was she at the Fall of the Crystal Empire?
RBD: ...No.
//She clams up for a while as we get the game going. Eventually, I ask:
Spike: Fluttershy's still an Avatar, though? Go!
//Rainbow Dash takes time to contemplate an answer. Hey, maybe she won't get to all her units!
RBD: She's unofficial. Could you imagine 'Avatar of Temptation' on the taxpayer rolls? She takes
suggestions from Twilight if she agrees, not -- darn it! Go!  
//Hah!

//I'm standing in the rain waiting for the Training Assistant to start. I think he just doesn't like me.  
TA: A reminder that bodily assaulting me during this Challenge will be grounds for failure.  
Spike: 'Swings, it was an apple. Sorry already.  
//He harrumphs, in the warm, dry cave.  
TA: In this test, your goal is to stop the fire on the wick from reaching the hay. Do that by--  
Spike: Yeah I'm not going to have trouble with this.  
//He points at the sheet of paper.  
TA: Would you _mind_, I'd like to _read_. Ahem. Do that by destroying the sealed clay container and recovering the key inside to unlock the cave's gate.  
//The cave has a chicken-wire grid preventing access, with a heavy wood door in the middle. My scales could probably take the wire, if even that were necessary. Inside, the wick is already lit, slowly advancing towards the hay.  
TA: Score is measured in inches of wick burnt. And with the signal from Tony, you can go ahead and--  
//The stallion inside the cave claps a hoof on the floor.  
TA: --destroy the credible reputation I--  
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Lake of Fire!  
//Through the grid I light the next millimeter of wick on fire! It shrivels instantly!  
Tony jumps away from the flames!  
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and dismisses the fires!  
//The embers of the wick fade in a second, connected to nothing, no more to burn.  
//The Training Assistant glares at me.  
Spike: Oh, sorry. Did I interrupt?  
Spike: So what's the deal with Pinkie Pie?  
//Rainbow Dash, watching as I roll a boulder up the mountain (more 'Hero mental training'), snorts.  
RBD: 'Deal'? Even if it's a bargain you wouldn't be able to afford it.  
Spike: Wh--  
//I slip in the mud and the boulder starts rolling back. It gets past me and speeds on down the mountain.  
//Sigh.  
Spike: First, I meant 'issue'. And second, she really does that?  
T: (Of course not. It's just an extremely overpriced sign of solidarity.)  
RBD: Pinkie Pie's a hoot. She's hyper, always bouncing off the walls and being kooky. She never stops smiling and laughing and talking.  
//I watch the boulder roll into a tree and stop. It's far down, but my pride won't let me give up.  
Spike: Uh, yeah, I've met Pinkie Pie. So?  
RBD: It's the same reason you don't quit moving during a snowstorm. If you stop, you'll die.  
//...It might be all the physical exertion but I'm too tired to comprehend metaphor right now.  
Spike: I don't get it.  
//Rainbow Dash launches into the air from a tree, shaking water to the ground.  
RBD: Pinkie Pie got serious when Princess Celestia left. Too serious. A person has to take care of themselves mentally, even a Hero, and she forgot that for a little too long. She almost went right over the edge, and by that point... it was a wonder we were still willing to catch her.  
Spike: ...It sounds like she wasn't strong enough.  
RBD: The world's dangerous. Everyone gets that. But good people can't throw themselves on spears to fix it.  
//T: ...In the end, you're the one most responsible for the happiness of you.  
Spike: Did she see the Thirty?
RBD: ...The Battle of Stalliongrad pinned her down.

TA: Alright!
//At the end of his patience, the training assistant talks from inside the cave. It's the same as the previous Challenge, but he's sealed off the chicken wire by putting wooden boards in front of it. I don't have line of sight to the fire anymore.
TA: You know the Challenge. Go!
//He slams the door shut from the inside. Rather rude...
//I turn to the sealed pot. It looks like it has a very thick layer of glaze all around... fire wouldn't break it. If I were a pegasus, I could fly it up high and drop it... what would an earth pony do? Pin it against a tree and kick it?
The Drakeling picks up the *clay pot*.
//I carry it a little ways (it's heavier than it looks, and the rain on the glaze makes it slippery) and slam it on a rock!
The *clay pot* slams into the ground!
The *clay pot* bounces off the ground!
//Huh, only a slight scratch, this is a tough container...
//From behind me, I hear a cough.
Spike: Yeah, yeah, I'm getting on it. No need to be a prick--
//Hold on, that's a coughing fit. I turn around.
\\He sealed himself in the cave entirely, the idiot!
Spike: What, are you crazy? Get out of there!
//The smoke will consume all the oxygen in the closed space, or he'll be burnt!
//I run towards the wall to pound on the door!
Spike: Are you okay? Talk to me!
//All I hear from the other side is wheezing. Who knew wicks gave off this much smoke?
//LET THE BASTARD SUFFER HIS OWN MISTAKES JUST GET THE F**KING POINTS
Spike: Even if someone is in trouble due to their own actions they shouldn't be denied help from others.
The Drakeling strikes the wooden door in the handle with his Fist of Justice, and the severed part flies off in an arc!
//The door flies open, pushing me back, as the assistant rushes out of the cave. A cloud of smoke follows him.
Spike: Celestia, what happened?
//The bale of hay is on fire. So is the wick, at the opposite end of the cave. I don't get it.
T: (Huh, it looks rained on. Must have been a wet hay fire.)
Spike: (That's dumb. It's wet, how could the hay catch fire?)
T: (Agricultural science isn't my field. But there's plenty of empirical evidence.)
//There's more evidence of important ponies tricking me from what I know. Who would want the hay to be on fire...?
Spike: Applejack? Go!
//I'm finally getting the hang of Strategy at this speed. Trusting my instincts, I'm breaking even.
RBD: Needs a promotion to pay grade O, if you get me. Go!
//Though that doesn't mean the games are even, just the results. This speed causes huge variance.
Spike: Uh... no? Go!
//Rainbow Dash chooses to send her troops into terrible position. It's a simple trap, but at these speeds even a simple trap works.
RBD: As in, 'needs dude badly'. Go!
//I mop up her forces without trouble.
Spike: I don't think 'get laid more' is an answer to many people's emotional turmoil, especially her. Go!
Playing a losing game, Rainbow Dash speeds up even faster. I try to keep calm myself since she's trying to rush me.

RBD: Applejack's problem is she sees the world as too black and white. Go!

//That's not far off from how she thinks, if what I know of her is true.

Spike: How is that connected to her boy problems? Go!

//I've basically won at this point, but there's no reason to get cocky now.

RBD: She went after -- killed, that is -- a terror of a dragon after the disappearance. Good game, nice job.

//She gets out a cloth to clean the timer and I clear the game board.

RBD: When she heard reports his family was coming to the area, she thought it was for revenge. To protect them, Applejack disowned her family and had them forcibly relocated, scattered all over Equestria. Turns out the dragons were there to get the body, have a burial, and mourn.

//...Even evil people have family, and rituals that comfort them. It's a shame they had to get hurt, but if he was so vile, maybe it's... the world isn't a black and white place.

Spike: At the risk of repeating myself--

//Rainbow Dash holds up a hoof and rolls her eyes.

RBD: Hold your horses! Getting to it. Some ponies, more traditional ones, think the end goal of, y'know, 'taming the fifth leg' is to continue the family line. If you're disconnected from your family 'cause of your own mistakes, why bother?

Spike: Especially if you think someone is going to threaten your family to get to you.

//If you're looking for enemies everywhere, you'll find them.

RBD: Exactly. New game?

Spike: Sure. Was Applejack at the Fall?

//I place my pieces again. A sudden feeling of deja-vu hits me.

RBD: ...There wasn't much an earth pony like her could have done.

Spike: You know, I'm going to go on record and say I have major concerns about this Challenge's fitness.

TA: Uh-huh.

Spike: I think it's the flying. Yeah, it's probably the flying.

//A pegasus (another assistant) and I are standing five feet from each other, in launch position. His target is a line in the mud sixty feet ahead of us, watched by the Training Assistant. My target is him.

TA: This Challenge has been set up by the rules and we're going to execute it by the rules, understand?

Spike: I'd like to lodge a complaint with whoever made those rules.

TA: Duly noted, by which I mean _cram it_. Do you understand the Challenge?

Spike: Yeah, yeah, I have to stop him from reaching the finish line for as long as possible.

TA: That's right. Score's measured in time delayed.

Spike: Could we get going already? My neck's getting tired.

TA: Go!

//The pegasus launches off the tree, speeding along the ground with the help of his wings. I decide to stand up and watch him.

//He crosses the finish line with no delay.

//Snottily, the Training Assistant asks:

TA: I asked if you understood the rules. What happened?

//What happened is I completed each Challenge by using a different one of my moves, and with the strange hay fire of the last challenge I don't want to show all of my cards too early. In the event I do have to fight Rainbow Dash, I'm keeping Touch of Grisly Terror hidden, since not even Twilight knew about it.

Spike: There's no reason for me to get points anymore.

TA: It's not about the points! It's about the training!
Spike: What, for me to overwork to complete a Challenge which will be nothing like any real-life scenario I ever encounter?
//As the assistant grumbles, a bright spot in the rain zips closer with astounding speed. Before he can think of something to say, Rainbow Dash is on the premises.
RBD: Hey, Spike. Hey Tarro.
Spike: Hey.
TA: Hello, Sensei.
//He starts rubbing out the finish line with a hoof, and dismisses the other pegasus.
RBD: Wait, did you actually fail a test? The Hero of the Land lost at something?
//She gasps in mock horror.
Spike: There was no incentive for me to try.
RBD: What's that supposed to mean?
//She swoops closer, hovering above my shoulder. Rain bounces off her onto me.
Spike: I can beat all these trials. It's not increasing my skills; it's measuring them. This is a waste of time.
TA: Thank the skies.
//He gathers his (soggy) notebook and trots off, probably going to breakfast. I think my existence put him in a bad mood.
RBD: Someone like you doesn't wander in every day.
Spike: Could you get the test set up? I think I'm done with your mental training, too.
RBD: You're just starting to be quick--
Spike: That's crap and you know it; I only tolerated Strategy so I could ask you who else knows about the Thirty and now the pattern's pretty clear.
T: (You still haven't asked about me.)
RBD: Twilight would know more.
Spike: ...Twilight does what she wants. All I can do is ask for her help. Knowing what happened doesn't change that.
//The dragon instinct revealed Twilight was responsible for the Fall in Longbridge. And Na-Mira confirmed it, if I remember right. I don't want to make her re-live that by asking Rainbow Dash about it.
//Starting up the mountain to the dojo, I nod at Rainbow Dash.
Spike: And, I mean, you? Kind of obvious.
RBD: Oh, come on.
Spike: I mean it, I do. Completely transparent, couldn't fool a filly.
//Rainbow Dash chuckles and flies in front of me, spraying water everywhere.
RBD: Fine! Humor me, then.
//The dragon instinct and Na-Mira's information, along with Rainbow Dash's own reactions, have given me enough to put the pieces together.
Spike: You were charged with helping the Crystal ponies however possible after the disappearance. But then, their trust and love was shattered and the barriers fell. When the Thirty attacked, you decided to abandon them instead of helping anyone else get out alive.
//RBD: _Heroes don't make mistakes_! You decided that your life was more valuable than the lives of over two dozen others!
Spike: Which is why you yelled at me for doing the same thing, in the Valley. I made a decision that took the lives of others to save myself. My own ignorance and lack of power caused the death of twenty-seven people...
//And the livelihoods of so many others were lost. An entire biome was destroyed, millions of bits of damage done. Everything I've done so far hasn't yet paid back that loss.
Spike: But that's the difference between you and me... I made a mistake. You _chose_ to let others die. Which led you here, training Heroes.
//I walk past Rainbow Dash, flapping an inch from the ground.
Spike: Because those who can't do, teach.
T: (Spike, Rainbow Dash is your friend! Don't be cruel to her!)
Spike: (What kind of friend attacks you physically?)
//Rainbow Dash is staying where she is, silent. I don't know if I'll make it to the dojo by dawn, why is breakfast served early here...
T: (...You also never asked about Rarity.)
Spike: (I can see the pattern. No one was there but you two.)
//Just like Na-Mira said. Besides Twilight's brother, for some reason.
//I climb a tree, hoping to take a shortcut on this north side of the mountain. The cliffs here are steeper.
T: (...Your sample size is three.)
//Rainbow Dash speeds next to the branch I'm walking on, and I almost fall off.
RBD: And how about your _wife_, huh? Maybe you'd like to know a little something about _her_?
Spike: Not really; she is by all accounts whiny and useless.
//I jump off the tree, and catch the cliff edge with my stomach. No one helps me up.
Spike: She lost her husband and paid immortality ticket. Now she has to deal with not only dying, but dying alone. Better to leave her be, right?
//Angry huffs come from both Twilight and Rainbow Dash.
T: (Spike! Have some respect!)
RBD: What?! You self-centered featherbrain!
//She kicks in the air, getting madder.
RBD: Sweet Celestia, you think everything is about you! That pony was _killed_, three times, defending a world where your sorry tail could _be_ a house husband! You don't think _dying_ leaves a scar?
Spike: ...Dying?
//The Avatar of Speed sticks her face in mine, spitting venom.
RBD: Rarity's entourage watched her mangled guts fall from Canterlot Castle! I saw her crushed under sixty thousand tons of molten crystal! _She woke up at her funeral and saw her family walk out on her for having a dragon mate_. And what did she do? She went right back to work!!
//To be honest, I don't really know how the phoenician drake immortality works. Did that all happen?
RBD: You think _you_, of everything that's happened, is going to break her? Get lost!
\That snarl could shatter the courage of warlords, if it weren't accompanied by her high-pitched squeak.
//'Crushed under molten crystal', so she was in the Crystal Empire...
RBD: You know what? Until you can be as strong a Hero as that, you shouldn't even talk about her. In fact, you just probably shouldn't talk to me at all.
//Rainbow Dash launches into the air, knocking me back. She stops, turns, and extends one front hoof for me to grab.
RBD: The test is ready. Let's go.
//...

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//I'm taken to the middle of nowhere in the desert, midday sun shining hot. Pale sands beneath us roll by like waves. Dunes and valleys lie underneath us, bypassed completely by Rainbow Dash's wings.
//The silent Avatar takes me to a dreaded spot on the desert's southern side, far from any known city. Here, the wind refuses to blow, and as a result the sand is flat for miles. I can see tracks in it that may have been made many years ago, and I wonder how they handled the choking heat.
//She spots something on the ground and descends. I spot it just after, a brown stone pyramid jutting out of the landscape like a mistake.
Spike: Is that the test?
//Rainbow Dash stays silent, and dumps me off while we're still ten feet from the ground. I hit the sand. It's not as soft as I was expecting.
Spike: Gah, could have given me some warning...
//She stays in the air.
RBD: This pyramid goes underground. Inside it is the tomb of Bucket James.
//Who?
Spike: So?
RBD: Your task is to recover or destroy the amulet Leave A Tin Out For... to recover or destroy that amulet. The pyramid is designed to only let by a two-person team of a pony and a drakeling. Let's see how strong your bond with others is.
//...Does she mean it like that, or...?
Spike: At least tell me you won't be the pony I have to work with.
//She stays silent and drops to the ground. As she does, I notice a trail of hoofprints in the sand, leading into the pyramid. They start from very far away.
Spike: ...Huh.
//Rainbow Dash says nothing more, and I enter the pyramid.

Chapter End Notes

With apologies to Tarn Adams.
Nowhere Written Are My Failures

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

//The stench of stale air wafts out of the pyramid, passing around me. It's much cooler in here. Spike: It looks like nobody's been here for a while.
//I brush dirt off a dark stone wall, and it crumbles away. There's more moisture in it than outside... but not much more.
//It's dark inside and I can't see. Spike: Do I get a torch or something?
//I yell out to Rainbow Dash, standing (hovering? Can't see her) outside the pyramid. There's no response. Spike: Grumble grumble no respect...
//With careful movements, I take out The Real Princess Hazel, Revision Two (the censored version) from my bag and tear a few pages out of it. Forming them into a stick, I cover it with dirt, and then use dragonfire on one end until it smolders. \\...That is much less light than you need.
//I shrug and continue onwards with my dim torch, following hoofprints in the sand past a defused trip wire.

//Deeper into the pyramid, I find a mural filled with small pictures, chiseled into the wall. The hoofprints track all over, mussing the sand. Very slight marks of black (they rub off with a finger) are here and there.
//A comment has been added to the mural in the same black markings, up in the top right corner: 'start?'
Spike: Start? Am I reading down columns, or across rows?
//I pick one and follow the path with a finger.
Spike: Sun... sun in sky. Sun higher in sky. Uh, okay, is that like 'in the beginning' or 'once upon a time'? Seems like a stock metaphor.
//Next comes a count, or a number. It's a bunch of dots arranged. 'When the sun rose X years ago?' Spike: Dots in the sky comes a little later, but what's this one between them... two circles above a line, but they're intersecting like that math diagram.
//Dots in the sky probably means night... so, what? 'In the beginning, the sun rose in the sky, bud out, and that's where all the stars came from'? It's like a creation story.
Spike: Probably isn't worth my...
//The makeshift torch illuminates an odd glyph. I have to take a look at it.
Spike: Haha, what the hell is that?
//It's a pony, squatting in a field of grain. Really?
Spike: I can't believe a creation story includes 'and then someone took a dump'. What happens next?
//I follow the trail of glyphs further. Sun rises in sky again, sun buds, but then a single dot. And the sun rises again into the sky, followed by another smaller one.
Spike: ...It's like... a child.
//A child. This isn't a creation story, it's a family history. The suns have got to be Celestia and her family, that metaphor is ancient.
Spike: Okay. Okay. Question one: why does a pyramid in the middle of nowhere supposedly contain the body of Bucket James, when I'm pretty sure I fought him in the Valley of Death?
//Silence.
//Osto Bacchus raised an old drakeling, extremely powerful, that the dragon instinct recognized. He had a sword, like Bucket James is said to have the sword Reality. And he wasn't that opposed to
Heroism from the looks of it...

Spike: Question two, why would someone who was dumped in with the dishonored dead heathens have a family history of Celestia in his supposed tomb?

Frankly, why would anyone have the family history of Celestia in their tomb? Unless... you know, I really doubt that a drakeling was part of Celestia's family.

Spike: And question three... why would the amulet with a long name be in here at all?

It doesn't make sense! Bucket James was known for the artifact Reality, a sword that could shield the bearer from magical harm. Why would another artifact be in his tomb, and if so why hasn't anyone taken it yet?!

Spike: Hmm... is it explained in the story?

So, Celestia has a child. Series of dots, then a carving of snow. It snowed this many times? No... Y winters pass? A stick figure appears on two legs, then a drawing of fire. Pretty easy. A hole in the ground, a gravestone, stick figure and a great 'thing' with six legs, a picture of a foot... then a shining sword. Picture of a foot?

Spike: Oh, I get it, it's a joke. He fought a giant bug. And got Reality for it. Or went to war with the second sun, Celestia's child, over issues about how ponies treat those with different legs. But I doubt that.

Spike: Second sun again, then a huge amount of dots, then a pony in a... let's call it praying position.

THAT'S RIGHT FUCKING REPRESS THE URGE

Spike: They worship Celestia's child? (Or she's very promiscuous?) How does that follow? Next, the second sun, then a pony turns its nose up at a... salt lick? Three dots, a spear, a jug behind reeds, and an island? A unicorn horn, a completely scratched-in square, the sun? What am I looking at?

Maybe it'll make more sense if I skip a little...

Well, here's an unambiguous drawing of an amulet. I suppose whatever is happening here, the amulet I'm looking for is involved somehow...

Over here is scratch square, dragon. I guess scratched-in square means 'not' or negation... it ends with stick figure, paper and quill, night sky without stars. That's, uh... that's kind of ominous.

Spike: I'm sure someone like Twilight would find the process of interpreting this all very fascinating, but I'm a Hero with limited time, so let's just move--

I hear a shout come from my left, deeper down in the pyramid, and start running that way!

Wow, I ran towards something on instinct. I must be the opposite of Rainbow Dash.

I come to a stop in the dark hallway before two voices, spraying sand across a wall. The room is lit by a great lantern meant for carrying by mouth.

I peek in.

Random Mare: A demon! Night and day! Let me through!

Sphinx: How many times have I _told_ you, I don't do riddles anymore, it's--

Random Mare: Eggs! A fish! Ouroboros!

The sphinx sighs.

It's -- she is, I suppose -- a large lioness with the head of a horse. A great shaggy golden mane is not present, or any hair (besides fur) at all. Her ears are even more lioness-like than a pony's.

And the pony confronting her has a blue coat, with grits of sand stuck in her straight yellow hair. Hold on, is that...

RM: I have to get in this chamber!

Sphinx: This is the chamber where the Lord of the Pyramid sleeps. I have strict instructions--

RM: Without seeing Bucket James's coffin I'll fail the task my love gave me! You have to step aside!

That must be Rinsesu Megimi! The pony who fell in love with Rainbow Dash, and was an idiot! I met her in Detrot!

\It looks like 'was' should be amended in that sentence...
Sphinx: Then you fail the task your love gave you. If he is truly your love, he will forgive you.
Rinsesu Megimi: My love is a she!
//The sphinx pauses for a moment, contemplating this.
Sphinx: Does that change the meaning of what I said?
RM: And my love will give me strength enough to defeat you! I swore on my honor I'd see this quest through!
//Does she shout _everything_ now?
//The sphinx extends a paw, and flashes sharp talons.
Sphinx: Listen, girl. It's great you've found someone to, uh... I've been away a long time, does 'love' still mean you fuck?
RM: Wh--
//Rinsesu sputters for a couple seconds.
RM: How dare you ask a question like that?!
Sphinx: Whatever. My orders are just to make sure nothing uses this door. But if you attack me, I will defend myself, and you're not winning that fight. Got it?
//Rinsesu glowers at the sphinx for a while, then calms a little. She stands with her hooves spread, and lowers her head.
RM: ...I understand.
Sphinx: Then I can get back to my nap.
//The sphinx lays down, but... with that body language, Rinsesu is planning on attacking! She won't last at all in a fight with a creature of that size!
Rinsesu Megimi: Be destroyed by--
Spike: Wait! Rinsesu! Stop!
//I leap into the room, waving my arms!
//Rinsesu turns to look at me, wide-eyed. The sphinx stands up.
RM: ...A drakeling? Who are you?
Sphinx: H-- How?!
//The sphinx glares at me, putting holes in me with eyes that have seen too many lifeless years.
Spike: I'm a Hero, and my--
Sphinx: You won't leave!
The Sphinx attacks!
//What?!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

The Sphinx rushes at The Drakeling!
The Sphinx bites The Drakeling in the right upper arm, tearing apart the scale, tearing apart the muscle and bruising the bone!
//Yow! Her teeth are sharp!
The Sphinx latches on firmly!
The Sphinx throws The Drakeling by the right upper arm with her lower front teeth!
//I speed towards the door next to Rinsesu!
The Drakeling collides with the obstacle!
The Drakeling's head takes the full force of the impact, denting the scale and bruising the muscle!
The Drakeling's left upper arm takes the full force of the impact, denting the scale, bruising the muscle and bruising the bone!
The ☽ wooden door☾ takes the full force of the impact, and the severed parts fly off in arcs!
//The door blows apart and I fall into a short passageway, filled with sand!

Spike: Ptoo, pppbtth, what was _that_ for?!
//I look up. In front of me, there's a slot in the wall, and next to it: stick figure, fire, gravestone. Scratched square, sword.
Rinsesu Megimi kicks at The Sphinx, but The Sphinx dodges away!
RM: Hyaa!
Sphinx: You deluded fool. Neither of you will see the sun again!
//The Sphinx raises a claw and slashes at Rinsesu!
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Walk of the Third!

//A gentle force lifts me to my feet. Okay. What's happening here?
//As soon as the sphinx saw me she attacked. Must have been told to watch out for dragons or something. It's possible Bucket James had friends.
//NOT IF HE WAS ANYTHING LIKE YOU
//Really, that's what you're demoted to? 'You have no friends'?
//HALF OF THEM TRIED TO RAPE YOU, FUCKWIT. DID THE SUDDEN APPEARANCE OF THIS CATWHORE WHO WANTS TO KILL YOU BEFORE TALKING TO YOU IMMEDIATELY MAKE YOU FORGET SHIT ABOUT THE PEOPLE WHO WANT TO KILL YOU AFTER TALKING TO YOU? EVEN IF I CAN'T FUCKING BLAME THEM FOR IT.
//Let's not waste the Walk of the Third on him.

The Drakeling leaps towards The Sphinx!
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Touch of Grisly Terror!
//First, stop Rinsesu from getting slashed. Then, talk this out.
The Drakeling touches The Sphinx in the left front leg with his left hand! The Drakeling touches The Sphinx in the upper body with his right hand!
The Drakeling's Walk of the Third ends.

//The sphinx hisses and flinches!
The Sphinx slashes The Drakeling in the lower body with her left front paw, tearing apart the scale and tearing apart the muscle!
Spike: Gaah!
//Wait, how did she do that?! It should have stopped her cold!
RM: Hyaaaa!
Rinsesu Megimi kicks The Sphinx in the right front paw with her left back hoof, and the severed part flies off in an arc!
//Her paw turns into a spray of sand! The paw reforms from the stub, pouring out more sand!
Spike: What the--

The Sphinx charges at The Drakeling!
The Sphinx bites at The Drakeling, but The Drakeling dodges away!
The Sphinx rushes past The Drakeling!
Rinsesu Megimi kicks The Sphinx in the nose with her right back hoof, and the severed part flies off in an arc!
//Sand hits the ceiling and falls back down over the Sphinx's rapidly healing nose.

Spike: This isn't working!
The Sphinx slashes The Drakeling in the upper body with her right rear paw, tearing apart the scale and tearing apart the muscle!
The Sphinx's claws are stuck in The Drakeling!
//FUCK SHIT WHY DOES DYING HAVE TO HURT SO MUCH
Sphinx: I am the desert, and the desert is me. Vast, beyond mortal reckoning. You will not escape from--
Spike: Shut up!
The Drakeling breathes fire!
The Sphinx is caught in the dragonfire! The Sphinx's right rear leg has been turned into glass!
//What?
The Sphinx releases the grip of The Sphinx's right rear paw on The Drakeling's upper body.
The Sphinx: My leg! Why can't I feel my leg?!
Rinsesu Megimi: Sand turns to glass when it's heated! Let's do this, Hero!
//Alright!
Sphinx: Silence, fool of a pony!
The Sphinx bites at Rinsesu Megimi in the lower body, but Rinsesu Megimi dodges away!
The Drakeling breathes fire!
The Sphinx leaps away from the dragonfire!
Rinsesu Megimi kicks The Sphinx in the right rear leg with her left rear hoof, shattering the glass!
The severed parts fly off in arcs!
//I shield myself from the shards.

//The back leg doesn't regrow, it stays a stump of jagged green glass. The dismembered paw turns to sand and sinks into the ground.
Sphinx: Never...
The Sphinx slashes at The Drakeling with her left front paw--
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Walk of the Third!
//I breathe fire at the Sphinx's incoming paw, and then set myself in position to meet it.
The Drakeling breathes fire!
//...For good measure, I breathe fire at her face.
The Drakeling breathes fire!
The Drakeling's Walk of the Third ends.
Spike: You shouldn't attack someone on sight, especially if you don't know them.
The Sphinx is caught in the dragonfire! The Sphinx's left front paw has been turned into glass!
The Sphinx is caught in the dragonfire! The Sphinx's throat has been turned into glass!
The Drakeling strikes The Sphinx in the left front paw with his Fist of Justice, shattering the glass!
The severed parts fly off in arcs!
//Slivers pelt the back wall of the room.
The Sphinx stabs The Drakeling in the right hand with her left front leg, but The Drakeling's scales deflect the attack!
Sphinx: You say I don't know who you are? What lies are these!
//With only two legs, she's unsteady.
The Sphinx falls over.

//Let's finish this; I have no intention of letting her claw me up a few more times!
RM: Over here! Quick!
The Drakeling breathes fire!
The Sphinx is caught in the dragonfire! The Sphinx's lower body has been turned into glass!
Rinsesu Megimi kicks The Sphinx in the lower body with her left rear hoof, shattering the glass!
The severed parts fly off in arcs!

//She only has one limb left. The Sphinx uses it to prop herself up and glare at me, to hate me, instead of defending herself.
Sphinx: Dozens, dozens I have prevented from seeking this murderer, but--
Spike: I said shut up!
The Drakeling kicks The Sphinx in the throat with his right foot, shattering the glass! The severed parts fly off in arcs!
The Sphinx has been struck down!
//Rinsesu covers herself from the glass (it gets in her hair) as the remnants of the Sphinx turn into pale sand, and flow into the floor.

The Sphinx was defeated!
Spike earned 15000 experience points!
Spike is now level 34!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

RM: Crazy lioness bint...
//The green shards of glass in her hair are turning to pale sand as we speak.
Spike: You said it.
//I sweep my foot through the sand where the Sphinx's head melted. Even the glass shards there are turning back. What the hell kind of creature...
//Rinsesu Megimi shakes her straight yellow mane, flinging sand about. She refastens her leather armor and says:
RM: I suppose I should thank you, whoever you are, for your help with this. Your dragonfire really came in oh not you again!
//When our eyes meet she recognizes me. That's, uh, that's not good.
Spike: So, fancy meeting you here...
//She stares at me and demands:
RM: Why?! Why are you here?!
Spike: Poor decision-making?
//SECONDED
//Rinsesu kicks sand at me in a huff.
RM: It isn't enough you ridicule me for following my dream, you have to chase me to see if I fail?
Spike: What? No!
//SHE THINKS SHE'S IMPORTANT, HOW QUAIN'T
RM: Come to loot the pyramid's ancient tombs, then? I'll stop you, graverobber!
//Rinsesu spreads her legs for a fighting stance!
//I wave my hands, trying to calm her down!
Spike: No! That's not it!
RM: The Sphinx attacked you on sight. What demon are you in disguise? A true Hero will defeat you!
//I stare open-mouthed at this pony.
Spike: _Celestia's wings_, do you _listen_ to yourself, girl? Get a grip!
//A few seconds after I yell, we both stand in silence, staring each other down. The aspiring Hero shifts her stance.
RM: ...Very well then. Why are you here?
Spike: ...So that's a no on the thanking me?
//For a moment her nostrils flare. Next, with more humility than I thought she had when we last met, Rinsesu bows.
RM: Thank you, Hero, for your help in the fight against this monster. What was your name?
Spike: Spike.
RM: Spike, I am here on a task given to me by my love and master. I politely ask you not keep me from it any longer.
//She turns towards the broken wooden door and steps over the splinters, inspecting the entrance (?) to Bucket James's burial chamber.
../..You know, even if she said 'politely', it wasn't that polite...
Spike: Rainbow Dash asked you to do something here?
RM: Yes.
//Rinsesu continues inspecting the glyphs on the wall. I hoist the lantern closer in by the mouth-handle, then wipe drool off on my leg scales.
Spike: What's your task? Is it a Challenge?
//With a hard, dark blue hoof, she scrapes over the slot in the wall. Dirt falls away, revealing... a differently-shaped slot.
RM: Hmm...
Spike: An oval thing with a chain could go there.
   //A pendant, or something.
RM: I need to get in here.
   //With the glyphs around it (stick figure, fire, then gravestone; another scratched square then sword), Rinsesu must have been charged to find something in the grave of Bucket James, or at least something besides Reality. Unless she thinks the markings are a misdirection.
Spike: Oh. I need to find that amulet with a long name.
RM: Leave A Tin Out--
Spike: Yeah.
   //She nods at the slot a few times, and turns to me.
RM: That's good. It looks like this slot will take an amulet of some kind, I'm willing to bet it's designed for the artifact you're looking for. We can work together.
   //...It would be kind of odd for Rainbow Dash to mention a pony/dragon team and then not have to work together on something.
Spike: Sure. There's probably more of the pyramid to explore.
   //Nothing's ever gone wrong trusting people who have attacked me before.

   //We come to a room with a tiled floor, deep underground in the pyramid. The ceiling is very low here; I have to stoop. Rinsesu sets the lantern down and masses her jaw.
Spike: Hold on, don't step in.
Rinsesu Megimi: Ponies of old trapped all manners of burial tombs to ward off would-be thieves.
One of the tiles is an obvious trap.
Spike: I'm not so sure about 'one'...
   //I drag the lantern closer. Every tile is inscribed with more glyphs, up to a dozen per tile. As far as I can see, they're all unique.
   //It's obvious, then. A puzzle.
RM: Look around the walls. There are holes.
   //Apple-sized holes dot the walls near the ceiling. Stray lantern light catches some of them tunneling up and away, others horizontal. Because of the low ceiling, anyone would be hit by those.
Spike: So...
   //Rinsesu sits down in the sand, tail swishing back and forth.
RM: Hmm, we've got an arrow trap, or javelins, or a fluid. Sand or poison gas for the fluid, likely not water. Is there a way to tell which?
   //Or spear traps, or flaming oil, or a collapsing chamber... there's too much to consider here.
   //I look at one of the tiles. Fancy chair, fire, broken chain.
Spike: If it's the first two, we'd be fine, but we can't test the tiles without risking the passage back crumbling behind us.
   //A trap with arrows or other ammunition we can outlast. Spear traps can be burnt after putting something heavy out there to make them trigger. I feel like the chamber has to collapse... or else you can just run away and come back with a better plan, and that's a crappy trap.
RM: ...Looks like it's up to us to figure out what each tile is, and what sequence is safe.
   //...I don't know how to read the pictures. This might take a while.
Spike: Oh, so, I found some black marks on the wall in one of the rooms near the Sphinx. Did you do that?
   //She looks up from a tile, yellow hair dragging on the ground.
RM: Hmm? Yeah, I studied ancient glyph writing when I was a filly. (We used it to pass notes in class.) But it's just the old Favored Daughter story, so I moved on.
   //I sit cross-legged in front of tiles not far from Rinsesu, inspecting one. I sniff, and only smell old dust and pony. Something doesn't seem right here...
Spike: I've never heard that one.
JUST LIKE THE VOICE OF A FRIEND OR AN HONEST COMPLIMENT.

//Rinsesu mutters the story as she bounces attention back and forth between two tiles, deciding between them.

RM: Celestia one day had a daughter. ...Tell the truth, on quite a few days she had daughters, and almost as many days she had sons, but this daughter was special. From the very beginning, it was clear this filly would have the same sort of power that Celestia had, since she and no other member of Celestia's family was born an alicorn.

//If the chamber itself collapsed, it would make a dip in the perfectly flat landscape... which, with the pyramid, is basically a huge 'dig here for loot' sign. So, what, the trap designers only cared about the first graverobbers? How lazy.

RM: She did have comparable -- not equal, but almost -- magic ability to Celestia as she grew up. And Celestia loved her the most of any filly alive. But one day, all of Celestia's family besides her Favored Daughter were found dead.

//THAT WAS A GOOD FUCKING DAY.

RM: Stricken with grief, the Favored Daughter retreated into Canterlot Castle and stayed until she wasted away. And thus Celestia was left, watching the last of her children wither before her eyes, with an Equestria that still needed to be led right outside the door.

Spike: Huh. So what does a praying glyph have to do with that?

RM: Praying? Where'd you see that?

Spike: A pony was bowing, with a curved back, head down and up in the air was her--

RM: A straight back is bowing. That was probably 'presenting'.

//Even if it collapsed behind us, to trap us in, a dip in the land would appear. Something worth going to great lengths to protect, yet the trapmaker overlooked hiring a bunch of expendable ponies with shovels as an answer. So this trap can't be meant to keep the well-equipped riches-seeker out. Just the scrappy ones. Or someone who, for their own reasons, didn't have the time or inclination to get a digging team...

RM: Naive interpretation gives that glyph as lust. But, knowing the ideas they had in those days, a better translation would probably be 'non-familial love felt by a female'.

//...Huh. So in some ways, it was just a family history, and in other ways it wasn't.

Spike: The daughter of Celestia, of all people, fell in love with Bucket James? Excuse me if I don't buy it.

RM: That's... there's no drakelings in the tale of the Favored Daughter. Was that not...?

Spike: And then a salt lick, or something. If that helps.

//Rinsesu is utterly baffled.

RM: What? 'Betrayal'? The hell kind of story was that?

//She stands up, looking into the darkness back behind us and thinking.

//If I'm a plucky treasure hunter, I don't know the glyphs, so I take a pick at random and... die, leaving no trace? That'd require a power source, like beetles or magic, neither of which lasts over the years. But if I leave a trace (read: body), the next plucky crypt raider sees me and knows what the trap does, and figures out how to avoid it. I'm not a trap designer, but that seems like shoddy workmareship to me...

\ So who is this room trying to trap? Someone with power but not a lot of time or connections. An independent explorer who needs what's at the end for herself alone. A... someone like a Hero.

//This trap was built for people like us.

Spike: Hold on. I think I've figured it out.

//I stand up and look at the tile in front of me.

RM: You figured out which path is safe?

//We have to do the opposite of what people like us want to do. And Rinsesu and I both sat down and tried to inspect the tiles to find a path.

Spike: Never said that. I can't stand straight up, but...

//Spinning around once, I heave my bag of books to the middle of the tiles!
The bag sprawls over several tiles far away from the entrance! A +siltstone mechanism+ has been triggered. A +siltstone mechanism+ has been triggered. A +siltstone mechanism+ has been triggered.

A soft ticking sound comes from the walls on either side of us. Every sixth tick is a little louder.
RM: Wh-- you fool! Run!

//Rinsesu Megimi turns and runs away!
Spike: Wait, it's not -- why would any decent trap have an audible ticking sound?!

//...She has to come back, the light source is here.
//All it would do is tell people something was coming... which would only help potential graverobbers out, they'd be scared away. Is that the point?
Spike: This... the entire room is meant to present a trap that isn't there.
//It's a room designed to waste a graverobber's time. Smart ones in particular, the glyphs would cause a huge waste of time and impress that the reader chose wrongly on the first step, not that there was no right step.
\Besides, if there were ever a real possibility Latoftcyanwits was here, Twilight would have locked down the place for inspection, including disabling all the traps...
//Still, what kind of person designs a pyramid not to ward off dumb robbers, but smart ones?//Unable to find an answer, I walk over the tiles to the other side, and come up in a new passageway.

//‘Thees be a Test of Cleverness.’ Glad the builder pointed it out.
//The passageway leads to a small, foul-smelling room. An inscription, in Middle Equestrian or some such nonsense, is carved on the iron door behind me, room-side. To my left and right, small stone basins hold clear, acrid liquid, one much less than the other. In front, perfectly preserved vertical iron bars. At the base, an upturned glass bowl, a dark patch of sand, and a clearing in the sand that shows: a tunnel with an eaten-away yak-hair string running under the bars. This is all lit by a crystal above the entrance.

//Huh.
//I sit down in the sand, tail curling and uncurling as I think.
Spike: So... in the basins is acid, it smells like vomit. Glass bowl, you would need a glass bowl because acid would eat through a metal one. That doesn't look like a test of cleverness; just use the acid to chew through the bars. But someone tried that...
//Oh, it's an obvious bait. Someone tried to pour acid on the bars, and it doesn't work, but does soak into the sand, eating the string, and... what? Alerts the maker to a break-in?
//I squint and try to see the far wall beyond the iron bars. An inset in the wall is closed off by an iron slab. It must have slammed shut; the siltstone beneath it is cracked...
Spike: Oh. So. Person gets baited to do the obvious thing, it triggers protective measures. Except... the 'obvious thing' relies on knowledge of acid not dissolving glass but dissolving metal. The designer's still targeting smart people, did he just assume no one would get this far otherwise?
//Just to check, I grab a bar in my hands and pull. No dice.
\..Getting around the bars somehow, and into the locked vault/safe/whatever, is our priority. Not figuring out who built this and for what reason. You still shouldn't rule out that Twilight built it herself.
//...If Twilight built it for me not long ago, who tried to pour acid on the bars?
Spike: Okay. We're not getting anywhere thinking, and, considering molten iron is quite a lot hotter than not-molten iron, this should work...

The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Blood of the Earth!
Snaking through the sand, streams of magma flow around The Drakeling’s scales and into his veins!
//Still holding the bar in my hand, I feel magma rolling through my veins. Glass forms from sand underfoot. All I have to do is wait for the iron to melt, and I can force my way through.

//You're assuming the iron of the vault is the same, or even iron at all. It might be tungsten for all you know.

//Who would make an entire vault door out of pure tungsten?
//A booming rumble in my stomach reminds me I'm starving to death standing here. But as I push on the bar, it hasn't melted in the slightest. Taking my hand off of it, it's not even marked...

//FUCKING THINK OF SOMETHING YOU PIECE OF SHIT OR YOU'LL BE AS HUNGRY FOR FOOD AS YOU ARE PONY PUSSY

Spike: Uh, bars aren't melting, I need to get by -- maybe the walls?
//I drag my feet to the wall (leaving a trail of glass, and shriveling the rest of the yak-hair string) and push myself against it. After just a moment, it gives, and I sink in. Pulling myself to the other side, I arrive in half a minute, significantly less energetic.

Spike: Guh. Feet covered in slag. Hope other iron is meltable.
//Reaching forward, I touch the vault door with my hand--
The Drakeling touches the vault door in the iron with his left hand! The Drakeling passes through! The Drakeling stumbles!

//What?!
//A small item, smooth like soapstone, knocks against my fingers, and a string with beads draws along my wrist. In half a second, they're gone, and my arm is caught in a display stand.

Spike: Darn it!!
//I see smoke escape the vault rising upwards and know it's the amulet. There's nothing else it could be.

The Drakeling's Blood of the Earth ends.

//There's nothing left to feel in the vault but the stand, slightly melted. It's empty.

Spike: ...Darn it.
//The amulet was valuable. Nobody ever had to mention what it did, but it's obvious the thing is powerful. Getting that would have been a great help. Whether Rainbow Dash or Twilight would know if I had it, on the other hand, is a different story... guess I have to say it's destroyed now. Because it is.

//Oh, and Rinsesu can't complete her test either. But that's less important.

//From the passageway, I hear a faint echoing:
RM: ...Spike?

//And lantern light comes in from behind the iron door. This is exactly what I need right now.
//I sigh and sit down, trying to kick melted glass off my feet.

Spike: Yeah. In here, there's no traps or anything.
//She pushes the door open with her two front hooves and comes in, setting down the lantern.
RM: Ugh. It smells foul in here.
//...There, now most of the glass is off. Still, let's make sure not to walk on the shards.
Spike: That's the acid.
//Rinsesu sniffs the fuller basin of acid and immediately sneezes, splashing acid up the wall!
Spike: 'Swings!
RM: Aah!
//She backs up and holds a hoof over her nose.

Spike: Are you okay?
RM: ...Yes, I'm fine. It didn't splash me.
Spike: At least some luck, I suppose.

//Grabbing the iron bar at the end, I pull myself through the hole melted in the wall. The siltstone scratches my back, and it's a tight fit...

RM: Why didn't you corrode the iron?
I point at the bowl with my toe, still trying to get past the bars.

Spike: Someone tried that. Didn't work.

RM: I see. Is the door behind you made of the same metal? Did you get in it?

Spike: It's --ooof!

//The iron bar catches my foot and I trip into the sand.

Spike: Ptoo, ppbbth, I hate sand so much...

//As soon as I get out of this awful place I'm leaving and never coming back.

RM: Are you okay?

Spike: Yeah, fine. The vault door is an illusion; Latofcwyidwits was in it.

//She rears back happily, shouting:

RM: Yes! I knew it! Good job, Hero!

//...Thanks? You didn't do any of the work, or mention you 'knew it'...

RM: Now we can take it to the tomb and finish the task set out for me, and my love will...

//Silence falls. Standing up, I notice Rinsesu staring at the vault, contemplating. The bag of books (and other junk) is still out there, on the tiles. I'm not holding anything.

RM: 'Was'?

Spike: Uh, I destroyed it.

//A long stare happens between us. I'd leave, but Rinsesu and her lantern are blocking the door.

Spike: That was my task.

//I think I'll just not mention the 'or retrieve it intact' part and act like this was the plan all along...

//Quietly, Rinsesu Megimi says:

RM: Did I mention I needed the amulet to get in the tomb, as part of my task?

//Blue eyes glare at my empty hands.

Spike: Uh... yeah.

//She yells:

RM: Did I mention I needed the amulet to get in the tomb, as part of my task?

//I busy myself picking glass slivers from the scales of my feet.

//WHHELP, LOOKS LIKE YOU'RE GOING TO HAVE TO KILL THIS FUCKSTICK TO GET OUT, THE ONLY HARD PART SHOULD BE RESISTING THE URGE TO SPREAD EAGLE AND ASK FOR AN ANGRY FUCKING--

Spike: ...

RM: We defeated the sphinx together! Found our way through this labyrinthine darkness and forgave each others' past mistakes, but I see that meant nothing to you! Did you even _consider_ thinking about other ponies' needs, for once?! Did you hesitate for a _second_?!

//Needs? You're trying to convince a pony who doesn't know who you are to love you back.

Spike: ...Yelling at me won't do anything.

//Angrily, Rinsesu Megimi turns around, grabs the lantern in her mouth, and leaves. Besides the crystal above the door (too high up to reach), there's no light. From the passageway, only:

RM: There must be another way, I will find the way, love will find a way...

//And then silence.

\\What was it you said near the beginning? 'Why is it that every adventure takes place in a dark hole in the ground filled with people who want to tear my head off'?

//Hours later, I emerge from the darkness of the pyramid into the fading day. Glad it didn't take longer; the books didn't burn as long as they should have...

//Flat, pale sand surrounds us. Rainbow Dash, lying in the heat (taking a nap?), brushes sand off her flank as she spots my approach. The small pyramid has one exit, and no pony tracks can be seen but those going in.

Spike: I destroyed the amulet.

//I stretch in the sunlight and blink a few times.

Rainbow Dash: You've failed the Test of Loyalty.

//Wait, uh... what?
Rainbow Dash leaps into the air, scattering sand about. I can hardly pick her out in the bright blue sky.

Spike: ...Excuse me?

RBD: Failed. Test of Loyalty. How is there any other way to put that together?

Spike: My test was to--

RBD: Your _task_ was to retrieve or destroy the amulet Leave A Tin Out For And So On. I never said that was your _test_.

//Bullcrap, it was definitely implied. I put my hands on my hips.

Spike: That's garbage and you know it.

RBD: Oh yeah? 'Cause I remember mentioning how important working with others was. And that you'd need to work as a pony/dragon team to survive.

Spike: I'm supposed to figure out what my test is from _hints_?

RBD: Listen, Spike, you're trying to argue that _I_ was too subtle.

//...Damn, I can't argue with that.

