



Pony Age: Origins

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Chapter 1

The Harrowing

“And thus the light of Celestia has darkened,
With each trot you take in My hall,
Marvel at perfection, for it is fleeting,
You have brought Sin to Canterlot
And Doom upon all the world.”
-Canticle of Coltenides, 8:13

The Chantry teaches us that it is the hubris of ponies that brought the Ponyspawn into our world. The Unicorns had sought to usurp Canterlot, but instead they destroyed it. They were cast from Canterlot, blackened by their own dark desires. They returned as monsters, the first of the Ponyspawn, and quickly became an unstoppable scourge across the land.

The Donkey Kingdoms were the first to fall, and from the Dark Tunnels, the Ponyspawn waged bloody war against the ponies again and again, until we were near obliteration.

Until the Grey Wardens came. Mares and Stallions from Earth Ponies, Pegasi, Unicorns and Donkeys, together formed the Grey Wardens and sacrificed everything to hold back the evil tide...and prevailed against the darkness.

It has been four hundred years since we have claimed victory, and kept sentry against the Ponyspawn. We have waited for the return of the evil tide, but those who celebrated our names have forgotten the sacrifice of the Wardens. We are few now, and our dire warnings have been unheeded.

For it is too late. I have seen the darkness in the skies. May Celestia's light protect us all.

On the cliff overlooking the Lake Darkwater, stands the Unicorn Tower. This is the only place in Equestria where the Unicorns may study and practice their craft in safety. The Tower is a jail as much as it is a refuge, as the Unicorns are always under the careful watch of the Earth Pony Templars.

This is the only home Twilight Sparkle has ever known. Found to be sensitive and powerful to magic as a young filly, she has lived in the Tower as an apprentice all her life. Yet her apprenticeship nears its end, with her final challenge: The Harrowing.

Inside the Harrowing Chamber, the templar commander, Hornsheild, looked on as Twilight Sparkle was brought before him and First Enchanter Wise Eyes. Along side Twilight was her young dragon Spike, who she had hatched many years ago when her magic became more potent. The violet pony appeared strong before the templars and her master of magic, but beneath her strong expression her nerves were wracked.

All her life she had studied magic and to be a safe and responsible unicorn, but all that could come crashing down if she failed the Harrowing. Success in this test was the only option, as no one failed the Harrowing, and returned.

"I don't know if I'm ready Spike," Twilight said softly to the baby dragon, "All my studies on the Fade, on Demons, I don't know if I'm going to make it through this."

"Well it's not like those templar bullies are going to let you back down now," Spike said, "Just remember not to let those demons get under your skin. Literally, if all those dusty books you read are right."

Twilight swallowed before stepping forward as the grey and grizzled stallions eyed her cautiously. The templar commander was a stern yet fair pony, simply doing his duty to protect the unicorns from themselves as well as the rest of Equestria. Wise Eyes kept true to his name, teaching the

young unicorns how to practice their magic in useful and safe ways. Hornshield's cutie mark, a templar shield, and Wise Eyes, an eye in the centre of a book, shined in the torchlight as they watched the apprentice unicorn.

Hornshield nodded to Wise Eyes, before beginning. "Magic exists to serve ponies and never to rule over them. Thus spoke the sister of Celestia, Luna, as she struck down the Unicorn Imperium. Twilight Sparkle, your ability with magic is a grand gift, to be celebrated by those in Unicorn Tower. It is also a heavy burden, to be kept under the watchful eye of the templar. This is necessary as Demons of the world of dreams, the Fade, will attempt to use you, body and mind, to enter our world."

"This is the purpose of the Harrowing," First Enchanter Wise Eyes continued, his long grey mane slightly swaying against his robes, "To determine if you have the will to resist the Demons of the Fade. You will surely encounter such a beast in the Harrowing. But I am certain that you will do well in this test, Twilight Sparkle. I have my utmost faith in you."

"Of course!" Spike piped in, "She is the most gifted and talented Unicorn in the Tower. She'll get through this Harrowing no sweat! What could possibly go wrong?"

"Much, young dragon," Hornshield said, "Are you prepared to undergo the Harrowing, Twilight Sparkle? Know that if you fail, the Templar...I will perform my duty, as we swore to the Chantry. You will die."