RBD: I mean, you did your task alright. Congratulations on that, 'A' for effort. But you didn't think loyalty was a big part of the test? You know, the test _I_ brought you here to do?

//...just wasn't thinking. Honestly, it kind of seemed like this was just something needing to be done, not a kind of test...

RBD: The pony in there is dedicated, hardworking, and honest.

//Also completely obsessed with Rainbow Dash.

RBD: She helped you, but you decided to abandon her and her task at your earliest convenience. Is that any kind of loyalty?

Spike: It was an accident, I--

//Her hoof cuts me off.

RBD: Accidentally, deliberately, not thinking about the test, whatever! You showed you're not loyal by nature and you don't deserve the Element. You fail. I'd say sorry, but I'm not.

//Not even willing to hear me out... my hands ball into fists. Would it even be worth it to say the amulet was destroyed on accident? She'd just find a way to blame me for that too.

//Rainbow Dash spots my anger, and looks at it with amusement. The look on her face yells, silently, 'Go on. Hit me. I always wanted to be immortal.'

//...My quest is to see Princess Hazel. If I have all the Elements of Harmony, sure, I can demand an audience. But why wouldn't having most of them get me there if I ask politely?

Spike: Okay. Have a nice life.

//I turn and start to climb the pyramid. With my best guess at the latitude and longitude, another guess at how long it's been, and the current position of the sun, there should be a way to find out where this is in the desert... and if it's a thousand miles from Forlegsandria.

//A burst of wind follows me up the pyramid, and Rainbow Dash reaches the point before I do.

RBD: And what is _that_ supposed to mean?

//I fold my arms.

Spike: What do you think loyalty _is_? It sounds like loyalty is just barter to you; assistance demands in return future compensation. What idiot Hero would ever expect rewards from the people he helps?

RBD: Knights serve their king, but the king serves his knights. If you don't--

Spike: See? That's what I mean. That loyalty leads to corruption, to cults and good-old-girl clubs that strip organizations of their meaning, the good they do, just to gather power for the organization. And no one else is considered.

RBD: What's _wrong_ with wanting the best for your friends?!

//I squint as she takes position in front of the sun.

Spike: When it comes at the expense of everyone else.

RBD: Are you kidding? You threw away a pony's hopes and dreams to join my dojo but blab on
about 'the good of everyone'?
//I roll my eyes.
Spike: Listen, the adventures of people who have desperate dreams of impressing you so you'll love them back are none of my concern. My--
RBD: Uh, what?
//Unfazed, I continue:
Spike: My concern is defending people from dangers they can't take on themselves and bringing dragons and ponies closer together.
//HE FUCKING ADMITS IT, FINALLY
//Shut up I'm on an angry roll here.
Spike: You're right. I didn't help Rinsesu win your love through her own, fantastically deluded manner. And I'm not loyal to her. This has been a great waste of my time, pyramid and all.
RBD: You're giving up on being a Hero 'cause you failed?
Spike: I'm loyal to the people of Equestria and their benefit. This morning, that meant taking this test to get the Element of Loyalty, which would bring me one step closer to meeting Princess Hazel. Helping explore a dead old drakeling's tomb for a confused lovestruck mare is not part of that.
//The angle of the sun, how long it's been, and if I remember the tracks' orientation when we were coming from the northeast... west should be that way. I slide down the side of the pyramid.
//Behind me, Rainbow Dash says:
RBD: Throwing your companions to the wolves is _exactly_ what loyalty is meant to prevent!
Spike: That's not -- gaah, you're so simple it hurts!
//Wings beat above my head and I decide to acknowledge them, looking up.
Spike: Loyalty is meant in half to prevent selfish behavior. 'I can't take advantage of the group like that'. It's _also_ meant for unity of purpose, putting one cause above others. You can't see that half, because you're not the thinker.
//Rainbow Dash lands in front of me, close enough for a tackle. But I wouldn't win a fight against her, and I'm not getting an Element from reasoned debate anyway. If Rainbow Dash could be talked down I wouldn't be here in the first place.
Spike: Because the last time you thought for yourself, hundreds of people died on the ice!
//FUCKING GREAT WAY TO CONVINCE PEOPLE, INSULT THEM UNTIL THEY CAVE LIKE BITCHES
//Angry snorts from Rainbow Dash. Probably not inspiring much harmony with this angle... I breathe and give it a moment, locking eyes with the Avatar of Speed.
Spike: The knights serve their king. But the king serves a cause, and there can be good causes and bad causes. Bad ones including 'only my knights', and good ones 'all my people'. A Hero, any damned decent Hero, is not a knight -- a tool to be used and directed. _We_ are as kings, to find our own way and follow it to the end...
//I brush past Rainbow Dash, walking west. Bag gone (burnt to ashes for light in the pyramid), I have no food or water for any journey... I just hope Jebed -- or someone -- will pick up.
//Just to clarify, I add parting words, muttered into the cooling air:
Spike: The 'we' includes me, and Rinsesu Megimi, even if I won't waste my time on her. But it certainly doesn't include you.
//I wrap my displacement cape around me, preparing for the journey. Behind me, a yell comes:
RBD: You have no right to call yourself Spike! Because _he_ would never abandon his friends!
//The Avatar of Speed flies off, and I am left to walk alone.

//Early night. Somewhere in desert. Think in fragments. Ankh was in bag. Assorted curses.
//I stumble over another dune, having made it all the way to where there are dunes. Flat, cold sands stretch away to the east, pyramid lost on the horizon somewhere inside them. There's no moon out, but this far away from everything and nothing can drown out the stars. They're beautiful.
//They're beautiful and watching me die.
Spike: Dizzy...
The Drakeling falls backwards!
//My mouth is made from sandpaper. The last time I had something to drink was... over a day ago. And I've been fighting and running ever since the flight here. I tried breathing in through my nose, but it cracked and bled.
//I have nothing to eat or drink, in the middle of Equestria's greatest desert, with no ankh or other way to contact anyone. The only person who knows where I am is Rainbow Dash, not counting Twilight who I haven't seen in the last week at all...
Spike: Hhhhh.
//Too tired for words. Stomach grumbles, head pounding. Sand feels good on my legs and tail.
//Why did I try this? I should have remembered where the ankh was. And Rainbow Dash, of all people, isn't going to worry about the well-being of someone else. I should have asked for a flight back to Fillydelphia, or stuck around to see where Rinsesu went...
//YOU TRIED THIS BECAUSE YOU'RE A FUCKING IDIOT. NOT JUST THE DESERT TEMPER TANTRUM, THE WHOLE HERO SHITFEST IS BECAUSE YOU'RE AN UNREASONABLE MORON.
\...You know, his insults have had less edge lately. What's with that?
//CHOKE TO DEATH ON YOUR OWN COLON YOU INEFFECTIVE TROGLODYTIC SLUDGEMIND
//A breeze starts from the south that brings stray grains of sand over my chest. It dies as quickly as it came.
//Why did I bother becoming a Hero; I wandered off into the desert without food or water or a way to contact anybody. How was I ever going to do anything? The plan was to depend on someone else to bail me out, save me from my own mistakes. What kind of Hero could I ever be?
//Was everyone just laughing at me? Playing along with hidden sad smiles as I stumbled about, like the child no one wants to tell he's lost the game. I bet it was all made up, from the beginning. How could someone like me ever take on the Thirty?
\...Was Na-Mira the only one who believed in you?
//I block out the stars with my eyelids. They're too bright, I don't want them anymore, they shouldn't shine on me...
//A pop of dry air skitters sand down from the dune above. Scrunches tell of a pony steadily making her way down the slope.
Twilight: Oh, Spike, there you are!
//Past a cracked throat I grumble:
Spike: No...
T: 'Swings, do you look bad. What happened?
//Twilight summons a pack from nowhere and digs through it. A few heavy pouches fall to the ground. With great effort, I sit up and look at them.
T: Never mind, it's not important. It's water and cheese, go ahead.
//Immediately I bite into the pouch and gulp down water. Huh, suppose gloomy resignation to death doesn't last long if I'm not going to die.
Spike: ...Cheese?
T: Yes! Magic requires a lot of protein; I always take some with me. Anyway -- hold on, is that Rainbow Dash?
//As I drink another pouch of water, headache still pounding away, Twilight peers into the sky. I can't see anything.
T: Quick, breathe fire, she's looking this way.
Spike: It's never been a great idea for me to attract--
T: Spike, please trust me when I say we don't have time.
//...With difficulty, I work up a meager burst of flame that lights up the dune. Then, nothing can be
heard but me tearing into cheese.
//From much closer than I would expect comes:
Rainbow Dash: ...Spike? Is that you?
//Through a mouthful of sharp cheddar I respond:
Spike: Mm-hmm.
//Hesitating, she starts:
RBD: ...Listen, I thought about... what you said, at the pyramid. I mean, once I got--
T: Dash, hi, it's Twilight. If you're going to give him the Element of Loyalty, get on with it. We officially Do Not Have Time For This.
//Rainbow Dash stares into the darkness, trying to find Twilight. Purple is one of the best colors for hiding in the darkness, incidentally.
RBD: ...You charged off to certain death in the desert because you were so loyal to your cause. I'm just glad I found you in time.
//Rainbow Dash tosses the Element of Loyalty over my neck!

Spike has acquired The Element of Loyalty!
[4/5] Elements acquired!
Congratulations!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

Rainbow Dash rubs The Drakeling's head with her right front hoof!
RBD: But you're still a total bonehead, heh-heh.
A power surges through The Drakeling, like holy water through his blood!
[Hand of Judgment] was mastered!

//Holy water... what could--
RBD: Anyway, what's got your saddle riding high, Twilight?
T: An army is marching on Canterlot.
RBD: What?!
Spike: What?!
//Cheese crumbs fly out onto the sand, and I start coughing.
T: They've blocked the southern roads and destroyed rail lines to Fillydelphia. We can't use the northern roads until the skies are clear, but they have archers underneath their fliers. Oh, and dragons.
RBD: _What_?!
//With no color in her voice, Twilight continues:
T: I've been organizing Canterlot for siege conditions, which is the only thing to be done considering what little we've got there. Most of the Cavalry is dealing with the Aquinatics cleanup or on rotation through the Manehattan-Stalliongrad area, and your Wonderbolts are stuck in Mountainville until the volcano stops smoking. A third of the Magic Corps and trainees are in Canterlot, but that and the Castle Guard form all we have to work with.
RBD: How _big_ is this army?
T: Too big. I'm still looking into how they traveled this deep into Equestria and weren't noticed. It should be impossible.
Spike: You said they have dragons?
//Jebed said dragons are by nature filled with bloodlust, it makes sense that some of them would join an army, maybe from the Aquinatics. They might be mad about the resolution... but if they're going to hurt innocents over it, I have to stop them!
T: That's where Rainbow Dash comes in. We need the skies clear if we're going to last under siege conditions for longer than a week. As Avatar of Speed, identify, isolate, and eliminate enemy flying dragons. They're the first step.
//Rainbow Dash salutes, not sarcastic.
RBD: Understood!
T: And, Spike -- well, you do whatever you think is best, as a Hero. I trust your judgment.
//HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA
//Twilight disappears, but you can only tell by the sound of sand resting.
RBD: Alright, 'Hero', hop on.
Spike: Huh?
//I guess she's giving me a ride, but to where? And why?
RBD: If I'm going to hunt dragons, I'll need a distraction. And, who knows? You may even do some damage!
//THAT IS A WILD FUCKING UNDERESTIMATION OF WHAT THIS SHITPILE CAUSES
//Chuckling to myself, I mount Rainbow Dash, and we fly northwest, towards Canterlot.

Chapter End Notes

With apologies to Tarn Adams.
//Hours later, in the sky near Canterlot. Usually it can be seen for all the night, a city of brightness on the hill like a lantern, but in tonight's dark night no lights are on at all. Looking closer, something shrouds the capital city in a blackness, stronger than any night, shaped like a bowl turned over and placed to block in the light.

//The stars, steadier than ever, look down upon the hills and river that flank Canterlot. They are filled with tents, and the river with the wreckage of bridges. No more detail can be made out. It's silent with no wind, save for the rapid beating of Rainbow Dash's wings beneath me. This rocking motion is making me queasy...

Spike: (What's that dark thing around Canterlot?)
RBD: (Dunno! Looks like magic.)
Spike: (Makes sense. Could be a defensive measure.)

//There are so many camps here... they stretch on for longer than I can see in this dimness. I can't see any signs of dragons.
RBD: (Where should I put you?)

//AT LEAST THE BITCH IS ASKING THIS TIME
Spike: (I don't know yet, I can't see any command structures...)

//A puff of wind washes over us as Rainbow Dash dives for a closer view.
RBD: (Take a closer look, maybe you'll spot something.)
//Hope that wasn't a prelude to dumping me off her back.
//I lean out and squint, but there's nothing for it. Air pulling at me weakens in strength.
Spike: (Thanks, that should help.)
RBD: (Huh?)
Spike: (Slowing down.)
RBD: (I didn't slow down.)
//And yet, the air isn't blasting us like it was.
Spike: (Are you sure?)

//I check the ground, but it's true. We're going a bit faster and the wind isn't as strong; how could that happen unless we're in--
\--slipstream--
RBD: _Front_!
The Crimson Dragon breathes fire!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//Rainbow Dash pulls up sharply, taking evasive maneuvers!
\Already under attack?!
Rainbow Dash dodges away from the dragonfire!
Spike: Waah!
//I slip off the Avatar of Speed's back as she twists!
The Drakeling is caught in the dragonfire! The Drakeling's scales are unharmed!
//Unharmed or not, I'm headed straight for that dragon's mouth!
Spike: Here goes nobody!
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Touch of Grisly Terror!
The Crimson Dragon bites The Drakeling in the left lower arm, tearing apart the scale and tearing apart the muscle!
An artery has been opened by the attack!
The Crimson Dragon latches on firmly!
The Drakeling kicks The Crimson Dragon in the jaw with his left foot, but the attack is deflected
by the scales!
The Drakeling touches The Crimson Dragon in the mouth! The Drakeling touches The Crimson
Dragon in the jaw! They become limp and useless!

//KYAAAAAAAAAAAAAA
//These teeth are bigger than my fingers!
//Flying high above the camps, the dragon has lost control of her jaw and mouth, but I'm about to
fall!
The Drakeling grabs The Crimson Dragon by the nose with his right hand!
The Drakeling breaks the grip of The Crimson Dragon's upper front teeth on The Drakeling's left
lower arm!
//I put my foot on her limp, hanging lower jaw and pull myself up.
//The dragon has, patterned by different scales on her forehead, the emblem of a red helm between
enraged golden eyes staring back at me.
Spike: Not you assho--

The Crimson Dragon breathes fire! The Drakeling's wounds are sealed! The Drakeling's scales are
unharmed!
//In the light of the dragonfire, I can see Rainbow Dash fighting off a group of pegasi, wearing red
helmets.
Spike: I was talking!
The Drakeling claws The Crimson Dragon's right eye with his left hand, tearing apart the right eye!
//Blood (well, more blood) spurts onto my left arm as the dragon howls oddly. She still doesn't
have control of her mouth.
The Crimson Dragon shakes her head!
The Drakeling maintains the hold of The Drakeling's right hand on The Crimson Dragon's nose!
//My claws are digging into the inside of her nose. I'm sure that's not sanitary.
Spike: Hey, stop that! Do you want me to fall?!
The Drakeling grabs The Crimson Dragon by the upper lip with his left hand!
//As I pull myself up, she lets loose again with the dragonfire!

The Crimson Dragon breathes fire!
Rainbow Dash is caught in the dragonfire! Rainbow Dash's mane has been singed! Rainbow
Dash's tail has been singed!
RBD: Hey!! Keep it off me, Spike!!
//I look over to Dash's high pitched squeaks. In the last light of the dragonfire, I see an entire squad
of pegasi falling, some burnt and some broken. There's no saving them before they hit the ground,
if any are still alive. There's also no way of telling whose side they are on.
Spike: Trying!
//The Crimson Dragon loops in mid-air, and starts flying upside down!
Spike: Aaaah no go back the other way!
//I barely hang on, tearing at the dragon's lip and nose with my claws!
The Drakeling grabs The Crimson Dragon by the head with his right lower leg!
The Drakeling bites The Crimson Dragon in the right ear, tearing apart the scale, tearing apart the
muscle, and tearing apart the cartilage!
The Drakeling latches on firmly!

The Crimson Dragon shakes her head!
The Drakeling maintains the hold of The Drakeling's left hand on The Crimson Dragon's upper lip!
The Drakeling maintains the hold of The Drakeling's right lower leg on The Crimson Dragon's
head! The Crimson Dragon breaks the hold of The Drakeling's right hand on The Crimson
Dragon's nose.
//The dragon snorts, spewing blood across my tail. I have a free hand now, so:
The Drakeling claws at The Crimson Dragon's left eye with his right hand, but the attack is
deflected by The Crimson Dragon's scales!
//With a modicum of control over her mouth, she lets out a full-chested roar, echoing through the
sky over the hills. It's so loud my whole body shakes, hanging off the dragon's head.
//I don't want to deal with reinforcements. Through biting teeth, I yell:
Spike: We haff to get out of here! More are coming!
//A different dragon's fire lights up Rainbow Dash's dodging, and she yells:
RBD: Don't you think I know that?!
//More than one are already here?!! Damnit!
//I need, I need, to figure out something to end this quickly... I need time to think!
The Crimson Dragon bites The Drakeling in the left hand, shattering the scale, bruising the muscle,
and bruising the bone!

The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Walk of the Third!
//The night slows down, I know it, but there's little to see. The wind at my back stops dragging, and
that's almost it. Stars above aren't twinkling.
The Drakeling releases the grip of The Drakeling's lower front teeth on The Crimson Dragon's
right ear.
//NO FAT AT ALL, TASTES NOTHING LIKE PREY. 2 STARS, NOT FUCKING
RECOMMENDED.
//I climb up the dragon's head and straddle her neck with my legs. She's rather small, actually...
Spike: Why is a dragon fighting for the people who tried to abduct me?
//MAYBE IF YOU DIDN'T FUCKING STUN HER FACEHOLE WE'D KNOW, SHITSTICK.
Spike: You're the dragon instinct in every dragon, why don't you know?
//BECAUSE FUCK YOU SHUT UP ASSHOLE THAT'S WHY. AND I DO, BUT TELLING
YOU ISN'T ON MY FUCKING LIST OF SHIT TO ACCOMPLISH TODAY
The Drakeling's Walk of the Third ends.

Crimson Dragon: Wh--
//Not caring she has speech back, I yell over the wind:
Spike: I have no idea what this does, but whatever it is you deserve it!
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Hand of Judgment!
The Drakeling punches The Crimson Dragon in the neck from the side with his right hand,
shattering the scale, bruising the muscle, and bruising the upper spine's bone!
//From my hand just after the blow, a static causes my scales to stand on end--
The Bolt of Judgment strikes The Crimson Dragon in the throat, charring the scale!
//It pops, and a flash of lightning lights up the entire sky!
Spike: My eyes!!
//Immediately, the dragon's wings crumple, she rolls to one side, and starts falling out of the sky.

The Drakeling releases the grip of The Drakeling's left upper leg on The Crimson Dragon's neck.
The Drakeling releases the grip of The Drakeling's right upper leg on The Crimson Dragon's neck.
//What the hell was that?! There's not even a cloud in the sky, how?!

Your Hand of Judgment must use divine lightning to punish evil. But that's less important than
falling to your death.
The Drakeling falls away from The Crimson Dragon!
Spike: Rainbow Dash!
//Dragonfire erupts in the sky, long and downward, in the wrong direction. Taking advantage of her
opponent's blindness, the Avatar of Speed flies around and--
Rainbow Dash strikes The Vermilion Dragon in the neck with her Wind Drill, shattering the scales,
bruising the muscle, shattering the upper spine and tearing apart the upper spine's nervous tissue!

//The Vermilion Dragon drops out of the sky, but more dragonfire spews forth at Rainbow Dash! I keep dropping, following the convulsing dragon below me, spinning in her dive.

\Swings are those tents coming up awfully quick!

RBD: Spike!! I need backup, where are you?!
Spike: Crash course with the ground!
//A pair of dragons breathe fire at Rainbow Dash, and she barely escapes!
RBD: _Damn it_! I need to lose them, gimme a second!
Spike: I have _six_!

//USE THE WALK, LUKA

//The red helm army's camps rush up at us, fires starting and ponies mobilizing. I need to time this just right!
The Drakeling grabs The Crimson Dragon by the lower body with his left foot!
The Drakeling jumps!
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Walk of the Third!
//As I watch the stunned dragon plow into a large tent, I hit the ground myself, too hard.
The Drakeling slams into the ground!
The Drakeling's right lower leg takes the full force of the impact, shattering the scales and bruising the muscle! The Drakeling's upper body takes the full force of the impact, shattering the scales, bruising the muscle and bruising the right lung! The Drakeling's upper right arm takes the full force of the impact, shattering the scales, bruising the muscle and bruising the bone!
//I, of course, communicate this with:
Spike: Oooof!
//To the still figures in running poses around the to-be crater and furrow.
The Drakeling's Walk of the Third ends.

//Loud, meaty thumps and wooden cracks trail away ahead of me. I look up. The crimson dragon has left a deep furrow in the dirt and dragged along a tent with her. Twenty yards ahead, her body is covered with the tent, surrounded by debris and splinters. It's not moving.
Spike: Groan...
//Hooves stomp around me, but not too close. Bruised and battered, I roll over.

The Crimson Dragon was defeated!
Spike earned 16000 experience points!
Spike is now level 35!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

Spike: Oh. You bastards are uglier than I thought.
//Most of them have tengu masks on, painted red and shaped into demonic smiles. Ponies and unicorns, male and female, surround me completely.
//(I'm in the middle of the war camp surrounded by hostile soldiers, many of whom are spellcasters; my only ally (if you could call Rainbow Dash that) is a mile above me fighting off at least one fire-breathing dragon; the enemy is unknown completely in size and strength and directive...)
Spike: I like these odds.
The Drakeling stands up.
//I take a fighting stance. Still no clue who these ponies are or what they're after, but I'll do my best not to kill them.
//BUT NO FUCKING CONSIDERATION FOR THE DRAGON WHO NOW HAS RIBS WHERE HER LUNGS SHOULD BE?
//That, uh... I didn't know Hand of Judgment would do that.
//...Silence, even from above. I can't hear any spells starting, that's what I'm waiting for, but soft
footsteps and a strange crackling approach.

Spike: ...

//Two ponies retreat, and in their place appears a drakeling. Her scales are an iridescent blue, shifting in the light of the torch she carries. A broadsword is secured to her back by a leather strap, but that and an anklet make up all she wears. Curiously, I see no red or helmet shapes anywhere. \You weren't wrong about the 'bunch of ugly bastards', though.

Blue Drakeling: Spike.

//What?! Celestia's wings, how do they know my name?!

Spike: Sorry, Ralph.
///I manage to keep it together. Who have I told my name over my journey? Barely anyone, which frankly is a problem considering I want to make myself a symbol... but where could these people have learned it?
//In the voice of a cherub, she orders:
Blue Drakeling: Oh. Kill him, then.
///I wave and shout:

//Several raised spears stop at their shoulders, and spells fade away. No one is laughing, not even me.

//THAT HAPPENS WITH ALL YOUR JOKES FUCKBRAIN
BD: I supposed so. You killed our best flying dragon and survived a terminal-velocity fall, it couldn't be anyone else. Not to mention, you look just like the description Hazel gave to Canterlot Castle security.
///...Hazel knows what I look like? She told Castle security? These people have a plant in the Castle?

Spike: Why are you here?
Belladonna: My name is Belladonna. I am the champion of our leader, General Warhelm.
Spike: Oh, I get it. The most powerful representatives of the respective leaders duel it out, me and you. Same way that dragons deal with their land disputes.
///Remarkably embracing of other cultures for the Princess, and whoever this General Warhelm is. Except for the part where I have to do all the dirty work, that's still disappointing.
BD: ...No. That would be stupid.
///...Oh.

BD: General Warhelm wishes to speak with you in person. Tales of your heroic deeds have reached his ears, and the General acknowledges your power. He wishes to work together with you.
///This is a... a job recruitment? Seriously?
Spike: He couldn't take out a want ad?
BD: Please follow me. He wishes to speak with you before the morning is on us.
///...If I say no, it's likely they all will attack me, and if she really is a champion I'll have to use lethal force to defend myself. But if I go, the General should be protected by the best soldiers he has under his command, and I'm only getting in deeper... why isn't Heroism filled with easy choices?
Spike: ...Don't see any harm in talking.
///Relaxing, I check over my wounds and bruises. None are bad enough I need Blood of the Earth yet.
///No further words, Belladonna turns and marches off. Noting the barest hint of sunrise on the horizon, I follow.

//The camps are spread over the hills surrounding Canterlot; we walk down almost a mile through thick forest before reaching another group. I follow Belladonna and note ponies dragging logs in haphazard non-lines, setting up barriers facing the wrong direction, digging trenches perpendicular to the line of battle. Sounds of combat practice fill the early morning air, disorganized, undisciplined. I stop, once, on the edge of a slope to look into the sky; teams of pegasi with red
badges are patrolling like angry bees -- everywhere. It's like these ponies nominally know what an army is supposed to do and how to act, but haven't got it down just yet. Few dragons can be seen. Belladonna urges me along.

//She has to stop four times, some security person stopping her (once a griffon, but not one I recognize). Each time, she points to her anklet in silence, and we move through.
//I try to orient myself as we reach what is obviously a command hub, double the security of anything else and poorly disguised from the sky. A simple, medium tent is to the north. A long hut, stretching over a hundred feet, must make up the war room to the southeast, lower down. And a cherry-red dragon blocks the entrance to a cave which has been marked 'Armory'--
//Something tall shifts in the shadows there, steps out into the sunlight. It fades into mist. I freeze. BD: ...Hero? The General wishes to see you at once.
Spike: ...
//What was it that I saw? I know it in my eyes, but I need to capture it, word it out because it fled so quickly... a powder-blue helmet, same color decorative horseshoes. A fully black, tall pony, more of a horse. Celestia-sized, also an alicorn. Hair made of emptiness, scattered with burning dots. It had a sneer on its lips, and its cutie mark...
Spike: ...the Caduceus...
BD: Could you speak up?
//I stare at the dragon in front of the Armory. She's alert, watching. Should have smelled an intruder...
Spike: Belladonna? Do you have an alicorn in your army?
BD: ...To the best of my knowledge, no. Considering all known alicorns can be counted on one hand, I doubt we ever will.
//Osto Bacchus: Let it never be said that deals with devils are unprofitable.
//That alicorn... it must have been the same person who empowered Osto Bacchus. But to what end?
Spike: How meticulous is your quartermaster?
BD: ...These are some very strange questions, Spike.
//Gah. Using my name again jars me, I don't like that they know it...
Spike: I'm just wondering. This is a nice setup, and I _am_ sworn to overthrow the Princess. I could see myself here.
//The fact this army shares a link with Osto Bacchus means it is going down, hard. No compromise, no negotiation. Evil of that sort can't be just quarantined.
//The blue champion puts a hand on her thigh and smiles at me.
BD: ...Zhuque has the eyes of an eagle and the ears of a bat. Nothing goes on without her knowing.
//Then it's settled. When it comes to the leaders of this army, I'm not pulling any punches.
//We walk ten more feet to the entrance of the simple tent. Belladonna motions for me to stay, then opens the flap, enters, and bows.
BD: General Warhelm. The Hero Spike, as you requested, will speak with you now.
//I can't see perfectly into the tent because Belladonna is blocking my sight. Also, I'm concentrating more on the quiet burst of air that happened next to me.
Spike: (_Now_?! Of all times?!)
T: (Hush! They're right there!)
General Warhelm: Good. Thank you, Belladonna. Bring him in.
//She turns, walks the five feet between us, grabs me by the hand, and nearly drags me into the tent, saying nothing. Excuse me?!
//I take my hand away, and look around the room.
//A table, a chair, a bed, and a chest, all simple. But behind the table stands a broad pony, with red fur and piercing grey eyes. He looks me over like a hawk does prey. Bald, his only other details are a front anklet that matches Belladonna's, an amulet, and a sword as his cutie mark. I can't get away from his eyes.
GW: Welcome, Spike.
Spike: Hi.
//WHAT UP FAUSTUS
//I blink, once, and look at the ground in front of me. What did his parents think when they saw a
flaming sword was 'his destiny'?
//Twilight floats beside me. I can feel the disturbance in the air, but no one else pays it any mind.
They're probably not looking for it.
GW: Belladonna, you know I value your company, but this must be a talk between the Hero and
me alone.
//She bows, almost knocking me in the head with her broadsword.
BD: I understand.
//Without another word, she leaves.
Spike: ...So...
GW: So. It is good to finally meet you, Hero. I have heard much about you. Please, sit down.
//Twilight's rear flumphts to the ground beside me as I take a step, not too loudly... I reach the chair
without realizing why.
//Staring at it dumbly, I mutter:
Spike: I think I'll stand.
//And stand next to it. The General eyes me over, once, and in a reluctant tone responds:
GW: If you so wish.
//I still can't get away from those eyes.
Spike: You said you wanted to talk to me?
GW: Yes. You are the Hero of the Land of Equestria, as I understand it. Very many people should
want to talk to you. I consider myself lucky you deigned to meet me.
//Most people aren't commanding an army besieging Canterlot...
//Instead of responding, I inspect his anklet, pretending to stare at maps on the table in front of me.
It's the same design as Belladonna's, just larger to accommodate a pony's leg.
GW: Stop staring at my hooves.
//I snap up and look him in the eye.
Spike: So, uh, from what I understand you invited me here for a job offer?
GW: ...No. I'm not offering you just employment. What I will offer you is much more than that. It
is based on what I myself journeyed my entire life to see, and why the largest volunteer army
Equestria has ever seen follows me.
Spike: (Great, what I really needed today is backstory.)
T: (It may be important at his trial.)
//Hah, she thinks he'll make it to a trial.
GW: What are you muttering?
Spike: Just some sarcasm, don't worry about it.
//My own answer came out quicker than I was expecting, huh...
GW: While I went to great pains to meet you, Spike, do not think of yourself as above me. The Red
Helm Legion is thousands strong.
//True, I don't know his motivation yet and there must be some reason thousands of... eager fighters
follow his command. But until I hear something worthwhile, he's just another evil conqueror.
GW: Hero, what would you say is the only worthwhile goal of pony accomplishments and
achievements? If you had to choose only one?
//Just one? That's hard, there's so much to think about...
Spike: ...Uh, do you mean, 'pony', or 'pony and dragon and so on'?
GW: Only listen. I apologize, but this is meant to be a monologue.
//...Sweet Celestia's Wings is this guy bossy. Nothing's opened itself up to me yet, though...
GW: Would it not be their happiness? I find the only worthwhile end, no matter how phrased or
how measured, asserts 'make the most people the most happy'.
//Yeah, sure. So what?
GW: I feel -- no, I know this, in my heart and mind -- that people are self-centered. Not in a bad
way, either. They focus on their world, their experiences, their wants, because that's the manner of our lives. A person knows what would make her happy, but less anyone else.

//T: In the end, you're the one most responsible for the happiness of you.

//Hmm...

Spike: Okay, sure. I'd agree with that.

//As I speak, Warhelm looks a bit flustered. He licks his lips, and holds out the amulet around his neck to look at it.

\\No way, that can't, it can't be... soapstone and beads, impossible...

GW: ...Well, uh, Spike, there have been too many tyrants in Equestria's past for me to say any one person, even the most well meaning of them, beyond Celestia is fit to rule over all of them. //It's not like any Princess or Prince goes about commanding every single person on the daily tasks in their life... they delegate, organize, have people they trust who specialize in certain areas.

//The General turns around, eying the back of the tent. I take the opportunity to move back near Twilight.

GW: I say, let each pony rule herself as best she can, find her own happiness. But such a thing isn't sustainable; the chaos that results inevitably leads to new governments and new forms of control.

//That might be true; for the most part history is filled with examples of a few people with power ruling over a bunch of people without it. It's more stable (fortunately or not) than everyone just trying to make it on their own.

GW: If there must be a government, let it be a yoke that does not chafe. If there must be control, let at least it be accountable, modifiable, subject to the will of many. The collective wisdom of all peoples will see that errors in rulership will diminish, as there will not be a ruler.

Spike: (Oh, so he's proposing some sort of democracy. Blech.)

//Silence, even though I'm next to Twilight and I know she can hear me.

GW: This is the reason behind self rule -- poor decisions will directly harm the people who make them. The people will find happiness quickest themselves... but it leaves a significant organizational problem.

//...Isn't this where Twilight would snark in with 'I'll say' or something? She's just sitting there...

GW: There are too many people to simply obey these orders, like a great hivemind stretching across Equestria; no. There must be an executor, a group or person that sees these things done. And, Spike, I don't mean to brag, but... of all the people I've ever met in my journey, none have disagreed that I am exactly the stallion for that job.

Spike: So where do I come in?

//He smiles, poorly. It's obvious Warhelm isn't used to anything but sternness and ordering people about.

GW: One pony can't handle the execution of democratic affairs himself. But you, a Hero of Equestria proven in far more battles than even I have seen, and I, never met a person I haven't been able to reason with, together as equals...

//He draws breath in, leaving the rest of the sentence unsaid.

//That's his angle? 'Help me abolish the monarchy because it's the right thing to do for the people -- oh wait really do it because we'll be the most powerful people with the most resources ever, but less than we would have if you just became the new king'? What convoluted, stupid thought process would lead to 'I kinda want to help people, but I kinda want to be powerful beyond compare'? It just makes neither happen!

GW: I'm offering you a chance to be something greater than just you alone could be. All we need to do is overthrow Hazel -- something you've sworn to anyway. What do you say, Hero?

//...All in all, he is a particularly poor speech-giver. Seriously, Hazel was better than him. He didn't even explicitly mention the 'overthrow the throne and establish a new ruling government by the force of this army, _then_ transition into democracy', it was totally implied even though it's most of the work I'd be doing. If he really thinks that's not something to focus on it's a wonder he made it this far.
Spike: ...I'd say, at best, your plan makes you a naive Faustian idiot with no sense of how the world works.

//SO YOU'D BE THE RULING TWINS OF FUCKHATTERY
//It looks good on the surface, sure, but it's garbage underneath. For the same reason you poison strong foods.
GW: Follow me. Take my offer. And I'll show you that's not true.
//His eyes bore holes through mine, like drills. The hypnotic effect in his voice is stronger than before -- but now that I've noticed it's there, it's easy to resist, and just sounds silly.
Spike: If people could correctly determine and want what is best for them, no government rule would be necessary. You know what you'll get, as this 'democratic executor'? The people will command you to do impossible things, ask for something and give you nothing to do it with, then blame you for failure. Tyranny of the majority and tragedy of the commons erupt, and when -- if -- you step in to correct it, that's 'a perversion of justice'. Groups of well-connected noblemares start rabble-rousing, misleading and misinforming the public, until great groups of people are dividing into packs and believing only what it is most profitable for the noblemares' coffers to believe. Your end goal is doomed to failure!
//General Warhelm, utterly bewildered, raises a hoof, and then slowly puts it on the ground, still staring at me.
Spike: The 'wisdom' of the masses? Decidedly average wisdom, because that's exactly how it will be; you may as well flip coins! You're even wrong about self-rule; it arises because people are born into a system of governance without consent, so they may as well get some say. But that's already present in the mayoral elections, like in Forlegsandria and Ponyville!
//I fold my arms.
Spike: A ship can't be directed by popular vote because it makes the cabin boy's thoughts as valuable as the captain's. Hazel's made mistakes, sure, but I'm here to make sure she never makes those mistakes again. Saying 'everyone should lead us, instead of being led by the best of us'? The opposite of that is what's obviously true!
//After my rant, I breathe for a minute, staring back at a less imposing Warhelm. If I could put a word to his expression, it'd be... disbelief.
//Slowly, the words Warhelm manages to come up with are:
GW: You won't join me, then?
Spike: No.
//Seriously, how was that not clear?
GW: ...I see.
//A stray breeze rustles the tent flap behind me, but it dies down quickly. Warhelm's bed creaks loudly, once.
GW: Will you attack the Red Helm Army?
//...That depends. They're doomed anyway, with Twilight and the Avatars set against them, it's just a matter of how much bloodshed there will be...
Spike: (I'm not saying this next thing to bluff him, this is actually true. Just in case you wondered.)
//Warhelm makes eye contact with me as I'm talking to Twilight. He glances quickly to where she is sitting.
GW: Who--
Spike: Who was that dark alicorn with the Caduceus as her cutie mark?
//Stunned, he sits down, grey eyes probing around the room wildly. But he is silent.
Spike: Well?!
GW: I think invisible people in the room should reveal themselves.
//Before he ends the sentence, I shout:
Spike: And I think you're projecting!
//And swing my arms dramatically. My left hand brushes Twilight in the flank, jolting her out of dismissing her spell. She was seriously about to do that...
Spike: Deal with your own devils, not mine! Who was that mare?!
A long staring match. He meets my eyes the entire time, unblinking, but says nothing. I spit at him:

Spike: How could I be an equal if you don't tell me? Screw that, how could self-rule happen if people don't know what's being done in their names? You're not powerful enough to take Canterlot and secure Equestria without a devil's deal. Which means you won't rule Equestria. She will, whoever she is. And frankly, an unaccountable person with no clear dedication to her subjects' welfare trying to take the throne by schemes should in no way ever be allowed to do so.

T: (Did you... did you really see a mare like that?)

Ignoring Twilight, I finish:

Spike: I _know_ who she is far better than you do. And you should hope I'm the one you see at the end, instead of _her_.

That, however, was a _complete_ bluff. I don't know anything about the Caduceus pony besides that she worked with Osto Bacchus... that, and the Caduceus is a symbol of trade, meaning she wants something back from Warhelm after all this is done. But those things are enough to convince me.

After a short moment, Warhelm roughly states:

GW: Please excuse me. Stay here, I'll be back.

And wobbles out of the tent, leaving Twilight and I behind.

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

Spike: Huh.

Didn't expect him to just... up and leave.

Spike: Well, I learned a lot during that conversation. How about you?

T: I... think I'm more confused than I've ever been. What happened here?

Spike: Oh, at this point, not really important. Let's go, I can tell you later.

By 'later', of course, I mean not at all.

T: ...Warhelm said to stay here.

Spike: ...So?

T: So he'll be back. We should wait for him.

That seals it, I just have to know... soapstone on beads, right? The same as I felt Latoftcwyidwits melting between my fingers. Though that must have been a replica.

Spike: Hey, Twilight. Can you do me a favor?

She nods, hair bobbing in front of her eyes.

T: Sure! What is it, Spike?

Spike: Think back to every imperative verb Warhelm used. Were there any you didn't do?

Come to think of it, I was compelled to do things he said at the beginning... and he seemed really surprised when I didn't.

Twilight puts a hoof on her chin, thinking for a minute, then hurriedly stands up in distress.

T: ...Oh my skies.

Spike: I have a question: what were Bucket James's amulet's magical abilities and what did it look like?

Twilight puzzles for only a second before responding:

T: You're saying... you think the amulet on his neck is Latoftcwyidwits? And it enchants his voice?

I still don't know how she pronounces that.

Spike: Yeah. Think about it: he's a terrible speaker, but somehow got an army to follow him and made you do things without noticing, even with your level of magical power and will.

T: So how were you able to resist?

...I shrug.

Spike: Guess I'm used to dismissing the mental urges of annoying morons.

HEY DON'T YOU FUCKING DARE COMPARE ME TO THAT SHITPILE, I AM A
GODDESS-DAMNED POET AGAINST THAT PATHETIC MOTHERFUCKER.
//Whatever. I rub my knee and start thinking about what comes next.
T: ...Do I see a plan forming?
//She's right. I chuckle, but since I have to say it:
Spike: I have a plan.

T: (_This_ is your plan?)
Spike: (I didn't know he was at the latrines!)
//I hope the battle records don't show 'the valiant Hero then ambushed his sworn enemy whilst he was taking a crap'.
//It's a small trench dug downwind of most anything. Doubt they dedicated a lot of operating capital to luxurious, uh, 'accommodations' (though I'm sure they'd find it in Canterlot...)
Spike: (Whatever, it just means there won't be anyone watching. I sincerely, sincerely hope.)
T: (Tell me again what we're going to do.)
//Twilight and I are both invisible, from a spell of hers. The smell of burning rubber helps keep my concentration, but only a little.
Spike: (The main source of his power is the amulet. If we take that from him, we can use it ourselves to dissolve the army.)
//LIKE IN ACID? FUCKING AWESOME
//Not like in acid.
//FUCK YOUR PLAN IT'S SHIT THEN
T: (Tell me again what we're going to do.)
//Poor choice of friends?
Spike: (Someone needs to deal with the amulet in case anything magical comes up.)
\You're sure it's not because Twilight might be Princess Hazel, who is an adequate speaker even before the amulet's powers and can use it to easily establish the reforms you want her to?
//...Quiet, here he comes.
Spike: (Get ready...)
T: (Why? You're the one doing all the fighting.)
//Warhelm walks out of the ditch, shakes his head, blinks a few times, and notices my tracks down the hill.
GW: Hey--

[SAVE LOCATION]

The Drakeling charges at General Warhelm!
Spike: This is for trying to hypnotize my best friend!
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Hand of Judgment!
The Drakeling punches General Warhelm in the head with his right hand, bruising the skin, bruising the muscle, bruising the skull and bruising the brain!
General Warhelm has been knocked unconscious!
The Bolt of Judgment strikes General Warhelm in the head, charring the skin!
//A lightning-web pattern burns into his fur and down to the amulet!
LATOFTCWYIDWITS absorbs the energy! LATOFTCWYIDWITS begins to glow!
General Warhelm falls over!

General Warhelm was defeated!
Spike earned 1000 experience points!

[SAVE LOCATION]

//Wow, that was particularly easy...
//Warhelm lies on the ground, smoking slightly. Checking that no one else has noticed, I kneel next
to him and inspect the amulet.
Spike: (...It's giving off heat and light. The beads look darker than they did, and the string contracted... was it burnt?)

T: (By just lightning? What kind of ancient artifact can't take a few thousand amps through it? Talk about shoddy workmanship.)

//Twilight's probably made artifacts with more protective abilities than this amulet, but the ability to magically compel others isn't something she can protect against... what a strange arrangement of magical ability that is.

//I reach around his neck, trying to slip a finger underneath the amulet. It's strangely immobile; it both contracted and burnt itself into his flesh, but even so I should be able to at least wiggle it.

Spike: (I... I think I need help with this.)

//I said I wasn't going to pull punches, but cutting away at someone's neck to get at an amulet is horrific, and more importantly unfeasible because I don't have a cutting tool on me.

T: (Use your fingers.)

Spike: (Look at this, it's too tight. I can't fit a finger in there.)

T: (Don't worry if it hurts, just go for it!)

Spike: (No, I'm serious. Can't you use your magic for this?)

T: (Spike, if I wanted to do it by myself would you be here?)

Spike: (It's going to bleed if I try forcing it. And how far are we from a hospital?)

T: (You're the one who wanted to try it this way, Spike.)

Spike: (I really need your help right now, Twilight. Could you use your magic to loosen it? Even just a little would work.)

T: (...Try lubricating it?)

Spike: (What, with like, soap or something?)

T: (Do you _have_ soap on you?)

Spike: (No, as much as it would be appreciated here.)

T: (Lick it until it's wet.)

Spike: (But I might start to like the taste! I've been tempted before...)

T: (It's okay. I trust you.)

//A crack of a branch startles us, and we freeze in place, staring. Eventually, after a long and awkward silence, we start talking again.

Spike: (Besides, the _charred flesh_ is kind of a major turn-off.)

//OH THANK FUCK I THOUGHT THAT SEGMENT WAS GOING TO CONTINUE

T: (So I see. The longer we stay here, the higher the chance we're discovered, so--)

//A spell moves down from the top of Twilight's horn onto her forehead, morphing and spreading until it separates into two hovering spheres, one near her ear and one near her mouth.

T: (Rarity, can you hear me? You have incoming.)

Twilight Sparkle points her horn at General Warhelm and casts Teleport!
General Warhelm is struck by the beam!
General Warhelm disappears!

//Echoing out of Twilight's ear, I can barely make out a triplet of thumps, then:

Rarity: Twilight, dear, I understand you're concerned about me as a friend, but teleporting a stallion into my creation room is completely unacceptable! There are _ways_--

T: (He's General Warhelm, leader of the Red Helm Army. The people besieging Canterlot. Get that amulet off him before he wakes up, then I want a full thaumic analysis A.S.A.P. Oh, and throw him in the Castle dungeon I guess.)

T: ...Of course. Ta-ta for now.

//Twilight's orbs fade and she looks at me, expectant.

T: (No amulet as of yet, and it could be anywhere from five minutes to days before the analysis is done. Is there a part of your plan based around being in limbo?)
//Huh... suppose I could re-work that part.
Spike: (Strangely enough, yeah. But first, I have an important question: how do drakelinghood resurrections work?)

Spike: (You know, I honestly didn't think that would work.)
//Twilight, disguised as a generic Red Helm soldier, pretends to look over me as a pre-fight inspection.
T: (How could it not have? Noticing the anklets was a stroke of genius; I'd have never thought a general would start a romance with a soldier under his command.)
Spike: (Because Applejack pens up all her sexuality in a little box and never cracks it open?)

//YOU MUST BE FUCKING SOULMATES
//Twilight glares at me and snorts. Forgot they're still close friends, whoops...
Spike: (Though I still don't see why I had to speak for Warhelm's illusion, instead of for my illusion. Scratch that, why did I need an illusion in the first place?)
T: (Your illusion didn't talk, but Warhelm's did. The spell is limited to visuals; I don't have anything memorized for sight and sound illusions. Besides, your freakish voice--)
Spike: (I prefer to call it a talent--)
T: (Was enough to convince _his own lover_ to fight you for the position of Red Helm Champion, when combined with my illusion. What are you worrying about?)
Spike: (Right now? Fighting to the death with Belladonna, really.)
//A drum echoes behind us, the signal for both drakelings to step away from their allies and enter the makeshift duel grounds. Belladonna steps away from Zhuque, the cherry red dragon quartermaster, and I step away from Twilight.
Zhuque: ...Who is that?
Spike: My dentist. What's it to you?
//I enter the grounds. It's a makeshift circle dug into the ground, lined with tree trunks as the walls. Why trees, for two drakelings that can breathe fire? Because Twilight wanted it to take as much time as possible to dig out the space, build the arena, and gather everyone around for the fight. It took only an hour, despite the Red Helms' inefficiency. Probably because of their lust to see someone beat the hell out of someone.
//Rarity hasn't gotten back to us.
\You want this to take as long as possible, so Latoftcwidwits is removed from Warhelm. That, and Hazel's troops in Canterlot probably appreciate all the time you can give them...
//The plan is, we find a way to stall the army for long enough that the amulet is ours, then we convince them just like Warhelm convinced them to fight. Plan B is... they take Canterlot and in return get slaughtered by the Cavalry and the Avatars. I very much hope we don't fall through to Plan B.
//Belladonna stands a few feet in front of me, holding her broadsword. Her anklet is gone. The doors close behind both of us.
BD: It is assumed, as Champions, we have the decorum needed to direct the fight ourselves. There's no referees or announcers.
//I nod, and speak loudly:
Spike: Fine, then! My name is Spike! I am Hero of the Land of Equestria! I mean to see this land abolished of the mistakes Princess Hazel has inflicted upon it for the last one and a half years! With my fists and my mind, I will defeat you and become the Red Helm Champion!
//Belladonna points her sword at me and responds:
BD: My name is Belladonna. I am the Red Helm Champion, and after our fight I will be the Red Helm Champion. Two hundred days I have served as Warhelm's most loyal subject, and I won't see anyone else take my place under him. He deserves the strongest, and that is me.
//She then takes a step forward, lowers her sword, and focuses on me with the deadest eyes.
BD: (And I'd like to add on a personal note: I am going to _ruin_ you, _boy_. I'd understand opposing the Red Helms as a whole, but trying to take my spot? I will humiliate you. In front of
every pony and dragon who has gathered here, whoever your so-called 'dentist' happens to be, and all your friends that may be scrying on you as we speak. I'll make you _scream_ before the end.)

//Feh, I've heard better.

BD: (I've beaten down plenty of prettyboys in my day and when I'm done with you I'll beat down plenty more, but none of them so far have been stupid enough to be a drakeling. Do you have any idea what I'll do to you? I'm going to _torture_ you, in front of as many people as possible, kill who you are and replace it with someone else, and you're going to _love_ it. You will moan and buckle and cry before me and before them, powerless to stop it.)

//...So, this took a weird turn...

BD: (I'm going to start with my feet. Because you are nothing more than worthless dirt to be walked upon, a nobody that makes up my path more than you do an obstacle on it. Then I'll move to my hands. To show you are little more than a tool, an item I use to get what I want, fashioned and maintained and kept by me, at my whims. I will use my mouth. Because you are something to consume, a candy in wrapper to be opened and eaten and forgotten, a crayfish to be sucked dry and discarded.)

//Uh... is this a fighting contest, or a fanfiction writing contest?

BD: (I won't let you feel me truly, have what is rightfully Warhelm's. Because you are not worthy to call yourself equal to him; you are a lesser worthless being and you will be my slave. You will be my slave, and the meager existence you find picking up the scraps of the glory he and I share will be infinitely greater than anything you have ever experienced.)

//She stares at me, grinning in her red eyes but not her lips. I'm suddenly aware of a thousand people around us, watching, waiting for a response to something they may or may not have heard. Spike: Has anyone told you that you're _really_ messed up?!

Belladonna attacks!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

Belladonna slashes at The Drakeling with her *steel broadsword*, but The Drakeling dodges away!

Spike: Hey, I was still talking!

The Drakeling breathes fire! Belladonna is caught in the dragonfire! Belladonna is unharmed!

//She stands far from me, saying nothing.

Belladonna slashes at The Drakeling with her Scythereach from a distance, but The Drakeling dodges away!

//WHAT THE FUCK HOW DOES SHE KNOW THAT

//Whaa! How do you have that sort of reach with a sword?! Screw this!

The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Walk of the Third!

//Time slows down around me, the cheering and jeering of a thousand gathered Red Helms downshifting greatly. Belladonna, in preparation for another strike, stands tall with both her hands on her sword.

//Is she taller than you?

//Never mind that. There's something I've been wanting to try for a while, now, after reading about it in The Truth About Dragons (Terry Fick), but there weren't any bipedal opponents to test it out on...

//I walk over to behind Belladonna, and...

The Drakeling grabs Belladonna by the jaw with his right hand!

The Drakeling grabs Belladonna by the head with his left hand!

The Drakeling locks Belladonna's neck with his right hand!

The Drakeling breaks Belladonna's neck with his right hand, tearing apart the neck's muscle, denting the upper spine's bone, and tearing apart the upper spine's nervous tissue!

A ligament in the neck has been torn and a tendon has been torn!

//Whoa! Holy shit! I wasn't even pulling that hard!
The Drakeling's Walk of the Third ends.
//Full sound comes blasting back, immediately followed by a gasp as the crowd reacts to my disappearance. Belladonna drops her sword and collapses forward, unable to stop herself from falling.
Spike: ...Wow.
//It is impossible to emphasize how easy that was. I stare at my hands in disbelief.
//SEE I TOLD YOU KILLING IS EASY AND EFFICIENT NOW FUCKING DO IT MORE
//The only reason I tried this was because Belladonna will be resurrected anyway!

Belladonna was defeated!
Spike earned 20000 experience points!
Spike is now level 36!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//Crazy bound bint...
//As Zhuque rushes into the arena, and murmurs start running through the crowd, Twilight casts a spell, receiving a magical contact from Rarity.

Chapter End Notes

With apologies to Tarn Adams.
//I walk past Zhuque, the cherry red quartermaster, concealing Belladonna's dying body with her large wings. Twilight, still disguised as a Red Helm soldier, is listening to Rarity over a spell. The crowd gets louder and louder as we listen, so I lean in close. Very close; Twilight and I end up sharing a cheek.

R: --quite a task. First of all I had to draw the blinds because there was an _unconscious stallion_ in my creation room, and heavens knows what the neighbors would think if they saw. And you mentioned the amulet but not the additional spell on it or it being burnt into his neck--

T: (There was a spell cast on it?)

R: With a 5-F structure as it had? Dear, please; don't tell me you're going soft.

//I BET FUCKTOY HERE HAS HEARD THAT SENTENCE BEFORE

T: (I, uh, the lenses dry out my eyes. Did you find out anything about the amulet?)

R: That was my intent before the entire thing exploded into shrapnel.

//What?!

T: (Oh my skies! Are you okay?)

R: Don't worry, Twilight, my abjurations were more than up to the task of protecting me. No promises about bringing this 'Red Helm leader' to the dungeons, however; today likely sets a new nadir for his bodily integrity.

//Both General Warhelm and Belladonna are dead... from what Twilight explained to me, we don't have much time before they come back, either.

T: (...Is the amulet totally lost?)

R: Most certainly. Thaumic NTA registered two separate releases of magical energy on destruction. Ruling out the non-casting earth pony's negligible magical power, both spell and enchantment were dismissed.

//...Darn.

T: (Why did it explode? Were you doing anything to it?)

R: I find this is the most distressing part (which is strange, considering just exactly what I'll never get out of my hair): the destruction happened on reaction to an initial Pondeleev probe targeted at the amulet.

Spike: (Huh?)

//Twilight covers the sphere in front of her with a hoof and says:

T: (Basic magical tool. Low-level as you can get.)

R: If I must guess, I'd suppose the spell was placed to prevent magical inspection of the amulet, by destroying it as it has. Which, to me, says this 'Red Helm' army should have a talented mage amongst them.

T: (...Understood. But you're certain nothing's recoverable?)

R: All I'm certain of is a shower and a quite desperate need for this room to be bleached. (It even got on the ceiling, blasted thing...)

T: (Alright, I'll let you go then.)

R: Twilight, be careful. I understand you are the best spellweaver in all of known Equestria, but these ponies showed up out of nowhere. There may be someone you don't know about that you can't handle... unlikely as that may be.

//The dark alicorn I saw comes to mind...

T: (That may be true... I still need to figure out how Mountainville didn't see them before this. But I'm sure I can handle anything thrown at me. And I have a trump card.)

//Twilight winks at me.
R: Trump card or not, get your flank back here in one piece. You do still owe me for covering the bill at the Snaffler, dear.
//She rolls her eyes and snarks:
T: Yeah, love you too, girl.
//And dismisses the spell. I stand back a step, out of shared-air distance.
Spike: (So. No amulet?)
T: (Doesn't look like it. And for the time being, no Warhelm, either. Can you figure out a plan that doesn't include either of them?)
//I think for a moment, acutely aware of the crowd watching us and a pair of medics looking over the broken Champion's body.

Belladonna has suffocated.

Spike: (Can I? Sure. A good plan with a high chance of success? ...How much time do we have?)
T: (...Let's say 'until either one of them revives'. I don't think they'll listen if it gets out we abducted and killed their 'glorious leader'.)
//That's not much time at all! I could go out and talk to them, try to get some of them to see reason, but crowds think as a whole... if it doesn't go well, I'll end up decreasing the amount of people who desert or surrender!
Spike: (Do you think--)
//A buzz of magic lights up the tip of Twilight's horn, like the top of a ship's mast. Confused, she awkwardly tries to stare at it.
T: (What? Who's in my office at a time like--)
//The same two spheres split from Twilight's horn and hover near her head, out of which we both hear:
Unknown Caller: Whoa!
T: (Who are you and why did you call me?)
UC: Oh, uh, Miss -- Dr. Kim! University Cleaning. Sorry for the cold call, but your necklace here has been shouting ever since I walked in. Do you want me to turn it off?
//...Seriously. When an army threatens to take Canterlot and overthrow the monarchy, someone at Canterlot UMS decides 'time to clean the windows'!?  
T: (Necklace? ...Shouting?)
UC: Yeah. It's, uh, the grey one. The voice is pretty insistent on getting a response...
//...Wait a minute, that might be...
T: (The grey one?)
//I speak into the ball:
Spike: (Is it an ankh?)
UC: ...Uh, I think it's a 'Jevett'. Whatever that is. So, is there an off switch, or...
//Twilight immediately dismisses the contact spell, then casts another spell that brings a scent of lavender.
The Grey Ankh falls on The Drakeling!
Spike: Ow!
Ankh: --matron of the Forlegsandria dragon district and assistant to Mayor Ellis, stationed southwest of Canterlot, any dragons in the region please respond--
//That must be--
Spike: Jebed! What's going on?
Ankh(Jebed): Is that you, Hero?
Spike: Yeah! Damn, am I glad to hear you.
//Wait, did she say 'stationed southwest of Canterlot'?
Ankh(Jebed): The same. Is it fair to say you know of the Red Helm army?
//...Yes.
Spike: (I killed their Champion in an arena a few minutes ago in a scheme which is no longer
working. Does that count?)
//Twilight leans in to listen to the both of us.
Ankh(Jebed): ...Yes. It is our understanding Canterlot is unable to defend itself from this threat at this time. Is this true?
//About to respond, I then pause, and choose another response. I mouth to Twilight:
Spike: ('Our?)
//She looks at me for a moment, and then her eyes trail off as she nods, thinking.
//There are people with Jebed, most likely dragons. She said 'stationed', and was calling out for all dragons in the region... why does Jebed want to know if Canterlot is properly defended? There's no way she's in the Red Helm army, but... does Jebed have a group of dragons who want revenge on Princess Hazel? Maybe, maybe not, but...
Spike: (Yes. The Red Helm army is disorganized and haphazard, but they have the numbers. If they attack, Canterlot is going to fall. I don't know how many people the Magic Corps and the Avatars can save, but it's not 'all of them'. A lot of innocent people are going to die.)
//The deaths of non-innocent people aren't great, either. If there's a way Jebed can help to save the lives of the Canterlot guard and even the Red Helm Army, as a Hero I should find out!
Ankh(Jebed): ...I understand. Hero, the dragons in this flock have agreed to follow me to combat the Red Helm Army because I've promised them their actions will lead to better pony/dragon relations; I am here because there are a little shy of three dozen reports of drakelings in Canterlot bound forcibly into sexual slavery. Disruptions such as this could cause all of them to be lost.
//Well, if anything, Jebed hasn't changed all that much...
Spike: (How many dragons are with you?)
Ankh(Jebed): Around six hundred. All of whom can fly.
//Six... six hundred, flying, fire-breathing dragons...
//Twilight looks at me, also surprised.
T: (Did she say 'six hundred?)
//I nod, slowly.
Ankh(Jebed): Many dragons in Forlegsandria consider themselves collectively co-owners of the region with the Equestrian crown. When a protector of a region is threatened, its people are threatened. And few dragons that I know of will accept such a thing.
Spike: (Well, uh, glad I'm on your side, then.)
//A tutting comes from the ankh. Huh?
Ankh(Jebed): Hero Spike, this is Lieutenant Galsid of the Alicanter Expedition. We are three miles north-northwest of Canterlot, to answer your question.
T: (What could they possibly want in the desert?)
//Now is not the time to play civic leader, Twilight...
Ankh(Jebed): As I've heard... glass.
//...Huh.
Spike: (How far away are they?)
//Another voice comes out of the ankh, this one much sharper.
Ankh(???): Hero Spike, this is Lieutenant Galsid of the Alicanter Expedition. We are three miles north-northwest of Canterlot, to answer your question.
//Galsid, I swear I've heard that name before, Galsid, where...
//ASK HER HOW HER WING IS DOING
//Oh, right! That dragon!
\..Oh. Right.
Spike: (Uh... okay.)
Ankh(Galsid): We number one hundred and eighty. If dispatching of the Red Helm Army will stir Canterlot's graces enough for our petition to be heard, I place myself and my troops under your command.
//They sound very military. Then again, one hundred and eighty dragons who survived the Aquinatic Conflict and are brave enough to travel to Canterlot to ask for aid would need discipline...
//The crowd around us suddenly goes silent. Only murmuring runs through it.
Zhuque: Hero. Would you mind stepping out for a moment?
//I look about. Pretty much every person, dragon or pony, within eyesight is looking back at me. I shrug my shoulders, and move out into the arena.
//Belladonna is still dead.
Spike: Okay. What is it?
ZQ: It's been the allotted amount of time since Belladonna's death. Our previous Champion was bound to General Warhelm, if you didn't know. But she has not revived as expected.
//I pause. That's odd, we both thought they were bound to each other. And this quartermaster dragon is more likely to know than I...
Spike: So what does that mean?
ZQ: Nothing. It is, by definition, meaningless. It is an impossibility. By all logic, this is not happening.
//...What? That's stupid. I can see Belladonna's body with my eyes. I poke it with a foot, just to be sure.
Spike: ...Is there anything that could stop a drakeling from resurrecting?
//The crowd around us has gone deathly silent, still watching. Few of them if any have returned to their assigned tasks, especially because Warhelm isn't there to give them orders. I see a few runners moving desperately around, trying to look for something. Probably him.
ZQ: (...The only possibility is that, within the universe, there no longer exists a drop of General Warhelm's blood or body. Even if he were in a deadly location, Belladonna's body would burn up and reform in front of us.)
//...She knows.
//SO FUCKING KILL THEM
//Yeah, that won't give me away! Start killing every Red Helm I can see to hide that I'm hostile to the Red Helm Army!
\\...Wait, Rarity said it was a mess in her creation room. Wouldn't that count as 'blood or body'?
ZQ: I don't know how you've done it, Hero, but congratulations. By killing both of them, you are now the leader of the Red Helms.)
//Is that... is that how that works? I doubt it; General Warhelm wasn't a good fighter, so establishing a policy of 'whoever is the best fighter' as leader would be unwise in the extreme.
\\You're Champion now and he's dead, that's more likely it.
Spike: Uh... Zhuque?
ZQ: Yes, Champion?
//...Maybe now...
Spike: I'd, uh, can I give a speech?
//We look around. A significant portion of the army is around us now, on this hill and the next, just watching and waiting for something to make sense...
ZQ: I wouldn't see a better time for it.
//I motion Twilight over, give her the ankh, and tell her:
Spike: (I'm going to give a speech to try to convince them to surrender. If it doesn't work, teleport out of here. I don't want you to be hurt.)
//...I'm not exactly sure why I said that last part. Twilight is still way more powerful than me.
//She opens her mouth for a moment, says nothing, and then rolls her eyes.
T: (Cute. But you really think this will work? There are better ways to start a fight.)
Spike: (Twilight... just trust me.)
\/
...At the end of the day, if you can't trust your friends, who can you trust?
Spike: (Tell Galsid to get her dragons to roar in sixty seconds or so. As loud as they can. And Jebed for hers to roar ten seconds after that.)
//I need to time the dragon roars right so it convinces them they're outmatched, surrounded and the only option is surrender. Here's hoping I can come up with something grandiose in such a short time...
Spike: (...And tell Rarity someone's probably in her house.)
//I don't know who could possibly have the will and ability to erase Warhelm completely from existence, but I doubt they're one to respect private property...
//Twilight trots away, dismissive, and I start my grand speech:

Spike: Uh... hi.
//FUCKING GREAT WHAT ARE YOU AT FUCKAHOLICS ANONYMOUS
//I hear sniffs from the gathered ponies, many in tengu masks, and a cough. Someone far in the back says 'hi'.
Spike: My name is Spike. I'm a Hero, and now, I'm your Champion.
//The way I'm saying it and the strange circumstances abound means no one cheers for that.
Spike: To tell the truth, my reason for coming here isn't to join the Red Helm Army and help you take Canterlot. The real reason I came here...
//IS TO SCORE POINTS WITH YOUR PURPLE POT-OF-HOLE AT THE END OF THE FUCKBOW?
Spike: ...is to--
The Pony throws a gabbro stone at The Drakeling! The spinning gabbro stone strikes The Drakeling in the head from the side, cracking the scale, bruising the muscle and bruising the skull!
Spike: Aagh!!
//I clutch the side of my head and wince. That really fucking hurt!!
Zhuque: Are you okay?
Spike: Who did that? Huh?! Who was that?!
//A painful headache starts as I dart my eyes back and forth between segments of the crowd. I think I'm bleeding...
The Drakeling picks up the gabbro stone.
Spike: Who threw this stone?! I want to know! Right now!!
//Angry, I stare at ponies from that side. Even behind the tengu masks, they cough and avoid my gaze, shuffling their hooves about.
Spike: If the pony who threw this stone doesn't own up to it I'm going to find him and shove it so far up his--
//From north-northeast a great roar erupts, one hundred and eighty dragons vocalizing the struggle and the pain of living under constant fear, the threat of death hanging over them every single day for twenty months on end, and the unfathomable rage to lash out against anything and everything living in such a way would cause. Each are, in their own way, an imitation of Quine's terrible cry, and combined they almost reach its volume.
//A new panic sets in for many of the Red Helm soldiers. Wide eyes and shifty hooves abound, nervousness heightened.
Zhuque: What in blazes?
//Oh, right, I was going to give a speech here.
Spike: I was _going_ to let you all surrender on good terms, but then _someone_ decided to--
//Southwest, close enough to be the bottom of the hill we are on, an encroaching wall of air strikes like a tidal wave. Grass stands on end and whips back and forth in the burst. A stampede of wildlife, critters small and big, flood out from the woods around the Red Helm camps, scrambling to find a different shelter. Things made of glass shatter in the distance, and every tent in sight falls down or is knocked over, but I can't hear any of these things. The only thing to be heard, for miles
on end, is the sound of dragons trying to tear the ground open with only their voices, and nearly succeeding.

//After eternity, the sound stops. I pop my ears a few times and open my eyes.
//Most of the Red Helm Army looks stricken with paralysis. Those who dare to move watch the skies, fearful for their impending doom, or take cover.
\If the first was the sound of people who have lost everything dear to them, that was the sound of people who haven't yet.
Ankh(Jebed): ...Beat you--.
Spike: ...but then _someone_ decided to throw a rock at the dude who's talking! And that's not how civilization works! You don't throw rocks at people for talking!!
//There's scuffling and a little protest to my right. I turn that way and demand:
Spike: What is it?!
Unidentified Pony: It was Pin.
//A stallion freezes, pushing against another to try to get away. I stare him down.
Spike: You! Turn around!
//Slowly, he does. Warhelm must have trained these soldiers to obey the person shouting the loudest.
Pretty Scared: P-P-Pinpoint Striker reporting for duty, s-sir.
Spike: (Pinpoint Striker. What kind of sadistic parents did he have?)
Twilight Sparkle: (The Strikers are a well-known family in Stalliongrad.)
//But who names their son 'Pinpoint'?
Spike: Did you throw this rock at me?
//He gulps and doesn't answer. Someone prods him.
PS: Uh... no?
//Convincing.
//I turn to the rest of the crowd and shout:
Spike: Well, I _was_ here to get your conditions for surrender. As Champion and current leader it's my responsibility to negotiate with leaders on the Equestrian side, many of whom I know personally. But because _Pinhead_ here--
//I point directly at him with a finger, singling him out in front of everybody--
Spike: Decided to be an _asshole_ I'm not giving you that option! You can surrender unconditionally or get eaten by dragons, your choice! And I don't care either way!
Zhuque: How many did you say there were?
Spike: (Only seven hundred.)
//Zhuque scratches the scales on her neck, looking away from me. I rub my head. It still really fucking hurts.
Spike: And you have _sixty seconds_ before I decide to say 'screw it let them die' and go look for some aspirin.
//I visually search through the crowd, meeting eyes every so often. Some ponies are starting to gallop off, some look angry at Pinpoint Striker, some at me. For the most part, though, terrified regret is abound.
\Who says you need an amulet to talk to people, when the alternative is a dragon's stomach?
[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//T: Spike, I need to look over some records being held in Mountainville. I'll be gone for a couple of days.
//She finishes bandaging my head, and tears the gauze with her teeth. Slobber gets on my ear.
//Spike: Is that the, uh, magic-in-coins thing?
//T: Magic in coins? What are you talking about?
//Spike: ...(She's still lying to me.)
//T: Maybe there's a way to figure out where this army came from. Now that they've surrendered
the ponies in it need a place to go.
//Spike: The dragons do too.
//T: It's a figure of speech, Spike. I've been looking since you mentioned them in Quine's lair, and haven't found anything yet... but the army couldn't have just popped up from out of the ground.
//Someone else's army was going to...

//Sleep. Sleep. Sleep.
//I stumble towards a hotel in inner Canterlot, covered by the darkness of the protection spell still over the city. Strange how the inner parts of other cities are considered dangerous, where in Canterlot the deeper you get to the heart of the city (and therefore closer to the Castle), the more regal it becomes. Covered with blood, mud, and sand; burnt by dragonfire and lava; probably reeking of everything I've been through since leaving Fillydelphia (though that part wasn't so bad); bandage over missing scalefeathers, plucked to let my wound swell... I'm the most disgusting thing anyone in this area has seen in probably years.
//The doorpony opens the door for me anyway. I thank him, walk ten steps, trip by accident and smash my head into the front desk.
Spike: Ow, agh, shit!!
//The same fucking spot!!
Assistant: Skies! Sir, are you alright?
//THE ANSWER TO THAT SHIT IS PERPETUALLY NO
//It still isn't the most pain I've felt on my journey...
Spike: Gah, yeah.
//The assistant, before I'm done answering, walks around the desk and helps me up. Nice guy. Then again, he's being paid to be.
Assistant: Are you certain, sir? That was a nasty fall. Is there anyone I can call for you?
Spike: Yeah, see if you can get Celestia on the line. Till then, I'd like a bed.
//The room is an accessory in my current state.
Assistant: Why, of course, sir. Just follow me, if you please.
//He levitates a key off of its hook and slowly walks to the elevator, staying next to me. I lean on him for support, and don't even remember the rest.

//A haze starts up, perpendicular to all the other hazes, but it does not cut them short.
Celestia: Spike.
Spike: Zzz... no, give me back my pants, this is an outrage...
C: Do you normally wear pants?
Spike: They... parents make... school...
C: Yes, your parents. Whom you do know, and weren't taken from early as an egg.
Spike: Eggs... always morning, but never breakfast... zzzz...
C: Spike, this is Celestia. Please, wake up.
Spike: No, zzzz... I don't wear make-up...
C: ...It seems you are in a very deep sleep. Every level of your mind is resting.
Spike: Hee hee hee... I get it, now... 'Bonemeal?' Guess I am crazy...
//The tall, white figure stares at the curled drakeling, mane dragged by a missing wind.
C: Take your well-earned rest, my Hero. Let it never be said the greatest mare in the world turns from her charges. I have watched over you since I bathed you in the Lethe by your ankle, and will until the end of your days.
Spike: Greatest thing in world... inability of mind... correlate all contents... zzzz...
C: If you do recall any of this conversation, know this: you have pleased me greatly by your actions. But also know, that until you have defeated the false Princess, all your work will have been for naught...
Spike: Zzzz... fortnight... burning oil... they don't make bath towels out of sandpaper, do they...
C: Destroy the false Princess, Hero Spike. Kill her. And you shall know a reward beyond
The goddess fades, and the drakeling returns to his dreams.

// I wake up in the late afternoon, well rested. Yawning, I scratch a few places that haven't had a good scratching in a while and tear off the loose bandage. Is it the same day as it was, or did I sleep thirty hours straight? Ah, who cares? I'm devilishly hungry anyway, so there's no way to tell. The blinds are open and the sun is passing behind Canterlot Castle, throwing oranges across the sky. (The color, not the fruit.)

// Something in my dreams feels important, but I can't grasp it. Like a jigsaw puzzle where someone's shaved edges off half the pieces, so none of it fits together and it all looks jagged... oh well, they're only dreams.

// Speaking of oranges (the fruit kind), the dresser at the end of the bed has a fruit basket. Guess this is a swankier place than I first thought. And... someone has put a sheet over me. Huh. Well, hope they don't charge extra for cleaning that; I'm filthy.

// I stuff whole fruits down my face for a while and then move on to the (huge!) bathroom, using a bunch of _things_ (I mean, there's soap, but there's so much more!) that smell like vanilla and feel like silk. For half a moment I even regret not having a mane to use the shampoo on. I walk out of the bathroom, feeling pounds lighter, quite a bit cleaner, and regretful I ate so much fruit.

// Rubbing my tail down with a towel (I'd breathe fire, but everything in here is flammable and it looked fluffy), I notice two slips of paper slid under the door. I pick up the first.

:: Welcome to Fancypants Suites, located at luxurious 22 Acacia Lane! We hope your stay here is the highlight of your time in Canterlot! Please enjoy the complementary fruit basket and mini-bar!

// Whoo, there's a mini-bar?!

:: Here at Fancypants Suites, all of our friendly staff and personnel are here for you! Feel free to talk to anyone in a white uniform if there are any issues with your accommodations! For convenience, your key has been attached to this card.

// That's followed by an underline which is blank:

:: ____________, we're happy to serve you!

// Hah, yeah, they wouldn't know who I am. I should tell them my name; being a Hero means accountability and increasing my renown.

// I put that aside and pick up the second note (after drying the inside of an ear with the towel), which only says:

:: Paid your bill. Room 511. I want to talk. ~A Hero's Friend

// Well, that's a mini-bar?!

\ Also means the mini-bar is open for raiding!

// I want to figure out what this note is about, is there anything on the back... nothing. Huh. It smells slightly off... something which I can't find in my head, there's an arrow leading to nowhere where there should definitely be something.

// After memorizing Room 511, I light the second note on fire, hide the room key in my displacement cape, put it on and exit the room.

// My door says '549'. So that means...

// Bright, light blue hallways stretch off in three directions. Sleek architecture lets most of the natural light in, but the sun is fading quickly and magical lights are starting to turn on inside. Numbers are decreasing that way. I stalk along the inner wall of the hallway, on the tips of my toes.

// The sound of a voice can be heard, for the briefest moment, then fades away. Same direction as I'm moving... I sneak a little faster.

// There we go, this one is 519. It should be at the end of the hallway. The sun hits me in the face...
from the right, obscuring me with its glare; stupid sun... Huh, that reminds me of the darkness spell cast over Canterlot. If it's been dismissed, whoever cast it thinks there's not a threat anymore; maybe I have slept a long time.
//I lay flush up against the wall, holding my tail out so it doesn't scrape and make noise. Closer, closer, closer...
\\Are those hooves around the corner--
//Before I can react, a gentlestallion in a pinstriped suit and tie rounds the corner far in front of me, head held high. We exchange a long stare as I freeze in place clinging the wall, while he continues to walk towards me. The stallion slows down as he approaches, barely walking at all a few feet from me, and then, within normal speaking distance, stops completely.
//I look back at him, wide-eyed, still frozen.
//The gentlestallion blinks twice, raises his eyebrows, and keeps going.
//WOW WHAT A WEIRDO
//Crawling further down the hallway, the voice I heard gets closer, and I can make it out consistently now... it's a female voice, a loud one, that reverberates and carries a tune with it -- no, is she singing? ...That is definitely singing. And... wow, I can barely hear what the song is, but damn can that girl sing. It must be a lament. I've never heard anything like it. No one I know can evoke that sort of emotion with words, and I'm not even hearing them.
//REALLY? WHAT ABOUT A SUMMARY OF YOUR FUCKING USELESS JOURNEY, THAT WOULD EVOKE ENOUGH FUCKING SORROW IN ME TO QUALIFY
//I grab the (hoof-friendly) handle and silently open the door. A beautiful pony is standing at an open window, belting her heart out. One more couplet, and then her voice fades away, whispering: Singing Beauty: And so the world does end/With these six little words:/I have to save them all.'
//I stand, for a short while, just looking. This unicorn's fur is white, the color of cream, and meticulously groomed. Her hair rolls and tumbles in curling bunches of pink and purple, like cumulus clouds with striations, or soft pillow with a grain. Average sized for a mare (and therefore above-sized for a unicorn), with... curves in very specific (and flattering) places, a red barn swallow adorns her flank.
\\That lipstick... is the exact color of blood. It looks like she just drank someone's bodily fluids.
Spike: ...
\\Well, not those ones, obviously.
Spike: That... was beautiful.
//Hearing me, she turns her head from the window slightly, meets my eye for a second, and then looks down.
SB: ...I know.
//For just a second, I check that this is Room 511, then I step in and close the door.
Spike: You, uh, left me a note under my door.
//I take off the displacement cape and hang it on the coat rack, noting a red grossular on a table in the living area.
SB: ...Yes, I did. Hi, Spike. My name is Sweetie Belle.
//Suppressing the urge to mention that I'm Spike, I ask:
Spike: ...Are you going to keep staring out that window?
//She smiles.
Sweetie Belle: I'm looking at the sun. I have to start work in an hour.
//It's almost night! Who works at this time? Does she dig graves?
Sweetie Belle: ...But there are more important things than money. Not that you'd ever be able to tell my sister that.
//Sweetie Belle turns swiftly, walks over to a long pillow set on the floor, and lays down on it, getting comfortable. I decide to stand.
Spike: So why did you call me here?
//From the living area, she summons a fancy drink, and then a toothpick with an olive on it.
SB: ...A lot of reasons. Not all of them that good...
I don't have time for this.
Spike: Listen, as I'm sure you know, I'm a Hero. Which means in my life the one thing I possibly do not lack is a multitude of crazy mysterious bints giving me unsolicited cryptic puzzles. So if you'd be kind enough to just _get the hell on with it_--

She puts down her drink and says:
SB: Sorry, sorry! I know you're a busy stallion. Er, well, you know what I mean. I promise, just listen to me and I'll give you the Element of Generosity.

Spike: _What_?!
SB: I--
Spike: How do you have the Element of Generosity?! Who are you?! Were you the one who eradicated General Warhelm?!

She looks about to say something, and then in response to the last question:
SB: I -- what?
Spike: Did you defeat the Avatar of Avarice and take it? Are you a Hero?!

Sweetie Belle, fed up, shouts:
SB: Spike!

I calm down, but only on the outside. Who could this person be?
SB: Rarity is my _sister_. Whether she acknowledges it or not.

Oh. That... explains how she knows who I am.
SB: Rarity called me 'cause she needed help cleaning up her creation room. But when I arrived, the room was spotless, and she was still in the shower. So I got angry and took it.

The room was spotless'. So Warhelm's body _was_ destroyed, sometime between Rarity talking to us and Sweetie Belle coming over.
Spike: You stole an Element of Harmony... because you were miffed at your sister?

That seems like an overreaction.
SB: That's not the only reason. ...I heard about your accident.

Spike: Accident?

YEAH LET'S SEE IS IT THE FOREST FIRE OR THE DOUBLE MURDER SHIT OR KILLING THE TWO PEOPLE WHO COULD GIVE YOU A FUCKING LEAD ON WHAT THE HELL THE RED HELMS WERE ACTUALLY FUCKING DOING

Hey! I had every reason to believe they'd both be alive after what I did!
SB: Two months ago. In Everfree Forest.

What, with Kezno?

No, no; she's talking about your memory loss.

Oh! Right.
Spike: ...Yeah. I lost all of my memories. I had no idea who I was, what I was doing there, or anything about the world at all.
SB: ...I heard that. For the longest time, I'm not sure if I believed it.
Spike: Were we friends? Before I hit my head?
SB: Hit your head?

Sweetie Belle and I stare at each other, thinking. She must have contacts that make her irises bigger, I swear...
SB: The way Rarity made it sound was like Twilight cast a spell on you.

Hold on. Twilight acted like I hit my head, and was checking me over for injuries...
Spike: ...what kind of idiot would I be to trust the first person I meet after waking up?

Would she really... could she really lie to me about something so important? I don't know if I want to start thinking like that... maybe Rarity assumed too much. Or maybe Sweetie Belle misheard.

Spike: ...Yeah. I hit my head.
SB: We were friendly, Spike. At least I'd say so. I mean, you weren't all bad for a boy, but you
spent most of your time with Twilight and her friends.
Spike: I see.
//A sadness creeps into Sweetie Belle's eyes. She looks away from me, staring into her (full) drink. 
SB: ...I saw you a lot more in Canterlot, actually. After... you know about the marriage?
Spike: ...Yeah.
//Again, I should have been told all of this crap at the beginning.
\You brushed off Twilight when she offered to! What are you complaining about?!
//...I still stand by that decision. And with this new information, that I may never have hit my head at all... I'm not sure I can trust Twilight any more. If she's been willing to lie to me from the beginning, all this time.
\..You do realize that makes _zero_ sense?
SB: You... we... Rarity decided that I, as... the way I am, wasn't fit to be an Avatar's sister. Especially for an Avatar wanting to establish herself within Equestria's upper classes. You were always trying to convince her to reconcile with me, even though it never worked out.
//She stares off into nothingness, a smile breaking on her lips. A sip of the glass leaves no lipstick prints.
SB: ...I liked that about you. You were always trying to see the best in people. Rarity... expects people to be there when she needs or wants them, and to get out of the way when she doesn't. Like me, disowned as a sister and sworn to distance, but still called when there's a body to dispose of... or you, I hear, in Twilight's old library.
//I remember that! At the time, I thought it was really rude. Now, looking back... it's almost quaint. Is it bad I've gotten so used to being assaulted?
SB: Nevermind the traumatic experience that losing your memory must be, or that you were never told up to that point you had been married; Rarity was horny and that was that. What a way to treat someone you love!
Spike: Sweetie Belle, if you don't mind me asking: why doesn't Rarity want you as a sister? 
//Here's hoping 'perpetually luring her husbands into a hotel and murdering them' isn't the answer.
//Night has fallen outside, the skies shades of violet and bruised blue. It's not a new moon anymore, but barely enough to see by. Sweetie Belle smiles, amused, and looks at me, but not in the eye.
SB: Je suis une jument de la nuit.
Spike: Uh, yeah, I get that your lipstick is blood red but vampires aren't real.
//She giggles, rolling over slightly on her pillow, and continues:
SB: I'm a call girl.
Spike: Oh, like that magical contact spell? You call people in the middle of the night and ask them to take surveys? Heck, I'd disown you.
//Sweetie Belle chuckles.
SB: Spike -- I'm a prostitute.
//...Oh.
//I put my hands on my hips.
Spike: Well why didn't you just say that?
SB: Because... some people don't like to be told things how they are. 
//Euphemisms protect people from having to accept reality. 
Spike: ...She didn't want to be associated with you because the uptight, stodgy folk she's trying to get in with don't appreciate that sort of thing. 
//Just like Twilight didn't mention our marriage...
//Sweetie Belle chuckles.
SB: Yeah. Joke's on her, though. Mom and Pop don't talk to either of us now.
//...What?
//RBD: ..._She woke up at her funeral and saw her family walk out on her for having a dragon mate_.
//Heh. Guess the apple doesn't fall too far from the... other apple.
SB: I tried. I really did. When I came to Canterlot, I was going to be a singer. Fresh cutie mark -- a
songbird, no less -- and a head full of fanciful ideas, with no way to turn them into rent. The reality is... slaving away gig after gig to make ends meet, wearing your voice away for people who don't appreciate you and hoping, beyond any reason, that somehow you'll be the one in a million to be noticed and get a big record deal and make it. Instead of the nine hundred thousand and so on who don't.

I'm sure this personal tale of finding oneself when expectation is different than reality is riveting to some people, but I have an Element to collect, so if we could hurry it along?

SB: ...It was easy. After a gig, one of the managers was cute, and... in the morning, when he offered me money, I just didn't say no. I made a decision that day to not go hungry any more.

Well, if the money's there, and she chose to do it...

SB: I like my job. It's challenging, and fun, and nobody gets hurt. I like what I do and I do only what I like. The customers are always friendly... and I do use my special talent at work, from time to time, except there's not as many words in it.

That sentence could have been said without the wink, I feel.

SB: Sure, I have to be careful, but safety's an issue in any job. And with the money I'm making? Bodyguards throw themselves at me so they can hang out in hotel lobbies and drink beer as I work. Heck, next year I'll be a legal adult and could even join a union!

You know, I was with her completely, up until that last part.

I'm not your parents; I don't care what you do with your genitals.

YOU'RE NOT GOING TO FIND OUT IF YOUR WIFE'S SISTER IS BETTER?

SB: ...Okay. I took the Element because I was angry at her. But I'm giving it to you because you deserve it, if the rumors going around about the Red Helm Army are any true. And if you're still the Spike I once knew, you'll only do good with it.

Sweetie Belle casts a spell with her horn, and from the living area floats the Element of Generosity, a golden necklace with a diamond as a centerpiece. It sets on the floor in front of me.

Spike: And besides, usually when a marriage is over each person gets at least part of the stuff.

I take the Element of Generosity and put it around my neck with the other four Elements.

Spike has acquired The Element of Generosity!

[5/5] Elements acquired!
Congratulations!!! All Elements acquired!!!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

It feels strange, just being given the Element like this. I didn't have to do anything for it, or prove my worth in any trial... but of any Element for that to be true, I suppose it'd be this one.

The Element of Generosity has something engraved on the back. 'Ars, quae est vitae simulacrum'...

SB: And -- I'm not nearly the spellcaster she is, but the spell nexus was just on the table...

The Drakeling with her horn and casts Revelation!

[Scythereach] was mastered!

Spike: I didn't think that'd actually work.

There was no text about 'like xxx through his blood' at all!

Hold on a moment, Scythereach? Isn't that the sword move Belladonna used against you? Why would you learn a sword move?

JUST A BIT OF INSURANCE

SB: I guess this is where I leave you, Spike. I have a client meeting coming up and your Heroism keeps you busy, I'm sure.

Sweetie Belle stands up, and finishes her drink. She then winks at me and smiles:

SB: But if you ever find time in your questing schedule to relax, I do offer very competitive rates...
//Does she remember she's my sister-in-law?  
Spike: ...Don't take this the wrong way, Sweetie Belle, but there is absolutely no way I will take you up on that offer.  
//She shrugs, and walks out.  
SB: Oh well. You can't win 'em all.  
//After closing the window, and quietly wondering what to do next, I grab the grossular from the other room and turn off the lights on my way out.

//...  
\//ELLIPSIS
Spike: You know, no one ever mentioned that Canterlot Castle was so _big_...  
//The castle looms up in front of me, almost one-hundred and eighty degrees of my vision even standing outside castle grounds. It blocks off the night sky, replacing stars with lights all up and down the many towers, people doubtlessly working into the night. I'm sure the surrender of the Red Helm Army made Canterlot's suppliers of paper very happy.  
//It's hard to go on about the marble, gold, royal banners, detailed carvings, well-dressed patrols and immaculate cobblestone walkways. As soon as I talk about one, I'm choosing not to mention the thousand other items of its kind and quality.  
//That's really the most amazing part about Castle Canterlot, I think: not that any of the artwork and architecture is so far beyond the level of quality to be found in a noblepony's mansion (it _is_ adequately beyond that level, just to be complete), but the vast quantity of such maintained quality...  
Passing Guard: Any idea what he's standing there for?  
Other Guard: Probably a tourist. Happens to a lot of 'em.  
//Nibbling the last of the grossular, I walk to the garden entrance. A broad pony, with unshorn fetlocks and a badge, is talking quietly to another guard. His badge has a big dent in it, but she's nodding every couple of words anyway.  
\\Well, here we go; you have all five Elements of Harmony (whether you earned any of them or not), and you're legally the Hero of the Land, it's your right to be here so just walk up and act casual, nothing's wrong--  
Badge Pony: Oh. Hi there, Spike.  
//That's a little bit too casual!!  
Spike: Uh -- hello. How do you know who I am?  
//He looks over me quickly and noses towards my shoulder.  
Badge Pony: Your cape's on backwards.  
//Give me a break, clothes are confusing.  
BP: Hmm. Mind if I ask what you're doing with that many Elements of Harmony?  
Spike: Oh, I just, you know, thought... I'm a Hero, so I'm here to see Princess Hazel.  
//The badged pony scrunches up his forehead, bemused.  
BP: Wait, _you're_ the Hero Twilight's been telling me all this time?  
//Hold on, how does he know Twilight? I thought she was pretending to be dead?  
//Na-Mira: Right, so I looked for family.  
But she only has a brother, who's captain of the guard at Canterlot Castle, so...  
//...Oh.  
Nodding Pony: Uh, Shining Armor, sir, infosec protocols say--  
Shining Armor: I wrote those protocols, Nopheratu. And besides, this guy is basically my nephew.  
//That's not true -- oh, he means back when Twilight raised me. Before the memory loss.  
Spike: So, uh, you heard about the accident?  
SA: I'd heard about the... you know, separation and all. You and Rarity. But I didn't know it was caused by amnesia. I'm sorry, dude, that must have been really hard on you.  
//Strangely enough, it was pretty easy. But then, most people don't regularly have limbs broken in
their line of work.
Spike: Hey, I'm over it now. I'm a new drakeling, ready to take on the world and all its challenges!
SA: Sounds great! Nopheratu, could you get his information?
//Nopheratu pulls a clipboard from the belt on her side and holds a pen in her mouth.
NP: Name?
Spike: Spike.
NP: And your last name?
//Last name? Do I have a last name?
Spike: Uh...
NP: We've had three Spikes visit in the last two weeks. What's your last name?
//I sincerely doubt it would be 'Sparkle'.
Spike: Uh, 'the Dragon'.
//Nopheratu looks at me for a while, before Shining Armor motions for her to write it down.
Somewhere in the gardens, a frog croaks.
NP: Reason for your visit?
//SAY YOU'RE THE PRINCE OF THE SLAG EMPIRE. GO ON, IT'LL BE FUCKING HILARIOUS. SHE'LL GET A KICK OUT OF IT.
Spike: Pri-- I'm a Hero, and I've collected all the Elements of Harmony.
SA: Put down 'diplomatic visit'.
//As she writes that down, Shining Armor explains:
SA: Heroes of the Land are meant to be state secrets. They're unaccountable to the general public by nature.
//It's true that I hold myself accountable to people's greater good, but there's no mechanism forcing me to do that. I kind of understand. But it will be hard to become a shining symbol of interspecies relations when my existence is kept under wraps by law...
NP: Do you want to receive offers in the mail about deals on Castle Tours and Gift Shop merchandise--
SA: Okay, I think we're done here.
Spike: So, what, do I walk in?
SA: Unless you want to skip merrily. The Avatars are waiting for you in the great hall, and when you're done with them, the Princess should be ready to meet you in the throne room.
Spike: The Avatars? Why are they here?
SA: ...The law says you have to defeat them in combat before getting an audience with the Princess. Did no one tell you that?
//They most certainly should have!!
//THIS FUCKER REALLY KNOWS HIS STUFF. WHY DOESN'T HE SPEND MORE TIME WITH HIS FAMILY? I'M CURIOUS, FIND OUT FOR ME.
//No.
Spike: ...
SA: I'm confident it won't be an issue for you. But, hey, it's getting late, and I don't want to keep you. If there isn't anything else, you can go on in.
//ASK HIM IF HE'S BRAINWASHED LIKE HIS SISTER. ASK HIM IF HE THINKS HIS CHILD IS IN HEAVEN. SHE TASTED DELICIOUS TORN RIGHT FROM THE WOMB.
Spike: ...Have a nice night.
SA: You too.
NP: You too, sir.
//I walk through the castle gardens, planning frantically.

//The Avatars, all five of them, are assembled in the great hall of Castle Canterlot. Temptation and Avarice lay on decorative couches near the center of the room, looking comfortable. Speed is hovering in the air, circling the group slowly as she talks. Strength leans against a pillar, watching the entrances. Luck tries to figure out a set of nesting Princess dolls on the floor with the greatest
confusion.
//...Wait, how would those work?
RBD: All I’m saying is, we should be out there!
AJ: Hold your horses, Dash. It’s been three days since the Element of Generosity was stolen. Spike could be comin' in any moment now.
//Hold on, three days? I slept for... more than fifty hours straight?
RBD: Why don't we just get Twilight to scry on it?
FS: Twilight is very busy right now. The surrender of the Red Helm Army has to be taken care of in an orderly manner. She’s the only pony for the job.
AJ: As if Equestria didn't already have a problem with surrendered dragons! Good gravy, girl, d'y'all want her to drop dead of exhaustion?
//Pinkie Pie's stomach rumbles.
PP: Oooh, gravy, I could go for some gravy right now...
//A patrolpony's torch filters through stained glass windows on the north side of the hall. It moves down the line, lighting up each mosaic in turn.
RBD: We can't find someone else to do it? I'm sure there are some dorks at CUMS--
R: --It's 'Canterlot UMS', dear--
RBD: --who'd do it in a heartbeat if Fluttershy winks at them.
//Fluttershy gets a bit brighter in the cheeks and sinks deeper into her couch.
R: Firstly there's the problem of scrying itself: it takes quite a bit of magical power. Twilight is the only one known to try it with any success. And then, there are appearances to keep up. How would it reflect on the crown if we walked into the University and asked, 'please find my Element for me, I think it's with my house keys'?
//The Avatar of Luck giggles, and she rolls over once, looking at the dolls from her back. Fluttershy whispers:
FS: (Pinkie Pie... your, um... 'end'... is showing.)
//Pinkie Pie sticks out a tongue and says:
PP: So?
//Fluttershy opens her mouth again to add more, but decides not to and buries her nose in the cushion instead.
//A figure painted vague enters the hall from the far side, pushing a cart filled with pastries, pies, cakes, desserts of all kinds...
AJ: Besides, think of the timin'. Aquinatic Conflict ends two weeks ago, buncha dragons got nowhere to go and nothin' to keep 'em occupied but pent-up hate. Then the Red Helms surrender, got thousands of ponies far from their homes -- also criminals, I reckon, guilty of treason -- all geared up for war. Rainbow Dash, you and I are the last two ponies who should be out there doin' anythin'!
FS: Dash, you're brave and true and just a wonderful flyer. But right now, Equestria needs a pony with subtlety. A pony who's willing to compromise.
PP: So why aren't you out there, Fluttershy?
//The cart stops on a bump in the carpet, but nothing spills off it, and no one looks over.
FS: I... I couldn't. I'd be too scared, it's just so important...
R: Fluttershy, don't sell yourself short. You told me about what a number you did on Mayor Ellis's electoral opponent -- whose name escapes me right now -- but frankly any pony in the world would bend over backward for you if you'd just use your powers more.
FS: Oh, no, I don't want them to! It's unfair of me. People should think what they want to think, not...
PP: ...Agree 'cause you're wiggling your butt at them?
RBD: Hold on, are we talking about the guy who was found unconscious, in front of City Hall, in full black leather and with two--
R: It's fair to say that may have cost him the election.
FS: ...Jebed asked me to. I couldn't turn her down knowing how much it meant for her to ask...
AJ: So Twilight's out there. She's like... Goldilocks! Not too little compromise, not too much. Just the right amount.