Twilight swallowed again, but saw a sad yet iron gaze in Hornshield's eyes. He had seen many failures, no doubt, and prayed to Celestia that Twilight would not join them. "I'm ready," she answered, looking towards the centre of the chamber, "Let's go."

Spike was told to stay back by the other templar as Twilight, Wise Eyes and the templar commander moved toward the centre of the room. "This is Lyrium," Hornshield explained, "The very essence of magic. Once you have touched the lyrium with your horn, you will be in the Fade and the Harrowing will begin."

"Keep your wit sharp inside the Fade, young filly," Wise Eyes said, "Every unicorn must undergo this test. Remember your studies, that the Fade is a

dream world. What you see may frighten you, but the strength of your mind and soul will protect you.”

Twilight Sparkle nodded. “I will not fail you, First Enchanter, Templar Commander.” She gave one last look to Spike for support before continuing to the lyrium. Spike gave Twilight a thumbs-up, giving the unicorn one last measure of reassurance.

Looking down at the blue shining fluid that swirled in the cup, Twilight called on her magic to lift a stream towards her horn. As the mystical water touched her horn, she felt a surge of energy enter her body. Her horn and eyes glowed for a moment before all was engulfed in light.

* * *

Twilight looked around the realm of the Fade. Like all unicorns, she saw the Fade in her sleep, but this was the first time she had ever seen the dream world with such clarity and detail. It was bizarre, nothing like what she had read in her books and tomes. The land itself seemed to shift and change shape on a whim, and various objects such as closets and trees and pots floated harmlessly in the sky, only to disappear in a blink.

“No use standing around here,” Twilight muttered to herself, “If only I knew where here was.”

“A lot of hopefuls wonder that whenever they come here,” said a voice, “And so quickly do they get lost and stuck here, just as I did.”

The violet unicorn let a squeak as she heard the voice, looking around for somepony, anypony. All that stood before her was a small flower. As she lowered her muzzle towards the flower, a flash of light emanated from the plant, transforming into the image of a green and white-maned unicorn filly.

“I hope you finished all your affairs back in the real world,” she said looking Twilight over,

“Because you are not getting out of here. It’s not fair! We study and train all our lives, only to put ourselves in danger in the Fade by the Templar and the Chantry!”

Twilight looked on the filly with pity. "I'm so sorry," she said sincerely, "Is there anything I can do to help you?"

She shook her head, eyes focused on the ground. "There is no one to help. My body is likely long gone from the land of the living. I have no where to return. By the way, you may call me...Flower. I have been in that form for so long, it seems fitting. I don't even remember my real name."

That sent chills into Twilight's spine. To be trapped in the Fade for such a long time. How long had it been since Flower had failed the Harrowing. No, Twilight told herself, I won't fail like she did. I will get out of the Fade. "You said you were here for a long time," Twilight asked, hoping for an answer, "Do you know what I have to do escape the Fade?"

Flower looked at Twilight and narrowed her eyes. "You have to find the Demon in this realm. Confront the demon, and defeat it. I was defeated yet I escaped, but as you can see, that sealed my fate as much as if the Demon took over my body. You can seek out other spirits in the Fade, and they might be able to help you. I hope you find success where I did not."

Twilight looked around the Fade, trying to find a way out. She spotted a door standing alone near a ridge, and approached it with caution. As she held up a hoof to open the door, she could hear Flower's voice in her head. "Remember that the Fade is a dream world. Your thoughts make things real. But if you are not careful, not prepared, the demons will make the world real for you."

Taking in a deep breath, Twilight stepped through the door, and looked to be in an entirely different area of the Fade. Standing before her was an altar to Luna and Celestia. On the altar was a ring that resonated with magical energy. If she could wear that ring around her horn, Twilight was certain her own abilities would be strengthened.

She trotted up to the altar and gazed at the beautiful ring. As she looked, a voice sang to her, "Take the ring, young filly. It will help you escape the Fade much faster; it will help you become a brilliant unicorn. When you escape, the magic of the ring will remain within you, allowing you to have anything you desire."

"Anything I desire," the violet unicorn echoed. Her horn began to glow, lifting the ring on high to place it around her horn. She shook her head,

letting the magic cease and the ring fall back onto the altar. “No,” Twilight said out loud, “All I want is to complete this test. This ring is a shortcut, and I didn’t study all my life just to accept a shortcut here. Thanks but no thanks. I’m just going to continue on my own.”

Silence answered for a moment until the voice spoke again. “Desire does not rule you,” it said, and the altar disappeared in a flash, being replaced by another door. With a smile, Twilight walked through the open door.

Again, she was in a new area of the Fade, but this area was darker with a haze in the air that made it difficult to see. As she walked, Twilight’s eyes became heavy and she let out a tired yawn. “Something in the air must be making me...sleepy...” Her hoofsteps grew slower as she continued, but the sight of the door on the other side helped keep her awake. If only she could get to that door...

“Your body is so weak, young filly,” spoke a new voice, “Do you not want to stop and rest for a moment? Take a load off your hooves and take a nap. Look, there is even a wonderful bed to rest on, with fluffy pillows and soft blankets. Much better than those hard uncomfortable bunks in the Tower, are they not?”

Twilight looked at the large bed. It did look wonderful to sleep on, and she was very tired. But the door was so close, and all she had to was trot a few more steps. As soon as she got near the door moved away, the path stretching farther and farther.

“Come now,” the voice said again, “Go and sleep. You need plenty of rest to make it through the Fade. Just a short nap.”

“No!” Twilight shouted, “I did not come here for a nap! I’m going to make it through that door, and your comfy beds won’t stop me.” Despite her fatigue, Twilight urged herself into a gallop, charging towards the door.

The voice spoke as the door opened. “You are not hindered by sloth.” With her head low, she rushed into the door and landed in front of large tables. Twilight looked around, noticing that the sleepy feeling from the previous room was gone, this time replaced by a resounding hunger. As she got to her hooves, the unicorn looked on as she saw that the tables were adorned

in mountains of food of all varying types. Fresh fruit and baked sweets as far her eyes could see.

“Travelling the Fade must be making you very hungry, young filly,” said a new voice, “Come and sit at the table and feast! Cakes, pies, apples and oranges, all you can ever hope to consume!”

The food did look delicious, and Twilight had never seen such a bounty even during the feasts for Celestia and Luna. “Thank you for your offer,” she said, bowing her head, “But I am not hungry. I still have to make my way through the Fade.”

“Muffins and cupcakes, savoury juices and nectars! Eat my friend, eat and be merry! The Fade is not going anywhere! Just one bite, I beseech you!”

Twilight kept her muzzle low, eyes closed as she ignored the hunger pangs in her stomach. *This is just like what you read about the Fade*, she told herself, *Flower was wrong. I didn't have to face one demon, but three: Desire, Sloth, and now Hunger. The books spoke of two more, Rage and Pride. I just have to resist a little while longer.*

The food and the tables vanished. “You are not driven by hunger,” said the demon. When Twilight opened her eyes, she let out a sharp gasp. Instead of a door like before, the entire area was filled with fire. Twilight moved away from the flames only to be surrounded by more.

Twilight turned to look for a way out of the flames, but they just inched closer to her. The heat was beginning to make her sweat until her attention was turned by a cry. “Help!” shouted a familiar voice, “Twilight! Help me, please!”

“Spike!” the unicorn gasped, looking for a path to follow Spike’s voice. The fire was relentless though, fuelled seemingly from the Fade itself. That’s it! She remembered, everything in the Fade is based on thought, on dreams. I just need to think and...

Twilight concentrated, and the flames relented revealing a path through the Fade. She galloped hard through the flames, until she came upon Spike who was burnt, battered, and barely breathing. Standing over him was what could only be described as fire given true shape, a large blob of molten liquid with hateful eyes and long arms.

“Leave Spike alone!” shouted Twilight as she lowered onto her front hooves, horn raised and flaring. The demon laughed as it slammed one burning hand onto the baby dragon.

“Your friend will die here, young filly!” the demon roared, “Unless you plan to stop me! Come at me with all your anger, or watch as I reduce this infant to cinders!”

Spike screamed as the demon continued to pound him with his burning hands. “Please Twilight, help me!”