//Pastries approach the gathered Avatars at a medium pace now, still unnoticed. 'Swings, why does this hall have to be so big...
AJ: Heck, I'd be surprised if she couldn't swing a twofer and get the Red Helm varmints sent into the desert with the dragons.

R: I'm looking forward to what they're going to build out of glass. Desert nights are so romantic; starry sky over milky sands, just cold enough for cuddling up with someone next to you...

RBD: Great, it'll be another Mountainville.

PP: What's wrong with that?

//The cart stops completely a few feet from Pinkie Pie, in front of all the Avatars. Applejack steps away from the pillar, suddenly wondering why she hadn't noticed it at all. Pinkie Pie rolls upright, eyes wide.

PP: Oooh! That looks delicious!

RBD: I wouldn't mind a slice of that!

FS: Oh, apple crisp. I wonder if it's as good as yours, Applejack?

AJ: Wait a minute...

R: It looks like the kitchen staff noticed how long we've been here and made us a little something. How generous of them.

//I take off the displacement cape and put it next to the cart.

Spike: ...Not exactly.

Chapter End Notes

With apologies to Tarn Adams.
Spike: And, yeah, I seriously do need all of this, so hooves off.
Applejack, Pinkie Pie, Fluttershy, Rainbow Dash: Spike?!
//What were you expecting, a -- wait, no; baker actually works in this context. Nevermind.
//Applejack takes a fighting stance, Rainbow Dash lands. Pinkie Pie looks at the cakes glumly
while collecting her impossible dolls and putting them into hammerspace.
Spike: So, the guard captain said I needed to defeat all the Avatars in combat to get an audience
with the Princess. I don't know if there's any formalities to go through, or if you want time to
prepare... but I'm ready whenever you are.
//Fluttershy and Rarity are still lazing about on their couches. Pinkie Pie is eying the pastries
beside me furiously, Rainbow Dash shrugs, and Applejack trots over to stand next to Pinkie Pie. I
feel like this is a group of ponies who weren't prepared to fight...
RBD: It's Castle stuff. There should be _some_ formalities.
//I thought she wasn't talking to me?
PP: Isn't it traditional to greet a Hero with a big huge scrum-diddly-umptious feast?
AJ: 'Swings, girl, stop thinkin' with your stomach!
PP: Hehehehe, sorry!
//I take a fighting stance next to the cart, looking at a still spot on the floor so I can see all of them
if they move. My first action should be Walk of the Third; I need time if I'm going to fight five of
them at once...
R: Hero, we haven't yet decided who will be your first opponent.
Spike: ...First?
//...
AJ: Huh huh, you were thinkin' we'd all fight you at once? What's fair about that?
//...Oh.
Spike: Uh... okay.
//I stand straight and look at the cart, recalculating. Plans slide about in chunks in my head, none of
them fitting together.
PP: Ooh! Ooh! Should I go first? And can the big cake be the reward for the winner?
AJ: What did I just tell ya, girl?!
FS: Pinkie Pie, if you go first you'll have to wait for everyone else to take their turn. Are you sure
you're patient enough for that?
PP: Yeah, you're right. Second it is!
//Rarity hides rolling eyes with a turn of her head.
R: That leaves Applejack, Rainbow Dash, Fluttershy and I. I'd ask who's volunteering, but -- that
may as well be assigning the task.
AJ: I've been standin' here waitin' for somethin' to happen. And I'm sure Rainbow Dash is antsy; I
mean... she's Rainbow Dash.
PP: But I wanna see Rarity fight! Spike didn't pass a test for her Element, so I wonder if she has
some ooky-spooky foolery up her sleeve!
FS: ...But she's not wearing anything.
//Rainbow Dash points at me.
RBD: Why don't we let the Hero decide?
//Everyone falls silent, contemplating this.
RBD: I mean, it is his challenge.
R: Challenger sets the rules... I find it keeps with the traditional spirit of the encounter. Good
suggestion, Rainbow Dash!
AJ: It's decided, then. Spike'll pick the fightin' order.
PP: So who's it gonna be? Huh, huh, huh?
\Think about what you know for each pony. What their capabilities are, if you fought them, how
the fight went, what you've heard about them, the Avatars they are and the Elements they carried.
The past traumas you can abuse, and how they'll react to it (because let's face it you're not getting
out of this without a low blow somewhere). Your moves, the amount of calories here, how far that
will take you...

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

>>APPLEJACK  
>>FLUTTERSHY  
>>PINKIE PIE  
>>RAINBOW DASH  
>>RARITY

Spike: Fluttershy.
//She sinks lower into the couch and gives off a little squeak eyes wide. A terrifying warrior.
\It was mentioned Fluttershy is able to deceive someone's senses at will. That's a powerful ability
she didn't need to kick your tail last time. She's a pegasus, too; even if she doesn't fly like Rainbow
Dash does it's an additional dimension in which you don't have movement capabilities. And the
great hall ceiling is high.
AJ: Well, we should move the furniture first and all so nothin' gets broken in the fight.
//Applejack walks over to the cart and starts pushing it with her head. As the rest of the Avatars
start dragging couches, taking down banners, and moving rugs, I walk next to her and stabilize the
tower of desserts.
AJ: (Spike. You do know, if anypony defeats you in this here challenge, that pony is gonna crawl
on top of you faster than--)
Spike: (I don't need a folksy colloquialism for that, thanks.)
AJ: (Just sayin'. I think y'all are underestimatin' Fluttershy. She doesn't need to draw blood to
defeat you, if another liquid could do it. And, from what I hear, controllin' the bodies of others is a
specialty of hers.)
Spike: (Out of... let's call it 'morbid curiosity', does the 'anypony' include you too?)
//Applejack pauses for a second as we set the cart in a secure place, behind a pillar. As long as a
wandering guard doesn't find it...
AJ: (...You'd be a great addition to the Cavalry if y'all were more willin' to take orders. Heck, you
should think about it anyways; the military life ain't all that bad. And, maybe this piece is me bein'
a little too honest, but I'd have to be mighty noble to pass on a free chance at livin' forever.)
//I turn away and mutter:
Spike: Yeah, but think about how awkward it would make family reunions.
//After a moment watching me walk, Applejack recovers and yells:
AJ: Why you dirty son of a bitch, you ain't got no right talkin' to me like--
Spike: What, are you kidding?
//I stand twenty feet from trembling Fluttershy, taking position in the cleared great hall, fight about
to begin.
Spike: Hurting people is what got me here.

//ROUND ONE... FIGHT!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//Fluttershy stays still, eyes closed.
FS: Just do your best, it'll be okay...
//...Wow, that's very supportive of her.
Spike: Oh, thanks. I'll try to.
PP: Hehehaha *snort* hehehaha, Spike, I think Fluttershy was saying that to herself!
RBD: You're having motivation problems? Spike burnt down the Valley forest!
//That was like, six weeks ago!
PP: He what?
RBD: I didn't tell you? Totally his fault!
Spike: It was an accident!
RBD: Get him, Fluttershy! Only _you_ can prevent forest fires!
FS: Oh my goodness -- you didn't do it on purpose, did you Spike?
//Didn't I just answer that?
//JUST START FIGHTING ALREADY

The Drakeling breathes fire at Fluttershy!
Fluttershy leaps away from the flames!

//As Fluttershy dodges, I look to where she should be.
Spike: Uh.
//I look around. She's nowhere.
PP: Hehehaha *snort* hehehaha, oh man, he has no idea!
AJ: Don't tease him, Pinkie; he's concentratin'.
//And here's where I say 'no idea about what' like a stooge, setting me up for a dramatic--
Fluttershy grabs The Drakeling by the left lower leg from behind with her left front hoof!
Fluttershy grabs The Drakeling by the lower body from behind with her right front hoof!
Fluttershy takes down The Drakeling by the lower body!

//I faceplant into the marble, knocking the wind out of me. With her hoof pressing down on my back, I can't move or twist on the floor.
The Drakeling is pinned!
RBD: What, no quip?
FS: Words are nice. But now our bodies will say all that we need to share between us.
Spike: Is that why no one in this country understands the word 'no'?
The Drakeling struggles in vain against the grip of Fluttershy's right front hoof on The Drakeling's upper body!
//Fluttershy leans her head close to the small of my back. I can feel her breath underneath my scales.
FS: My, my. It seems you talk very much about being a Hero to help everypony. It'd be a shame if your body simply weren't up to the task.
//Her hair brushes against my leg, and a mental strength is sapped from me. Fight? Why fight? It only hurts people...
FS: That's okay. We can always find something to do with our bodies.
//STOP FUCKING LISTENING IT'S A CHARM IDIOT
//But, there's nothing else to do! I can't use any of my moves like this, and even if I could use Blood of the Earth or Touch of Grisly Terror, using them so early means I'd have nothing to work with in the later stages...
//DID I FUCKING TELL YOU TO? NO! SHUT HER UP!
RBD: ...You know, I really didn't expect it to go like this.
PP: Spike's a fighter, not a lover!
AJ: Huh, I guess 'Avatar of Temptation' ain't a misnomer...
//How, if I can't--
//WOULD SHE DARE BE SO RUDE AS TO TALK WHEN YOU'RE TALKING?
FS: Just relax, and everything will feel much better. I'll teach you how to be a lover...
//Silently clearing my throat, I go for shock.
Spike: Fluttershy, you _harlot_, get off of my husband!!

Fluttershy releases the grip of Fluttershy's right front hoof on The Drakeling's lower body.
//Clarity floods back.
AJ: What in--
PP: Did he--
RBD: You little--
The Drakeling elbows Fluttershy in the head with his right elbow, bruising the skin, bruising the muscle and bruising the bone!
//I turn over and breathe fire!
The Drakeling breathes fire!
Fluttershy is caught in the flames! Fluttershy's mane has been burnt!
Fluttershy leaps away from The Drakeling!
//Like a cartoon, she rushes behind a pillar too small for her and disappears.

AJ: --hell's blazin' inferno did y'all do there?!
//Rarity is calm and collected, watching the fight in silence. It's obvious she didn't say that.
Spike: Don't ask.
The Drakeling stands up.
RBD: I can't believe you pulled _that_ out in a fight. ...Good job.
//...You know, I was actually expecting sarcasm from her.
Spike: Come out, come out, wherever you are...
FS: Hmm-hmm. Do you think I'm hiding?
//Left--

The Drakeling breathes fire!
The pillar is caught in the dragonfire! The pillar's stones are unharmed!
//That should have wrapped around and scorched her a little... is Fluttershy a ventriloquist?
\No, remember in her bedroom, the time when you fought her--
FS: I'm not hiding. Every inch of me is right here to see.
//Her voice comes from both the front and the back. I check behind me, but the Avatars aren't looking close to themselves.
FS: But as they say, hmm-hmm, someponies only see want they want to see.

Fluttershy nuzzles The Drakeling in the upper body with her fuzzy snout!
Spike: Whaaoo--
//As Fluttershy appears in front of me, my legs give out, and I fall to my knees!
//Fluttershy stares down at me, with large, soulful eyes that grow deeper and more inviting the longer I stare into them. Both our heads are enclosed by her hair, wrapping us into a separate world and tickling my back, sharing breath...
FS: ...Why would you trust your eyes, instead of your heart?
\Don't look at her anymore, don't; think of something else, think of--
Spike: Wuh...
\Think of bones you broke and the raw shrieking pain and the gore, anything but this--
Spike: The heart just pumps blood!
The Drakeling punches Fluttershy in the upper body with his left hand, bruising the skin, bruising the muscle and bruising the right false rib!
Fluttershy leaps away from The Drakeling!

The Drakeling stands up.
//As Fluttershy stands on the engraved marble floor, she seems to melt into the scenery, blurring
and becoming translucent. In less than a moment she fades entirely.
FS: Do you see with your eyes? You'll never be able to see me like that, hmm-hmm.
AJ: Ah, great. She's tryin' to lecture durin' a fight.
RBD: Everyone knows talking is boring! Just kick his tail!
R: Girls, I'm sure Fluttershy has her reasons. Let her work, please.
//See with my eyes? How the hell do people see otherwise?!
FS: I see with my heart. To me, that means your eyes are nice marbles to play with.
//...Northwest, it's been both times--

The Drakeling breathes fire!
//It hits nothing!
//Fluttershy's voice comes from left, right, behind, and in front. Not 'all around'; those directions specifically.
FS: I hear with my soul. Listening to others makes us ponies, instead of animals. ...It ~also~ means your ears are only cute things meant for me to nibble, hmm-hmm.
Spike: Are you hoping I'll keel over and die from stupid metaphors?
//IF IT MEANS I'LL GET TO STOP LISTENING TO THIS FUCKING SHIT THEN I AM
//Two hoofsteps, the second closer, in front of me. Fluttershy's attacked from the front already--
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Lake of Fire!
Bouts of flame coat the ground!
//That's to my left, so go right--
The Drakeling kicks Fluttershy in the right front leg with his left foot, tearing apart the skin and bruising the muscle!
FS: Oh!
//Before she even attacks, the Avatar of Temptation scrambles away!

//I guess this is the Patatrin-Vikramana Fluttershy is known for, but I never got that good with the technique.
Spike: If we're giving criticism during the fight then I'd like to take a turn.
\Breathe in through the nose while you're speaking. It should be easy to smell her bleeding leg and burnt hair.
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and dismisses the fires!
//And maybe she won't concentrate on smell if she's listening to me.
Spike: Have you ever considered thinking for yourself? Or is it easier to dangle on strings than stand up?
RBD: (Wasn't he complaining about metaphors a second ago?)
//Blood, far left and just behind. Staying away, what does she have up her sleeve...
Spike: I get it, you like slaving for others. So much you try to show me how great it is against my will.
FS: I'd never have thought a Hero would dislike the betterment of others.
//Far right, just ahead. Directly opposite, a fearful response... though the smell is getting closer.
Spike: Heroism _is_ the betterment of others--

Fluttershy charges at The Drakeling!
The Drakeling punches Fluttershy in the upper body with his right hand, bruising the skin and bruising the muscle!
Fluttershy headbutts The Drakeling in the head, shattering the scale, bruising the muscle and bruising the nose's cartilage!
Fluttershy collides with The Drakeling! The Drakeling is bowled over!
Fluttershy grabs The Drakeling by the left upper arm with her right front hoof! Fluttershy grabs The Drakeling by the right upper leg with her left rear hoof! Fluttershy grabs The Drakeling by the upper body with her left front hoof!
The Drakeling is pinned!
//Pinned? To hell with that, I've got my--
//Fluttershy places her face just in front of mine, and asks:
FS: Can you say that looking me in the eye?
//Eyes, wide but not unfriendly, with innocent shiny black ovals front and center. Hair, soft pink and curving, falls across my face and tickles my neck, slipping itself through my scales. Breath, sweet and hot that mixes with my own, reminds me of no word I can remember but 'seeds'. In peripheral vision, welcoming wings of this angelic pegasus pass in front of the light. The world grows yellow and still.
//I try to repeat it, but my mouth won't respond.
FS: Spike, when you take big, dramatic actions as a Hero, what you do affects just so many ponies. Nopony can truly know how everything they do will turn out; we just learn afterward. Are you?
//Am I? I look back at her, blankly.
FS: Think about Shinra. Do you know who that is?
//I shake my head the slightest bit as someone, somewhere far away, screams in my head.
FS: She was a secretary working just outside of Canterlot. Please try to remember.
Spike: Ya.
//My voice stumbles out of its cave like an oblivious bear blundering its way through a peaceful brook. Auditory tension releases as Fluttershy speaks again.
FS: Only a few days ago her life was ended because of actions you chose to take. Now, most surprising to me is that you didn't learn from your mistake. Why are you here?
//To... to meet the Princess, and... Fluttershy speaks in a whisper, almost not speaking at all but her words slip into me.
FS: ...It's okay, I won't make you lie to me. I was there when you started your quest, hmm-hmm. You set out to defeat the Princess, because Celestia wanted you to.
//That's... kill was the word, kill was it... screaming comes closer but it's muffled on the other side of an imaginary door.
FS: I hear you told Twilight what happened up there. Celestia wanted it all to happen. But how can you be here today if ponies like Shinra get hurt doing what Celestia says?
//Fluttershy's body is on top of me; I didn't notice it a hint. She's warmer than I am, and it's almost hard to breathe.
FS: You must be here to defeat the Princess. Have you learned from your mistakes? Doing what you thought Celestia told you led to innocent ponies getting hurt. How can such terrible things be the result of the best action to take?
//The screaming gets louder and louder until it bursts through:
\%Your eyes are dry! Stop staring!
FS: ...Maybe you haven't learned. But it's okay. I'll teach you.
//Not wanting to break eye contact, I blink my inner eyelids.
//Fluttershy, surprised, pushes herself off me. Stone pillars and reality come slamming back. The Drakeling breathes fire!
Fluttershy dodges away from the flames!
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Walk of the Third!
//Okay. That was a powerful charm and I need time to compose myself.
The Drakeling stands up.
//Fluttershy is nowhere to be found, as expected. No significant damage has been done to either of us. I've revealed Lake of Fire, Walk of the Third, and... that's it. The Avatars stand, most politely looking away, twenty feet from where we lay. Almost lay.
//She said I shouldn't follow Celestia's orders because they led to some people getting hurt. The reasoning was... some people getting hurt is unacceptable in the extreme. Which is unreasonable.
Spike: So, first things first.
//I take a big sniff. Blood and burnt hair southeast, strong. I take one step that way and a running
Fluttershy slides into view, like she was hiding behind a borderless painting. 
The Drakeling's Walk of the Third ends.

The Drakeling charges at Fluttershy! 
The Drakeling punches Fluttershy in the lower body with his left hand, bruising the muscle, 
bruising the left kidney and bruising the guts! 
Fluttershy counterattacks! 
Fluttershy kicks The Drakeling in the first finger, right hand with her right rear hoof, shattering the bone! Fluttershy kicks The Drakeling in the second finger, right hand with her right rear hoof, 
shattering the bone! 
The Drakeling collides with Fluttershy and bounces backwards! 
//Fluttershy disappears again as I blink from the pain.

//THERE WE GO SOME FUCKING SIGNIFICANT DAMAGE
//I got the worse end of it!
Spike: Gah... you're wrong. About everything. Your kindness makes you shortsighted. 
//I test my fingers. Can't move them at all... right hand is down for the count. 
//WHICH ONLY GOES UP TO THREE NOW
Spike: It's too easy to say 'I'll only take actions that have negative consequences for nobody'. You 
end up doing nothing!
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Walk of the Third!
//Again, I step to the left and the Avatar reforms. Her power must work on my eyes, not on her 
body... when I step outside targeting, Fluttershy is there as normal. 
//Still... if she's able to do it at will, I don't want to keep dropping into Walk of the Third for every 
initiation. If I pay attention and place it right this will work: 
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Lake of Fire! 
\Hey that's the checkerboard sentry pattern from Strategy! 
//That's the point...
The Drakeling's Walk of the Third ends.

//After a second dodging the flames, Fluttershy disappears again.
RBD: Finally. What took him so long? 
AJ: Uh, what'd he do? 
RBD: It's a grid pattern. If Fluttershy runs, it'll give her away 'cause of the fires behind her, and 
she'll overheat in there before too long. 
PP: What if she flies? 
RBD: Then it's obvious where she is. 
R: Her sole option is to attack, which is her least favored. 
//I have to believe I'm a better fighter than Fluttershy, as long as I can resist the charms. 
Spike: I mean, failing me on the test because one non-person got hurt? Now I get why you stopped 
being an official Avatar, stopped trying to -- do anything! Because if you do anything, there's a 
chance someone loses! 
//Which leads to plans like 'trying to romance the Aquinatic Conflict's prime agitator to convince 
him to end it', and other such garbage that will never work. 
Spike: But people lose out if you choose to do nothing, too. Someone like me... I can't stay 
paralyzed in fear of making a mistake. 
//Fires dance to my right, and I dive that way, swiping through them. But a cough comes from far 
behind, quickly muffled, so I turn around and walk. 
Spike: If no one is brave enough to fail, the world's problems will stay with us forever! 
//Trail of air pulls fires to the north, and I chase after them, one good hand balled into a fist. 
FS: This might hurt a little... 
//Fluttershy appears a few feet in front of me, closing her eyes, concentrating. She's dismissed the
visual illusion. I don't care why.

The Drakeling charges!
//Before I can take two steps, a force grabs me internally, near the stomach, and squeezes.
Spike: Ough--
//I come to a halt, doubling over without another word. Flames dance around me.
//The pain, this pain, I've never felt anything like it before, tears well up in my eyes--
The flames are dismissed.
//Fires in the checkerboard pattern fade away, smoke dissipating. Fluttershy opens her eyes, and the pain pulses.
//Damn... dammit, what did she do, I can't think for the pain; it's rooting itself in my stomach, growing tendrils up into my chest and down my arms and legs. Nausea, fatigue and heat echo after the pain, amplifying and chasing it.
PP: Huh? What's happening?
R: ...Fluttershy is giving it her all.
\I'm a dragon. How am I feeling hot?
FS: ...I'm sorry.
//The pain flips off. After it, fire works its way up my stomach, past my lungs, and out my nose and mouth like vomit, tasting of bile.
//KILL THIS FUCKING BITCH HOW DARE SHE
Spike: What... did you do...
FS: Hmm-hmm, I know your body better than you do.
//THOSE GLANDS ARE MY PROPERTY
//She... Fluttershy forced the fire glands, dismissed the flames... and I couldn't do anything about it.
FS: How does it feel when your body betrays you?
//Pressures, in waves, start inside different parts of me, shaking my chest and making it hard to breathe. Like in Quine's blizzard, ice digs under my scales, surrounds me, compels me to sleep and close my eyes... at least that's what I feel.
FS: Our bodies give us signals. Good and bad are some of these signals too. We feel what is right and wrong in our hearts, whether or not we acknowledge that in our minds.
//The world slides away, data from eyes and ears and nose disregarded as unimportant. At the same time as I retreat within my own mind, adrenaline surges, and my heart pumps wildly -- I should be paying attention but I'm losing it!
FS: In the same way vomit reflexes trigger when something we do brings us ill; guilt, sadness, anguish, and empathy reflexes trigger when what we do brings others ill.
//How can she do this?! How does she have the right to make me feel however she wants me to?!
//Anger reaches a peak and bursts, but like a balloon it all escapes, replaced by weariness. I never was a match to any of the Avatars. Fluttershy can fight the least of them, and here I am bowing to her. I'm worthless...
//NO SHIT, ASSHOLE. YOU CAN'T EVEN FEND OFF YOUR OWN SHITBALL CHEMICALS.
//Hunger drags my stomach in, sapping strength from my bones. Acid kicks up in my throat, looking for something to burn. And a confusion as well, but that's about the dragon instinct.
:\You mean, she's forcing _all_ my glands and such to activate? That's what's making me feel all these things?
//ISN'T THE MIND JUST A CHEMICAL FUCKING WONDERLAND?
//My leg seizes, and blood flow is restricted to it.
//Whoa, _that_ is too far--
PP: Hehehaha *snort* hehehaha, I guess she really _does_ know his body!
//The other waiting Avatars are silent. In embarrassment or patience, I can't tell.
FS: Hmm-hmm. Glad to see you too, Spike.
Spike: It's... you're doing it, this isn't--
FS: I am? I'm so sorry. Let me help you with that.  
//What can I do against this assault? Every part of my body is telling me radically different things; she has strings around each part and I can't defend myself.  
Spike: No! I planned on fighting today. My mind is already made! I should be proving myself with -- uurrgh --  
FS: You must have seen the terror and pain of those who you've hurt. Did it feel something like this to you? What about to them?  
//No, nothing's felt like this ever, because this cocktail of emotion isn't a possible thing to feel--  
FS: How can hurting others be the best path for your mind to choose, when your _unconscious_ body rejects it? Shouldn't you listen to how you feel?  
//That's -- that's it! I don't care anymore, this has to stop!  

The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Blood of the Earth!  
Snaking through the marble, streams of magma flow around The Drakeling's scales and into his veins!  
//As molten iron and nickel replaces my glands, emotion rolls off, washing away. Anger, terror, bitterness, lust burn off cleanly -- everything but hunger. Pressure waves might be there, but I can no longer feel them.  
//Fluttershy takes a step or two away, sensing a change. Fingers healed, I stand up. Marble beneath my feet is warping and burning.  
Spike: No. I shouldn't.  
FS: Wh-- what do you mean?  
//I don't know if she was counting on Blood of the Earth being this, instead of the paltry heal-faster move.  
Spike: _Feeling_ bad when others are hurt... maybe that's how you are. So you can trust your feelings. But I learned, on my own journey and from the words of the wisest person I know, that dragons are built to be remorseless killers. That's something I'd like to override.  
//Of course social herbivorous prey animals would have glands and instincts that reward cooperative, beneficial actions. And solitary, carnivorous predator animals have glands and instincts that reward tearing others apart limb by bloody limb. Use of the mind is what separates me from dragons like the one who burnt down the Olfrus's farm, and what separates us from insects.  
Spike: I've never felt good or evil, not even a little bit. I've always thought it. And that means good and evil don't change when I'm having a bad day!  
The Drakeling's Blood of the Earth ends.  
Spike: I'm going to take a chance! I'm going to believe that I can do better for the world! And I'll repay any injury I've caused a dozen times over with my successes! That's where I see good, and I'm chasing it!  
//I take a fighting stance. Finally, maybe now the battle can begin!  
Spike: So come on! Fight me for real!  
//Fluttershy, a growing sadness in her eyes, lowers her head and lets hair conceal her face.  
FS: ...No.  

Fluttershy was defeated!  
Spike earned 25000 experience points!  
Spike is now level 37!  

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

Spike: Uh... what?  
//If this is the second stage of the fight, at least I gained a level out of it...  
FS: Hurting each other doesn't prove anything, Spike. I tried to talk to you, and you disagreed.  
Spike: ...I'm supposed to go through combat with each Avatar before seeing the Princess.
FS: I don't want to hurt you. And I don't want to see what it would do to you if you hurt me. Because you're my friend, and I'm your friend.
//Is this a trick? She might be telling the truth...
FS: We can agree to disagree. That doesn't mean we should hurt each other over it. //...Fluttershy's master is her own emotion. She still likes me even though I'm a mostly different person, one who's only brought her trouble my entire life.
Spike: Sometimes, we have to hurt each other over it. //Every war is the result of a difference of opinion. Sometimes, the biggest questions can only be answered by the greatest of conflicts.
FS: ...But not right now. //Turning her side to me, Fluttershy returns to the gathered Avatars, head shrouded in burnt, bloodstained mane.

//The Avatars, gathered and quiet, shift to absorb Fluttershy into their standing bunch. Rarity looks over her hair sadly and tutts.
//My stomach gurgles. The oranges felt more filling than that...
RBD: So, thought about your next opponent yet?
AJ: The fight ended not two moments ago, Rainbow Dash. Give him a second, will ya?
//Time to think isn't Rainbow Dash's style, heh.
Spike: Thanks, Applejack.
R: Hero, I do believe her concern is the knightly honor of fighting a prepared opponent. Less so you.
//I walk to the cart, protected behind a marble pillar, and yank a pie off it. Here's the stuff!
PP: Hey! It's rude to eat in front of others without sharing!
//Gravy and crust falls to the ground beside me as I eat. Not aiming for decorum so much as highest calories-per-second right now...
FS: ...Oh my goodness.
R: (It is rather rude.)
//In only seconds the pie is gone, stomach full. As greedy, fire-based digestion kicks in, I lick my face clean.
RBD: (That's impressive.)
FS: But where did he get a meat pie around here?
//I rub my face dry with the back of my hand, retaking my place in the middle of the hall.
Spike: You wouldn't believe what I had to say to the chefs so they'd bake that for me. //Because it was 'please'. Surprisingly accommodating.

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

>>APPLEJACK
>>FLUTTERSHY
>>PINKIE PIE
>>RAINBOW DASH
>>RARITY

Spike: Fluttershy.
FS: ...Yes?
//Oh. Wait. I've already fought her. Then why is she still in the menu?! Who coded this crap?!
Spike: Nevermind.
//She hides again behind her mane, whispering:
FS: Okay...

[[SAVE LOCATION]]
Spike: I think--
PP: Ooh! Choose me! Choose me!
Spike: Oh, why not. Pinkie Pie.
PP: Ohmyskies yes! I'm so excited! Have you ever been so excited?
Spike: Uh, yes.
PP: Well I've never been so excited! Except for those two times, but apart from that!
//Would she just stop talking and get ready to fight?
PP: We're going to have the bestest fight ever! I'm so jealous you guys get to watch, this is going to be great!
AJ: Go on, girl, get!
//Applejack shoves Pinkie Pie by the flank, sliding her out to the middle of the hall, eyes open in surprise. Once there (after her head bobs stop), she leaps up on her rear hooves and takes a fighting pose!
PP: Grrr!
//Wow. Scary.

//ROUND TWO... FIGHT!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

Pinkie Pie charges at The Drakeling!
Pinkie Pie headbutts The Drakeling in the upper body, but the attack is deflected by The Drakeling's scales!
Pinkie Pie collides with The Drakeling! The Drakeling is bowled over!
//How does that combination happen?! No damage, but knocked over?
Pinkie Pie kicks at The Drakeling with her right front hoof, but The Drakeling rolls away!
//I mean, the charge wasn't even that fast!

The Drakeling stands up.
Spike: 'Swings, I must be off today.
PP: Hehehaha *snort* hehehaha! Why do you say that?
Spike: I'm sure I could have dodged that.
PP: Nope!
//...Excuse me?
Spike: What do you mean, 'nope'?
PP: Well, duh! Of course the boss is unavoidable on the first hit! How else would you know how strong I am?
\What is this, a video game?

The Drakeling breathes fire!
Pinkie Pie dodges away from the flames!
//Yeah, not expecting that to work. Hold up--
Pinkie Pie charges at The Drakeling!
Pinkie Pie bites The Drakeling in the left upper arm! Pinkie Pie latches on firmly!
Pinkie Pie throws The Drakeling by the left upper arm with her front teeth!
//I was too used to Fluttershy disappearing!
The Drakeling's tail skids along the ground, tearing the scale and bruising the muscle!
The Drakeling's right foot skids along the ground, bruising the scale!
The Drakeling slams into the pillar!
The Drakeling's upper body takes the full force of the impact, shattering the scale and tearing apart the first dorsal ridge!
//Kyaaa that hurt! It's for decoration, anyway; why does it sting so bad?!
The Drakeling stands up.

Pinkie Pie charges at The Drakeling!
Pinkie Pie kicks The Drakeling in the right upper arm with her Dashing Rogue Kick, but the attack is deflected by The Drakeling's scales!
The Drakeling counterattacks!
The Drakeling punched at Pinkie Pie with his right hand, but Pinkie Pie dodges away!
Pinkie Pie rushes past The Drakeling!

\She must be a brawler. With no wings or spells, the only way she's hurting you is through hoof-to-hand combat. Prepare for close and personal, maybe?
Spike: Screw it!
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Walk of the Third!
//The Avatar of Luck, looking doofily at me, freezes in place.
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Lake of Fire!
Bouts of flame coat the ground!
//With careful consideration, I set a ring of fire tightly enclosing Pinkie, twice her height. The rest of it, I use to set my left arm alight. Useful for any pin scenarios.
\Why don't you do that more often?
//...The crackling and light make it hard to concentrate.
The Drakeling's Walk of the Third ends.
PP: Woah-ho-ho-hoah!
Spike: What's it going to be? The scorching flames, or trying to hold on through the waning oxygen?
AJ: (Does dragonfire use oxygen like a regular fire?)
RBD: (Heck if I know. Who says that's even dragonfire? It didn't come from his mouth.)
R: (Then where did it come from?)
RBD: (As far as I can tell, he pulls it out of--)
PP: Oh man, that would be an absolutely _awful_ decision to make!
//That came from the pillar behind me--
//Pinkie Pie steps out, licks her hoof, and--
Pinkie Pie touches The Drakeling in the left hand with her right front hoof!
The flames are dismissed.
//The flames on my arm disappear!
//BULLSHIT
The Drakeling punches Pinkie Pie in the upper body with his right hand, bruising the skin, bruising the muscle and bruising the left true ribs!
Pinkie Pie tackles The Drakeling, taking him down by the upper body with her left front hoof!
Pinkie Pie grabs The Drakeling by the right upper arm with her left front hoof! Pinkie Pie grabs The Drakeling by the left upper arm with her right front hoof!
//Standing over me, she giggles and says:
PP: I never knew this could be so much fun!

//THERE ARE TOO FEW DISEMBOWELMENTS FOR MY TASTE
The Drakeling kicks Pinkie Pie in the lower body with his right foot, bruising the muscle, bruising the guts and bruising the pancreas!
Pinkie Pie looks sick!
//Queasy, she leaps off me!
The Drakeling stands up.
Pinkie Pie starts to run!
//She disappears behind a pillar too small for her. I doubt she's actually there anymore.
Spike: See, this is just boring to me. I'm not in any real danger from you.
FS: ...That's a very bold statement, Spike.
Spike: You can keep your strange omnipresence, silly first hits, and weird zany antics. They're well and great.

//From the pillar hiding the pies and cakes, a great crashing echoes!
AJ: _Swings_Pinkie--
RBD: Can't you concentrate?! 
FS: Pinkie Pie, those have meat in them! You'll get sick!
//I turn around.
Pinkie Pie throws the cart by the steel!
//The cart tumbles end over end, bouncing off the ground once! Pastries fly off everywhere!
The tumbling cart strikes The Drakeling in the upper body, bruising the muscle and bruising the right false rib!
//Oof!
The flying *steak and kidney pie* strikes The Drakeling in the left foot, but the attack is deflected by The Drakeling's scales!
//Great, now I have gravy under the scales. It'll smell like that for days... I start circling left, strafing around the pillar.
Spike: Every living thing has a breaking point, where if it gets hit anymore it'll roll over and die.
//A squeaking. The cart's over here, what could...
Spike: And you'll reach that point before I do!
//I keep walking and see Pinkie Pie, behind a -- a what?
//BOOM!
The speeding *steak and kidney pie* strikes The Drakeling in the upper body, shattering the scale, bruising the muscle, bruising the right true ribs and bruising the right lung!
The Drakeling is sent flying by the force of the blow!
The Drakeling's tail skids along the ground, tearing apart the scale!
//What the hell?!
The Drakeling slams into the ground!
//Covered in flaky dough and gravy and meat, pie tin making a din off behind me, I lean invisibly forwards. That was a cannon!
Spike: Hhhhh... ooh...
//Lungs rebooting, please stand by...
//Pinkie Pie stows the cannon away in some impossible nowhere, and then charges!
The Drakeling stands up.
Pinkie Pie charges at The Drakeling!
The Drakeling charges at Pinkie Pie!
The Drakeling punches Pinkie Pie in the nose with his left hand, bruising the skin and tearing apart the cartilage!
A minor artery has been opened by the attack!
Pinkie Pie kicks The Drakeling in the right lower leg with her right hoof! The attack glances away!
Pinkie Pie collides with The Drakeling! They tumble together and fall over!
//We descend into a big ball of violence!
The Drakeling kicks Pinkie Pie in the left rear leg with his right foot, bruising the skin and bruising the muscle!
Pinkie Pie headbutts The Drakeling in the head, bruising the scale and bruising the muscle!
The Drakeling bites at Pinkie Pie in the ear, but the blow is deflected by Pinkie Pie's hair!
Pinkie Pie kicks The Drakeling in the lower body with her left front hoof, bruising the muscle and
bruising the pancreas!
//I think that thing has taken more hits than any organ ever should--
The Drakeling punches Pinkie Pie in the upper body with his left hand, but the attack glances
away!
The Drakeling breathes fire!
Pinkie Pie dodges away from the flames!
The Drakeling stands up.

//She appears to the left of me, suddenly, confused as to what even she's doing.
PP: Buhuh?
Pinkie Pie kicks The Drakeling in the left lower arm with her right rear hoof, shattering the scale,
bruising the muscle and bruising the bone!
//Rushes over to the other side in an instant -- no one is that quick!
Pinkie Pie kicks at The Drakeling with her left rear hoof, but The Drakeling dodges away!
//She moves behind me before I can react!
Pinkie Pie bites The Drakeling in the tail, chipping the scale and tearing the muscle! Pinkie Pie
latches on firmly!
Pinkie Pie takes The Drakeling down by the tail with her front lower teeth!
//She lifts me over her head and slams me down on my back!
The Drakeling's lower body takes the full force of the blow, bruising the muscle and tearing apart
the third dorsal ridge!
//Kyaaa that hurt! Again! Again, why do I need these hurty bastard things?!
Pinkie Pie grabs The Drakeling by the left upper leg with her right rear leg! Pinkie Pie grabs The
Drakeling by the right upper leg with her left rear leg!
The Drakeling is pinned!
//I can't move, but my arms are free -- how is that pinned?! Who's writing these combat logs?!
PP: Phehehaha, wheeeeeeee!
//A spray of blood specks covers my chest as she laughs. That can't be sanitary, her nose is
bleeding everywhere... and that's before the gravy, which is all over us now.
Spike: What in Celestia's name just happened?!
PP: Whad did you egsped? I'm ad half hid poinds!
//You know what? I'm tired of this crazy pink bint with her stupid antics and impossibilities and
nonsense. This is ending right now!
Spike: For a mental patient like you, electroshock therapy is just the thing!
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Hand of Judgment!
The Drakeling punches Pinkie Pie in the head from below with his right hand, tearing apart the
skin, bruising the muscle, bruising the jaw, and shattering the lower front teeth! The severed parts
fly off in arcs!
//My scales stick on end, fuzzy electricity gathering on their ends--
The Bolt of Judgment strikes Pinkie Pie in the upper body, charring the fur!
//She spasms wildly, hair standing on end! A glow surrounds her!
The Drakeling grabs Pinkie Pie by the upper body with his right hand! The Drakeling grabs Pinkie
Pie by the upper body with his left hand!
The Drakeling throws Pinkie Pie by the upper body!
Pinkie Pie's right front leg skids across the ground, tearing apart the skin and bruising the muscle!
Pinkie Pie slams into the ground!
The Drakeling stands up.

//I watch the Avatar of Luck, breathing heavily. Smoke rises from her back, trailing up to the
ceiling.
...You still smell like gravy.
RBD: How did he not get shocked by that?
Spike: I guess, of the two of us... I'm more grounded.
//OH COME THE FUCK ON
//Sue me, I deserve a one-liner every now and then.
//Pinkie Pie groans, tries to push herself up on one hoof, and then gives up. I take that as a surrender.
PP: Derrible... pun...
//...

Pinkie Pie was defeated!
Spike earned 25000 experience points!
Spike is now level 38!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

FS: Oh my goodness, Pinkie--!
//Fluttershy gallops over to the defeated Avatar, closely followed by Rarity. I wander to the pillar which once hid pastries. Those were mine, damnit!
FS: Are you okay? Can you talk? Oh, please talk...
PP: ...I bant... ice cream...
//Sigh. Nothing. Not one pastry is left intact at all; every single one has been demolished. That puts a tight constraint on my options...
R: Ice cream? What kind, dear?
PP: ...every kind.
AJ: 'Every-kind' ice cream sounds right terrible.
RBD: She probably means one of each, not one with all of the flavors in it.
AJ: Oh, shucks. Yeah.
//Pinkie Pie, eyes closed, weakly sucks gravy out of her hair.
R: Hero, Pinkie Pie is a right mess, as you can see. We'll have to clean her up elsewhere -- not Fluttershy alone, either; those chipped teeth require magical attention.
Spike: Okay. So, break 'till then?
FS: We don't know how long this will take. She's in a bad way. Was that... lightning?
//Fluttershy inspects a lightning web pattern in Pinkie's fur where the bolt hit her. Pinkie is grumbling in response.
Spike: No. It was just what I had to do.
//I burn blood off my chest and tail with dragonfire, then turn to Rainbow Dash and Applejack. The other three make sounds of leaving behind me.
Spike: So... who's next?

Chapter End Notes

With apologies to Tarn Adams.
Lavender scent fills the hall, ruffling the piled tapestries in the back corner. I glance over and see the three Avatars are gone. Also a night guard outside the window who screeches when I make eye contact.

Spike: (Yeah, bring your friends next time.)
Applejack: I reckon you did a right number on Pinkie, Spike.
Spike: Uh, yeah. Combat. Hello?

When she surrendered I stopped fighting, and she's not dead. So, as could be reasonably expected.
AJ: I ain't sayin' you shouldn't have, but... y'all really didn't feel anythin' bringin' pain onto a friend like that?

No. We went over this.
Spike: ...Was she not listening ten minutes ago?

Rainbow Dash shrugs and ruffles her hair.

AJ: I ain't sayin' you shouldn't have, but... y'all really didn't feel anythin' bringin' pain onto a friend like that?

AJ: Mind explainin' yourself?
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AJ: Sounds troublesome.

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AJ: Sounds troublesome.

RBD: Hey, you try and keep a clear head when the Avatar of Temptation is at it. That's just, like, _art_.

Is... is Rainbow Dash implying...?

Spike: So you're saying there might be hope for Rinsesu Megimi after all?

When she surrendered I stopped fighting, and she's not dead. So, as could be reasonably expected.

Spike: Not in a very... let's say 'professional' way, either.

AJ: Let's get back to whatever conversation we were havin' before, please.

Spike: It wasn't much of one. You were asking me how I could see a friend hurt, and I was about to respond I explained that very same thing not ten minutes ago to Fluttershy.

Energy from the pie I ate after Fluttershy's fight brings me back to full, focus getting just that little bit stronger. Make that last, now; it's our last one for a while...

Why did the crazy pink bint have to smash the food?!

Spike: And honestly, everyone's overestimating how close I am to you guys. I met Pinkie Pie what, three times?

Blankly, Rainbow Dash blurts:
RBD: Three?
Spike: The Element in Mountainville, then one time she was gambling in Longbridge as Rarity complained about Princesses Hazel and Celestia, and lastly when Hazel met you in that shitty bar to make me Hero of the Land. (Though the last two I was kinda eavesdropping...)
AJ: What?!
RBD: Eh, expected it. Saw you with the cape a little while before that. Was that you in the teleporting plaza too?
Spike: Yep. How did you know who I was through the displacement cape anyways?
RBD: It's easy. If your eyes pass over them even when you don't want to, it's someone you know. After that I just guess.
Spike: What about people you don't know?
RBD: Your mind just puts in who's supposed to be there.

//ASK THIS CUNT HOW SHE KNOWS SO MUCH ABOUT HIDING
Spike: How do you--
AJ: In the interest of gettin' this show on the road, mind choosin' your next fight?

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

>>APPLEJACK
>>FLUTTERSHY
>>PINKIE PIE
>>RAINBOW DASH
>>RARITY

//...Okay.
Spike: It would be silly to ask for anyone but you two, right?
RBD: Duh.
//Thought so, let's choose again...

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

>>APPLEJACK
>>FLUTTERSHY
>>PINKIE PIE
>>RAINBOW DASH
>>RARITY

//...I have a plan. But it will only work this way.
Spike: Applejack.
AJ: Right. Well, no use horsin' around about it.
//Applejack trots to the center of the hall, leaving Rainbow Dash hovering in midair. She zooms off above the stairs and perches on a statue.
Spike: Actually, uh... could I get a handshake?
//About to say yes, the Avatar of Strength catches herself, and asks:
AJ: And why's that?
Spike: Because we're fighting? I'd like to know that even if I'm about to get kicked in the face a bunch of times it's only because we have to.
AJ: ...Is this a trick? Y'all better not pull the one over on me, Spike.
//...Well, it is entirely a trick. May as well be honest.
Spike: It's a trick. I'm getting you to acknowledge me as a person and a fellow warrior, instead of someone who just beat up your best friends, in the desperate hope it'll give me a better chance in battle.
//We share a stare for a moment, and then Applejack lets out a chuckle.
AJ: I gotta appreciate honesty, huh-huh. Put 'er there.
AJ: I was wonderin' if were of the same mind 'bout these things.
Spike: And that is?
AJ: I was wonderin' if we were of the same mind 'bout these things.

//That's meaningless. I _was_ right. Who does what they think is wrong?
Spike: Hey, I have to ask... why'd you ask about seeing my friends hurt? Did you just not pay attention?
//She shakes her head.
AJ: I was wonderin' if we were of the same mind 'bout these things.

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

Applejack rears back, then stomps on the ground!
A block of marble breaks up from the ground!
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Walk of the Third!
//The block of marble is between us, blocking sight and dragonfire. Well, if she wanted sight blocked...
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Lake of Fire!
Bouts of flame coat the ground!
//I raise a wall of fire that blocks sight between us, higher than normal because she jumped over the one in our previous fight.
The Drakeling leaps away from Applejack!
The Drakeling's Walk of the Third ends.

//The block of marble hurls itself towards where I was, skips off the floor (leaving marks and throwing off chips), and tumbles to the back of the hall next to the furniture and tapestries.
//I pause, still, trying to hear Applejack move over the sound of the flames. It's impossible, or she's not moving... is she trying the same thing?
Applejack rears back, then stomps on the ground!
//Marble behind the flames turns jagged and surges forward, advancing a path over the wall of flames!
//Applejack charges over it!