Twilight moved to attack, but the flames around the demon surged forward to block her. “You foal!” the demon laughed, “You will not save your friend from my fire, and soon I will come for you!”

Spike’s screams echoed, until Twilight realized that he would not be allowed to go near the lyrium in the Harrowing chamber. As headstrong as the dragon was, he would not do anything to endanger his friend especially during this final test.

“That is not Spike,” Twilight said, “He couldn’t come here into the Fade. You demons think you so diabolically devious, but you’re nothing but devilish dimwits!”

The being sharing Spike’s appearance began to melt, until much to Twilight’s surprise formed another rage demon. The two roared in unison as they surged towards the magical pony. With a spell in her mind and magic twisting in her horn, she called on the very energies of the Fade to fuel her casting. She imagined a first blizzard, and soon the mystical ice hailed down on the demons, their cries echoing in the dreamscape as their bodies froze solid. With swift kicks from her hind hooves, Twilight shattered both rage demons as the fires around her finally died. The familiar door she searched for in the other areas of the Fade appeared, and with a breath she trotted through.

Twilight blinked. She was back in the Harrowing chamber. Hornshield and Wise Eyes were beaming at her, with Spike in his corner leaping and cheering her name. “Is it over?” she asked, surprised that the Harrowing was now complete.

"It is, dear student," Wise Eyes answered, "You have completed the Harrowing, the fastest of any unicorn I might add."

"Such a prodigy amongst ponies," Hornsheild chimed in, still smiling, "Never have I seen such skill in magic! Such bravery in a young filly!"

"You saved me from the Fade!" sang a familiar voice. Flower cantered about, looking amazed at Twilight. "I even have my body back and everything!"

Twilight felt herself blush with all the praise. "It really wasn't anything special. Just the Harrowing, like all unicorns have to go through." Something did not feel right. All the accolades from the templar commander and the First Enchanter felt wrong. Almost forced. Also seeing Hornshield smile... Twilight had never seen that before. And Flower had said that her body was gone, long since died since how long ago she was trapped in the Fade.

"This is just another illusion," Twilight said softly, looking around at all the faces, "I'm still in the Fade."

"Nonsense, dear student," said the image of Wise Eyes, "You have left the Fade. Do you not want to relish in your victory? Do you not take pride at how powerful you have become, so quickly?"

"Of course I am proud of my accomplishments," the unicorn retorted, "But I also know that I did not make it here on my own. My teachers, Spike, even the templar showed me the wonders and dangers magic has in this world. And stop calling me a young filly!"

In a moment faster than the blink of an eye, the Harrowing chamber was replaced by the first dreamscape that Twilight had entered in the Fade. Standing before her was Flower, but with a stern expression on her face.

"It seems not desire, sloth, hunger, rage or...pride, can subsume your spirit," The voice was cold, not at all like that of the pony Twilight had met, "You will be an interesting prize for a demon one day, though regretfully that day is not today. Know this..."

With those words 'Flower's' body began to grow and shift, turning into a pony demon of unspeakable horror. "Know that you will be watched from the Fade from this day onwards. And one day, you will be claimed. Go, young mare. Go into your world, into your 'freedom'."

The demon laughed as a blinding light engulfed Twilight Sparkle again. As she opened her eyes, the unicorn saw that she was back in the Harrowing chamber, with Wise Eyes and Hornshield standing over her, both with looks of concern. Wise Eyes' horn glowed bright, connecting his magic with Twilight's.

"Is she possessed, First Enchanter?" Hornsheild asked.

"No, Hornsheild, she is fine. Thank Celestia child, you gave us such a fright." As Twilight got back up to her hooves, she felt cold and shivered. "Worry not, Twilight Sparkle," the First Enchanter said in a comforting tone, "Such an experience in the Fade will have lingering effects, but you have done well. The Harrowing is over, and now you can go out into the world." Twilight groaned as she was guided out of the chamber. Everything was swirling, and she was feeling very dizzy. As the door opened, she heard a familiar voice arguing with somepony not so familiar.

"I don't see why you would want any of the younger unicorns, when you can have the Great and Powerful Trixie." Twilight grimaced whenever she heard Trixie speak about herself, and the dizzy spell was doing nothing to endear the braggart's voice.