The Drakeling breathes fire! But nothing comes out!
\Crap, I mis-clicked!
Applejack charges at The Drakeling!
Applejack kicks The Drakeling in the left lower arm with her left front hoof, tearing apart the scale, bruising the muscle and shattering the bone!
A ligament has been severed by the attack!
The Drakeling counterattacks!
The Drakeling kicks Applejack in the right rear leg with his right foot, bruising the skin and bruising the muscle!
Applejack collides with The Drakeling, and bounces backwards!
RBD: Are you just going to stand there?!
//It's not the type of thing to forget.

The Drakeling grabs Applejack by the tail with his right hand!
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Blood of the Earth!
Snaking through the marble, streams of magma flow around The Drakeling’s scales and into his
veins!
Applejack's tail is incinerated!
Applejack's left rear leg has been singed!
Applejack's right rear leg has been singed!
AJ: Woah nelly!

Applejack leaps away from The Drakeling!

//Applejack snaps her tail, looking at the burnt ends of the hair left there.
She looks disappointed.

Spike: ...Sorry.
AJ: Nah. Been meanin' to get it cut anyway.
Applejack rears back, then stomps on the ground!
A block of marble breaks up from the ground!
//I brace my arms in front of me as the block of marble strikes!
The spinning -marble block- strikes The Drakeling in the left lower arm, but the attack is deflected
by The Drakeling's magma!
//The marble breaks against me, and my feet burn into the floor an inch. Slag left on my arms and
feet falls off as I take a step towards Applejack.
AJ: Now, they say I ain't the smartest of ponies, and maybe that's a little true. But I reckon I'm not
a fool, neither.
//I keep walking towards Applejack. She can't fight me when I'm like this.
Applejack rears back, then stomps on the ground!
A block of marble breaks up from the ground!
The spinning -marble block- strikes The Drakeling in the upper body, but the attack is deflected by
The Drakeling's magma!
//I'm stopped from taking another step for a few seconds, but then I continue.
Spike: Really? Right now you just look stubborn.
AJ: Stubborn, tenacious, call it what you will. I think y'all won't be able to stand much more of
this.
//What, is she kidding?
Applejack rears back, then stomps on the ground!
A block of marble breaks up from the ground!
//I lean my head into the blow to show how little it hurts me.
The spinning -marble block- strikes The Drakeling in the head, but the attack is deflected by The
Drakeling's magma!
//My neck feels a pinch for a minute, but it goes away, and I take another step.
Spike: Trust me, I can take much more like this than you can dish out.
RBD: Applejack, I kind of have to agree with him.
AJ: And that's why you're not a general, Rainbow Dash. This is attrition.

Applejack leaps backwards!
//Darn, she is kind of right. She just erased the progress I made, and a life-ending emptiness is
starting to grow in my stomach...
AJ: See, first thing Spike did after the fight on Quine's mountain was askin' me for some grub. And
y'all brought a cart full-a pies and cakes to snack on. Sounds like that magma of yours likes bein'
fed, huh-huh.  
//...She is totally and completely right. I'm slowly dying and she knows it! I need to do something else!  
Applejack rears back, then stomps on the ground!  
A block of marble breaks up from the ground!  
The Drakeling's Blood of the Earth ends.  
//DON'T LOSE YOUR HEAD  
The Drakeling dodges away from the spinning -marble block-!  
//It crashes through a window somewhere behind us!  
RBD: _Celestia_, Applejack!  
//Her eyes grow wide, staring at the priceless work of art destroyed.  
AJ: Whoops! Uh... I'll pay for that.  
Spike: (You sure will.)  
//WHY DO I DOUBT THAT  
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Hand of Judgment!  
The Drakeling charges at Applejack!  
The Drakeling punches Applejack in the upper body with his left hand, bruising the skin, bruising the muscle, and bruising the right true ribs!  
//A fierce SNAP jumps from my hand into Applejack's side! But nothing happens!  
Applejack counterattacks!  
Applejack kicks The Drakeling in the right upper leg with her right rear hoof, bruising the muscle, shattering the bone, jamming the bone through the right hip's muscle and shattering the right hip's bone!  

//FUCK FUCK WHY SHIT I TOLD YOU YOU FUCK  
Spike: Yyyaahhg!  
//I fall to the side, on my good leg (thankfully). Applejack, unharmed, smiles at me.  
\So there is one person in the word who doesn't smile like a psychopath.  
Applejack leaps away from The Drakeling!  
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Blood of the Earth!  
Snaking through the marble, streams of magma flow around The Drakeling's scales and into his veins!  
//I lay on the ground, breathing, as magma starves me to heal my wounds.  
AJ: Huh-huh, and they say there aren't advantages to bein' an earth pony.  
\\You tried Hand of Judgment, but she has a connection to the land like you did when you cast Terrae Corpus. You tried Blood of the Earth, but she knows how to beat it, and nothing is being saved for the next two people you have to fight...  
//She even knew to jump away as soon as I got hurt because I'd use the magma. Applejack, the General, is defeating me with her strategic skill.  
//YOU'RE FIGHTING LIKE A PONY. FIGHT LIKE A FUCKING DRAGON.  
The Drakeling's wounds have healed.  
The Drakeling's Blood of the Earth ends.  
RBD: ...Is he just gonna lay there?  
//Fighting like a pony?  
//WITH MERCY. DID SHE SHOW YOU ANY? TEAR OUT THIS CUNT'S FUCKING THROAT AND SHIT DOWN HER NECK!  
//No, I'm powerful now, I can make sacrifices like not killing opponents, I refuse--  
AJ: 'Trust me, he's gettin' back up.  
//POWERFUL? IS THAT WHAT YOU CALL LOSING TO THE WORLD'S LEAST CAPABLE MILITARY COMMANDER?  
\You shouldn't leave anything in reserve for the next fight if it means you lose this one.  
Spike: Okay, okay...
//I have to win this now, and without Blood of the Earth! I'll starve if I do it any more!

The Drakeling stands up.
Applejack rears back, then stomps on the ground!
A block of marble breaks up from the ground!
The Drakeling dodges away from the spinning -marble block-!
Spike: Woah!
//That ruffled my feathers!
//I can't keep dodging stone; she has a longer range than my dragonfire and Lake of Fire is only a delaying tactic! She shook off Hand of Judgment now and Touch of Grisly Terror in our first fight!
What else is there?!
Applejack rears back, then stomps on the ground!
//Walk of the Third!
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Walk of the Third!
A block of marble breaks up from the ground!
//So, what, I get plastered in slow-mo?
\No, no... fight like a dragon. Leave nothing behind. Walk of the Third is a limited resource, yes, but it's one you have right now. How would Quine fight? Actually, no; screw him. How would Jebed fight?
//The grey ankh, the one Twilight gave me, hangs heavy against my chest. People who don't fear death itself... Applejack's not wearing an ankh.
The Drakeling leaps at Applejack!
//I rush past the block of marble hanging in air!
The Drakeling's Walk of the Third ends!
The spinning -marble block- shoots off into the air!
//It strikes a pillar and kicks up a cloud of dust!
RBD: Hey! Watch the masonry--
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Walk of the Third!
//Applejack, still swinging around to face me, lowered head. That's not what I need!
//I lie close to the ground and breathe fire!
The Drakeling breathes fire!
The Drakeling stands up.
The Drakeling's Walk of the Third ends!

AJ: Where -- 'Swings!
Applejack rears back!
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Walk of the Third!
//Perfect!
//I rush over to Applejack, who has her front hooves in the air, trying to block out the dragonfire. Do this right, we don't have much time...
The Drakeling grabs Applejack by the upper body with his right upper leg! The Drakeling grabs Applejack by the upper body with his left upper leg!
//I climb on the Avatar of Strength's back, hoping I won't very soon regret that fact.
The Drakeling grabs Applejack by the head with his left hand!
//My claw's pulling up her jaw, quick--
The Drakeling grabs Applejack by the throat with his upper front teeth! The Drakeling grabs Applejack by the throat with his lower front teeth!
//I dig in the littlest bit, not drawing blood but making pressure.
The Drakeling's Walk of the Third ends!
Applejack is caught in the dragonfire! Applejack's left front hoof has been singed!
AJ: Get offa--
Applejack struggles in vain against the grip of The Drakeling's left hand on Applejack's head.
Woah, she's shaking hard--
The Drakeling grabs Applejack by the neck with his right lower arm!
Spike: Shhurrender!
//Has she not noticed I'm about to bite out her jugular?!
Applejack struggles in vain against the grip of The Drakeling's left upper leg on Applejack's upper body!
\Remember 'at least let me be a credible threat'?
Spike: Come on! I mean it!
//Hey, you know, that's actually not bad...
//Applejack freezes in place. With my tongue, I can feel her breath catch, and heart rate skyrocket.
Rainbow Dash takes off from somewhere in the hall.
AJ: ...Let go of me.
Spike: Shhurrender.
//Silence passes between the two of us. From her flexing neck muscles, Applejack doesn't like the sound of that idea.
AJ: Spike, I'll give you 'till five. One.
Spike: It's over! I've won!
//She's really not giving in, even when I'm in position to kill her... isn't that bad sportsmanship?
AJ: Two.
Spike: ...Really?
//I'm tasting your blood! Why are you doing this?!
AJ: Three.
\This is it, Hero. It had to come to this one day. There are people you can't beat into submission, that refuse to bend. General Applejack fought dragons for months on end; did you think just because she wears no ankh she's afraid of risking death in combat?
AJ: Four...
//This is another test, it's got to be, no way would Applejack put me in this situation...
\What do you do when someone is wrong and refuses to change? Do you destroy them, or leave them be?
RBD: Lieutenant General Applejack! Stand down!
//...What?
AJ: What?
Spike: What?
//Rainbow Dash lands next to us and cuffs Applejack on the ear. The Avatar of Strength then stares at her angrily.
RBD: New orders from Princess Hazel: get your _head_ out of your _ass_ and surrender! You've lost! At least admit it!
//A long glare passes between Applejack and Rainbow Dash. I feel like an accessory attached down here...
AJ: I can still get out of this.
RBD: Maybe. But chances are you force Spike to tear out your jugular to show us all how _courageous_ you are! And all that makes you is a terrible, dead friend!
//Far in the distance, a guardspony discovers the shattered window from the outside, marble block also having destroyed a railing. In the silence I can hear his tuts.
RBD: And if you don't surrender, Spike's not the only one you'll be fighting.
//Hold on... she's not, is she?
AJ: ...Pardon?
RBD: Hey -- if a friend needs a whooping to get their head straight, I'm more than willing to give it!
//Angry stares pass between Rainbow Dash and Applejack. Her pride and stubbornness are getting the better of her...
//After another moment, I feel held breath release in a sigh. Applejack surrenders:
AJ: Fine.

Applejack was defeated!
Spike earned 25000 experience points!
Spike is now level 39!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//I slide off Applejack's back, letting go of everything. My stomach growls.
RBD: You're not at war anymore. You're _testing_ your _friend_.
AJ: I get it, good gravy!
//Holes in the floor betray the blocks taken up by Applejack's fight. A smashed window lets in cold night air at the end of the hall, if I remember correctly one of the only depicting Princess Luna.
//NO GREAT LOSS
//Applejack turns to me. She's not blinking or bowing her head. Beads of blood rise on her neck.
AJ: ...No hard feelin's.
Spike: Of course not.
//Applejack walks off heavily to the base of the stairs, saying nothing more.
RBD: You should probably go to the med center, get some antibiotics! He drew blood!
//The Avatar of Strength ignores this and sits down, watching us.
RBD: (Is it too much to expect her not to be an idiot?)
Spike: Why antibiotics? I'm not poisonous.
\That would be 'antivenom'.
//Rainbow Dash shrugs.
RBD: Better safe than sorry; mouths aren't the cleanest.
Spike: What you do with Rinsesu on your own time is your own business, but my mouth is clean.
//Rolls eyes.
RBD: Shut up, dork.
//Although, if it meant a free lunch of grossulars, I'd be tempted...
//My stomach rumbles again, despite the pie I ate not twenty minutes ago.
RBD: So, it looks like Rarity isn't back with the others yet. You ready?
Spike: Let's get this show on the road.

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

>>>APPLEJACK
>>>FLUTTERSHY
>>>PINKIE PIE
>>>RAINBOW DASH
>>>RARITY

Spike: Rainbow Dash!
RBD: The one and only!
//She launches into the air, flying about madly!
Spike: ...Could I get a handshake?
//The Avatar of Speed pauses in midair, says:
RBD: Oh yeah.
//And drops to the ground.
Spike: I know we've had our differences in the past -- by which I mean you tried to molest and/or kill me at least three times not to mention leaving me to die in the desert--
RBD: --details--
//She holds out her hoof as I walk forward.
Spike: But I hope this is a good old fashioned, fair--
The Drakeling leaps at Rainbow Dash!
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Touch of Grisly Terror!
The Drakeling grabs Rainbow Dash by the left wing with his right hand! The Drakeling grabs
Rainbow Dash by the right wing with his left hand! They become limp and useless!
Rainbow Dash kicks The Drakeling in the head with her right front hoof, tearing apart the scale,
bruising the muscle and bruising the skull!
The Drakeling is propelled away by the force of the blow!
The Drakeling's tail skids along the ground, tearing apart the scale and bruising the muscle!
The Drakeling falls over!

//ROUND FOUR... CHEAT!

RBD: Nice try--
//Rainbow Dash leaps into the air, but her wings don't spread! She falls back to the ground, hooves
skipping off the marble.
RBD: My -- my wings!
//Sickly horror spreads across her face. Several more strained attempts to move her wings fails.
AJ: Huh-huh, you didn't know about that?
The Drakeling stands up.

The Drakeling breathes fire!
Rainbow Dash dodges away from the dragonfire!
//Huh, even without wings she's still quick... but nothing compared to with them. I've fought
opponents on this level before!
RBD: What did you _do_?!
//I remember her yelling that at me when I burnt down the Valley of Death forest. Is taking away
use of her wings as distressing as the deaths of two dozen innocents?
AJ: That's the paralyzer, right? Y'all make it so she can't move her wings?
Spike: It'll wear off after the battle.
//Applejack shrugs and turns away, trotting up the stairs.
AJ: I don't need to be here to figure out how this one ends, I reckon. Here's hopin' the med center
ain't busy; I want to be back for Rarity...
//She leaves the hall completely, leaving only me and Rainbow Dash.
RBD: You -- you cheater!
Spike: Excuse me?
The Drakeling breathes fire!
Rainbow Dash dodges away from the dragonfire!
//Don't talk too long, Touch of Grisly Terror might wear off...
RBD: You attacked before we shook hooves!
RBD: Screw you!
Spike: Now we play the guessing game: itinerary or frustrated outburst?

The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Walk of the Third!
//Let's end this quickly.
Spike: This is for all that you've done to me!
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Hand of Judgment!
The Drakeling leaps at Rainbow Dash!
The Drakeling's Walk of the Third ends.
//I forgot! Using it so much against Applejack and earlier means it's cutting out now!
The Drakeling charges at Rainbow Dash!
The Drakeling punches at Rainbow Dash with his left hand, but Rainbow Dash dodges away!
Rainbow Dash counterattacks!
Rainbow Dash kicks The Drakeling in the lower body with her left rear hoof, chipping the scale, bruising the muscle and bruising the stomach!
//Gooh, man, glad that's empty...
The Drakeling charges past Rainbow Dash!

//Crap! Even wingless, the Avatar of Speed isn't going to be easy!
Rainbow Dash kicks The Drakeling in the right lower leg from behind with her right rear hoof, denting the scale and bruising the muscle!
The Drakeling falls over!
//I stumble over and put my hands on the ground.
//SNAP! comes from my scales, and static jumps into the marble. That's Hand of Judgment gone.
The Drakeling's Bolt of Judgment dissipates.
Rainbow Dash leaps away from The Drakeling!
//I'm still powerful enough to defeat her!
The Drakeling stands up.

RBD: What's the matter? Can't win a crooked fight?
Spike: It's a fight, there are no rules to break. If you don't like it, run away and start a martial arts club or something.
RBD: You--
Rainbow Dash charges at The Drakeling!
Rainbow Dash kicks at The Drakeling with her right front hoof, but The Drakeling dodges away!
The Drakeling counterattacks!
The Drakeling kicks Rainbow Dash in the upper body with his left foot, bruising the muscle and bruising the left false ribs!
Rainbow Dash collides with The Drakeling! Rainbow Dash bounces backwards!
The Drakeling punches Rainbow Dash in the head with his right hand, tearing apart the skin and bruising the muscle!
Rainbow Dash bites The Drakeling in the right lower arm, tearing apart the scale and tearing apart the muscle!
Rainbow Dash latches on firmly!

Spike: Get off!
Rainbow Dash shakes The Drakeling around by the right lower arm, tearing apart the right lower arm's muscle!
An artery in the right lower arm has been opened by the attack!
//FUCKING FUCK OWWWWW
The Drakeling breathes fire!
Rainbow Dash has been caught in the dragonfire! Rainbow Dash's upper body has been burned!
RBD: Kyaaa--
Rainbow Dash releases the grip of Rainbow Dash's upper front teeth on The Drakeling's right lower arm!
Rainbow Dash leaps away from The Drakeling!

//Aaagh... my arm is bleeding profusely, blood visibly rises in cycle with my heartbeat. The tear is about six inches long; she really did a number...
Spike: So, tell me.
RBD: What?!
Spike: Does dragon blood taste as good as pony blood?
//I'd imagine it has a smoky flavor.
RBD: Blech, disgusting. It tastes like sulfur.
//FIRE AND FUCKING BRIMSTONE, BABY, DRAGONS BRING THE NOISE
A bell tolls somewhere in Canterlot, ringing into the castle from the cool night air. I cauterize my wound.

Spike: Huh, that's strange.

Rainbow Dash says nothing, trying to look at the burnt fur on her chest.

Spike: It's premature for a funeral dirge!

The Drakeling leaps at Rainbow Dash!

Rainbow Dash leaps away from The Drakeling, into the air!

What?! No!!

Rainbow Dash rises up into the air and does a twirl!

Rainbow Dash twirls in the air, casting Wind Pool!

Her wings are working!! She recovered too quickly!

Air drags at me, pulling me to the left and almost off my feet. I leap forward, away from the circle trying to enclose me, before it starts!

Rainbow Dash spreads her wings, and casts Wind Wall!

The Wind Wall strikes The Drakeling in the head, tearing apart the scale!

The Drakeling is knocked over by the force of the blow!

Rainbow Dash's wings fail!

RBD: Oshsitwhat--

Rainbow Dash slams into the ground! Rainbow Dash's left rear hoof takes the full force of the impact, tearing the skin and bruising the muscle!

Her wings must not be fully recovered. On the ground like this, I can hardly crawl against the wind, but it's the only way to move.

The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Walk of the Third!

The Drakeling stands up.

Probably the last one. Wind pushes around me softly, urgent but not enough to sway me.

Rainbow Dash is recovering from the fall. I have one shot--

The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Touch of Grisly Terror!

The Drakeling's Walk of the Third ends.

Spike: In the name of Celestia, and all that is right, I won't be stopped!

She slides a hoof back, readying to dodge Hand of Judgment. Perfect.

The Drakeling charges at Rainbow Dash!

The Drakeling punches at Rainbow Dash, but Rainbow Dash dodges away!

Rainbow Dash counterattacks!

Rainbow Dash strikes The Drakeling in the left upper leg with her right wing, shattering the scale, bruising the muscle and bruising the bone!

The Drakeling collides with Rainbow Dash! The Drakeling bounces off!

The Drakeling touches Rainbow Dash in the left wing with his lower body! The Drakeling touches Rainbow Dash in the right wing with his left upper leg! They become limp and useless!

Success!

Rainbow Dash kicks The Drakeling in the right hand with her left rear hoof, bruising the muscle and bruising the bone!

Ow, that hurt!

Rainbow Dash leaps away!

Spike: Everyone wants to get crazy with their deceptions. Twilight, Herr Yyz, Caduceus mare...

The Avatar of Speed looks at me oddly, behind multicolored hair.

RBD: 'Caduceus mare'?

Spike: But simple deceptions _work_. There's less to go wrong.

Rainbow Dash leaps into the air, but her wings fail her again. She falls back to the ground, same sickly horror pulsing.
RBD: No, my wings, not again; I just felt them--
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Lake of Fire!
Bouts of flame coat the ground!
//I place a rectangle around myself and Rainbow Dash, fully enclosed. There's nowhere to
maneuver, unless you're a dragon immune to fire.
Spike: Information control is a part of fighting. Applejack understood that, which is why she was
suspicous to shake my hand. Fluttershy understood that, which is why she disappears, and never
showed me it.
//Flames lick at Rainbow Dash from each side and behind, curling the tips of her tail. She looks at
me with a kind of amusement, one I can't place.
Spike: But you and Pinkie? You have all your cards on the table, nothing's left to hide.
RBD: We're Avatars, the faces of Hazel's administration for hugely important tasks. Hiding
anything makes us look merciful -- what special forces team is _merciful_?
//That's exactly what someone with terrible power and important tasks should be -- if not the
Avatars then at least the person ordering them around!
Spike: Is it okay to do anything you like to people, just to look scary? Are appearances more
valuable than peoples' _lives_?!
//Rainbow Dash looks about, raising a hoof at the walls of flame beside us. Her back legs tense up,
and she looks at me from under her hair, ears back. She mutters:
RBD: Yeah, I'm not a debater. Could you call off the fire?
Spike: Uh, no? We're still fighting.
RBD: I surrender! Call it off!
//She is surrounded by fire, and through me is the only way out... I guess she doesn't know I can't
risk Blood of the Earth.

Rainbow Dash was defeated!
Spike earned 25000 experience points!
Spike is now level 40!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//...But that's not it. Crazy non-flying bint probably thinks an easy trick like this will work.
Spike: No.
RBD: Hey! I'm burning to death here--
Spike: Are you kidding? I just fought you using trickery as my main tool. Falsely giving up won't
work.
//Her body language is like a cat waiting to pounce. As soon as the flames go away, she'd attack
again. The only thing stopping her now is she doesn't know I'm on the edge of starvation. And I'm
not keen on telling her.
Spike: So I'm going to wait until someone gets back to accept your surrender.
RBD: ...Darn it.
Spike: Yeah, fighting someone intelligent is a change, huh?
//I sit down and look over my wounds. Besides the cauterized gash in my arm, nothing is too bad...
I should probably go to the infirmary. Mouths aren't the cleanest.
//Rainbow Dash shrinks away from the walls of flame and sits down on the marble, looking at the
floor in front of her, mind internal.
RBD: Heh-heh... heh-heh, heh-heh-heh-heh-heh.
//Why is she laughing? And why is it so weird?
RBD: Okay. No one's here, this is what you do, heh. So much for what I thought. Guess I needed a
reality check.
//Uh, is she making sense to anyone else?
\"I'm still you, just a different internal voice. Idiot.\"
//FUCK YOUR STUPID MORTAL SHIT
//Never mind, I won't ask again...
RBD: But I gotta know. Just between you and me. Who is it?
Spike: Who's what?
//I'm Spike, last time I checked.
RBD: I know it's not me, I get that. But come on, it's got to be _someone_. So who is it? No one else is here. I just gotta know.
Spike: What are you talking about?
RBD: Don't play dumb, Spike. Is it gonna be Twilight? Went on this whole journey just to impress her, the Hero gets the girl at the end?
//Is she... she's really talking about this?
RBD: Can't be Rarity; you'd never rebuild what you guys had. Applejack? Fluttershy? Pinkie Pie? Old friends become something more, or maybe you've found a sight you wouldn't mind seeing for hundreds of years. Did you find a dragon over your journey whose egg nest you'd like to come back to at the end of the day?
//Rainbow Dash is seriously asking... who I've decided to become rebirth-mates with? My throat chokes up, and I freeze in place.
//WHY IS SEX MORE SCARY TO YOU THAN FIGHTING EQUESTRIA'S MOST POWERFUL KNIGHTS
RBD: ...It can't be. Celestia? You honestly think she'll come back to Equestria just for you? No, not her... so who could it be? Who does Spike take as a rebirth-mate?
//...How do I even begin not answering this question?
//Staring at me for seconds, Rainbow Dash then shakes her head, grinning beside the flames.
RBD: Heh-heh. That's it, then. Body language really does say everything.
//A pop from far ahead, at the top of the stairs, signals the return of three Avatars. Their wounds and burns have been fixed. I can see them over the flames, but Rainbow Dash's back is to them.
PP: Oooh, it's still going on! What did we miss? I hope nothing good!
Spike: Yeah. Nothing good at all.
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and dismisses the fires!
RBD: I just surrendered. Applejack's in the med center, she's--
AJ: I'm back, y'all. Wasn't much of a line.
//Applejack walks in from one of the doors at the top of the hall (not the center one, which is stone; one of the 'lesser' wooden ones). Together, the four Avatars start descending the stairs.
R: Oh, Applejack! What _happened_ to your tail?!
//Applejack wags her burnt tail as she walks.
AJ: Huh-huh, just a trimmin'. I like it short, anyways. Didn't have to pay for it, either.
//Rarity lowers her head and puts on a smile.
R: ...Well. Suppose there was no reason for me to be so dramatic, was there?
//Rainbow Dash trots uneasily back to them, burn still visible on her chest.
FS: Why were you at the med center?
AJ: Oh, uh, just a little somethin' I got from bein' too reckless. Nothin' to worry about.
//Her head and neck fur looks a little damp. Either I drool more than Rainbow Dash at a drakeling convention or Applejack mixed up antibiotics and bobbing for apples.
//Fluttershy raises an eyebrow but says nothing. Pinkie looks around, counting the holes in the floor from raised stones.
R: What I think Fluttershy meant to ask, Applejack, is: have you and the Hero fought?
AJ: Oh! Yeah, Spike won. Fair and square, too.
PP: Wow! Did you remodel the floor while you two were at it?
//Rarity tuts at the smashed window.
R: Oh, darn; that was my favorite of Luna as well.
RBD: She wasn't that great anyway.
FS: Dash, how can you say that? The Princess was perfectly wonderful, as soon as she started to calm down, relax, talk in her inside voice, not demand tribute as often...
AJ: (Nah, she was a nutcase through and through. Remember when she impaled a dragon on one of the Castle's spires?)
PP: Uck, and I hate cleaning up my _own_ messes...
R: Still, out with the old and in with the new. I wonder who will be commissioned to replace it -- and what history they will depict.

//HEAR DEAD PRINCESSES ARE IN STYLE NOW SO WHY NOT TWILIGHT'S IN-LAW?
PP: They should make it a party! With everypony everywhere coming together and having a super-duper amazing old time!
AJ: (So, complete fiction?)
//Certainly not a historical scene.
//I look around. It seems there aren't any pictures of Hazel in the stained glass windows. And none of Twilight, either.
RBD: I bet they'll make it of Spike.
//That's... not what I was expecting from her.
Spike: A stained glass window is a little far to go for a wanted poster.
FS: Wanted? Spike, you're not a bad person. As soon as you talk to Hazel she'll understand.
//YEAH WHEN YOU TEAR THAT CUNT'S THROAT OUT SHEL'LL LOOK UP AND ACCEPT IT
R: You have to excuse me, Fluttershy, but I do feel that is a bit premature.
//Rarity breaks from the Avatars, walks out in front of me, and takes her place with panache. We're only a few feet away.
R: There is, after all, one more Avatar to defeat.

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

>>APPLEJACK
>>FLUTTERSHY
>>PINKIE PIE
>>RAINBOW DASH
>>RARITY

Spike: ...
//This is it. The last Avatar of them all, and the one you know least about. She hasn't blinked at anything that's happened here, unflappable in the extreme. Never fought her before, out of Blood of the Earth and Walk of the Third, a spellcaster known for creation and use of magical items that can extend her power far beyond just her own body... and someone who knows you better than you probably know yourself.
//This is going to be tough.
//THIS IS GONNA BE FUCKING AWESOME
Spike: I--
Rarity: In lieu of combat, I challenge you to a game of Strategy.

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//ROUND FIVE... TRITE.

//...What?
AJ: Huh?
RBD: Is she serious?
//A white glow starts on Rarity's horn, pointing up in the air. I tense up, ready to spring for a moment, then a wooden box carved with rose petals and detailed by silver appears between us.
FS: Uhm, Rarity, I'm not sure you can do that--
R: Are you sure, Fluttershy? Because where I'm standing, when I squint hard and look between my hooves I can almost see the law down there.

//Strategy? I haven't played that since I was at Rainbow Dash's dojo, and that wasn't exactly normal Strategy. When was it before that? Fluttershy's cottage, so long ago? Who thought this game would actually come up somewhere important?
Spike: The captain of the guard told me I had to face each Avatar in combat--
R: And you are a Hero of the Land as well. People such as us are responsible to each other, not vestigial laws blindly grandmothered in from a previous generation.

//Crap, 'cause I had no confidence in my Strategy skills, especially if she's choosing it as her challenge...
PP: Hold on, I thought we agreed not to tell--
AJ: He already knew, Pinkie.
RBD: And Rarity wasn't at that meeting. Remember?
PP: Oh yeah!

//Not even sure it's preferable to combat. I'd be hard pressed to win either.
R: You and I are above the law. If I may be frank, none of this was even necessary since the moment Hazel decided to recognize you.
Spike: So... I really could have just walked right in?

//WHAT DO YOU THINK 'ABOVE THE LAW' MEANS, FUCKWIT?
R: Of course not. We'd have stopped you. But you are not finally earning the acknowledgment of Princess Hazel today. You are earning ours.

//Rarity sits down next to the box, unlocks the latches, and starts unfolding a Strategy map. Small bags of playing pieces levitate out with it.
R: But if you don't sit down to play, you can never win anything at all.

//What, standing up is forbidden?
\No, it's synonymous with 'if you don't play'... which was Pinkie Pie's lesson during her test. You have to accept you might fail in order to win. Though, responsibility to each other and breaking rules was what you learned from Fluttershy... and from Applejack's test it was made clear talking to each other will lead to harmony quicker than bloodshed. She's combining lessons from many Avatars here... what did Rainbow Dash teach you?

//Not to trust Rainbow Dash?
\No... well, yes, but no. You learned not to give up, even when people were telling you it was over.

//IT IS OVER. YOU'RE JUST WAITING TO GET FUCKED.
//I sit down at the other side of the Strategy board, and start arranging my pieces.

//The remaining Avatars gather around us, watching the game unfold. We're just starting to place our pieces.

//...The hall is silent but for wind through the broken window and clacks of wood on wood. Avatars, usually a talkative bunch, watch us patiently. And I can't think of anything to say. What do you say to someone who's been married to you for years but you haven't got the slightest clue about?
Spike: Uh, do I place first?
Rarity: Placing second is a bit of an advantage, so I'll place first.

//One by one, she carefully levitates pieces, placing them with deliberation.
R: Challenger benefit, and all.

//The three-player map is split into three asymmetrical sections: air, land, and sea. Oriented towards me is land; Rarity places on the air. With no symmetry I can't get my bearings by inspecting her movements and copying them; the shape of the map leads us to different strategic paths.
FS: Since it's a three player map, the fight will be over the untaken start point.
That's only part of it. If someone secures it they've won the game, so there must be a strategy to prevent securing it by aggression, giving rise to defensive techniques that slowly claim ground, making greedily grabbing the spot a viable tactic... the game will be about that element of the map, but it's possible nothing will actually happen there.

RBD: Air, huh? What does that do?
R: Nothing, dear. It just fills space.
RBD: No, I mean, in the board game.
R: ...That is what I meant.

//Rarity has placed her peasants and warriors in a... complex way. It's not obviously defensive, offensive, or greedy. It looks more like math was done... too complex for me, I'll just try something.

\"You're improvising against a pony who sat down one day with a pencil and paper and figured out perfection for this map? That's sure to work.\"
AJ: Hmmm.

//Since I'm obviously the lesser player here, I have to take a risk to win. Being defensive isn't a risk, being offensive would be too predictable... let's try greed.

//I am, after all, a dragon.

PP: What's happening? Why's everyone so quiet?
FS: This is a complicated game, Pinkie. A lot of care needs to go into every decision you make.
//I place my soldiers and peasants almost recklessly, scattering them about to grab more land than I should be able to hold. I just hope at the end enough of it is still mine.
RBD: Good choice.
PP: What happened? I don't get it.
RBD: Rarity's opening is flexible, and the price you pay for that is against extreme stuff, like what Spike's doing.

//MODERATION IS A WEAKNESS, LIKE MERCY AND HONOR
R: Alright, I do think it is time to begin. Best of luck, Hero.
//Why does she call me 'Hero' instead of 'Spike'?

//The Avatar of Avarice moves her units in a way to claim land. It's not as much as I have taken from the start, but the units move naturally into strong positions.
RBD: I don't know if that'll work out.
PP: I am so confused.
RBD: She's doing what Spike's doing, but from behind. Basically, she thinks she's better at it.
R: It is your turn.

//Hmmm... she's probably right about being better at it. I'll only have an advantage for so long before her skills allow her to catch up. I need to attack Rarity when my advantage is greatest.
//I set up to make soldier-producing structures and develop the land I'm on. For the next few turns, it's going to be mostly bookkeeping. With a slight wave of her mane, Rarity notes:
R: In what I've found to be a strange coincidence, the highest levels of nearly any competitive activity all look the same, whichever activity it may be.

//She moves units, also doing bookkeeping activity. This part of the game is unexciting.
Spike: What?
//Rainbow Dash's training kicks in and I move my pieces rapidly, more intuition than thought. Oh, darn; I made a slight mistake on that one...
R: There was a time when I designed dresses. After that, I studied combat. Now that I find myself with great quantities of free time, aside from designing magical artifacts I indulge in Strategy. And in all of them I have discovered the competition is less important than the competitor.
//She arranges her peasants to chop wood in strange ways. I look at it for a minute, trying to think.
R: It is your turn.
Spike: Okay.
//I take my turn.
R: Ponies who rise consistently to the top, beyond normal variation, seem perpetually lucky. In
reality, they understand themselves, their opponents and their environment so thoroughly these ponies may as well be clairvoyant.

//Halfway through moving my last piece, I realize all Rarity's trees will fall across paths into her operations, blocking me out. It can only be done on her side of the map, with how she placed her workers. And that's almost a dozen turns from now.

//Whoa.

R: Skilled competitors have a reputation. Great competitors _use_ their reputation, to force opponents into paths which illude the greatest chance of success, and then predict it.

//Rarity assigns her peasants to development operations. By the time I'm there with an attack, she'll have a greater resource base despite less land just because I'm putting so much into an attack... and all this is happening two to six turns from now; right now little has actually been accomplished.

\And then you'll be delayed for several turns, giving her the ability to train an army to defend. One that's going to be bigger than yours.

R: At the highest level, information is the only essential commodity. Execution is necessary, but when execution is guaranteed, information takes importance. Combine this with the clairvoyance mastery can grant, and predictive games start forming no matter the competition. There is a saying that all wars are won years in advance, but it need not be only wars.

//Would she mind not lecturing about how she's completely crushing me as she's completely crushing me?!

R: The choice of strategy becomes a strategy itself. When do you amplify your environment, when should you exert your will over it? How often do you gamble to keep future opponents honest, knowing it reduces chances of winning today?

Spike: It's your turn.

//There's nothing more for me to do. If I change paths now, I lose no matter what. On this course, at least there's a chance.

R: At the top... it is lonely. There is no one to practice with, no one to follow, no one to be inspired by. And in any art worth practicing, success requires constant innovation. If simple-minded work ethic is all that is necessary, there is no art in competition.

//Rarity finishes her speech by placing her last piece. Her own greed paying off because of the fallen logs, she's looking to defend my attack with barely enough and use a stronger economy to counteratttack immediately... taking my own momentum and using it against me. We're less than ten turns into the game and I'm already beaten.

//I said Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie were obvious, but they're as obvious to me as I am to someone like Rarity. Out of the barest glimpses of information she's able to glean my intent, prepare a defense and a deadly reprisal dozens of steps before any of it actually happens. This is... how do you compete against a person as crazy as this?!

Spike: I... I...

AJ: Y'need to speak up, Spike.

Spike: I've... I've already lost.

RBD: You have? That was fast.

PP: Now I really don't get it.

//Fluttershy is unable to explain, and hides behind her own hair instead.

R: ...Yes. But it is impressive that you've managed to see it this early.

//Impressive, hah... impressive would have been avoiding it. I'm still blundering about with no clue what I'm doing.

AJ: Are you sure? This looks like a normal kinda game to me. Nothin's happened yet.

//The Avatar of Avarice, enjoying her victory, turns her head kindly towards Applejack.

R: You don't see it? ...Very well. Hero, shall we play out the rest of the game to demonstrate?

//Why bother, I've lost against an Avatar, my quest is over; I'm no Hero...

Spike: ...I don't want to waste your time.

PP: (Am I the only one with no idea what's going on here?)

FS: (...I think Rarity wanted to--)}
Nodding curtly, the last Avatar stands up, looks me in the eye, and then declares:
R: Of course. Then I will surrender.

Rarity was defeated!
Spike earned 25000 experience points!
Spike is now level 41!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

...WHAT THE FUCK IS THIS BULLSHIT
Various confused responses come from the assorted Avatars and I. It's fair to say the dragon instinct summed up the feeling of the room.
Rarity looks down at me, but not in a way that implies I am lesser.
R: Suffice it to say that I can surrender. It is the only action that can be taken at any time in Strategy, whether I am in a winning position or no, and I have chosen to do so.
Cold night air nips at us from behind, and I curl my tail closer in as I stand up. The Avatars are still looking towards Rarity, leaning in and expecting an explanation for... well, frankly, the whole thing.
R: I will not tell you why I chose Strategy, instead of allowing you to pass from the very beginning. That is for you to figure out.
FS: But that means... you were planning on giving in from the start?
R: Yes. Tests are meaningless. You can either succeed at the tasks needed of you, Hero, or you can fail. If a test could find that out you would not _be_ a Hero.
Spike: ...I don't know. Seems like all of this could weed out any false positives.
AJ: 'False positives'?
PP: Hehehaha *snort* hehehaha, how many people do you think are crazy enough to _do_ something like this, Spike? You're one-of-a-kind!
The last defeated Avatar bows her head, gathers the game into the ornate box with a wave of her horn, and moves to the side.
R: Go on, Hero. The one you seek awaits.
...After a long moment in silence, I stretch my legs and cough.
Spike: Uh, yeah. Thanks.
SEE ALL YOU CRAZY FUCKING BINTS NEVER IF WE'RE FUCKING LUCKY

The Hero of the Land, challenges complete, passes through the great doors of marble and gold that lead, past a long hallway of stained glass windows, into the closed throne room.
Pinkie Pie: That was fun!
Applejack: I'm not sure I was expectin' any of that.
Rainbow Dash: Hold on, did he leave his cape?
PP: Who cares? Anyone up for some sandwiches? I'm famished!
Two pops are heard echoing from the ceiling, and the sound of something rolling across the floor, but the sound is amplified and compressed.
Fluttershy: What was that?
Applejack: Uh... the radio?
A voice from ceilings of rooms throughout the castle crackles:
Public Announcement: (Hck, it's like they've never seen an oddity before.)
Three dull bangs are heard from the announcement system, and then a muttering:
PA: Quit trying, it'll hold for a while! (Let's see, soundboard, soundboard... 'everywhere but Throne Room'. I guess that's what I'm looking for?)
A click.
FS: Have they been having problems with it?
Rarity: None that I'm aware of.
PA: This is Information Gatherer Na-Mira contacting Hero of the Land Spike. Hck, doesn't look
like there's anything for you to talk back with, so, uh... I guess I'll just start.
PP: Ooh, what is she starting? Are we playing a game?
RBD: Come on, Pinkie Pie, do you take anything seriously?!
PP: Cakes?
PA: This is information you need to know, Spike, so listen close. Uh, if you're hearing me at all; I don't know where you are in the castle.
//Two more loud, dull bangs come from the PA system.
PA: Speaking of that, don't worry about me. I have to do this, because I failed you; I didn't get this information fast enough and now you're walking right into a trap. The barricade will hold for...
uh...
//Pages are hurriedly flipped over the PA.
RBD: Why would she need to barricade herself into the PA room?
//Na-Mira's voice comes quicker:
PA: Month Three, Day Two, of My Torment.
//Rarity's face drops like a stone.
PA: I will meet the Hero for the first time tonight. Sweetie Belle says he has woken up. I refuse to call him by the name he chooses for himself; the name reopens a wound I would rather let scar. He was given the Element of Generosity as I directed.
//A slight pause as the reader takes a breath.
PA: That's followed by like ten paragraphs of dreadful emotional baggage and rhetorical questions, all of which I'm sure is just heartwrenching but in the interest of time no one really needs to hear it.
AJ: Rarity? Where are you goin', girl?
Rarity: I'm going to murder someone in the PA room. Care to join me?

//Why do I need to hear this? Why is Na-Mira endangering herself?
PA: At this point, diary, you are probably wondering why I avoid my duty as an Avatar and a holder of an Element in order to help such a person, one who has caused... everything you see above and in previous entries. Wisely so. Even if my actions fall within the rules of my position, one may say they are certainly not aligned with its spirit.
//A page flips.
PA: One is wrong. My intent is to see justice done. The person who is the Hero causes me pain incidentally, not deliberately; to punish him would be punishing a separate individual. My husband is dead. His corpse is not possessed by another willingly, at least not by the other. It would be unjust to punish him for an act he has not committed. But, you ask, in what way can this be justice?
//Is this... Rarity's journal?
PA: My actions will level the playing field. As it stands, Canterlot Castle has an immense informational advantage over the Hero. The Princess, if I act as expected, will also have the advantage of preparation over the Hero. If I do nothing, the Hero will be danced about on strings by a certain mare who wishes to direct everything -- and that is a scene I have seen for far too long.
//Rarity wants to help me?
PA: Easy challenges for the Hero to complete will and have taken little time. Estimations are likely for the Hero to challenge the Avatars at the end of the week. He should instead be in the throne room as of this evening, when there will be no extant plans for this confrontation. And that, diary, is an encouraging thought. The true test of an actress is not when things go according to plan, but instead when they do not. And _someone_’s acting skills need a little work.
//She's doing this to get back at Twi-- Princess Hazel? ’Swings, even after I've had amnesia and we've been separated for two months, this mare still wants to own me...
PA: I look forward to seeing the results. The throne has no idea he is coming, at least this early. The Princess is not who the Hero thinks she is. I can only hope things go terribly, terribly wrong. The ruination of months-long plans would be proper revenge.
//Wait... I know only one person who makes intricate plans months in advance.
PA: You know how hard it is to create months-long plans, Twilight. I will show you how easy they
are to destroy. Just as you found it easy to destroy the memory of my rebirth-mate, and my entire life.
//...
PA: Hck, Spike! You lost your memory?!

Chapter End Notes

With apologies to Tarn Adams.
In Which We All Sit Down and Have a Nice Talk

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

//The announcement cuts out with a crash and a wordless yell. Silence returns to this hallway with only me in it, standing still, surrounded by historical figures in ancient mosaic.
//I look at the cauterized gash on my arm and blow on it. It's still sensitive.
//Rarity thinks Twilight destroyed my memories in Everfree Forest. Maybe even deliberately. She said I wasn't Spike but someone else; Spike had been killed and I put in his place. Can that really be true? The ways Twilight and Rarity have acted over the course of my journey, I...
///I'm not going to find out the truth about that standing here and mulling it over.
//HERE WE FUCKING GO, 'HERO', PUT ON YOUR FUCKING BIG BOY PANTS AND TRY NOT TO SHIT YOURSELF AND SPASM UNTIL YOU DIE
///...Keeping that in mind, I grasp the large (strangely pony-unfriendly) handle of the throne room and pull.
//Then, I push, and it opens slightly, enough for me to take a step inside.

Princess Hazel: Shit, right. Maybe change to spherical coordinates? The differential azimuth would be...
///Princess Hazel, ruler of Equestria, is at the foot of the stairs leading up to her throne, concentrating on one of many standing chalkboards around her. Crown placed on the throne, she levitates a stick of chalk in the air which attacks the second board from the right. A small sponge in a bucket of dusty water lies at her hooves.
///With her military brown hair, dark blue eyes, and lack of wings or other jewelry, she could be mistaken for just a larger unicorn. As long as she doesn't speak in that voice...
PH: There we go, that's pitch and yaw. If I get roll in the same algorithm, thaumic optimization would be...
///Spotting something, the Princess of Equestria sticks out her tongue and shakes her head.
PH: ...completely impossible. Damnit. I swear, there's got to be a way to use Axiom of Choice to simplify this.
///I have no idea what she's doing but it sounds like book work. Is this why Equestria has gone to hell recently? Because the person who's supposed to be looking after it instead locks herself away solving esoteric problems for no practical purpose at all?
\\Magic and calculation... who do you know that uses extremely complex spells?
Spike: Excuse me.
///At the sound of my voice, Hazel steps behind one of the chalkboards, blocking line of sight. A levitation starts on the crown; the stick of chalk drops and marks the floor.
PH: Hello. If you have the pastries I sent for, the Avatars should be in the entrance hall. Just leave one for me, please.
///...Huh.
PH: And, erm. I like for people to knock before coming in. Are you new?
Spike: I'd say so.
PH: Okay. Shining Armor does have an orientation session about this with new hires. But he would have a lot on his plate recently.
///The crown lands behind the chalkboard. Hazel, now with fully-formed wings, steps out from behind it and meets my eye.
///She raises one eyebrow, slightly.
PH: ...Those wounds aren't on-the-job injuries, are they? Labor Resources is right next to the med center if you were looking for worker's comp.
Spike: I'm the Hero of the Land. I defeated the Avatars and, uh... they told me to walk on in.
Her eyes wander around a bit as she sticks her tongue out, slightly, thinking.
PH: Oh. ...Right! I do remember declaring a Hero of the Land. You're...?
Spike: Call me Spike.
PH: Spike, right. Well met, Spike. I am Princess Hazel, ruler of Equestria.
REALLY? CAUSE TWENTY- NINE CERTAIN MOTHERFUCKERS WOULD MAKE ME RULER OF THIS ASHEN WASTELAND IF I SO WISHED
...You know I'm sworn to defeat them, right?
FAT FUCKING CHANCE
PH: I've heard a lot about you from the Avatars. Is it true that you saw a vision of Celestia about me?
...The crown on Hazel's head has a many-pointed star amethyst, set in gold, as the main focus. It's the same symbol as on Twilight's flank. Hazel's horn knocks against it when she moves her head.
Spike: ...Yeah.
PH: Although, the ex-Princess was seemingly, hah, not too friendly towards me. Do you feel Celestia wants you to defeat me and take my place?
Spike: No.
The slight smile fades from the Princess's lips. She tilts her head, curious.
Spike: Celestia told me to kill you.
PH: What?!
The Drakeling attacks!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

Hazel steps back with wide eyes, hooves skipping against the marble.
The Drakeling leaps at Princess Hazel!
PH: What are you _doing_?!! Stop!
Princess Hazel points at The Drakeling and starts to cast a spell!!
The Drakeling charges at Princess Hazel!
Princess Hazel casts Stupefy!
The Drakeling jumps away from the beam!
The Drakeling grabs Princess Hazel by the left front leg with his right hand! The Drakeling grabs Princess Hazel by the left front hoof with his left hand!
The Drakeling locks Princess Hazel's left knee with his right hand!
The Princess sinks down as I press on her knee and begs:
PH: Please not the leg don't break my leg oh 'Swings please don't--
I look her in the eye quickly. Her nostrils are flared in fear. She's not doing anything else to stop me but asking...
Spike: ...Not Twilight Sparkle.
PH: No!! Why does everyone always think that?!