"I have my reasons, Trixie," spoke another voice, calm and much older than Trixie, "The young make for capable Grey Wardens." Grey Wardens? Twilight tried to recall who they were, for she was sure she read about them before. But right now all she wanted was her hard uncomfortable bunk to sleep in.

"Are you implying that the Great and Powerful Trixie is old?!" The blue unicorn shot back, indignant.

Wise Eyes stepped forward to stand between Trixie and the guest. "Now now Trixie. Duncan is a good stallion who is simply looking for recruits for his order. Once we get Twilight Sparkle back into her room for rest, you

and Duncan and myself will talk about the events pertaining to this visit, yes?"

Trixie huffed off, while Duncan merely inclined his head in a short bow. Vision still blurred, she could only see that Duncan was a grey earth pony with a dark mane, and what appeared to be a grey shield for a cutie mark. "Pleasure to meet you sir," she said with a slur, still confused since leaving the Fade.

"Ah, this must be the newest unicorn to pass the Harrowing," Duncan said, looking Twilight over, "Get some rest. After such an ordeal, you deserve it."

"Your right she does," Spike said following close behind, "Come on Twilight, let's get you into bed." With Spike's help, Twilight collapsed onto her bed exhausted from the Harrowing. The Fade did not come that night, nor did the demons. Just a simple night with her mind in utter darkness.

Chapter 2

The Grey Wardens

“More books, Twilight?” asked Spike, incredulous, “You passed your test, now you can leave the Tower!”

“And where would I go Spike? It’s not like unicorns are in high demand in Equestria. Earth Ponies fear us; they don’t want us near them. I might as well stay here, study, and teach other ponies.” Twilight’s horn glowed as she lifted a book with her mind, placing it on her desk. The pages turned with her magic until she found the entry she was looking for.

“Here it is,” the unicorn said aloud, “The Grey Wardens. They were an order of ponies that stood against the Ponyspawn in Equestria in centuries past. They were removed from Equestria and forced into hiding many years ago after a supposed rebellion. I wonder why Duncan is here then.”

“We don’t get much news of the outside except what the templar tell us,” Spike jumped onto the table, “And I heard from them that King Blueblood allowed the Wardens to return. Why not go ask Duncan about the Wardens yourself? Maybe you can join up?”

Twilight thought about such. The book did not have much history on the Wardens, just dates and events of which they were involved. She shook her head before raising the book back into the shelf. “No Spike, adventuring is not for me. The Wardens have their duties just as I have my responsibilities. Besides, it’s dangerous going out our doors. The more religious ponies would probably hate me for simply existing.”

Life in the Unicorn Tower may have been a cage, but at least it was a safe cage with all the books Twilight could study in her entire lifetime. It was a

good life, a safe life. But when she looked to Spike, she felt pity for the baby dragon. He was just as bound to Twilight as she was to the Circle of Unicorns as long as they had her horn phylactery. As she returned to her books, Twilight could see the defeat in Spike's eyes. Even though it had been five days since the Harrowing, Spike still had hopes that Twilight and he could finally leave the tower.

"Why don't we go for a walk around the Tower?" Twilight asked, closing the book and heading to the door. "It will get your mind off things. Maybe get something to eat?"

Spike nodded dejectedly as he followed Twilight out of the dorm and into the main halls. Twilight looked to Spike for a moment before bumping into a wall and falling over onto her haunches.

"Teaches me to keep my eyes on ..." the lavender unicorn stopped as she looked up. There was Duncan, looking down as she picked herself up to her hooves. To his sides he was being followed by First Enchanter Wise Eyes and Trixie's mentor, Hubred. "I'm so sorry," Twilight said, bowing her head, "I wasn't watching and-"

"It is no trouble... Twilight Sparkle was it?" Duncan spoke calmly, as if nothing had happened at all, "I have heard much about you. Your recent excursion to the Fade has proved most impressive."

"Yes, yes, she is very good," said Hubred, "But I am certain you wish to see much more accomplished unicorns. Perhaps I can offer Trixie as an example of such?" Twilight glowered. If hearing Trixie boast about her powers was grating then hearing Hubred speak about his pupil was worse. The pale coated unicorn had no mane and his cutie mark, a red eye amidst fire, seemed like a cruel perversion of Wise Eyes. He looked down at Twilight as Duncan raised a hoof towards the elder unicorn.