The Drakeling releases the grip of The Drakeling's right hand on Princess Hazel's left front leg.
The Drakeling releases the grip of The Drakeling's left hand on Princess Hazel's right front leg.
Spike: ...Sorry.

Princess Hazel was defeated!
Spike earned 30000 experience points!
Spike is now level 42!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

Wow, a whole level? Cool.
Slowly as we stand, the Princess's demeanor turns from fearful to angry.
Princess Hazel: ...'Sorry'!!
I take a step away, accidentally knocking over one of the chalkboards. It cracks in half against the floor, equations split between each half.
Spike: Whoops.
Hazel glares at me, ears flat back against her head. In another moment, she composes herself.
PH: Listen, I may not know your personal history, but physical violence is a little below the standard of decorum I like to keep for my throne room.
...At least the monotonous voice is gone.
Spike: Uh...
...What is there to say? I kind of attacked the leader of Equestria for no real reason. Why did I do that?
Spike: ...I kind of expected you were Twilight Sparkle.
PH: You try to kill her on sight?
Spike: ...I kind of expected you were Twilight Sparkle.
PH: How can I say this in a way that doesn't sound stupid?
Spike: From the dramatic tension and foreshadowing abound I thought this room would be the end of my journey, and I have a lot of as-yet unresolved issues to figure out with Twilight, so I was predicting the climax would involve setting up everything necessary for closure and a satisfying denouement.
MISSION FUCKING FAILED
Princess Hazel squeezes her eyes shut and taps her forehead with a hoof.
PH: What is this, a fucking video game?
Spike: ...A lot of talking happens when I fight. I don't know why.
For a full minute we look at each other, saying nothing, trying to stumble through different confusions. Eventually, Hazel spreads her (fake) wings and busies herself sponging theoretical work off of the chalkboards.
PH: (Great, the one night a week I have to myself and I have to babysit a crazy dragon boy...)
I'll pretend I didn't hear that.
Spike: So, uh... why are all the windows covered with drapes?
Bluntly, Hazel responds:
PH: I like my privacy.
Spike: Oh, is it because your wings are magic?
Wiping off the last mark of chalk, the sponge freezes in the air.
PH: Excuse me?
Spike: You know, they cycle too fast for ponies to see when you put the crown on. Why does it have Twilight's cutie mark on it anyway?
Instead of looking at me over her shoulder, Hazel just closes her eyes.
PH: ...Has anyone ever taught you how conversations are supposed to go?
Spike: Two months life experience. In case no one told you.
The Princess starts wheeling the chalkboards together with her head.
PH: Listen. I don't know why I'm ignoring the fact you just tried to kill me, given that is _totally treason_ if anything in the damn world would be, but right now I need to think.
Spike: Okay--
PH: So _shut the hell up_.
HOW RUDE
For the next few minutes, Hazel gathers up the chalk, sponge, bucket, and chalkboards and puts them all in a hidden closet in the corner of the room. Feeling guilty, I pick up the broken chalkboard and drag it over as well. I end up sitting on the bottom stair of the throne room, stomach growling and cross-legged, and Hazel sits on her haunches in front of me, crown around one hoof.
PH: Celestia told you to kill me, right?
Spike: Yes.
//I remember that quite clearly.
PH: Why?
Spike: I... what?
PH: I assume there was a reason. Unless you charged off blindly before your heard it.
Spike: Uh... I think she said you were an ineffective and divisive ruler, unable to protect Equestria's
denizens from harm.
PH: And... how would killing me solve that issue?
//Where is she going with this?
Spike: Um, I _guess_ if I were to take the throne I could try to be better at those things, but I don't
think I'd be good at it...
//Maybe I could give the throne to Twilight? I know she's a good planner, and has been a Princess
before.
PH: What else did she tell you?
//It's been so long, I have to try to remember... why does it feel like she said a bunch of different
things?
Spike: Why are you asking?
//The Princess hesitates for a moment, then says:
PH: The way I see it, Spike, there are two options. One, Celestia appeared to you when you lost
your memories and gave you an important mission. Two, you hit your head and saw meaningless
hallucinations resembling a goddess. We can tell which is true by seeing if your vision made sense,
right?
//Made sense? Of course it didn't make sense! I was a new person with zero life experience being
given an essential mission by a goddess whom I never knew for reasons I still don't understand!
How could it _make sense_?!
Spike: I, uh, don't actually think I hit my head.
//Hazel leans back slightly.
Spike: ...I think Twilight cast a spell on me.
PH: ...Really?
Spike: Yeah. It's the only thing that fits.
//How could I have lost my bond to Rarity if I had just hit my head?
//Princess Hazel, priceless crown over her hoof in her own throne room, nods.
PH: Then we should talk to Twilight.

//The biggest problem of being Equestria's chief organizer, most talented mage and power behind
the throne is that at any given moment no one knows where the hell you are. Twilight's schedule,
as I learn, is haphazard by necessity; many times full blocks of 20-hour magically assisted sleep
follow or are followed by days on end of work. Hazel recounts a few anecdotes of being woken up
in her sleep to have an impromptu meeting or to be asked for help with a spell.
Spike: Help with a spell? I thought you just said Twilight is Equestria's best mage.
PH: I do research, in my precious little spare time, with to the laypony little foreseeable value. But
together, Twilight and I turn it into the groundbreaking advancements that the Magic Corps and
Canterlot UMS will find in the next few years.
//...Oh.
Spike: So you're also a powerful mage?
PH: Me? No. A turnip has more power than I do. I'm just good with math.
//Twilight, I also learn, has an office next to Celestia's old Magic Library here in the castle and a
bedroom in the southeast tower tucked between a washroom and a janitor's closet. Those can be
checked, and if she's not there, Castle Magic Corps Comms (a thing I never knew existed) can talk
to Ponyville and send a message if she's in her old tree library. But otherwise...
PH: ...We're kind of stuck waiting for when she shows up.
Spike: She always turns up eventually. Right now is the longest I haven't seen her in...
Spike: Hold on, if she really has all these important things to do for the good of the world, why
does she spend so much time with me?
//Princess Hazel coughs politely and searches for a word.
PH: Well, you two are... close, right?
Spike: Yeah, but Twilight has other friends too. She never seems to spend as much time with
Fluttershy or Applejack as she does with me.
PH: ...How much life experience did you say you had?
//I guess it's one of those mysteries that will never be explainable.
Spike: Could I get a snack before we start looking for her, though? I'm starving.
//How I wish that were an exaggeration.
//Hazel sticks out her tongue and looks up, thinking.
PH: I... think I keep a box of oats hidden behind the throne. You can eat those, right?
//Meh.
Spike: Hey, it's better than nothing.
PH: Oats. Not hay.
Spike: I...
//That was completely unnecessary. I start walking up the stairs.
Spike: Where is this box?
//She gestures with a hoof in a general way.
PH: Just behind it, on the floor.
//I step behind the throne and kneel, opening a basic wooden box.
//A sudden, scentless burst of air from the foot of the stairs. Princess Hazel looks over, nonchalant.
Twilight Sparkle: ‘Swings, what can't you solve with a clipboard and a stern voice? Another
existential threat to Equestria falls to simple organizational prowess!
//I can't see her from behind this throne. May as well try the oats anyway.
PH: Oh? What did you do this time?
T: Figured out sentences for upper-level Red Helm officers, granted financing of refugee dragons'
settlement request, and found work orders for Red Helm soldiers. The District Attorney and
Treasurer already have copies. (You signed them.)
PH: Of course. There's a version on my desk I can forward to the speechwriter?
//What are these, grain flakes? How am I supposed to eat these with pointed teeth?
T: I'll, uh... get back to you on that.
PH: Tell me what I decided, then.
T: The refugees will establish a glass-making company with fifty-one percent shares in hands of
the Crown (and the rest dragon-held), and all ex-Red Helms work for two years for the company's
Shipping, Irrigation, or Mining divisions at half pay. Startup and oversight costs notwithstanding, I
expect to be out of the red within the first year.
PH: You did take Applejack's suggestion, then.
//Twilight audibly rolls her eyes.
T: She wanted them all in the middle of nowhere, far away from everypony. But at least it got me
thinking.
//I scoop a handful of oats and pour a few in my mouth. With difficulty, I try to chew.
T: So what's going on with you?
PH: Hmm. I didn't get any further on that thaumic autodynamics bit you wanted.
//...These are absolutely disgusting.
T: Oh? What problem are you having?
PH: The Hero of the Land Spike beat all the Avatars and charged into my throne room to attack
me, breaking one of the chalkboards in half.
T: What?! When did this happen?!
//Hazel audibly shrugs.
PH: About two minutes ago.
//I stand up, brushing the rest of the oats back into the box, and swallow. It still feels like most of them are stuck in my gums.
Spike: Hi Twilight.
T: Spike?!
//BAKER ETC.
PH: (Was there something you didn't get about 'two minutes ago'?)
T: Wh... what are you doing here?!
Spike: 'So early'?
//I step from behind the throne and start walking down the stairs, joining Twilight and Hazel.
Twilight is pushing herself back on her hooves, defensive posture.
Spike: Honestly, that's the only way your question makes sense. Since before meeting Quine I've followed the Hero of the Land path to come here. And even before that you should have known; you were there when I started my journey.
//Spike: My mission was revealed to me in my dream: I cannot stop until I am powerful enough to defeat the current, false Princess, and bring harmony back to Equestria!' Those words seem like so far away, an eternity ago, echoes of a past mountaintop not heard now that I'm in a valley.
T: I... just thought you would sleep longer.
//It's unbelievable I actually slept for three days straight in the first place. And she looked away from me when she thought of it. There's no way Twilight would have forgotten I wanted to be here, except if she just assumed...
Spike: ...You were expecting the Avatars to defeat me.
//WELL SHIT I WAS TOO
//Twilight, silent, bites her lower lip. She looks to Hazel, as if the Princess has anything to add.
PH: Spike, you're an impressive Hero in your own right, but the Avatars are a bit above your weight class. Rarity alone is stronger than legions; I'm shocked you overcame a spellcaster like her.
//...Right, about that...
PH: But don't blame Twilight for trying to smooth things over with a half-truth. You've also done that, right?
//...Now I see why Princess Hazel is the face of Equestria. She just drained the emotionality out of the conversation with her voice and mannerisms, directing it where she wants to go.
PH: You told Twilight months ago Celestia's orders were to 'defeat' me, whatever vague nonsense that means.
Spike: But I was tasked with out-and-out regicide from the start.
//Twilight gasps, then covers her mouth with a hoof and starts furiously thinking.
PH: Was that all you were told? I'd prefer you try not to understate anything else.
//...It's been so long, it's hard to remember. I know Celestia was the one who told me about drakelinghood, and the immortality it grants, told me she abdicated the throne but this new Princess must die for the good of the world, what else...
\...Oh. So.
Spike: Celestia... said she could find a way to bring back my memories.
T: She did? How?
//I shrug. We spend a minute, contemplating this.
PH: If there were any pony in the world who could do it, it'd be her.
Spike: Yeah, 'in the world' being the biggest problem.
T: Celestia would need... some sort of way to retrieve those memories, or the shape of your brain before you were hit, or exactly what was hurt--
//That reminds me. If we're standing around talking, I want to know.
Spike: Hey, Twilight. What happened in Everfree Forest?
//Twilight and Hazel share a look. I can't tell what passes between them. Outside, past thick curtains and tall windows, early morning birds start to chirp.
T: What do you mean, Spike?
Spike: The day I lost my memory. What happened?
//Hesitation. Or is that confusion? I brush my tail on the stair edge.
T: ...I told you. You hit your head, and I called Nurse Joyful before you woke up.
Spike: No -- it's okay, Twilight. What actually happened is in the past. I can deal with it now. You
can tell me the truth, and I won't be mad. No matter what happened.
T: Spike, I _am_ telling the truth! You don't believe me?
//Uh, no, or I wouldn't have said so!
Spike: Then why does Rarity think you cast a spell on me?
//In Hazel's eyes, a glint of satisfaction passes. Is it because I'm talking out my problems instead of
attacking her?
//Twilight, taking a long time to respond, eventually hangs her head.
T: I... lied to her because it was easier.
Spike: ...Twilight...
//Each lie cuts a person off from another, because the worlds they share are now different. When
one person lies for their own ends, friendship is impossible. Harmony is impossible. Without
seeing the truth, the right thing is lost like gold dust in the wind.
Spike: I get, that as a ruler, sometimes you can't tell the truth. Sometimes telling the truth hurts
people. But I'm your _friend_. And _Rarity_ is your friend. That's how you introduced her to me,
remember? ...What kind of friend does that make you in return, not trusting your friends to trust
you?
//Sniffing, Twilight says nothing, looking at her hooves.
//THIS IS AMAZING; I'M GLAD TO SEE THIS OUT OF YOU, SPIKE. I NEVER KNEW
EMOTION COULD EFFECT PONIES THIS STRONGLY. I HAVE LEARNED SOMETHING
TODAY.
//...Waiting for the punchline.
//NOW THAT SHE'S VULNERABLE LEAD WITH A LEFT HOOK AND FOLLOW WITH A
GUT JAB TO GET IN CLOSE BEFORE SHE CASTS A SPELL
Spike: What exactly happened that day? Why did you lie?
PH: I'd like to hear the story as well. You never know what minor details might be important.
//Twilight looks back and forth between us. I try to exude the feeling that this is a place of
friendship, of honesty and trust, that we can be comfortable with ourselves with others right now.
For her part, Princess Hazel is much better at it than I am.
//Twilight takes a breath and starts her story.

T: ...I'm going to start about a month before we were in Everfree. It'll all make sense in a moment.
//...I was not expecting a tale that needed backstory.
T: I was looking over a series of criminal records that I thought were related to negative species
relations between dragons and ponies. One dragon -- at the time unknown -- had a strange habit of
destruction and abduction. Over a dozen times across Equestria, ponies were killed and their
belongings destroyed, only to be found alive and well wandering in from the wilderness days later.
//That's... so, they weren't really killed?
T: On a hunch, I found most of these ponies were surrounded by rumors of bonds with drakelings --
even if they didn't want to admit it. The few who did talk told me similar stories: a furious bronze
dragon caught them with their... I'll say 'lovers'; these ponies weren't so generous. They thought of
their drakelings as possessions, many of them paying good money and going to great lengths to
acquire the bond. To them, it was an underground symbol of status.
//Wait, bronze dragon. Could it be?
T: For treating people as items to be bought, owned, and shown off, the dragon murdered them,
took the drakeling far into the wilderness, and flew into the distance once the pony revived, never
to be seen again.
Spike: Was that Jebed?
Twilight shrugs her shoulders, sheepish.

T: ...I only found that out when she told you about it. At the time, all I knew was a dragon was murdering ponies and abducting drakelings.

PH: Then I remembered a letter of petition from many months earlier, almost the start of my rule. In claw-writing, a 'concerned citizen' urged me to do more about the black market slave and egg trade.

Spike: You actually read letters to you?

PH: I'm the public relations mare of this operation. Talking and listening are my the two jobs I have, right?

T: When Hazel showed me that letter, I realized we were dealing with a vigilante. Someone wanted justice for drakelings who had no choice in their bond. If it were a different problem -- say, normal sex trafficking -- I'd stamp 'Vigilante justice is no justice' on the case and call it a day.

Spike: But drakelings change after we bond. Our emotions and mind change, making the person we're bonded to the most important thing in our life. It's indistinguishable from love.

T: Right! These were dragons forced into their situations, but from the outside looked perfectly happy. The standard approach to crime, treating the victim and punishing the perpetrator, would only serve to hurt the victim more.

PH: Not to mention the difficulty obtaining evidence. Imagine Stockholm Syndrome, but twenty times worse.

T: So I thought -- heck, I've got a goddess's private Magic Library and a problem that looks like a nail --

Spike: Don't tell me you tried to make a spell.

T: Celestia had a surprising amount on drakeling biology in her personal study. Combining that with some amazing work from the filly prodigy here--

PH: It was nothing, really--

T: And I had a spell that would temporarily suppress the changes a drakelinghood bond causes. Temporarily? How long would that be? Long enough for the police to gather a confession, I'm sure, but... what good would it be if feelings for such horrible ponies returned halfway through a prison sentence?

T: I... and this is where the story gets harder to tell... I wanted to see if a permanent version could be made. If drakeling bonds could be broken. Sure, there were a bunch of reasons I wanted to believe... a person's right to control their thoughts, long-term rehabilitation and justice for those unfairly bound... but honestly, I wanted most to see if I could.

T: Sorry, dry mouth. Anyway... since this spell was permanent, I needed a different kind of test subject. Victimized drakelings wouldn't be willing to re-establish a bond to start out fresh, in case the spell didn't work the first time.

PH: (Spells never work the first time.)

T: So, Rarity and I were married, you hit me with the prototype spell behind Rarity's back and bam. Permanent memory loss.

Spike: Makes sense, really.

Spike: I mean, a little boring, but understandable--

T: No. That's just it. I never cast the spell.

T: Right, the whole point of the story is how that didn't happen. Forgot.

T: I asked you _and_ Rarity if it was okay. You _both_ agreed, Rarity because she trusted my magic skill, and... and you said you were in love with Rarity before you two bonded, so it wouldn't change anything.
//WHAT A FUCKING WIMP
T: ...And for the record, I hardly lied to you. We were in the forest to gather lactarius deliciousus mushrooms for Zecora--
Spike: Who?
T: --a zebra friend of mine, and ask her to monitor you during the spell. She knows a lot of things I don't; I thought she might see something. We never even made it there.
//Twilight takes another sip of water. Talking this long must dry out her tongue. Over the sound of her throat I can hear birds chirping outside.
T: You were wearing an amulet Rarity had given you. It was a beautiful blood ruby you decided not to eat, because she liked it so much. While we were walking, the most aggressive magpie I've ever seen attacked you!
//BLACK AND WHITE THIEVES, THEY SHOULD DIE
T: It took off with the amulet, and you ran after it. But there were thorns, and I had to cast a spell to get through them -- by the time I caught up, it flew over the waterfall.
//The waterfall near where I woke up, not too high. I remember that.
T: You jumped right off the edge and swung at it -- and you got it! The bird, the amulet, and you hanging off of it all dropped out of sight. Then...
//Twilight hangs her head. She moves her mouth, but words don't come out.
T: A... there was a flash of light.
Spike: A what?
T: Just for a second. It happened right when I heard you splash down.
Spike: The amulet wasn't magical?
T: No, I was wearing my contacts that day. I'd have known. I rushed over as soon as I could, and dragged you out of the water. It was about ten minutes of coughing before you woke up. And that's all I know.
//...That's all?
T: I checked the area the next day and found nothing. No magic, no amulet, just our hoofprints.
Spike: Why did you tell Rarity you cast the spell on me?
T: Because... after I realized how bad it was, I wanted to get her to you as soon as possible, and that was the easiest way. Some memory loss can be checked by seeing a familiar sight. And... at the very least, I thought you'd still feel the same way towards her because of your biology, even if you didn't know her.
Spike: But...
PH: Instead you tried to set her on fire.
//In my defense, she tried to mount me.
T: I told her the truth after. Just like I'm telling you the truth now. I...
//She chokes, and then continues:
T: I lied because it was convenient. But I can't lie to my friends.
//A long period passes, while we all stay silent and contemplate Twilight's story. I fold my arms and stare down. Outside, the guard shift changes and ponies speak about mundanities such as coffee and weekends.

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

>>BELIEVE HER
>>DON'T BELIEVE HER

Spike: I don't believe you.
T: Spike, no--
Spike: _Why_ would this be the truth? It's too perfectly constructed!
PH: I can show you the spell documentation--
Spike: The admission of lying, but you 'hardly lied' and told the truth right after. You said you
were responsible but the story has nothing where you do wrong! The stupid amounts of detail and then 'a flash of light' takes away my memories? 'That's all I know,' the greatest mage in Equestria doesn't find anything? You must think I'm a moron!

T: Please, believe me--
Spike: NO! This is another one of your half-truths, lies of omission meant to keep me on the track _you_ want me to follow! What really happened there?! What--

///SHE'S TELLING THE TRUTH.
///I stop dead, middle of a dramatic motion. Mouth half open, I continue staring at Twilight, who looks back at me with watery eyes.
///_What_ did you say?
///I WAS THERE.
///Slowly, I lower my arm. The dragon instinct talks quietly, I can hardly hear him over my own blood pumping.
PH: Is--
Spike: Shut up.
///DID YOU FORGET THE 'IN EVERY _SINGLE_ _FUCKING_ DRAGON' BIT, SHITBRAIN? I KNEW YOU BEFORE YOU WERE YOU. AND LET ME TELL YOU, YOU WERE FUCKING PATHETIC. A CHAINED PUSSY CHASING PUSSY, PANTING FOR PONYCUNT AND EVEN LESS LIKE A FUCKING DOG. WHEN YOU WERE SET FREE IT WAS THE GREATEST THING THAT EVER HAPPENED TO YOU. ///Did you... did you do this?///NO. BUT I KNOW WHO OR WHAT DID. AND... WHY.
Spike: Tell me. Tell me right fucking now.
T: ...Spike, I swear--
///NO.
Spike: You've -- you've been hiding it from me from the very beginning, I know it --
///I fall to my knees. Hazel and Twilight step forward, looks of befuddlement and worry.
Spike: --I can feel a thought to somewhere else like a bridge or a ladder that leads somewhere but I can't tell where through the clouds and the fog because the rope goes slack when I tug on it and it coils it coils it coils like a snake--
///THAT ROPE IS A NOOSE. SOME THOUGHTS HAVE TO DIE FOR THE GOOD OF THE WORLD. THE MOST YOU ARE GOING TO LEARN RIGHT NOW IS WHAT TWILIGHT IS TELLING YOU. THAT IS, FOR MY INTENTS AND PURPOSES, THE TRUTH.
PH: ...What's happening to him?
T: The dragon instinct--
///IS THE BIGGEST FUCKING PRICK IN THE FUCKING WORLD AND THE ONLY REASON ANYONE IN THIS CASTLE IS ALIVE RIGHT NOW
Spike: You wouldn't, you wouldn't send them to attack--
///ARE YOU FUCKING KIDDING ME? HOW HAVE YOU NOT PUT THIS TOGETHER YET, YOU FUCKING IMBECILIC VOMITUOUS PUSTULE? THE THIRTY ARE MY BISHOPS PREACHING TITANIC DESTRUCTION AND I JUST GAINED FIVE KNIGHTS BUT YOU ARE MY QUEEN, MOTHERFUCKER. THERE'S A WAR GOING ON AND I SINCERELY FUCKING HOPE MOST OF MY PIECES WILL BE DEAD BY THE END OF IT.
Spike: ...
T: ...Spike?
///INSTEAD OF ALL.
PH: What is the dragon instinct? I've never heard of that before.
Spike: Good for you.

///I'm brought a fruit smoothie as I digest the dragon instinct's words. It always feels like something I know, what I've seen in my journey should connect with this and I can arrange everything to understand, but it slips away every time. Like a sphinx into the sand.
We sit on the steps next to the throne, Hazel absentmindedly munching on oats. Twilight drinks the rest of her water and dismisses the glass. I recover.

T: Spike...

Spike: ...Sorry for not believing you, Twilight.

T: That's... fine. I understand. But, I was thinking...

//She pauses for a second.

T: Maybe we would understand each other better if we told each other everything we've been through these past months. You from the beginning, and me... everything.

//...That's quite a few years of experience. Do I have that sort of time?

T: ...It's not all flattering on my end. And you don't have to pretend it is on yours. But... if we're going to be friends, if we're going to work together, I think the time for secrets has come and passed. Don't you agree?

Spike: ...Yes. That's a good idea. Maybe I can figure out what's bothering me if I have another perspective on my journey.

//Twilight nods. I haven't mentioned what the dragon instinct has told me, now or in the past.

Spike: Although... my story is shorter. Mind if I go first?

I suck the last drops out of the glass. I can taste the emerald dusted in; it's delicious. The oats are back behind the throne.

//LEAVE OSTO BACCHUS OUT OF THIS. I WILL STILL FUCKING KILL YOU IF YOU MENTION IT.

//...And the brainfreeze might cool him down.

PH: ...Should Spike go on?

//Twilight sticks a hoof out.

T: No, I'm still -- still thinking.

//I've told them everything, up through my first vision of Celestia. It sounds equally as dumb as when I told Herr Yyz.

T: She said... Celestia said 'you'll find out'. But what _have_ you found out about Hazel?

Spike: Well, she's the front mare.

PH: You're... not using that word like 'top' or 'bottom', right?

Spike: I mean, you're the face of Equestria and the crown; your name is used everywhere. You're the lightning rod of attention so Twilight and the Avatars can get work done in peace.

//Blankly, Hazel nods. I guess that's an accurate summary of the situation.

Spike: And, you said you had the magical ability of a turnip. But Jebed said you killed dozens of dragons (or was it hundreds?) to establish stability.

//Twilight drops out of her trance for a moment to mention:

T: Oh, hah. That was me.

PH: An illusion spell before combat is a small price to pay for reputation.

//MAYBE IT ALSO KEPT HER ANONYMOUS SO HER BROTHER AND PARENTS WEREN'T HURT

//That's... excessively cruel.

//FUCKING HELLO, _DRAGON_ INSTINCT

Spike: I find it strangest that Celestia told me about all these threats to the land -- Forlegsandria's labor laws, the Aquinatics Conflict, Herr Yyz, General Warhelm, and that Princess Hazel let these things come up -- but didn't see fit to correct them herself.

PH: Maybe she was confident you would solve all those issues for her.

//Hmm... I feel like a goddess shouldn't work through her subjects. All that makes someone is a queen.

//With gradual murmurs growing louder, Twilight stands up:

T: What could she mean? 'Kill the false Princess.' Why would she say that?
PH: One theory -- albeit simplistic -- Celestia, or whoever it is Spike sees, is just another pony trying to usurp the throne. She did say with the full resources of Canterlot Castle she could restore your memories; a bit telling?

//...Usurp the throne? If Celestia just came back with no fanfare she'd have it in public opinion and to rights...

T: No, it's not that -- agh, I'm almost there, it's almost coming--

Spike: Maybe it was just a test. Celestia wanted to see if I'd do it, without having a good reason why.

//Hazel grins.

PH: I, for one, am glad you passed.

//I shrug.

Spike: You never know; maybe I was supposed to follow the commands of a goddess without question.

//Suddenly, Twilight strikes her front hooves against the floor, excited.

T: I've got it! I've got it! That's it!

//Hazel stands up and so do I. We're both eager to hear what Twilight says.

T: I finally see it! I finally see, now, what she has planned for me...

//Her eyes grow further away as she stares at the far wall. Some point a thousand yards away shines, and throws a glint into her eyes.

T: It's so beautiful... and it's terrible.

Spike: ...Twilight?

//She braces against the ground and looks at me.

T: Spike! Don't you see? I'm the false Princess!

//We already established that.

Spike: ...So what does that mean?

T: I'm the one Celestia told you to kill! Not Hazel! Me!

Spike: Twilight, why would I kill you? You're my best friend!

//Or, at the very least, tied for the position.

T: Celestia said... Celestia said all these threats to the world rose under my supervision -- and they did! And every single one of them, I didn't solve myself -- you had to go and do the dirty work first! I've only done the paperwork for the great things _you've_ accomplished!

Spike: That's... nonsense, if I hadn't been so hasty in killing Herr Yyz you'd have taken care of it.

PH: If I may interject: why are you happy that Celestia told him to kill you, Twilight?

T: When I was Celestia's student, years ago, in moments of doubt and weakness and faithlessness I thought to myself: 'why the heck do I have to do everything when saving the world comes around? Can't Celestia solve all these problems with a wave of her hoof?'

//I might have thought that once or twice during my journey...

T: But the problems weren't about the _problems_. Even if I'll never admit it, talking to Rarity has at least taught me that. In order to train me Celestia stepped aside, to make it look like there was no one in the world willing to work hard and take on the job! So I had to step up, or watch the world fall to pieces!

//She's... trying to draw connections between me now and her a few years ago. So?

T: And you've done the same thing! Except instead of Celestia overseeing these problems in case I failed, I was completely ignorant of the ones you solved!

Spike: I'm still not following how this leads to 'Hey Spike, isn't it amazing she told you to kill me?'

T: Don't you see? Celestia wasn't training me as just a student -- she was training me as a successor all the time! When she left, I was the only one capable of taking her place, because she wanted it that way! And when she appeared to you and told you to go on this journey, I started training _my_ successors!

//That is... not a good idea.

Spike: Twilight, there are two things I'm good at in this world, and neither of them aren't hurting people. I'm no ruler--
T: And I thought the same thing about myself, when Celestia disappeared. But she trusted me. And she trusts you. And I trust you.

THAT AND A SHARP KNIFE WILL GET YOU RESPECT

T: When I first met Celestia, as a little filly, she told me one day I would follow in her footsteps. She disappeared so the successor she trained could take over. Who am I to not do the same to my successors?

//Princess Hazel gently forwards a hoof, butting in.
PH: Twilight? If I may forward a radical notion... who says doing what Celestia wants is best?

//Twilight stares at Hazel for a moment, as if the thought would never cross a reasonable person's mind. She shakes it away.
T: What better way to bring harmony between dragons and ponies than to be ruled by both?

Spike: Wha?

T: This is what dragons are meant to do: fight! And ponies are meant to compromise. Together, you'll be much better caretakers of the world than I've ever been.

//I... don't like what she's implying by that.

PH: 'Together'?
T: Yes. I trust you, Hazel. You've learned a lot, and you'll be an excellent Queen Consort.

Spike: Have you gone _completely_ out of your mind?!

PH: I, uh, didn't exactly sign up for this--

PH: Twilight takes a fighting stance!
T: But I'm not going to roll over and die for you, Spike. If I have to give it to you, then you don't deserve it. What was it you told Warhelm? 'You're not powerful enough without a deal. Which means you won't rule Equestria. Someone else will.'

T: Dragons are meant to fight. And dragons are meant to kill. There are plenty of times Equestria has held or crumbled on just the strength of my back, but maybe it'll come easier to you.

Spike: No! This isn't right!
T: It could only have ever come to this, Spike... Celestia wants it this way. But I won't let someone weak inherit Equestria! So give it all you've got! Hold nothing back!

Spike: _I am not going to fight you_--

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

Twilight points at The Drakeling and casts a spell! Twilight casts Helium Flash!

PH: Wh-- FUCKING--
Princess Hazel jumps away from the beam, up the stairs!
The Drakeling jumps away from the beam, down the stairs!

The beam expands! The marble is caught in the spell! The marble has been melted, deforming its shape!

PH: Watch where you're casting that!!

This needs to stop before someone gets hurt!

Spike: Take cover in the supply room! I'll handle this!

//Princess Hazel turns to gallop.

Twilight speaks a word of power, forming symbols in the air! Her horn glows brighter!
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Walk of the Third!

//As soon as I enter Walk of the Third, Twilight's spell completes:
Twilight casts Flashbang!

//A tsunami of white light and a deafening burst overwrite all I know. I drop to my knees as I lose balance, sensoral input shutting off. Squeezing my eyes shut, I can't see or hear anything; the world is only an aching ring in my ears and a burnt echo in my eyes.

\\What the hell was that move? I've never seen anything like it!
Spike: Come on, when can I see already...

//I wait a few more seconds, then open my eyes and blink. I can almost make out Twilight following up with a second spell.
The Drakeling's Walk of the Third ends.

The Drakeling leaps away from Twilight!
Twilight casts Teleport! The beam strikes the marble!

//I roll down the stairs and land on my feet, quick enough to see:
//The marble stone hit by Teleport drops from the top of the room!
The marble collides with the ground, cracking the marble, and the severed parts fly off in arcs!
//One stair completely demolished and several beyond repair, clouds of billowing dust and boulders of jagged stone tumbling about. Are all throne rooms like this?
\\Idiot, watch out! Where did that marble stone go? Directly above where you were! It would have crushed and killed you or -- if you had been hit -- the fall would break your legs! Maybe even kill you!
//Still blind and unable to hear, Hazel shouts to no one in particular:
PH: What in fucking _hell_ is happening in my throne room?!
T: Just -- just take cover, okay?!
//There is no smile on her lips. No cheeriness in her eyes. Not even a hateful scowl. Standing next to the throne, even though she's yelling Twilight shows only calm acceptance. Almost... resignation.
//She's really trying to kill me.
The Drakeling breathes dragonfire!

Twilight speaks a word of power, forming symbols in the air! Twilight dodges away from the dragonfire! Twilight casts Heat Sink!

The Drakeling breathes dragonfire! But nothing comes out!

//What now?!
//Air grows colder against my scales. Instinctively, they pack tighter, trying to keep body heat in.
Frost starts collecting on my nose and eyelashes, and on the marble stairs between us, making them slick. Inside, I grow less energetic.
//I try to breathe fire on my hands to work again as rapid cold approaches. Nothing comes out, and Twilight looks on.
//My limbs feel like lead, nothing moves and my mind is starting to slow down. Freeze bites at my lips and I can't feel my feet or tail. This is colder than anything I thought possible, in a matter of seconds.
T: You told me dragons can't feel heat, but later on Quine's mountain you struggled in the snow. Did you fail there?
\\If you're going to not move, at least do it warm!

The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Blood of the Earth!
//Steam rises from my feet as the marble lets magma through it, snaking up from under the earth into my veins. Feeling, alongside molten iron, washes back into my fingers and extremities. The frost turns into water and boils away.
//Twilight whispers:
T: No. Twilight speaks a word of power, forming symbols in the air! Twilight casts Heat Sink! Little dots of solid marble start rising out of my skin. An orange glow between my scales turns into dull brown and grey rock, paralyzing me. Spike: What?!

//Such power, to nearly flash-freeze magma... Twilight, silent, readies to cast another spell. Is that one she used earlier...?

\Drop the magma, you're starving to death as you turn to stone! Those emeralds can only sustain you for so long! //If I drop it, I freeze to death! If I don't, I die as a statue! What is there to do?!

//DIE LIKE A BITCH?

//Shut up!! Twilight points at The Drakeling and casts a spell! Twilight casts Helium Flash!

//There's incentive!

The Drakeling's Blood of the Earth ends. The Drakeling jumps away from the beam! The beam expands! The Drakeling's left hand is caught in the spell! The Drakeling's tail is caught in the spell! The Drakeling's left hand is burnt to a crisp! The Drakeling's tail is badly burnt! Spike: Kyaah!

//I clutch my left wrist in the burning heat, greater than dragonfire. It's nothing more than charred, black, unfeeling remains. Spike: My hand, dragons are immune to heat--

T: There are a few attacks nothing in the world can withstand. Extremes of temperature are two of them. //So what'll she do if I survive this?! Move on to the next ones? 

\Survive?! You can't survive more attacks like that! Her offense is too strong! Spike: Grrrr... planning to kill anything in the world makes you insane! The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Hand of Judgment! The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Walk of the Third!

The Drakeling charges at Twilight! //I jump up the stairs, holding my destroyed hand against my stomach. Twilight, already prepared, finishes casting a spell as I'm in the Walk, not even knowing where I am. Twilight speaks a word of power, forming symbols in the air! Twilight casts Earthmold! The Drakeling's Walk of the Third ends! //Not much more of that left...

Earthmold shapes the marble! //I stumble up another stair as the floor below me shifts, like wet leaves underfoot. Earthmold grabs The Drakeling by the right foot with its marble! //The stone reaches up and grabs me! I trip! //ZAP! through my ankle into the ground. The Drakeling's Bolt of Judgment dissipates. //Stuck in place on the ground, my throat tightens and I tense up. Instead of doing anything useful, I look up at Twilight. Twilight speaks a word of power, and symbols form in the air! Twilight disappears!

//Wait... there was no burst of air. The tapestry behind her didn't flutter. Invisibility?

//In the pause, the door in the corner of the throne room is cracked open. Hazel pokes her head out of the supply room.

PH: Damn, the Mason's Guild is going to be livid with me. Spike: Why aren't you doing anything?
PH: I'm not endangering anyone else by bringing them into it. You know how powerful Twilight is, right?
//That doesn't make me feel better when she's invisible and somewhere in this room!
\You're on your own, Hero. Just like you've always been.
Spike: ...
The Drakeling stands up.
Spike: (No. I'm not on my own. And I've never been.)
//Although sometimes I wish I was.
//FUCK YOU
Spike: Twilight... did you plan this all along? Were we going to fight from the very beginning?
//No one responds. As expected; there's not much use to an invisibility spell if you start talking.
Spike: I... don't know if it's harder to believe than the opposite. You were always there for me when I needed it most. And when Equestria needed it most.
PH: (Pssst! Try to talk her down! It might work!)
//That's what I was trying, thanks... and whispering won't work when we're half a room away and she's also in here!
Spike: From helping me in my first fight against Wafa, to rounding up the Four Bandits messing around in Everfree, to dealing with Quine and Applejack to end the war, and training me in the early days of my journey, I wouldn't be here without your help... why help me with all that if you planned to kill me now?
//Nothing but stairs, melted and broken and scattered with rubble, around me. Curtains drawn over the windows and tapestries hanging on the walls give no clues to Twilight's movement. The throne shines ahead of me.
Spike: When I first started my journey, told you I was going to defeat the Princess to bring back harmony to Equestria -- Rarity scoffed and said I was chasing a pipe dream. Which any normal pony would say. You, however, accepted it with little question _despite the fact my quest was to overthrow what you've worked to create_. Do you believe in me that much? I haven't done anything to deserve that...
//What did you do when Fluttershy couldn't be seen? And moving to the side won't help; this is true invisibility...
Spike: Celestia... what I've realized is people use Celestia's name to justify what they want to do anyway. Herr Yyz taught me that. So I don't buy your 'sudden revelation' -- it's stupid for us to fight! No goddess would order that!
//Excepting the fact that she, you know, did...
PH: Hey, both of you, I just had a quickie visit from Celestia in here; she said to stop fighting. You know, by the way.
//That... is incredibly obvious and won't work.
Spike: I don't care if you want to die! I don't care if you think -- if you've made mistakes! The Crystal Empire, the hundreds of dragons after the disappearance, whatever happened in Ponyville - - it's in the past! Those are lessons now, for you to grow stronger! It's not like I haven't made mistakes!
//REMIND HER OF ALL HER FUCKING BLOODBATHS AND THE SCREAMING AND THE MURDER OF INNOCENTS--
//Whose? Mine or hers?
Spike: Our deaths won't solve anything -- they are _not_ redemption! We both want to work for the benefit of everyone! And you've proven that you can! People need to live for the good of the world, not die or kill for it!
//From the left, a simple rebuttal:
T: ...I'm sorry, Spike. But you're wrong about everything.
//Well then I have only one choice!

The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Blood of the Earth!
//Magma flows into my foot from the Earthmold, melting it away. Before I starve to death, let's end this--
The Drakeling's Blood of the Earth ends.
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Touch of Grisly Terror!
//Locking onto the scent of pony, I leap towards Twilight!
The Drakeling leaps at Twilight!
Twilight points at The Drakeling and starts to cast a spell! Twilight casts Airshock!
//Something like a lead weight slams into me from the front, a bullet train made of force that stops me in my tracks.
The Drakeling is knocked backwards!
Twilight's Invisibility is ended!
//Let's try this again.
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Walk of the Third!
//Twilight, still dodging away in front of me, slows to a crawl. I see Hazel peeking out of her hiding spot with one eye.
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Lake of Fire!
//A semicircular wall of flame erupts behind Twilight, waiting until time resumes.
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Hand of Judgment!
//Even if I have only one hand, I have to make the most of it! There's no other way to convince Twilight to stop than to defeat her!
The Drakeling charges at Twilight!
The Drakeling's Walk of the Third ends.
//There's nothing left to do! I have to win with this now!

//Twilight lands on the next stair down and finds me charging -- our eyes meet and, flinching, she casts--
Twilight speaks a word of power, forming symbols in the air! Her horn glows brighter! Twilight casts Flashbang!
Twilight points at The Drakeling and starts to cast a spell! Twilight casts Airshock!
//At the same time, blinding light, a deafening bang, and a flameless explosion from behind all hit me. I trip in my charge and stumble forward, unable to see--
Twilight kicks The Drakeling in the right lower leg with her right rear leg, shattering the bone, jamming the right lower leg's bone through the right knee and shattering the right knee's bone! A major artery has been opened by the attack, several ligaments have been torn, and several tendons have been damaged!
Twilight kicks The Drakeling in the lower body with her Kick of Justice, bruising the stomach, bruising the guts, bruising the left kidney, shattering the lower spine's bone and tearing apart the lower spine's nervous tissue!
The Drakeling is propelled away by the force of the blow!

//OH GODDESS WHY
//I'd yell as I'm lifted off the ground, but the pain chokes my throat closed.
//Before I slam into the back wall of the throne room, the only thing I sense beyond white light and ringing is a thin, solitary string that catches on my scale for a moment, and then snaps.
The Drakeling collides with the obstacle!
The Drakeling's left lower arm takes the full force of the impact, chipping the scale, bruising the muscle and shattering the bone!
The Drakeling's tail takes the full force of the impact, bruising the muscle and bruising the bone!
The Drakeling collides with the ground!
The Drakeling's upper body takes the full force of the impact, bruising the muscle and shattering the right true ribs!
//I feel something clatter to the ground in front of me, then slide and tap my right hand. Blind, deaf,
facedown and in tremendous pain, I'm not going to do anything like finding out what it is until one of those things changes.
The flames are dismissed.

//A few calm seconds pass, and I don't die. Hearing recovers first.
PH: ...all for mythological allusions, but this is a bit far, right? I'm not the only one who thinks that?
T: That wasn't... above the throne _the entire time_, was it?
//Huh?
PH: I can't figure out how it went undetected. The illusion to disguise it should have triggered...
_something_, right?
Spike: Ugh...
//What are they talking about?
//Twilight hums, and starts trotting up the stairs.
T: Oh, good, you're not dead. Although...
//Hazel sticks out her tongue.
PH: I sat under that thing for months. Could you imagine?
//I open my eyes. In front of my fingertips is a simple broadsword, undecorated and sharp. Its handle has two pairs of letters scratched in that I can't make out, and a golden horsehair tied once around.
T: ...you've lost. I'm sorry, Spike... but this is the way it has to be...
//Twilight, from in front of the throne (I'm behind it), starts casting a spell.
Twilight speaks a word of power, forming symbols in the air! Twilight casts Earthmold!
Earthmold shapes the marble!
//Marble starts crawling over my legs, forming a blanket rapidly closing me in. I can hardly move without the stone; my body is just giving in...
T: I hope you don't hate me for this, Spike... I hope _I_ don't hate me for this.
//From the front I hear, through ringing and pain, another voice.
Sword: 'Lo, Hero. My name's Reality. And I'm here to bring you a message: the pen can _suck it_.

Chapter End Notes

With apologies to Tarn Adams.
And Here My Troubles Began

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

_Et vidi, et ecce: equa albus, et qui sedebat super illium habebat arcum, et data est ei corona, et exivit vincens, ut vinceret. Equa clamavit, 'Ad hoc signo vinces'!

/I lift my head up and look at the sword. Did it just...?\nPH: 'Swings, Reality itself...\n//Yep. Wasn't just me; that sword just talked.\n//Twilight looks on with disinterest.\nReality: Also here to be the gladius ex machina that brings you a totally contrived victory, but who are you to argue?\n//Reality... the famous sword of Bucket James, lost five hundred years ago, said to protect its bearer from magical harm. Exactly the type of weapon I could use against Twilight!\nPH: This is _so_ bullshit.\n//Earthmold crawls up my tail and holds me still from the waist down. If I weren't already paralyzed...\nPH: Who'd have thought mythology would be the clue we never considered to find Reality's location?\n//You mean... who'd have thought ancient history would be the key to understand ancient history?\nReality: Hey Hero, aren't you supposed to be doing something? 'Cause I am shiny and all, but that only counts for so much.\nSpike: Uhh... feels kind of rude to just, I don't know, grab you.\nReality: I'm a sword. What am I going to do if I'm not used in the way I like? Walk away?\n//At least it has a sense of humor.\n
The Drakeling grabs Reality by the handle with his right hand!\nThe Drakeling slashes the Earthmold in the marble with Reality, but the sword bounces off! The spell effect ends!\n//The Earthmold stops creeping over me. I hear Twilight sniff suddenly, halfway up the stairs.\nT: Hmm, so it is Reality. I was wondering where Celestia put it.\n//MY SUGGESTIONS FELL ON DEAF EARS\nT: She must have kept it where she could keep an eye on it.\nReality: (Funny story about that; remind me to tell you later.)\n//O...kay?\nReality: (But for now, there's a big dramatic fight to the death with your best friend to get back to?)\n//...How?\nSpike: (I'm kind of stuck. This is my only working limb and I'm half glued by marble.)\nPH: Frankly, I'm surprised it exists... do you know what this means about infothaumics?\nT: Yes, Hazel, we'll figure it out later. But for now--\nReality: (Those are oats behind the throne. At least I think they are; can't say for sure; no eyes. All I know is, you can turn to lava and James fought on his stomach.)\nSpike: (Do you think we can reach?)\nPH: Electrothaumic symmetry? Thaumodynamic analysis and the monopole hypothesis will--\nT: Yes! I know, Hazel! This is a radical shift in ponykind's understanding of magic, now let's--\n//I reach for the box of oats with Reality's pommel. Almost there, almost...\nPH: I don't think you're taking this seriously, Twilight! This is award-winning stuff, a whole new field! Is Reality a method used within magic to blanket suppress other effects, or an opposite like--\nT: Hazel!! _Not_ the _time_!!
Success!
I pull the box towards me and scarf down as many oats as I can, scooping them up in an overly long tongue. Barely enough, but it will do!

The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Blood of the Earth!
Arm recovering... spine transmitting... limb use plural... I'm back in the game, baby!
The Drakeling's wounds have healed!
The Drakeling stands up.
I stand up through the marble, breaking and melting it!
Spike: (You're not hurt by this?)
Reality: (Are you kidding? Tungsten boils before I put the AC on.)

Twilight speaks a word of power, forming symbols in the air! Twilight casts Heat Sink!
The air around the throne plummets in temperature, freezing the tapestries next to me solid and causing a slight draft... but I don't feel it.
Reality: Yeah, I'm a bitch, huh?
The words vibrate up my arm as the sword speaks. Twilight narrows her eyes at me.
Reality: Continuing magical effects won't hurt you as long as you hold me or touch me in some way. Which sounds weird. I should reword that.
The Drakeling's Blood of the Earth ends.

Realities:

Instant magic like Teleport still works, though if I touch something that holds magic it's all drained away.
I see... a plan starts to form in my head.
Reality: So it's kind of like tag! Sometimes I'm home base, sometimes you get tagged, and sometimes you tag others! Except with blood! Yaaaaay, blood!

Twilight points at The Drakeling and casts a spell! Twilight casts Helium Flash!

As the beam approaches where I stand, I slash at it with Reality!
The Drakeling slaps the flying beam with Reality! The spell effect ends!
Reality: (Wow, that's a new one. Spicy!)
The beam expands! The *gold throne* is caught in the spell! The marble is caught in the spell!
The marble has been melted, deforming its shape! The *gold throne* has been melted, deforming its shape!
The Drakeling's right hand is caught in the spell! The Drakeling's right hand has been singed!
PH: Watch it! That's the best seat in the house!
I take a few steps away from the throne.
Reality: (Who's she? I like her style.)
Spike: I thought you said magic wouldn't effect me!
Reality: I can't stop it from doing things to things that aren't you! That spell heats up the air! By the way, avoid fast heavy objects.
Huh?

The Drakeling dodges away from the flying +marble block+!
The flying +marble block+ collides with an obstacle and is blown apart!
It turns to dust against the back wall!
Twilight points at The Drakeling and casts a spell! Twilight casts Helium Flash!
//Let's do it right this time!
The Drakeling slaps the flying beam with Reality! The spell effect ends!
The Drakeling leaps away from the beam!
The beam expands! The marble is caught in the spell! The marble has been melted, deforming its shape!
//Behind me, the two tapestries left catch fire (obviously no longer frozen solid) at once. The red carpet leading to the throne in front of Twilight starts to smolder.
PH: It's, hoo, a little hot in here. Anypony mind if I open a window?
Spike: Give up before I kill you!
T: Just roll over and die!
PH: That's a no, then, right? I'm going to open a window.

The Drakeling charges at Twilight!
Twilight speaks a word of power, forming symbols in the air! Her horn glows brighter! Twilight casts Flashbang!
//Ready for it, I close and cover my eyes before the flash of light. No apologies to my hearing, but in another second I can see again.
//Reality makes a quip but I can't hear it.
Twilight points at The Drakeling and starts to cast a spell! Twilight casts Airshock!
Twilight points at The Drakeling and casts Airshock!
//Two bursts of air cause me to tumble, below my foot and aimed at my sword hand, but I hold on, roll down a few stairs, and stand up!
Twilight speaks a word of power, forming symbols in the air!
The Drakeling breathes fire!
Twilight kicks at The Drakeling with her Kick of Justice, but The Drakeling dodges away!
The Drakeling counterattacks!
Twilight casts Teleport!
//Twilight re-appears next to the throne room doors, and starts trying to fumble them open.
\See, told you those things weren't pony-friendly.
//Maybe... if I use the one move I haven't yet used, this fight will be over... I saw Belladonna use it and if it does what I think it does, with Reality it'll work...

The Drakeling slashes Twilight in the left rear leg with his Scythereach from a distance, tearing apart the skin, tearing apart the muscle and chipping the bone!
A major artery in the left rear leg has been opened by the attack, and a tendon has been severed!
Reality absorbs the magic of Twilight!
//_What_?!
//SWORD. FUCKING HELLO.
//I meant to slap with it!
Twilight collapses from the pain!

//My hearing comes back as Reality giggles.
Reality: Oh, it's blood! Hi again! I haven't seen you in such a long time I thought you forgot about me! But now we're together again! Yaaaay!

Twilight Sparkle was defeated!
Spike earned 32768 experience points!
Spike is now level 43!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//Twilight props herself against the throne room doors, blood spattered against it and her fur. The red carpet beneath her has a darker, growing pool.
This... I agree, so bullshit.
//Hazel casts a spell that puts out the flames on the wall tapestries. More art destroyed, must not be culture's lucky day...
PH: Right?
T: But however it happened... you won. Congratulations, Spike. You're the new Princess.
Reality: He might lack a few of the requirements for that.
//She's bleeding out fast. Her eyes focus on me, unwavering.
T: You've earned it. You've... beaten every challenge I or the world could throw at you.
//Rarity said tests are meaningless, that the full execution of my duty could never be prepared.
That's what being a Hero is; taking on situations no one can prepare you for. Like this...
T: I have... one last request. If you were truly my friend, all along.
Spike: What?
T: Don't... don't hurt Hazel. She's a good filly, who tried her very best. Even if she was mixed in with the wrong sorts of people.
Spike: You're not the wrong sorts of people, Twilight, Equestria can't survive without you--
T: No... you're the ruler of Equestria now. And I know you'll do just fine. You did... what you had to do. What is going to be best for us all. What... Celestia wanted.
//Twilight closes her eyes, and leans her head against the doorway, strength fading.
T: Now go on... finish it. Don't make me suffer. Despite all my mistakes, and failures, I... I hope to have earned at least that much.

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

>>END HER PAIN, AND BEGIN YOUR RULE.
>>LET HER SUFFER. LAUGH.

//What sadist wrote these options? I don't really have to choose from that, do I?
//Quine: You can always do more than you think.
//Oh, hey, there's a button in the corner here, what does that--
Spike cuffs Twilight on the ear with his left hand!
Spike: You are the biggest _idiot_ of any smart person I have ever known!!

\Oh. That's what that does. Wonder what happens if you click it again...

//I turn around and look at Princess Hazel, standing next to an open window through which songbirds croon. She raises her eyebrows and motions for me to say something.
Spike: Do you have a gold potion of healing in that supply room?
//Pondering for a moment, Hazel sticks out her tongue.
PH: I -- yes, let me find it.
//She walks into the storage room and sets a light, searching. I turn back to Twilight.
T: ...I... don't understand...
Spike: Shut up. You're weak and also I don't want to hear you right now.
//Despite me admonishing her, Twilight lets out one more word, fully against the floor:
T: Celestia...
//The morning sun shines through the window Hazel opened, directly on Twilight. Unbloodied hair covers everything but her eyes, squinting past me into the brightness.
Spike: It's not the world I'm fighting for if my friends have to die for it. _No one_ should have to die for the world I want, but when they do, I have a solemn responsibility to make sure it's for the best, and that there's no other way.
Spike: Twilight -- you're not only an objectively better leader, thinker, organizer, and fighter than me, but the hardest worker I know. The example you show to everyone under you is invaluable; you're an inspiration to all your friends. Hazel, Fluttershy, Pinkie Pie, Applejack, Rainbow Dash,
myself and even if she won't admit it Rarity don't want to see you hurt.

Spike: You're the best thing that happened to us as a group, and Equestria in whole. Who cares if you've made mistakes! Everyone messes up; the fact that yours had large consequences is because your _responsibilities_ are huge! Not your mistakes! Why would you have to die for it?! The past is a lesson, not a duty!

//A scared gasp, and the sudden sound of thick glass bouncing on marble as Hazel drops her potion. Behind me, the Princess of Equestria sputters and then blurts:

PH: How long have you been standing there?!

Celestia speaks a word of power, casting a spell! The *gold throne* is mended!

/The goddess smiles in her eyes, as the morning sun rises.

Celestia: Please, don't mind me. I'm just the handymare.

//...What. What is going on. Celestia is here, great feathery wings of pure white extended higher than the throne itself, majestic horn and simple adornments framing the horse in the flesh, mane waving on ether like it is more real than the air around it. Celestia has come back. Celestia is manifest.

C: You were going to give Twilight the potion to save her life, it seems. I would expect nothing less out of dedicated friends such as yourselves. Be quick about it; she is still bleeding.

//Hazel hastily dons the Equestrian crown and gallops over to Twilight and I. Together, we manage to put enough of it in her mouth to stop the bleeding, but... Twilight still lays where she is, unresponsive, staring directly at Celestia.

PH: I'll, uh... I'll call for the cleaners. That's a lot of blood.

C: In the meantime, Hero, you should gather your friends from the great hall, and bring them here.

Spike: ...Why?

//Staring down at me from next to the mended throne over broken stairs, Celestia allows the smile in her eyes to creep a little into her lips.

C: The holders of the Elements of Harmony should see how it is truly brought.

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//The Avatars sit around a circular table in the Castle Canterlot great hall. They are playing a card game. A plate of sandwiches, cut in triangles, lies half-eaten next to them. The mood in the room is of tiredness.

//In a small voice, Fluttershy says:

Fluttershy: I fold.

Rarity: ...Fluttershy, if you keep folding every turn you can't possibly win anything.

//Pinkie Pie holds her cards out in front of her, looking goofy.

PP: Does anyone have any aces?

//Rainbow Dash groans and folds.

//I cough, drawing their attention. Reality is still in my hand (I don't have a sheath for it). (Well, not one I want to put it in.)

AJ: Howdy, Spike.

Spike: Hey all.

PP: (Is that blood?)

//Rainbow Dash visibly stops herself from picking at the wound dressing across her chest. The fur is still burnt -- the edges of what hasn't been shaven for the gauze, that is.

RBD: What's with the sword?

//Reality is silent. I'm not sure how to explain it myself, either, so...

Spike: Heck if I know. Are you all busy?

AJ: Only busy losin' money, so, reckon not that busy. What's up?

R: Was Twilight not there? Even so, I'd imagine a serious talk with Princess Hazel about the concerns you have with Equestria should take longer than that. Is something wrong?

//...I don't know the answer to that.
Spike: Well, uh, two things.
PP: Oooh, boy, are we playing charades? I love this game!
FS: I don't think we're playing charades, Pinkie.
Spike: One... with my authority as Hero of the Land I am totally commandeering the rest of that sandwich platter, so hand it over.
//Rainbow Dash tosses it to me with her teeth and I wolf down a slice. Egg salad; not that bad.
AJ: Huh-huh, and two?
//I swallow.
Spike: Two: after I almost murdered Twilight, Celestia appeared in the throne room and wants you all to come in and hear what she has to say.
//Baffled looks are shared by the Avatars, none of them saying anything. Then, they all rush past me in a hurry, heading for the throne room.
Reality: ...Hey, Spike. Remember that funny story I told you to remind me to tell you?
//It's hard to hold Reality, my sandwich, and the platter all at once. So I shove the sandwich in my mouth. Problem solved.
Spike: ...Mmmph?
Reality: The punchline is, Celestia never knew I was there over the entire five hundred years. I'm not sure if she was looking during any of the fight, but... on the off chance she wasn't, I'd like to play it safe. Don't mention me to her.
//Okay, sounds easy enough. I'd like to know why, but that can come later. Sandwich now.
Reality: And whatever you do, whatever happens in that throne room, you must remember one very important thing: under absolutely no circumstances are you to let me go. Understand? _Do not let me go_.
Spike: Phmm-phmm.
Reality: I'll, uh... I'll take that as a yes.

//I re-enter the throne room. The Avatars assemble, shoulder to shoulder, a few steps away from the first stair. They face Celestia, who is spreading her wings wide, standing at the top of the stairs in front of the throne. Twilight stands next to one of the windows... at least she's standing. Staring off into nothing like that doesn't seem good, though...
//Hazel meets me by the doors.
Princess Hazel: I stood Twilight up; she's catatonic but I think she'll be fine. We're all following your lead here, Hero. Whatever happens, I trust you.
Spike: ...Okay.
//We walk towards the throne, Hazel with crown high and folded wings. I grip Reality tight and try not to draw attention.
Celestia: ...Ah, my little ponies. By my wings, it is wonderful to see you again.
//At the sound of her voice, Applejack and Fluttershy bow, Pinkie Pie salutes goofily, Rainbow Dash stretches her wings. Twilight is still standing motionless. Rarity... is just calm.
//Celestia turns to the first Avatar and smiles, a wide crack of sunlight over the horizon.
C: My dear Fluttershy. It's been a long time since we last spoke.
Fluttershy: Why, yes...
//Fluttershy hides her face behind her bangs. Even the audience of just this room is too much for her.
C: I hear you tend to a glade within Everfree Forest. I care too for the strength of my lands.
//Celestia nods and closes her eyes. Is that how a goddess bows? The barest of gestures; being able to move Celestia such a small amount deserves titanic respect?
//She turns to the next Avatar, who is bouncing from hoof to hoof.
C: Pinkie Pie, how marvelous to see you in fine spirits. You turned your love of celebration into an
Pinkie Pie: Don't you know it! Come down to Mountainville sometime, Princess Celestia! We've got candy and cake and balloons and streamers and games and fireworks and prostit--
C: I'll be sure to.

//Hmm... so Celestia knows a little bit about what happened after she left. Did she see Reality? What about everything else?
//The goddess moves on, and her tone grows more formal.
C: General Applejack.

//Without hesitation, the Avatar of Strength stands at attention.
Applejack: Ma'am!

C: ...Your devotion to your kin is strong, as strong as the day you sold Sweet Apple Acres and joined the Cavalry. I mean no insult when I say I hope your new career becomes unnecessary, and you can return to them.
AJ: ...Thank you ma'am.

//Celestia raises an eyebrow, amused at Rainbow Dash's inability to keep her wings closed.
C: The famous Rainbow Dash. Almost two years and your records remain.

Rainbow Dash: ...There's more to life than flying.
C: So I hear. Equally important is the willingness to teach others to fly.

//After meeting Rarity's eyes, Celestia pauses, looking her over. Then, the goddess bows her head deeply, corona on display.
C: ...Gallant Rarity. It is true--

Rarity: Go and skip me, please; very little has been done on my account.
C: It seems you sell both yourself and the artifacts you create short.

R: Hubris is a dress ill-fitting.
C: Humility doubly so, for one as skilled as you. Your designs belong to the world, not a dark closet in a highest tower.

//A moment passes, then Rarity nods her head proudly. Celestia turns a little more.
//She passes over me, pauses for a second... and smiles. Her eyes never even touched Reality.
C: This is a new face which falls before my eyes. My little pony, what is your name?

PH: I am Hazel, the Princess of Equestria.
C: Ah, the spirit of youth! Keep your vigor, girl, Equestria will find a use for it in the time to come. But be mindful that of your two predecessors in this room, I was not the one to make you my heir.

//Softening eyes fall on Twilight, far away in the back of the room, mouth slightly ajar and staring deep beyond the marble.
C: Dear Twilight, my faithful student...

//An unconscious movement of her face causes Twilight to utter:
Twilight: Luh...
C: ...Too much has been done on your account for me to even say. But, for everything, you have done well.

//Celestia turns and looks me in the eye. The world grows a little brighter.
C: And, finally, the Hero Spike... I have watched you closely over your journey, since my absence. This I am sure you know.

//I lean my head forward a little. Why isn't the dragon instinct saying something? He should be throwing a tantrum right now, if I know him...
C: From a house husband to a Hero belonging to legend, in the span of not a dozen weeks. Impressive, to say the least.

//If only we could make that a program and sell it.
Spike: Why are you here?

//Celestia stops her talk and gestures for me to continue.
Spike: Why have you come back? I didn't do what you asked.
C: But you have done what I had hoped.  
//Huh?
Spike: You asked me at the beginning of my quest to kill the false Princess. I didn't.
C: That is correct. I asked you to defeat one of Equestria's most powerful and most influential statesmares. And you have not. For that, I am glad.
//So... Celestia told me to do something in the hopes that I wouldn't?
C: You have shown a discerning mind throughout your journey, and it has not failed you here. The words of a goddess were not enough to sway you into doing something you truly thought was wrong. Courage and strength like that are very rare these days.
Spike: ...So you lied to me. Hazel and Twilight weren't the problem with Equestria. Why lie to me, as a test?
//R: Tests are meaningless. You can either succeed at the tasks needed of you, Hero, or you can fail. If a test could find that out you would not _be_ a Hero.
C: There are different positions in the world for those who follow orders, and those who follow ideals. Now that I know you are capable, I will fully entrust you with a task that will determine the safety of Equestria for decades to come.
Spike: ...I still feel that could have happened without the deception.
\Spike: Was she honest?
\Twilight: Not as much as I would have liked.
//Celestia pauses, and says in a lower tone:
C: Some people have to lie for the good of the world.
AJ: (...That doesn't mean we have to like it.)
//Good, I'm not the only one confused by this.
C: Your goal led you to grow in physical and mental strength. It led you to fight the Avatars and your very friends, and you showed the blood of the covenant thinner than the wax of the seal.
//Pinkie Pie notices Fluttershy's confusion, and sticks a hoof straight up. Celestia stops and looks at them.
PP: Could you explain that? We don't get it.
FS: (I'm s-sorry...)
C: ...Spike's friendship did not overpower his sense of right and wrong.
//I'm glad she explained that, because the metaphor was kind of obtuse...
C: You searched for faults in a society that needed fixing. And, in my eyes, you have fixed them, in your own way. With your ability and prowess, a new journey can begin.
RBD: What's that?
//She's so blunt! Not that I wasn't wondering the same thing.
//Celestia spreads her wings and raises her head, framing the throne behind her. The rising sun illuminates her from the side window, casting shadows over one half.
C: I wish to re-take the throne of Equestria.
//Everyone steps back a little, as the sudden revelation hits us. Even though, thinking about it, it is kind of obvious...
AJ: Pardon?
C: I understand I have no justified claim to the throne ever since my departure. The decision to be made lies with you, and you alone. But I would like to explain why I am asking this of you.
//Yeah, so would I.
PH: O...kay, right. Explain then.
C: Princess Hazel, your duties are to represent the Crown and government to ponies inside and outside of Equestria. After her funeral, the Princess Twilight Sparkle became the organizer of Equestria, handing down law and policy direction for the betterment and protection of all of Equestria. These tasks have been done admirably, for the circumstances which required them.
AJ: I see. Y'all, on the other hoof, have a thousand years' experience of doin' that, Princess Celestia.
//Hazel mutters to no one:
PH: (She's not the Princess yet.)
Celestia smiles, as if rewarding Applejack's cleverness.

C: Very good. Leading Equestria from the front, creating a path for our people to follow, and lighting a beacon to call them; these are things a true Princess must do. It is not enough in this world to pass law and fight battles. What is necessary is... inspiration.

Hhm... Hazel's inability to bring people together in a spirit of unity did let a lot of interspecies tension continue between dragons and ponies. And buffalo. And water kelpies, but honestly, screw water kelpies.

(Tack 'true' on anything and you get to redefine it, it seems.)

C: We are not in a grim position as I return to you. The newly-appointed Hero of the Land has prevented many dangers by his own power. You, Avatars and keepers of the Elements of Harmony, have suffered much adversity. But this has made you stronger. With the wisdom, the personal strength, and the perspective gained by Twilight Sparkle, Equestria will become a land of glory never before seen in this world, where all peoples are granted my protection.

A long silence, as each person figures out what this means for them and Equestria. Whether we want to or not, no one can deny her words... her works back them up.

PH: ...And what will happen to me?

C: ...Whatever we wish.

Huh?

C: We have among us now the power to tell any story we wish. It may ease the passing of the crown if you and I were to engage in a climactic duel, for example. The specifics can be shaped to evoke the response we desire.

As the words settle in, Pinkie Pie, Rainbow Dash, and Rarity gather in a small group. They start to brainstorm ideas about the hypothetical duel. I hear a lot of wooshing noises and explosions.

PH: ...Well, damn. I wasn't expecting this, of all things.

Then again, maybe now I'll finally have a chance to work on the thaumic autodynamics bit Twilight asked for...

She hangs her head, obviously disappointed. I'd imagine losing the Crown of Equestria would be a difficult thing to go through for any pony, although a fake duel is much more pleasant than the way those things are usually lost...

I glance over at Applejack and Fluttershy. Fluttershy is physically near but not participating in the choreography planning. Applejack meets my eyes, for a millionth of a second, an urging somewhere inside them. She then walks over and listens to the circular conversation.

It's enough to make one of the Elements on my chest grow hotter. The wheels turn, and I'm forced to ask:

Spike: Why do we have to lie to them? Why can't we just tell the truth?

(Celestia turns back to me. The side conversation stops dead as the Avatars turn to look.)

C: What truth would you have them hear?

Spike: _The_ truth; there's only one truth. No tricks of wording or omission. We figure out what we're going to do and then tell them.

(Celestia pauses for a moment, turning her head slightly to say):

C: The people more easily believe a story than they do a truth.

Spike: What they believe isn't as important as what we say.

R: Hero, this is Celestia's modus operandi. The use of temporary deception to bring a greater good for all is a near-universal mentor trope.

Spike: The most solid strategies don't depend on deception.

...Why isn't the dragon instinct responding? He should have so much to say, but I feel nothing...

FS: Spike, we can't tell the truth because... well, the truth...

Spike: Would be 'Celestia appeared in front of us and said she wants the throne back, so we gave it to her without question or second thought.'

R: It's hard to see how that wouldn't be a public relations nightmare.

Spike: The truth doesn't sound good so we made something up to feel better about ourselves for what we've decided? That doesn't sound a little irresponsible to anyone?

A long silence follows for everyone in the room. It's like they're slowly realizing how much they
assumed Celestia would be given the throne back.

Spike: I mean, sure, people will ask questions. Because that's what people do, they search for the truth and more of it. But if we have to lie to them, doesn't that mean the truth is bad? If the truth is good, all we have to do is make them understand that.

R: How many people do you know, Hero, that would rather embrace a hard truth than a comforting lie?

//I ball my empty hand into a fist. They're not getting it!

Spike: At least one: _me_. Applejack, you're the Avatar of Honesty itself. How are you okay with this?

//Faces turn towards Applejack. Sheepishly, she withdraws a little.

AJ: Honesty's the best policy a great deal of the time, Spike... but one little white lie, for the happiness of thousands of ponies across Equestria... I'm thinkin' that's a hard bargain to pass up.

Spike: (Seriously? Am I the only one here who has more questions about this whole damn thing?)

PH: (It's... she's Celestia, returned to take the throne again. What's there to question?)

//I turn to Celestia and demand:

Spike: Celestia! Why did you appear after I almost killed Twilight, instead of before to stop me from hurting her?

//In an understanding voice, the goddess responds:

C: I would have prevented you from doing so. But it would not have been a positive mark for your character, so I am glad you chose as you did.

Spike: Then why did you let me make all the mistakes I did along my journey? Innocents died because of me!

C: When I was watching, your failures have made you stronger. There was no way I could save those lives without endangering the many more lives you were one day meant to save. And, though I am a goddess, my attention is not infinite. There are others to consider beyond you.

FS: Spike, please be considerate; the Princess is being very patient with you and there's no need to yell--

Spike: Were you paying attention when I lost my memories?

//She appeared to greet the new me into this world. Maybe she knows how the amnesia happened, or what that flash of light was.

C: ...I was not. Where I was, I had much time to understand your situation afterward. I want to apologize for telling you once that with the full resources of Canterlot Castle your full memories could be restored. As I understand now, it is impossible.

//Impossible... impossible. Damnit. Another lie from the start.

\Where she was, she had time... so, what, another plane of existence?

Spike: Where were you, then?

//Celestia pauses. It seems like she didn't expect this question.

C: Not a place you would know of.

Spike: What's the task I have to do for Equestria's safety for decades? What are you planning for me?

AJ: ...Spike, you beat the tar out of things better than anypony on record. I reckon it has to do with you beatin' the tar out of more things.

//Celestia pauses, not denying Applejack's words.

C: As Hero of the Land, you are the the ultimate enforcer for the Crown to ensure the safety of Equestrian citizens. To complete this duty in a discreet manner, you must remain a drakeling. With magic, this will not be an issue.

//ST: Quine was not k-kept as a drakeling by magic for the greater p-p-part of a millennium. Damn aristoc-cratic y--y-- ... snot-nosed bastards.

Spike: ...You don't want me to become a full dragon?

C: The power you've shown has not been due to your size, little one, but your heart.

//No... it's because of complete luck and the dragon instinct and Avatars granting me powers. I was just the right dragon in the wrong place; anyone could be as powerful as I am now.
C: You will be granted a boon, not often enjoyed by those of your kind, in return. As Hero of the Land of Equestria, you will have the right to mate with any mare or dragon of your choosing, including those you have encountered in your journey, and even those in this room. They will not be allowed to deny you.

//...Dead silence. I stare at Celestia as songbirds start up again. They stop singing when she speaks.
Spike: Does _one person_ in this world have a not-fucked-up view of sexuality?!
//The goddess blinks. I don't really think she intends to answer that.
PH: I'm not the only one who also thought that was weird, right?
PP: What's with all the questions, Spike? I wasn't expecting an Equestrian Inqui--
Spike: Why are you back?!
C: I wish to re-take the throne--
//I wave my hand, interrupting her.
Spike: No! Not 'manner' why, 'motivation' why. Why do you want to come back?
RBD: Eh, Spike, interrupting a goddess is a teensy bit ballsy, even for you...
//Celestia, to her credit, is standing with an open and welcoming air, not offended by my questions. The morning sun has risen further in the sky, and it hits the throne, sending reflections everywhere that are blocked by her wings.
C: My primary concern is the health and well-being of all peoples in Equestria, and throughout the world.
//That's what I thought, so now the sucker-punch question:
Spike: If you cared about Equestria why would you _leave_ in the first place?!
//It makes no sense, a benevolent goddess leaving the throne to chaos and then appearing here much later, when we have everything in place...
//I try to think about why Celestia would leave. Why? It rapidly gets confusing, there is no good answer. I can't see why she would do such a...
//Celestia, stone-faced, only says:
C: I cannot tell you.
//A wave of disappointment hits the ponies around me. But I can only lower my eyes, madly working it out... agh, my head, there's a burning at the top of my head and it rings...
Spike: Why would you leave? If you really wanted the best for people? Why -- agh...
//It's intensifying, pulsing with my heartbeat, a great growling flame being fanned by thought. I put my hand on my head and squeeze my eyes shut.
PP: Spike? Are you alright?
Spike: No...
//Everything I know, everything I've learned and seen, fits together except this one thing, everything but that final question...
The Drakeling drops Reality.
//Despite its warning earlier, it says nothing.
Spike: Why, why, why, why... it makes no sense, there are links leading to nowhere and leading from nowhere and buildings and structures and towers built with no foundation and a foundation with no building but bridges lead to open air and empty space where ideas should be, ripped out of my head like a page from a diary...
//I fall to my knees, holding my head with spread fingers. Dragons can't feel heat, and my fingertips burn.
PP: Spike? Are you alright?
Spike: No...
//Puzzle pieces are whirling about in my head, rearranging fast enough to cause friction burns. It's maddening.
Spike: Why, why, why, why...
//Celestia raises her head back, eying me. Why would she leave?
C: I think the Hero is in need. For what, I cannot say.
//All the ponies are staring at me but Twilight. Why is she catatonic at a time like this, I could use her...
//Whole strips of my life are torn up from the carpet of understanding and left floating in air. I
never put it all together, just thought what I knew was good enough, and now nothing makes sense... principle of explosion never felt so _hot_. Nothing I know can be true, it's...
//I'm losing control of my mind...
//My mind losing... of control... I'm M/osing lin dy..m. m'Ifo /.coorl..t n

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//AND CLICK
//My body leans back without me thinking about it!
Spike (Dragon Instinct): HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA I ALWAYS WIN
//Everypony in the room is taken aback.
//Celestia's eyes fill with hate.
AJ: Wha--what in tarnation is that?
PP: Spike sounds so angry! What happened? Did I miss something?
FS: No, it's--
//The dragon instinct, like lava, raises my arm and points at Celestia.
Spike (Dragon Instinct): HELLO, HECATE.
R: Hecate?
PH: Hecate was an old sorceress, lived over a dozen centuries ago. She killed the last of the true dragons.
R: I know, but why her?
FS: It's the dragon instinct.
PP: The what?
//Celestia watches the proceedings with absolutely no motion of her body, beyond her eyes.
FS: A shared consciousness that inhabits the minds of all dragons. He's... unpleasant.
Spike (Dragon Instinct): REMEMBER WHEN BUCKET JAMES KILLED YOUR ENTIRE FAMILY?
RBD: What?!
AJ: Family? Princess Luna can't have, y'know...
Spike (Dragon Instinct): BECAUSE THAT WAS FUCKING HILARIOUS. YOU SHOULD HAVE SEEN THEM BEG.
PP: Wow, Spike, is this in your head all the time? What a meanie!
RBD: I thought that Blueblood guy was the only relative of Celestia.
FS: ...Dragony, isn't it better to be nice?
//In a low, echoing tone, Celestia emits:
C: Foul spirit, how do you dare accost me now?
Spike (Dragon Instinct): ONLY THE MOST COWARDLY SHITPILE WOULD EVER FORCE A DRAKELING'S BODY AGAINST HIS WILL, IS THAT RIGHT?
//The goddess stiffens.
AJ: What exactly is he accusin' Celestia of?
//The puzzle pieces, they're whirling, they're spinning about in my head...
Spike (Dragon Instinct): OH, HERE'S A MESSAGE FROM THE ONE PERSON IN THE WORLD WHO EVER REALLY LOVED YOU: FUCK YOU YOU CUNT.
PH: No... in one of the seized heretical texts, a hypothesis for Celestia's immortality... a drakeling bond?
C: I will draw you, foul one, as poison is drawn from a wound.

The Goddess points her horn at The Drakeling!
The Goddess casts a spell!

//The one time in my life I want to listen to the dragon instinct, this happens...
The Drakeling dodges away from the flying beam!
I groan, and sputter:
Spike: Let him... have his say.
Avatars: Spike?!
RBD: You're still in there?
FS: It's not always like this, oh my...
Spike (Dragon Instinct): SHE DOESN'T WANT TO COMPETE WITH AN ANCIENT POWER THAT ACTUALLY TELLS THE FUCKING TRUTH.
//Celestia, attempt at silencing the dragon instinct defeated, now glowers at me from the top of the stairs, wings wide instead of tall.
//I... It's coming together, now structures are starting to build, and I see where the tip will be but I need to get there and bridges will be connected and from the rubble I make a library that holds the world--
C: I am a goddess. The truth is what I will to be.
Spike (Dragon Instinct): HAHAHAHAHA, YOU CALL YOURSELF A GODDESS NOW? I'M GOING TO KILL YOU, LITTLE FILLY, AND EVERYTHING YOU DO WILL BRING IT QUICKER.
The Goddess speaks a word of power, forming symbols in the air!
The Goddess casts a spell!
//Immediately, the dragon instinct fades away. His voice is gone, and I control my limbs again, lying on the ground with everypony but Celestia and Twilight over me... but the final brushstrokes are added to the painting. The building is complete. It all... it all makes sense now... My journey, and everything I've done. It's... the full picture is so beautiful... and it's terrible.
//It's horrifying.
//I have a plan.
The Drakeling picks up Reality.
AJ: Give him some room, y'all.
//The ponies retreat a few steps.
The Drakeling stands up.
//I walk forward, past Rainbow Dash, and look back at Celestia. Her visage is softening.
Spike: General Warhelm led the Red Helm Army to the center of modern Equestria from parts unknown while going completely unnoticed by Equestrian forces.
R: Is there a question at the end of this, Hero?
Spike: You'd think an army that size would have been recognized by the magical currency-tracking scheme Twilight has going on in Mountainville--
//Pinkie Pie gasps.
PP: Spike, you did _not_ just break a Pinkie Promise _in front of me_!!
//Fluttershy leans in towards Pinkie Pie and whispers:
FS: Pinkie, I'm sorry, but I think something much more important is happening now...
Spike: --or at least have some indication of a resource base at all. Unless, say, a mare in the shadows was handing them bags of gold and equipment every so often.
//That mare with the powder-blue armor, and the Caduceus cutie mark... who was she?
Spike: I haven't figured out how Latoftcwyidwits found its way from the tomb of Bucket James to Warhelm. Or, how despite exploding into a pile of gore, any trace of Warhelm was gone from this world minutes later.
RBD: Hey, Spike? Are you getting to the point soon?
//The point is that the Red Helm Army didn't make sense at all and couldn't have been predicted.
//R: It is dreadfully obvious all true dangers which we have been through were manufactured... none of the threats we seem to have defeated had any retrograde impact on contemporary society, despite seeming so dramatic and intense.
Spike: How many alicorns are there in the world?
At this sudden change in direction, Celestia takes half a second to think.
C: In the last century, there has been Princess Luna, Princess Cadence, Princess Twilight Sparkle, and myself.

//Cadence? Never heard of her before.
PH: Five, if you include me.
C: Of those, Luna and I are still alicorns.

//...Cadence must have been Twilight's sister-in-law, the one that was killed by the Thirty.
Spike: Does Luna have a Caduceus as her cutie mark? Black fur, powder-blue armor?
FS: Why, not at all. Princess Luna was a very normal pony; I couldn't imagine her looking like that.
R: ...Her name is 'Luna'. Her cutie mark could never be anything but the moon.
PP: Yeah, and I can't think of anyone with scary black fur and light blue gear except Nightmare Moon!

//A long pause follows, as all the ponies stare at Pinkie Pie.
Spike: ...The mare with a holiday?
PH: Nightmare Moon _was_ Luna. And Twilight became a Princess in the first place by finding a spell that changed a pony's cutie mark.

//Was Luna... that makes more sense. I see everything so clearly now.
PH: Are you asking because you saw a pony like that?
Spike: Warhelm froze up after I accused him of making a deal with a devil. _That_ is who I saw in the Red Helm camps, coming out of the armory. And now, if that really was Princess Luna, I know how everything else happened.

//R: I will agree with you on one thing, dear. 'Celestia did it' _is_ a valid answer for most everything.
Spike: But that doesn't explain how I know she was a devil.
FS: ...Those creatures with two legs and no fur or scales don't exist, Spike.

//...Devil, not demon. And it's a metaphor; I just said she was an alicorn!
\The dragon instinct was banished by Celestia, it looks like... you can tell the story of Osto Bacchus now.

Spike: In the Valley of Death forest, I fought a living skeleton. And that's not a metaphor.

//Above and behind me, confusion. Celestia remains calm.
RBD: A skeleton? Bones can't move on their own.
Spike: They did, enchanted by magic beyond what normal people could ever think possible.

//Twilight: ...magical healing is a tricky subject... not to mention there are no peer-reviewed publications focused on either topic until the last one point five years.
Spike: The evil I fought had the power to raise the souls of others from the dead. I fought against two spirits, one named Sizmig Gloric and one extremely powerful drakeling with a sword.

//Hazel taps her chin with a hoof.
PH: Gloric... the Inquisitor?
Spike: She was granted this power by the Rod of Asclopius, which I destroyed.
FS: Spike... I'm sorry, but the Rod of Asclopius is a story. It's a very good story, and I know--
Spike: It was an ever-living snake nailed to a staff whose venom was the gold fluid we use in healing potions and by touching it the skeleton was healed; does that fit the bill?

//When asked why the recipe for making those potions was lost, Twilight just told me Princess Celestia disappeared. She must have taken it with her.
RBD: ...Maybe I was a little harsh on you burning down the forest. Why didn't you just say so?
//BECAUSE I WANTED HIM TO SAY IT HERE
//That... that also makes perfect sense.
Spike: The skeleton claimed it made a deal with a 'devil', a dark pony with a funny way of speaking that had the Caduceus as her cutie mark. In return, it was granted undeath and the Rod of Asclopius. What's the legend about the Rod?

//Fluttershy squeaks once as I turn to her. She whispers:
FS: (Uh-uhm... it was... stolen from a dragon hoard by H--Hecate...)
//Hecate. That was what the dragon instinct called Celestia.
Spike: Celestia! When I was in the tower of Celestia's Faceless, after Herr Yyz told me she would cause famine and catastrophe, you told me to kill her.
C: ...It is possible that what you heard and what I said were two different things.
Spike: What? No; who cares about that; I did the right thing. Here's my question: why did the pony trying to _destroy Equestria_ recognize your voice? From three words, after one and a half years? //I understand that Herr Yyz was obsessed, but such a quick recognition is impossible unless Celestia was talking to her at other times.
//Celestia spreads her wings wide, and speaks in a condemning tone.
C: If you try to convince others of what you believe with no evidence, that makes you no better than her.
Spike: I'm sorry. You're right. I don't have any evidence you talked to her, just pattern recognition.
AJ: Pattern? I don't see any other cults tryin' to cause mass starvation...
Spike: No, not -- //TELL HER HOW THE WAR ENDED. YOU KNOW, WITHOUT HER IN ANY WAY.
Spike: ...fine. Let me tell you how the Aquinatic Conflict ended.
AJ: Spike, I was there, I know how --
Spike: Quine was adamantly refusing to compromise. The Thirty would attack Equestria after his death, which meant he couldn't be killed. So he had no reason to surrender. //Not even the well-being of his people could convince Quine. I guess that's why they call him Quine; he doesn't take into account anything but himself.
Spike: Until the dragon instinct chimed in and told us one little sentence: 'if you don't end this, Celestia will'.
//It's hard to see through the dragon instinct's rage sometimes, but there's always truth behind it. Except when he's telling me I went on this journey for sex.
//NO THAT'S ALSO FUCKING TRUE
Spike: Why does the spirit with millions of dragon-years experience cumulative, and all sensory information from every dragon that ever lived, think Celestia would use a crisis as an excuse to return to Equestria? When Herr Yyz thought the same thing?
//Celestia has been trying to return for a while now as the returning savior, the bright light that washes away darkness. But darkness rises only where the light neglects to shine.
Spike: Why did an alicorn -- who looks distinctly like Luna and has access to resources only a metaphorical goddess would -- try to manufacture two crises of the level of danger only a goddess could solve?
//It's a classic two-mare con.
//Celestia flaps her wings, once, brushing away my comments.
C: I am here to take back the throne, and better Equestria. Only I can do this.
Spike: No, see, that's not it. It's clear why you're here. I didn't kill Twilight to create a ruling crisis once no one knew how to organize Equestria, or Hazel to create a crisis of succession, so now there's no obvious hole for you to fill and you're trying to force it. //Even I am a crisis Celestia tried to create.
RBD: Uh, phrasing?
//Oh my skies, who cares?
Spike: You tried to kill potentially hundreds of thousands of people to retake the crown under thunderous applause! There's no denying it!
//Celestia lifts a hoof, and looks at it with disinterest.
C: I try not to treat mortal behaviour with disdain. Terrified of its own death, the brain seeks out patterns where none exist. I had thought you were above such biases, Spike, but it seems not.
//She puts down the hoof.
C: It is possible once you experience immortality, you will see how baseless these accusations are. //She's... trying to bribe me. It won't work!
Spike: I won't take bribes, especially not from a traitor.
FS: Oh, my...
AJ: Woah there, Spike, don't you think that's a little harsh?
Spike: For a pony who will do _anything_ to take back the throne? No. I think that's exactly the sort of person we should prevent from doing it!
PP: Well, duh, but Celestia's helpful, and friendly, and nice! She's not a nasty old meanypants!
R: (I do believe 'helpful, friendly, and nice' are mutually exclusive with the deaths of thousands...) //I fold my arms.
Spike: Believe it or not, I am a forgiving Hero. I am willing to let Celestia back on the throne. //Hazel paws at the stone steps, adding:
PH: Er, you know, if it weren't already occupied...
Spike: You'll be Princess of Equestria again if you answer one question. That's all I want. Answer one question, truthfully, and give me an answer we agree is good enough. And you have everything you're aiming for.
//Celestia regains her graceful visage. She spreads her wings.
C: I have answers. I have all of the answers, to any problem that may trouble you.
Spike: Why did you leave? Tell me that. That's all I want. And the throne is yours. Why did you leave?
//For the longest time, in the greatest room in all of Equestria, between two of the most powerful people to ever walk the land, there is a juvenile staring contest.
//She's not able to answer. When it mattered most, and would get her everything she worked these last two months for, she can't just tell the truth.
//With deliberate movements, and an air of finality, Celestia opens her mouth and answers:
C: ...I cannot endanger the ends I have worked by telling you. I ask only, that as my friends, you trust me.
//A stunned silence. But this is exactly what I was expecting.
//Princess Hazel, the rightful holder of the throne, answers first.
PH: I'm not your friend. And this is my castle.
AJ: For as long as Twilight is decidin' to remain comatose, I'm sworn to Princess Hazel.
RBD: Hey, Applejack, hold your horses!
//Applejack looks at at Rainbow Dash, standing proudly in the front.
RBD: You can't be the first one to swear loyalty to the Princess! That's gotta be me!
R: Celestia, your rule was filled with oddities and horrors and the most bizarre occurrences, the likes of which Equestria could never have predicted. Say what you want about Twilight, but at least her rule is defined by empirical truth. This new world, one without you, makes sense.
//Fluttershy squeezes her eyes shut. But from behind Applejack, she adds:
FS: ...We have to know each other better in order to get along. And I... oh, I'm so sorry, but dragons just aren't willing to do that with Celestia around. They've been hurt too much.
PP: While I hate to add to the party ruining, Twilight is one of my dearest and bestest friends! Princess Celestia isn't a bad pony, but she's someone I hardly knew! And I could never lose faith in my friends! We'll do a great job of running Equestria!
//Twilight mumbles nothing of great consequence. It goes unheard. Princess Hazel starts walking up the stairs, towards Celestia, crown shining from outside sunlight.
PH: You heard us well. Go on, now, go. You're not welcome any more. Equestria is our responsibility.
//A last thought triggers in my brain, the final puzzle piece sliding into place.
Spike: Not enough...
//I grip Reality tight. How could I have been so stupid?
R: Speak up, Hero.
//Gave power to a lich trying to enslave all of Equestria... planned a catastrophe to bring starvation and misery to the land... propped up a puppet to take the throne by force... and then, when that didn't work, tried to manipulate me, and my friends...
Spike: More than just that. Celestia...
"What kind of idiot would I be to trust the first person I see after I woke up'? What kind of idiot, indeed. I said it myself, and I've been so blind... if it weren't for the dragon instinct, I never would have seen it.

Celestia took away my memories.
Spike: With my power, as Hero of the Land of Equestria, in the name of the crown of Princess Hazel...

This is what the dragon instinct has been training me for. This is my mission, for dragonkind, for myself, for Equestria...

For Twilight...
I point my sword at Celestia and shout:
Spike: For treason against the throne and its people, I banish you forthwith from the kingdom of Equestria! Under pain of death!

FS: What?!
PP: Spike!!
RBD: _Might_ want to reel that one back a little, heh-heh...

Princess Hazel takes a few steps away from Celestia. The goddess is glowering at me from her old throne, a spell brewing on her horn, mystic mane floating on an impossible breeze.

R: What is that, the syntax is unfathomable...
The spell fades. Celestia's stance changes from one of anger, to acceptance, to sadness. She closes her eyes, and turns away.
AJ: (Uh... so what now?)
Spike: (...What did she cast?)
R: (Something lost to the sands of time, I suspect.)

Princess Hazel discreetly checks the air with her nose.
PH: (Divination... on you.)

From beneath an angelic wing, one eye of Celestia pierces through me in a manner which can only be described as ancient, with the full power and wickedness that such a word deserves.
C: You have chosen poorly.

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

The Goddess points her horn at The Drakeling!
The Goddess casts Bind Drakeling!

With a great arc I slice in front of me! Reality absorbs the beam in a burst of sparks!
Reality: (Oh my skies I forgot some spells taste like chocolate. Oh my skies.)
PP: Aah, what was _that_ for?!
PH: Get out of my kingdom!
RBD: Hey! No one hurts my friends and gets away with it!
Spike: Celestia...

In my hand, Reality yells:
Reality: I was over the throne the entire time! Also, you're a bitch!

Celestia, for the first time I've ever seen, looks genuinely shocked. That passes quickly.
Spike: You've had five hundred years to think of a battle cry and that's what you came up with?
FS: Talking sword, why is there a talking sword, this isn't happening...
AJ: Get a hold of yourself, girl!
CUNITIMUS PRIME CAST A SPELL AT YOU, WHY IS BATTLE NOT STARTING
Oh yeah, that's a good point.
Reality: I'm the blade that killed your family and now I'm back to finish the job!
PP: There, that's better! ...In a manner of speaking.

The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Walk of the Third!
The Goddess speaks a word of power! A blast of air radiates outwards!
The Goddess speaks a word of power! A blast of air radiates outwards!
The Goddess speaks a word of power! A blast of air radiates outwards!

//The triple blast strikes Hazel first and sends her tumbling back. It hits the Avatars and Twilight last, throwing them down, but I keep my ground.
The Drakeling’s Walk of the Third ends.
//Damnit! I forgot! I can barely fight right now!
The Goddess closes her eyes and concentrates! The Goddess completes a ritual!
C: ~Remina, Remina, Remina~!
//With three final words, a flash of white aether replaces Celestia, like the world is paper folded until the colors stretch. Goddess now absent, the only thing that sounds in the throne room is our breaths, and the echo of far-off thunder.

Chapter End Notes

With apologies to Tarn Adams.

End of Pony Girl Quest Part 2. Part 3 will be posted at a later date.
En un lugar de la Muerta, de cuyo nombre no quiero acordarme...

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

Reality: What... what just happened?
//I stand straighter and look around. It's a good question.
//The Goddess Celestia is no longer where she stood. A glowing section of floor has replaced her
throne, which has its upper part torn off like it was rudely sieved out of the universe. Twilight's
blood rusting on my blade, I watch the assorted Avatars, my friends, shake their heads and recover.
Reality: There was supposed to be blood! Where's the blood?!
Spike: (The bloodlust is getting annoying.)
Reality: (Uh, _sword_)
Spike: ...It looks like Celestia's left.
Applejack: Careful, y'all. We don't know if she's still around.
Fluttershy: Is everypony alright?
Rainbow Dash: I think my bandage is loose.
//Applejack helps Rainbow Dash with the bandage as Hazel stands, still woozy. She was near the
center of the burst. After looking around to check for Celestia, I help the Princess up.
Spike: Are you okay?
Princess Hazel: Of cour-ow fuck, not there--
//I take my hand off her knee--
PH: Of course not. (Just bruised, I hope.) I have _people_ for this shit...
//She turns and limps towards Twilight, eying the darkening skies above.
Pinkie Pie: Celestia left? What now?
Rarity: Hero, the throne is glowing. If some magic remains from the ex-Princess, you should
dismiss it with... I must assume that's Reality.
Reality: Keen of you to notice.
//I climb to the top of the stairs, Reality in hand.
Left on the floor where Celestia stood is a glowing
symbol on the stone: a bow of bone strung with sinew, and smaller a leather quiver stocked full of
flared--
Spike: (And I thought my mind was crude.)
//COME ON SHE'S A LONELY GODDESS. AT LEAST NOW, HAHAHAHAHAHAHA
//I draw Reality over that part of the figure, erasing it, and step back. Rarity has reached the top of
the stairs and stands still next to me.
R: (Are you in any way sure Celestia is not hiding and simply waiting to strike?)
Spike: (...Nope. Where do you think she could be?)
Reality: (If Rarity knew that, she wouldn't need aftersh--)
R: (I can eliminate this room only; my false eyelashes are invisibility sensors. But beyond that...)
Spike: (Is that why you dress up all the time? All your accessories are magic items?)
//Rarity smiles at the glowing symbol.
R: (No. That is simply a bonus.)
PH: Twilight, wake up. We need you now. I need you. This is _important_.
//Hazel talks into Twilight's ear, having rolled her on her stomach. When that doesn't work, she
nips the ear, which only gathers a twinge.
AJ: Uh oh, if Twilight's rightly and truly out of it, I don't see much of us dealin' with this mess.
//Rainbow Dash trots over (Applejack tied down a wing for the bandage's support) to the window,
puts her hooves on it, and watches the weather. Of all times...
PP: What's the glowy thing?
R: I'm in the process of asking it.
FS: What is it saying?
R: 'Thaumic connectivity issues.'
PP: Did you try turning it off and on again?
//I didn't realize Rarity was casting a spell at all; there's no glow around her horn or telltale signs. There is a small diamond stud on the horn's underside near the tip, though.
Spike: (Huh. Did that stud hurt?)
//Rarity notes glibly:
R: (It did, once.)
//...Well, uh, that was cryptic. I walk down the stairs, standing next to the two earth ponies and Fluttershy. The Avatar of Temptation leans in close to me, maybe in fright.
FS: (Spike? I, um, I'm s-sorry, but I was wondering if maybe -- you know, if you're not doing something right now--)
PP: So what are we doing now?
//Applejack glares Pinkie into silence.
Spike: (You need a recap?)
FS: (It's not to say I haven't been paying as close attention as I should have, but... yes. I wasn't paying as close attention as I should have. Sorry.)
Spike: Okay. So.
PH: So Twilight's out. Can't say for how long, but I'm hoping she recovers pretty damn quick.
Spike: So, that happened first. Twilight fought me because she convinced herself of some crazy theory or other that had to do with Celestia, whom I am quickly learning Twilight is nuts about.
//Nods and muttered assent.
Spike: I ask Hazel to dip into the supplies for a healing potion, Celestia appears. Twilight sees her and freezes up.
PP: Was this the part with the uber-explosiony, ultraviolence-filled, dramatic destructive magispectacular duel?
Spike: Ye-- no, that never happened!
//Pinkie Pie touches her front hooves together as the other ponies stare her down.
PP: ...Oh. My bad.
Spike: I realize her actions don't make sense, the dragon instinct pays a visit, Celestia has no response for why there's evidence linking her to traitors and evil, she tries to enslave me and hurt you all before disappearing.
//I think that's most of it. Princess Hazel stares at me.
PH: Wait. You said 'Thaumic connectivity issues'?
Spike: Uh... I did?
AJ: No, Rarity did.
//THANKS FOR THAT, JACKASS
R: Yes, quite persistently. (Though still better than an explosion.)
PH: Try folding a null call into the fourth vector of a standard 5-F probe, same carrier as the glow but orthogonal.
R: And that would show us what, exactly?
//The glowing symbols disappear suddenly. Rarity shakes her head and blinks.
PH: It's a ritual. Damn it all, why is Twilight still like that?!
//We look to Twilight. She's fluttering her eyelashes at the stone in front of her. It's less amusing than you'd think.
//A shrieking sound over harsh chugging, like a chainsaw running into steel, fills my mind as I drop to one knee, accidentally bumping my head into Applejack's flank.
AJ: Woah there -- Spike, you feelin' alright?
The dragon instinct leaves my mind entirely, taking the sound with it.

What was that?

Spike: Uh... yeah. Catching breath. Never better.

I lift myself back up with a hand on her and Fluttershy's back.

PH: My kingdom is under attack. A ritual is a spell which must be cast before it's called up --

which means Celestia was planning something in the event we rejected her advances. Shit, for the

throne. Not like that. Imagine I worded that better.

We all imagine that for a moment.

PH: Which means we are dealing with a fucking _god_ who wants what we have, is willing to kill

thousands of people to get it, and may have been preparing over the last year and a half for this

very possibility. We only discovered this in the last six minutes and have, to our name, a nifty

sword.

Reality: (Didn't even pun off 'keen'.)

Spike: (Thanks for that.)

PH: Which means we're not dead yet because her plan involves keeping us alive, and I want to find

out why. Rainbow Dash! I want you and your Wonderbolts in the sky, report immediately when

you see something--

RBD: --strange?

From the center of the room as we are, no one can see what Rainbow Dash is looking at. More

thunder crashes come in from the one open window.

RBD: 'Cause if you want strange, this is it.

We stumble en masse to the window she's gazing out of. The sky has turned from a normal

morning hue to a sky-spanning smear of dark, bulbous miasma. Where it splits, higher in the sky

beyond there is a layer of fetid yellow like rotted adipose. The sun, not blocked by any clouds

unlike the rest of the sky, is now a cracked and bleeding scab. A greyness descends upon the land.

Hazel immediately starts barking orders.

PH: Then look for hostiles! Scout only, do not engage! Rarity, find Canterlot's mayor and tell him

I've declared martial law!

Spike: Have you declared martial law?

PH: I will once I have time for fucking paperwork! Then use the Magic Corps to establish a

curfew!

FS: But it's morning--

PH: You two! Go to the Castle Comms Room and spread word that an impostor of Celestia has

tried to take the throne with a magic disguise! Then keep all lines open!

Pinkie Pie salutes while Fluttershy whimpers down.

PH: Applejack! Find Shining Armor, escort all non-combat Castle workers to safety! Don't include

me; the best use of my time right now is to try to wake Twilight.

She turns, takes two hasty steps and barks:

PH: Now go!

The Avatars rush off to their tasks, leaving an open window and open throne room door behind

them.

Spike: Wait! What am I supposed to do?

PH: You're a damn Hero, it's your job to figure it out.

After half a moment of pondering, I run after the Avatars with Reality in hand. The dragon

instinct left, so something huge is happening to dragons somewhere -- at Celestia's hooves, surely -

- that is not here. Hazel will be safe for now with Twilight.

And, even if it hurts to admit it, right now I'm not the person Twilight needs to see.

I skid into the Grand Hall, noting the ashen stains on the marble and meat pastries scattered about

everywhere. Cleaning supplies and an upended card table at the top of the stairs, everypony is still
here because no one but Rarity knows where anything is in the Castle.

PP: Is it next to the pool?

FS: Canterlot Castle has a pool?

R: No, Applejack, three lefts and then _straight_, it's not so difficult--

AJ: So I can't take the first right?

R: No, that leads down the stairs to the chapel--

Spike: Where's the Comms Room?

//Na-Mira was broadcasting from there. I wonder if they threw her out.

R: We were just there a minute ago, dear--

AJ: What if he's not in his office, any idea where he'd be?

PP: It's like a game of hide and seek! You have to zoom around everywhere yelling his name!

Spike: You were? What happened?

FS: Pinkie, that's not how you play--

R: No, I don't and as a matter of fact I'm going to go on record as recommending you all should acquaint yourselves with the Castle sometime soon, especially in the _strange_ event that _lives_ depend on it--

//A softer pop than earlier comes from the ceiling as a smooth voice echoes through the Castle.

Sound Above: This is Captain Shining Armor of the Castle Guard: all combat personnel to the southeast gardens; I repeat, all combat personnel to the southeast gardens. This is not a drill.

//The radio is put down with a heavy CRACK and the sound of hooves galloping away is heard. It seems like he missed the receiver.

Spike: ...What could that mean?

//Applejack runs off to the southeast with not another word.

FS: A-are w-w-we under at-t-tack?

//Fluttershy's stutter gives away what her body language doesn't.

PP: Nah, Hazel said the kingdom's under attack. We should be good.

//She pauses a second.

PP: Wait, how _do_ you attack a kingdom anyway?

R: ...The Tomb of the Unknown Pony is in that direction.

Spike: Tomb of the Huh?

//Rarity descends the stairs, following Applejack's trail as she speaks.

R: Military crypts, honored nobles' mausoleums et cetera. Fluttershy, would you be an absolute dear and tell the mayor about the curfew for me?

//Crypts... the spells Osto Bacchus cast came directly from Celestia. But would she really...?

//I rush past Rarity, trampling gravy and colored shards to leap out a shattered stained glass window. Outside, several guards gallop in the same direction, hastily donning helmets. I follow them.

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

Guardspony: Yeeaaaaaaaaggrh!

//Beyond purple poppy bushes, surrounded by flat headstones and perfect grass a thin pony is grappling... oh skies. Oh skies, what is that thing?

//Smashed enamel covers the side of its face and the guardspony's front hoof. Sunken flesh reveals ligaments and tendons stretched over a pony's skull, one eyeball still intact but blood and muscles drained away. Parts of its emaciated body have been split and bloodless gore spilled out, exposing bones here and there. No fur or hair can be seen anywhere on it.

Ghoulish Attacker: We had _respect_ for our elders in my--

The Guardspony throws the *iron javelin*! The flying *iron javelin* strikes The Ghoul in the lower body, tearing apart the skin and chipping the lower spine! The *iron javelin* has lodged firmly in the wound!
//Taking advantage of the distraction, the thinner guardspony attacks!
The Guardspony kicks The Ghoul in the front right leg, tearing apart the skin and breaking the bone!

GA: Well, if I say! I'll teach you some manners yet, if my name isn't Garackus--
The Ghoul bites The Guardspony in the neck with his broken front teeth, tearing apart the skin and tearing apart the muscle!
A major artery has been opened by the attack!
The Ghoul has latched on firmly!
Spike: No!

//I run and leap over a hole in the earth about six feet deep, slashing at the undead monster!
The Drakeling slashes The Ghoul in the upper body with his Scythereach, and the severed part flies off in an arc!
//Reality cleaves through the ancient pony and leaves him motionless.
Reality: (Aww...)
Guardspony: He's wounded! Quick, get--
//I glance at the injured guardspony's neck for only a moment, rolling the dry corpse's head away.
The wound sprays blood across the well-kept grass. He's looking at me, but I avoid his eyes.
Spike: It's his jugular. Get the rest of the guard out of here! They're not going to do any good!
//He blinks for a moment, so I add:
Spike: Do you need an order?! That's an order! Keep them back, I'll handle this!!
//I turn to see soft earth swell up and topple over a headstone, another ghoul bursting out!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

Digging Ghoul: What?! A dragon? What is such an evil creature doing in these fair lands?!
Spike: Drawing irony, apparently!
The Drakeling breathes fire!
The Ghoul is caught in the dragonfire! The Ghoul's left rear leg has been burnt!
//A foul stench rises off the corpse, worse than anything I've ever smelled.
Spike: (Ugh!)
Reality: (What'd you expect? You're burning a dead body.)
Digging Ghoul: Quickly, do it now!
//Huh?

The Ghoul bites The Drakeling in the upper body from behind with his broken front teeth, shattering the scale and bruising the muscle!
The Ghoul latches on firmly!

Spike: Aah -- fuck --
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Blood of the Earth!
Snaking through the dirt, streams of magma flow around The Drakeling's scales and into his veins!
The Drakeling touches The Ghoul in the head with his upper body, and it burns to a crisp! The Drakeling touches The Ghoul in the upper body with his right lower arm, and it burns to a crisp!
The Ghoul has been struck down!
//The most foul stench arises as ex-flesh hits lava. I start coughing.
Digging Ghoul: What sorcery is--
Spike: Shut up!
The Drakeling's wounds have healed!
The Drakeling's Blood of the Earth ends.

The Ghoul charges at The Drakeling!
The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Hand of Judgment!
Spike: Why won't you stay dead?!
The Drakeling punches The Ghoul in the neck with his left hand, tearing apart the skin, tearing apart the muscle, and shattering the upper spine's bone!
//A burst of electricity runs through the undead pony, causing muscle spasms up and down its body as it slumps against my front side. Flash-fried undead smells divine, by the way.
The Ghoul has been struck down!

The Digging Ghoul was defeated!
Spike earned 5000 experience points!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//Crazy goddess bint! Is this what she's done?!
//I turn around and check, confirming my suspicions that the pony who bit me from behind was none other than the one whose jugular was severed. The head's gone, but the body has moved from there to here. Raising the dead within seconds...
Reality: Undead, huh? Too bad. Maybe you can hit them with my end?
//His... oh, Reality means the pommel. I forgot he was a sword, somehow.
Spike: Why?
Reality: You can't slash undead who have lost all their blood and organs already.
Spike: ...You suck magic out of things.
Reality: Phrasing.
Spike: These corpses are animated with spirits that Celestia has summoned. Just touching them with you should whisk their souls -- or whatever -- away. I think.
//The first ghoul stopped moving even though he had front legs and a mouth to attack with.
Reality: ...Maybe? I didn't feel much. Then again, without squishy bits feeling anything is difficult.
//From far off sounds of a shout and magic spell. I dearly hope it's on our side as I start rushing over.
Reality: Like one time, James was trying to explain his love life to me, but I just had no sympathy because honestly? The guy was kinda--
Spike: (Quiet!)
AJ: I said stay back y'damn idiot!
//I sprint to the source of Applejack's voice!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//The Tomb of the Unknown Pony, a limestone statue of a blank-flank, faceless androgynous warrior, towers two stories over us with a spear. At the top of the stairs around the monument, Applejack tries to corral Shining Armor behind the broad spear tip, blocking him from the sight of three corpse-like unicorns. On the other side, four outright skeletons are clacking their way up the stairs.
//Applejack shouts:
AJ: Spike! Shinin' Armor's been charmed!
Spike: What?!
//Celestia has not only the power to raise the undead, but grant them magic?!
Dead Unicorn One: Why aren't you letting me see my husband?!
Shining Armor: That's my _wife_ down there, that's her! General Applejack--
Applejack slams Shining Armor in the upper body with her lower body, bruising the skin and bruising the muscle!
Shining Armor is propelled away by the force of the blow!
//Lifted off his hooves, he falls over beyond the spear tip. Applejack is trying to keep him away from his bloody death, so her hooves are full!
AJ: A little help here?!
//The two other unicorns look at me and attack!

The Dead Unicorn points her horn at The Drakeling and casts Charm! The Drakeling dodges away from the flying beam!
The Dead Unicorn speaks words of power, forming symbols in the air! The spell doesn't affect enemy The Drakeling!

The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Lake of Fire!
Flames coat the ground!
//I put a wall around the top of the monument, cutting off the skeletons and unicorns from my friends.
Spike: Over here! Don't you want a tasty drakeling, so you can not-live forever?
//I shake my tail, which draws the attention of the other unicorn and skeletons.

The Skeleton charges at The Drakeling!
The Skeleton bites at The Drakeling, but The Drakeling dodges away!
The Drakeling counterattacks!
The Drakeling slaps The Skeleton in the front right hoof with Reality, but the attack glances away!
The Skeleton collapses! The Skeleton has been struck down!

The Dead Unicorn points her horn at The Drakeling and casts Stun! The beam strikes The Drakeling in the right upper leg!
//For a moment my muscles lock up and I jerk, dropping Reality. Muscle control returns as quickly as it left when it hits my foot.
The Skeleton charges at The Drakeling!
The Skeleton charges at The Drakeling!
The Skeleton headbutts The Drakeling in the upper body, bruising the scales and bruising the muscle!
The Skeleton bowls over The Drakeling!
Spike: Gnhoo--
//That was supposed to be 'No!'--
The Skeleton kicks The Drakeling in the right upper arm with its left front hoof, shattering the scale and tearing apart the muscle!
//Yow! That hoof is sharp!

//On the ground I grab at ribs and yank--
The Drakeling grabs The Skeleton by the left true ribs with his left hand! The Drakeling breaks The Skeleton's left true ribs with his left hand, and the severed parts fly off in an arc!
The Drakeling grabs at The Skeleton's upper spine, but The Skeleton dodges away!

Dead Unicorn Three: Hold him down so I can charm him too!
//...Damnit! If I'm charmed now, the dragon instinct isn't here to yell me out of it!
The Drakeling dismisses the flames.
Shining Armor: My love!
Applejack: You idiot!
The Skeleton bites The Drakeling in the head, tearing apart the scale and tearing apart the nose's cartilage!
//Ow! Not on the first date!
The Drakeling breathes fire!
The Skeleton is caught in the dragonfire! The Skeleton's skull has burnt to a crisp! The Skeleton has been destroyed!
The Skeleton bites The Drakeling in the right hand, chipping the scale, bruising the muscle and
bruising the bone!
The Skeleton latches on firmly!
//More skeletons try to surround me from nowhere. One of them inadvertently touches Reality and collapses.

The Dead Unicorn points her horn at The Drakeling!
//I'm still on the ground please let this work--
The Drakeling grabs The Skeleton by the middle spine with his left hand! The Drakeling throws The Skeleton by the middle spine!
The Skeleton's middle spine has been broken!
The Dead Unicorn casts Charm! The flying beam strikes The Skeleton in the skull!
//It collapses in a pile of bones where it lands, but looks at the dead unicorn longingly.

The Skeleton kicks at The Drakeling with its front right hoof, but The Drakeling rolls away! The Drakeling breaks the grip of The Skeleton's upper front teeth on The Drakeling's right hand.

Reality: Mmmph mmmph mph-phmmm!
//I pull out Reality from under my back and slash with it!
The Drakeling slashes The Skeleton in the front right leg with Reality, shattering the bone!
The Skeleton collapses!
The Drakeling slashes The Skeleton in the pelvis with Reality, shattering the bone!
The Skeleton collapses!
//I stand up away from the last bony freak.

//The other unicorns, deciding the third one has a good plan, start casting spells at me.
The Dead Unicorn points her horn at The Drakeling and casts Charm! The Drakeling dodges away from the flying beam!
The Skeleton kicks at The Drakeling with its left rear hoof, but the attack is deflected by The Drakeling's Reality!
The Skeleton collapses!
//Shining Armor breaks away from Applejack and gallops down the stairs!
SA: Cadence! Cadence, I'm finally--
The Skeleton kicks at The Drakeling with its left rear hoof, but the attack is deflected by The Drakeling's Reality!
The Skeleton collapses!

//From the top of the stairs a monumental charge:
AJ: You dog-gone moron of a Captain--
Applejack charges at The Dead Unicorn!
Applejack kicks The Dead Unicorn in the upper body with her left rear hoof, and it collapses into a pile of gore!
The Dead Unicorn has been struck down!

//She's in the middle of them! I've got to take one out!
The Drakeling rushes forward!
The Drakeling slashes The Dead Unicorn in the front right leg with his Scythereach, and the severed part flies off in an arc!
The Dead Unicorn collapses!

Dead Unicorn One: Hold it!
//I skid to a stop near Applejack when I see the last ghoul is holding Shining Armor with a leg around his neck. He is crying into her rotten, mushy shoulder and refusing to let her go.
SA: I never thought I would see you again, I never... but I'm here now. We can be a family now, a family again...
DUO: One hoof closer and I take a chunk out of this one's neck. That goes for you too, dragon!
Applejack and I seethe, watching Shining Armor embrace a corpse he thinks is the dead Princess Cadence. It's, uh, well I can't say myself because I never met her but it would be a stretch to assume it's actually her.

Spike: (That's... not Cadence, is it?)
AJ: (...Are y'all blind, Spike?)
Spike: (Just give me a yes or no here.)
AJ: (Of _course not_.)
Reality: ('Of corpse not?)
DUO: I want the drakeling to put down his sword and take ten steps away from it.
Spike: Okay. Okay, I'll do it.

Spike: (It's okay, the sword's not turned off yet.)
//Our hero whispers to Applejack too loudly.
AJ: (I thought it didn't--)
//I glare daggers at her.
DUO: No no no. Turn off the sword, then put it down. No funny business.
Spike: Fine. I just want to warn you: it'll look like I'm actually casting a spell that makes me move faster and invisible, but in reality--

The Drakeling draws power from within himself, and casts Walk of the Third!
//Come on come on come on _hurry_!
The Drakeling charges at The Dead Unicorn!
The Drakeling slaps The Dead Unicorn in the head with his Reality! The Dead Unicorn collapses! The Drakeling's Walk of the Third ends.

The Undead Mob has been defeated!
Spike earned 20000 experience points!
Spike is now level 44!

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

//Crazy twist-the-knife bint...
//Shining Armor's joy turns sour as he watches the dead unicorn slump over in his front legs.
Reality: (It might be wise to smack him as well.)
Spike: (Oh, right.)
The Drakeling touches Shining Armor in the shoulder with his Reality!
//The Captain of the Guard looks at the corpse in his grasp for a moment, then lets it drop with a heavy thud.
AJ: Alright. So are y'all still messed up in the head or can we get outta this freaky graveyard?
SA: I... I really just... my head...
AJ: ...Is that a yes?
Spike: (Give him some time. He just watched his wife die in front of him. You know, again.)
SA: ...
//Shining Armor closes his eyes and mutters:
SA: I'm sorry. I need a minute.
//He trots off, back towards the Castle.
Spike: (Should he be going alone right now?)
//The Avatar of Strength dons a thinking look.
AJ: (He's got his magic. 'Sides, the path should be clear anyway, considerin' we got here through it.)
Spike: No, I meant 'should we leave too'.
//And he doesn't have magic right now because of Reality.
//As the earth pony shrugs indifferently, I look around us. Off in the distance, beneath the shade of
short trees, several more headstones are upturned as skeletons rise from the grave.

Spike: Some over there.

AJ: Last I heard, somepony was workin' on creatin' a perimeter. Not sure how well that'll hold up against magic attack, though, so seek-and-destroy is what's happenin'.

Spike: Right. Even if they are undead, spellcasters can't stand up to Reality.

AJ: (Special one we know.)

Reality: Speaking of that, I found something that might be a... _point_ of interest.

//One more damn pun and I'm gonna--

//A raindrop falls on my head before Reality continues. I look up, into darker clouds than came in earlier. Applejack, noticing me, does the same.

AJ: Rainin'?

Spike: Did't they say Celestia controlled the weather?

AJ: 'Course not. Pegasi made clouds and snow and all in Cloudsdale before it crashed to the ground.

//Which happened when Celestia left... Another drop hits my cheek, and I hold Reality over my head.

Spike: So how do you explain this?

//Applejack thinks for a moment, staring into the sky. A drop falls past her lips as she starts to speak, and she coughs dryly for a minute.

Spike: 'Swings, you okay?

//Through a wheeze she gets out:

AJ: 'Taint water...

//Another drop hits my shoulder. It turns into a viscous trail that slimes down my shoulder and between the scales, colored yellow-white.

//The hell kind of weather is this?!

//I grab Applejack and drag her back up the stairs to the monument, taking shelter below the broad spear tip as the rain grows heavier. A stench arises from the thick rain, and it gathers up on the ground in sludge-piles.

AJ: It's like... rotten custard?

Spike: Why would desserts start raining from the sky?

//Applejack shrugs.

AJ: It's happened before.

Reality: So, two things. One, I still have information that may give you an _edge_. And--

Spike: Would you stop?!

//Quieter, Reality mutters:

Reality: ...And there's someone coming with a bunch of magic items.

AJ: Buncha-- must be Rarity!

//We lean out from the improvised cover to see Rarity at the bottom of the monument steps, surrounded by a magic bubble deflecting the rain. She spots us and is taken aback when we approach.

Rarity: Applejack, what in _Equestria_ are you doing? This is a biohazard!

AJ: Huh-huh, it's just custard. Quit bein' so prissy, girl!

R: This is not custard. It is pus.

//Wh--

//I look at the goop squelching up between my toes. It does look more biological than custard...

The Unicorn touches her xx+woven cloth saddle+xx, forming symbols in the air!

The Drakeling is protected by a bubble! Applejack is protected by a bubble!

//Rain pings off the magic film above us. I clear my scales with dragonfire, and Applejack shakes her mane. Stray strands of pus bounce between our shields as she sheds it.

Spike: What kind of freaky weather is this? Why rain pus, of all things?
R: To spread disease and illness, of course. Either raining fire was too demanding, or Celestia has some sort of plan which involves the slow death of many people.
AJ: So what do we do?
R: Right now, several historical admirals are entombed beneath this statue. One of whom is Tellerius Gloric, founder of the Magic Corps. Given I have met (and dismissed of) two long-dead unicorns with their full magic powers, it is fair to say some of the living dead retain their intelligence.
Reality: Right, that's what I was about to say when you _cut_--
R: And if they owe their resurrection to Celestia, the military geniuses in this graveyard are not ponies we want organized against us.
//Applejack taps me on the shoulder with a hoof.
AJ: ...Spike? How long d'you think it's wise to ignore your sword there?
Spike: As long as he keeps making puns.
//The skeletons from earlier are now making slow progress towards us, stymied by slipping on the foul gunk coating the ground. I nod at them, making everyone aware, but for now they're no problem.
Reality: All right I give now listen. The unicorns we slashed apart had two sources of magic in them each, one shared and one independent. Happy?
//Two sources of magic... they cast spells, and Celestia caused them to rise from the grave. So, Celestia's spell, and the unicorns themselves.
Spike: So?
R: If Celestia raises spellcasters, she effectively increases the quantity of magic under her command.
AJ: Maybe not. Y'all said a pony comin' back from the dead still had its intelligence. Who says every pony she brings back is gonna try and do her biddin'?
Spike: ...Were we not just struggling with Shining Armor being magically charmed three minutes ago?
//An explosion from the north knocks Rarity and I over. Applejack covers her face from the sudden gust as we pick ourselves up, dripping pus. High up in the sky, blocks of stone, decorative artwork and cheap plastic toys tumble through the air. The skeletons are running at us now, with no trouble.
AJ: ...Was that the museum and gift shop?
Reality: Oh man I'm glad I steeled myself for that--
//The base of the Tomb of the Unknown Pony's statue bucks from another explosion, rising from the back corner opposite the speartip. Pushed against the ground, the stone spear breaks and slams into the monument's top.
AJ: They're tryin' to escape!
Spike: Applejack, can you take the skeletons? We'll deal with these ones!
//She nods and gallops off, having trouble with the hoofwork.
R: ...Museum and gift shop.
Spike: Now is _not_ the time to mourn art desecration!
//In the fetid rain Rarity's irises grow very small, looking past the monument in front of her. She then shakes and urgently gestures to the north.
R: Tomb -- Dawn -- end her -- go!
Spike: Bwuh--
//The Avatar of Avarice dashes past me, activating several magical items as she charges the monument.
R: Hurry!
//What?!
Reality: Dawn?! _Dawn_?!
Spike: What's going on?!
Reality: Run! Just run!
//I hold Reality close and sprint off north, towards the epicenter of the explosion.
Reality: No! Wrong way!

//I jump over the fencing, banging my tail on it more than once. No matter; the growing cacophony in the sky drowns that out. The crater below me is a hundred meters into an abyss full of flooded, labyrinthine architecture and broken rock. The ground is slick and almost impossible to get purchase on.
Growing Cacophony: The stars... where are the _stars_?
//An alicorn stands on air, radiating black-red heat and light, fizzling the rain on contact. Just the waste energy she's dumping is an order of magnitude more than anypony could claim to possess.
Spike: (Is that Dawn?)
Reality: (Oh gods we need to go we need to get out of here--)
//A great and terrible cry arises, echoing before it begins:
Growing Cacophony: What did you do to the _stars_?!
//The pony in the sky might have had fur of soft peach or sky blue once, but now it is stark white. Most of her mane is left, surprisingly, not whipped about madly by thaumic eddy currents but simply drifting in the not-breeze.
//...She's hanging in the sky without flapping her wings. I need to get her down here, somehow.
Spike: Hey!!
//Waving Reality, I shout up to the floating Dawn.
Reality: Aah, no! This is the opposite of what you should be doing!
Dawn: Impossible... the witch has even the power to blot out the heavens.
//"The witch"? Does she mean Celestia?
Spike: Celestia's name literally means 'the heavens', so it makes sense! Also, look down here! Yoo-hoo! Dawn!
Reality: Bad bad bad bad--
//At the mention of her name, the cacophony around Dawn slows down. The dimness about her recedes, and the rain fizzles less.
Dawn: My power... it feels different than before. A strangeness invades me. It is unpleasant.
Spike: Hey! What was with the explosion? Are you angry and undead? Dawn, look this way!
//Darn it, it's not working at all...
Reality: Yes, it's not working! Now take this shining opportunity to--
//I got it!
//I angle Reality so that it's angled between her eyes and my mouth. I breathe fire, experimentally, then wiggle it around to get it closer.
Dawn: Why do you not come? Why do you not confront me now that I seek you out once again? Why have you awakened me to this new, foreign world? Why -- why is there a glint in my eye?
//The glowing alicorn turns her long neck and spots me, then casts a spell!
The Favored Daughter speaks a word of power, forming symbols in the air!
The Favored Daughter casts Spaceturn!
//Behind me, a fifteen-foot radius sphere turns to air, centered on Dawn. Far above the crater, a hemisphere of dirt and broken fence starts falling from the sky.
Dawn: What do you?!! Serve you my mother?!!
//That's poor grammar if I've ever seen it.
Spike: Uh... I was wondering why you blew up the Castle gift shop.
//Technically true, I suppose.
//Baffled, Dawn (the Favored Daughter of Celestia, if the action text is to be believed) glares through me with the kind of force that tears down mountains.
Dawn: On top of my tomb she built a _gift shop_?!
Spike: What a crazy disrespectful bint, right?
//Maybe, if I keep talking to this person, she'll let me get close enough for Scythereach...
Dawn: Why... what manner of creature are you?
Here we go again.
Spike: Uh...
//Should I tell the truth?

[[SAVE LOCATION]]

>>TELL THE TRUTH
>>LIE

//Well... all things considered, being a drakeling has made people want to get close to me...
Spike: I'm a drakeling. Shouldn't you know that?
//Assuming the story in the tomb of Bucket James wasn't a historical fanfiction, that is.
Dawn: ...You do not look so. Then again, the whole world does not look... as it once did.
Spike: What the heck do you mean I don't look like a drakeling?
//I ain't no pony!
Dawn: You are a many-tentacled blackened writhing mass of knotted flesh, this is what I see. Is this not so?
//Uh...
Spike: Excuse me?!
Reality: (Uh, yeah, heads up, that's... what I look like under a magic sensor. She's seeing me.)
// 'Things I Didn't Need to Know About My Equipment, Part One'...
Spike: ...No. Dawn, listen, you're undead now. Celestia cast a spell--
Dawn: Tell me not of my mother's misdeeds! I have heard of them too many!
//Wow, really? Could this pony be an ally in the fight versus Celestia?
Spike: ...You attacked her... with your lover, right?
//His tomb implied that she fell in love with Bucket James, and betrayed Celestia. And others mentioned James killed Celestia's family, so, the only reasonable action after that...
Dawn: Yes. I remember...
//The floating figure, black-red aura now clinging closely to her skin, holds her head in her hooves.
Dawn: I remember she killed me. Twice. This is quite clear. I remember... that tentacled mass.
Reality: (Uh oh.)
//I take a step forward, into the hemispherical absence surrounding Dawn. It's too far to slash her... even if I wanted to.
Dawn: Reality. You have been found where I hid you, hanging above her throne. Did my James take you down?
//Reality mutters a little in my hand:
Reality: Er, well... I'm not exactly _sharp_ on the details--
Spike: So, yeah, you're undead now. A corpse risen from the grave to do Celestia's bidding. Unless you're not, in which case, uh... hi?
//Dawn muses for a moment, wings spread wide as her thick mane flows on a wind which does not drive the slimy rain. Her heredity is clear to see.
Dawn: A male drakeling, with Reality... kindly do me a favor, good sir knight. Place your sword away, so that I may look upon you with my own two eyes -- or what is present in their stead.
//Oh, she thinks -- hah! -- she thinks I'm Bucket James. Dude is long dead.
Reality: (DO NOT DO THIS OH MY GODS DO ANYTHING BUT THIS.)
Spike: (First off, only the dragon instinct can talk in all caps so cut it out, and second it's just a case of mistaken identity. I'll put you down for a moment, and then when she sees I'm not him I'll pick you back up.)
Reality: (Extreme-o ill-advised plan! Just parry her request, because--)
//I roll my eyes.
The Drakeling drops Reality.
Reality: (--you look _exactly_--)

//Reality
Dawn looks me over, once, the focus of her eyes not changing but her head moving. After a short moment, a smile like sunrise breaks on her face.

Dawn: James!!

//What?!

The Favored Daughter charges at The Drakeling!
The Favored Daughter grabs The Drakeling by the upper body with her upper body! The Favored Daughter grabs The Drakeling by the lower body with her left front leg! The Favored Daughter grabs The Drakeling by the lower body with her right front leg!
The Favored Daughter drags The Drakeling into the sky!

//She drags me into the air, laughing all the while!

Dawn: James! Oh-hoh, my James, by the stars! I thought I'd never see you again!

//Celestia's Favored Daughter squeezes me tight, driving the breath out of me. Her wings flap as the last of the dark aura fades into her, power fully concentrated.

//She leans back once to look at me again, laughing more, then buries her head against my chest. Her horn tickles my chin.

Dawn: Oh, James. Oh, James! What cruel world is this such that we were separated, but oh! To have you again! The coming of a thousand summers could not ignite such warmth in me!

//Really? 'Cause she's kind of slimy and cold.

Dawn: To have spent any amount of time elsewhere but beside you, my love... never again. No matter what it takes! Subservience or revolution; whatever may come I shall weather with you. The thought of losing you -- in my death or yours -- is too much to bear.

//...At what point should I have mentioned I'm not Bucket James? Is my grave too deep now?

//Still held close by the elated Dawn, we descend to the ruins of the gift shop and I'm let go, falling heavily on my back. The second most powerful spellcaster in known history stands over me, leaking formaldehyde.

Dawn: How long has it been since our eyes last met, my love? Has it been years? Even decades?

Spike: Er...

//I think 'five centuries' might freak her out a bit...

Spike: I'm... just surprised how remarkably preserved you are.

//She lifts a leg, and I note her body's intactness.

Dawn: It does seem my wrappings kept me well. For what purpose I cannot say, but the purpose I choose lies beneath me.

//Hold on--

The Favored Daughter grabs The Drakeling by the upper body with her left front leg! The Favored Daughter grabs The Drakeling by the upper body with her right front leg!

The Drakeling is pinned!

//Running the tip of her hoof down my torso, the mummy-pony coos:

Dawn: Has it been so long you've forgotten all my favorite places, my love? You're not... unhappy to see me, are you?

//...Now would be a _bad_ time to bring up my real identity. But I have to do something!

Spike: I... just don't know if your body has changed. Because of the, y'know, 'undead' thing.

Dawn: I... well, I do suppose it's something we'll have to explore in detail, you and I. But I am lusty, so do feel free.

The Favored Daughter points at The Drakeling with her horn and casts Arouse! The Drakeling is struck by the flying beam!

//Blood surges to one spot, flowing until it aches. I have to bite my tongue to not groan in pain. How is this supposed to be erotic?!

//Instead of speaking any more, or moving on top of me, the white demi-goddess shuffles her hooves against my chest, growing quieter.

Spike: ...Is something wrong?

//Tentatively, she speaks:

Dawn: It... may be my unfamiliarity with my new form. But I cannot feel the heat that should be
welling up from your chest in my proximity.
//Damnit, is there seriously something new about drakelinghood bonds to learn every single day?!
Spike: I -- er, that's -- um --

It speaks a word of power, forming symbols in the air! A massive chunk of stone rises from the
ground, forming a boulder!
It throws a boulder at The Favored Daughter!
The spinning boulder strikes The Favored Daughter in the left wing, bruising the muscle and
shattering the bone! The spinning boulder strikes The Favored Daughter in the lower body,
bruising the muscle, bruising the guts and bruising the left kidney!
The Favored Daughter is propelled away by the force of the blow!

//Dawn and boulder tumble past me, both breaking against a pillar that once held the museum roof.
As it crumbles back, Dawn sheds the boulder and with a magical flourish fixes her wing, staring
intensely. I roll upwards, looking back to the Castle with fire on my lips.
Twilight Sparkle: Get away from him!
//Oh. Hi, Twilight.
//A skin-conforming blue shield shepherds away errant rain from Twilight's body, leaving hoof-
sized circles of pus when she walks. I motion cutting my neck with my hand, stopping Twilight
before she reaches me. Dawn... doesn't rise into the air angrily shouting, which is unexpected.
Dawn: Who are you?
//Glaring daggers, Twilight declares:
T: My name is Twilight Sparkle, and I'm the Princess of Equestria! So keep your decaying hooves
off of my Hero!
//Uh-oh, bad bad bad... I try to stand up and slip in the thick gunk. Reality was that way, right?
//Dawn's eyebrows disappear behind her impossible, undisturbed mane.
Dawn: Princess? You rule Equestria now?
T: Yes! And it's my responsibility to defend it from _horrible creatures like you_!

Twilight points at The Favored Daughter and casts a spell! Twilight casts Helium Flash!
The Favored Daughter speaks a word of power, forming symbols in the air!
The Favored Daughter casts Spaceturn!
//Between Twilight and I a crumbled pillar with Dawn next to it appears, alongside fifteen feet
radius of surrounding scenery. Twilight's spell of heat passes over a circle of flat cobblestone
pathing and grass, scorching the earth.
//Dawn rises into the air, not bothering to flap her wings.
Dawn: Rebuke me no further, _mortal_. You are a fool if you believe any but Celestia rule this
realm.
T: _You are not Celestia_!

The Drakeling stands up.
//Finally! I didn't fall over this time!
Twilight speaks a word of power, forming symbols in the air! Twilight casts Heat Sink!
//Pus around Dawn freezes, sticking to the grass and stone as white-yellow frost. But a second later,
two black-red pulses from Dawn's body dismiss the spell!
T: (What!?)
//I lean to the side and try to mouth:
Spike: (Dawn!)
Dawn: By half I am. Do you hold the throne in my mother's stead?
//Twilight slightly leans her head my way, trying to make out what I'm saying.
T: (Huh?)
Spike: (Dawn! Favored Daughter!)
//I try to more expressively mouth.
Dawn: Well?!
T: I... Celestia left a year and a half ago. There was no one else, so yes!
//A narrowing of Dawn's glazed eyes reminds us both she can't actually see. Or not well; she did see the glint on Reality... I wonder how Twilight looks through magical eyes.
T: (What's going on?)
//She's mouthing to me, looking at Dawn.
Spike: (I don't know!)
Dawn: And why you, hmm? Is Twilight Sparkle the strongest, the savviest, the mare of most charm?
//Twilight stares at Dawn as her voice grows less hostile.
T: Honestly... no.
Spike: That's bullshit--
//Twilight cuts me off as Dawn turns her head my way--
T: I'm not the strongest, or most clever, or the best with people. I took the throne because no one else would! Celestia herself took me as an apprentice, for _this very situation_! Only I can do this!
//Time passes as rain falls, both of us taking in Twilight's words. I see a spell brewing on Dawn's horn, turned away from the patient unicorn, and gesture to my forehead.
Dawn points her horn at Twilight and casts Force lance!
Twilight speaks a word of power, forming symbols in the air! Twilight casts Teleport!
//Twilight pops next to me as Dawn's spell punches a hole, two inches in diameter, deep into the dirt where Twilight stood. I hug her immediately.
Spike: (_Damn_ am I glad to see you.)
T: (You too.)
//She nuzzles me in the head with her horn. We stand apart for combat reasons, even though neither of us really want to.
//Dawn swivels again, tendrils of raw power inching out and caressing the stones beneath her as she ponders.
Dawn: (Why there. Why there, of all places...)
//Twilight motions towards me and mouths:
T: (Reality?)
//I gesture with a thumb and respond:
Spike: (In a ditch.)
T: (I know, but where's--)
//Dawn falls to the sodden earth, landing heavily as her power visually retreats. Her head is turned down, but does not hang. She solemnly speaks:
Dawn: James.
//Immediately I motion to Twilight:
Spike: (_Do_ _not_ _ask_.)
//This crazy bint is far too trigger happy. If it keeps her more calm thinking I'm Bucket James until she's destroyed, I'm all for it.
//Confused, Twilight just nods.
Dawn: James, my love. Your response when I asked what oceans of time separated our last embrace was not forthcoming. I beg of you, tell me now: how long ago did I once live?
T: (She _knows_ she's undead?)
Spike: (I, uh, might have mentioned it to her.)
T: (That... changes things. I thought she was mindless.)
//That doesn't make any sense.
Spike: (How would mindless undead speak?)
//Dawn snorts. Dark red blood flows out of her nose with formaldehyde, dripping off her torn lips.
Dawn: You whisper and collude so. Has it been that much time? When did you grow to fear, instead of love me?
I look at Twilight, ending our conversation.
Spike: ...It's been five hundred years.
Dawn: I see. ...I see.
//She raises her head, staring dead between us.
Dawn: And you have remained a drakeling in this time. I suppose this one is to thank for such a deed.
//She's not implying...
T: That's not--
Dawn: Silence, interloper!

The Favored Daughter speaks a word of power, forming symbols in the air! The Favored Daughter casts Spaceturn!
//The world around me shifts, everything but a circle on the ground I'm at the edge of -- now I'm even further away from Reality! Twilight and Dawn are between us!
Twilight: Spike!
Spike: No!
Dawn: There are many ways to destroy a drakeling's bond. I will kill you twice, pawn of Hecate, and take my destined throne! With my love at my side I shall drive the wickedness of Celestia from these lands forever!
T: He's not bound to me--
Spike: We're fighting against Celestia--
//A black-red roar, like a tidal wave from a ocean filled with power and rage, beats us back. Wordlessly, the fight begins.

*****************************************************************

With apologies to Tarn Adams:

Life throws the *tonne of bricks* at the User 12! The *tonne of bricks* strikes User 12 in the motivation, and the severed part flies off in an arc!
It happens, sorry everypony; things got crazy at the exact wrong time in the story. The only exciting chapters left are the ones in the second half of Part Three and I'd have to slog through chapters of scene-setting yet meaningless fighting to get there -- which, while eerily similar to Monster Girl Quest Part Three, isn't something I want to do right now. I figure you've got a quarter of a million words out of the deal and I've got your eyeballs, so the deal wasn't too bad for either of us. I'll throw in a little extra, just 'cause I like you, kid: the rest of the plot in summary form. See the ending note.
*****************************************************************

Chapter End Notes

They win against Dawn. Fears of the dead rising happening all over Equestria are realized. Twilight and Spike are going to Detrot, because there are so many dead dragons and Cavalry in the region only they could handle it. The dragon instinct comes screaming back and complains that all of the Thirty but two are now destroyed. He then mentions Quine knows where the Trident of Power is. Twilight stops fighting and teleports the two to Quine's lair without an explanation. He is not there, so Twilight gives a short summary of how that changes the situation:
The Trident of Power triples magic power. Twilight could search for the ritual's spell
nexus by brute force and disable it, ending the siege. But the impostor could be
scrying to listen in, so the location of the Trident can't be spoken; it can only be kept
with Reality (prevents scrying). They convince Quine to tell the dragon instinct, who
can tell Spike how to find it, but DI demands a ship and both flying Avatars.
A long boat journey occurs in which Spike gets the Trident of Power. By now,
thousands of more people are dead, joining the ranks; more are displaced from their
homes or missing; a ponitarian crisis never before seen is forming as crime and
starvation rises; no progress has been made on finding Celestia or reversing the siege.
Twilight only takes the Trident from Spike in a magic-secure location. She casts a
planet-spanning spell searching for the spell nexus, finds nothing. Twilight finds
Celestia's lover on a random whim.
The Grey Drakeling has escaped from Celestia's ice palace near Forlegsandria; the two
find him in a bar drinking his sorrows away. When Twilight reveals a (difficult) spell
to unbind drakelings, Grey demands it be done; Spike tosses the Trident to Twilight.
Celestia, scrying continuously for the Trident, appears immediately and flattens the
city block; Grey is killed once by the explosion and again by the debris, destroying
Celestia's drakelinghood bond and immortality. Reality and the Trident are seized
easily, but Twilight teleports Spike and herself to a safehouse far away.
Celestia retakes the throne, dismisses the undead siege, fires the Avatars, 'disappears'
Hazel, and publicly blames Twilight for the failures of the last year and a half. A
nationwide marehunt starts; Spike realizes they can't win without Reality, and the
heroes travel to their old friends to round them up for one last job. Celel, Kezno, Wafa,
Jebed, Quine and Olfrus are recruited to distract Celestia (and Luna, who Grey has
outed as a recent soul-division of Celestia) by causing disturbances across Equestria
while Reality is recovered. All but Kezno and Jebed die; Twilight is captured but she
gets Spike away.
Celestia fast-tracks Twilight's trial and execution. The Avatars interrupt it, and draw
the royal pony sisters' attentions while a dragon uprising led by Galsid and Jebed
strikes Canterlot with the last two of the Thirty. Celestia and Luna retreat to the Castle;
Twilight orders her friends to secure the city. Twilight fights Luna first and is
outmatched; Spike (riding Hazel, who now has real wings) crashes in through a
window and cuts off Luna's leg. Luna kills Hazel with her teeth; Spike and Twilight
destroy Luna. Celestia immobilizes both by increasing gravity beneath them, winning.
At this moment, Na-Mira reappears and enters a portal at the same spot the bow-and-
arrow mark were. Celestia curses and follows her, and then Spike follows.
Celestia has created a universe where she is truly a goddess, and not simply very
powerful, to eliminate death entirely and everything done so far has been needed to
complete the spell (Trident was sacrificed). In tubes are the spirits of people who have
died after the Trident was taken, including Hazel, Quine, and Luna; Celestia notes she
will research how to put them in bodies again. Spike advances to Celestia's
bedchambers and tells her to step down as goddess; the universe she's created is
acceptable but her evil is not. The battle starts.
Celestia banishes the soul of Reality and it goes to a tube; Na-Mira attacks to distract
Celestia and says: "Luna's the spirit of Celestia! Reality's the spirit of dismissal! GO!"
Celestia kills her. Spike runs down to the tubes, smashes Reality's tube, and then is
killed before reaching Luna. From his tube, he sees DI possess his body and crack
Luna's tube; the world goes white.
DI, drawing on the background magical power of the dragon race, saves Spike and
shunts him from the dying universe. He appears with all his friends around him and
explains what happened. Half his friends think the created universe was fine (including
Twilight), half don't. All but the two heroes leave. Twilight casts Bind Drakeling on
Spike with hate in her eyes, spitting out that he can't be trusted to do the right thing. It
hits him square; she tells him to pretend their relationship developed into love and he obeys. The story ends.

End Notes

With apologies to Tarn Adams.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!