"That is my decision to make, Hubred," the Grey Warden said, almost like a warning, "The order is lacking in unicorns, and I must be absolutely certain I make the best choice. Trying times are ahead, and we must be prepared."

Duncan's eyes met with Twilight's, and the unicorn could feel the older stallion judging her. "Gentlemen, perhaps we should discuss this in my chamber," Wise Eyes said at last, ushering Duncan and Hubred to follow him upstairs.

"What was that all about?" Spike asked. Twilight could only shrug before continuing to the mess hall. After a simple meal of hay and oats, they turned to return to the dormitories only to be stopped by Trixie.

"The GREAT and POWERFUL Trixie has been sent to come bring you to the First Enchanter's chamber," the blue unicorn said, with the same upturned muzzle that Hubred had, "So if you will please hurry up and follow me, we can get this over with."

Following the insufferable braggart, Twilight had time to wonder what Wise Eyes would want from her. Was there an issue with the Harrowing? Was there something Wise Eyes wanted her to do? Did she actually insult Duncan when she bumped into him?

Wordlessly, Twilight and Trixie entered the First Enchanter's chamber. It was the same as Twilight remembered when she was just a little filly; filled with all sorts of books, scrolls and various oddities. Once again she was in front of Duncan, Wise Eyes, and Hornshield. Twilight's eyes widened as she saw what was in front of the templar commander: her horn phylactery. Already her fears were strengthened as she looked on the smallest sliver of her horn floated in the small crystal phial.

"Thank you, Trixie," Wise Eyes said, "For your service I would like you to take over teaching the yearlings. I am sure they will take their lessons to heart if they are diligent."

Trixie gave her thanks to the First Enchanter, bowing with flourish before smirking at Twilight. She had a slight hop in her trot as she left the room,

which only left Twilight feeling more insecure about the meeting. As the door closed, Wise Eyes regarded the unicorn and her dragon companion.

“Twilight Sparkle,” said Duncan, surprising Twilight, “What you are about to be asked is a large burden for you. I have spoken with many of the other unicorns and with the First Enchanter, and I have come to the same conclusion: You are the unicorn I want to recruit into the Grey Wardens. Your skill and mastery of magic are boons, yes, but from what I have been told of your Harrowing, you have the will to combat the corruption of the spirit, which is necessary to become a Warden.”

“You have encountered many hardships here in the Unicorn Tower, but they pale in comparison to what life as a Warden entails. It means combating against the ponyspawn threat, and making terrible sacrifices. But I know that Equestria is teetering on the brink of Blight, and I need only the most capable of ponies with the Grey Wardens.”

The explanation left Twilight in shock. She remembered what Spike said about becoming a Grey Warden and remembered her rebuttal for wanting to refuse such. Safe haven within the Tower, she recalled, and all the books to study for the rest of her days. But what if Duncan was right and it was another Blight? Those same books told her what the last Blight had caused; near catastrophic destruction of the Unicorn Imperium, and close to doing the same to Equestria before the rise of the Grey Wardens. There wouldn't be a tower or books if the ponyspawn destroyed everything.

Twilight looked at Spike who simply looked back. This could be the one chance to leave the Tower for both her and the baby dragon. To leave the tower with a clear purpose and direction. To help all of Equestria with her magic. She had to make the step into a new life outside of the cage. The unicorn took a step forward towards Duncan, meeting his gaze. “Alright,” she said with shaky confidence, “I'll go with you. I'll become a Grey Warden. If I can do anything to help, I will.”

The dour earth pony nodded. "Of that I am sure of." He walked over to Hornsheild and took the phylactery in his mouth before putting it into his saddle bag. "As a Grey Warden," Duncan continued, "You will no longer have to worry about the templar or the Chantry. You will answer to me. Now go pack the necessities for a long journey. The ponyspawn horde will be coming from the southern wilds, and we must meet the King there to face them."

With that Duncan left Twilight with Wise Eyes, Hornshield and Spike. The little dragon dashed to move in front of the Grey Warden. "Hey!" he said, incredulous, "What about me? If Twilight is going, then so am I!"

"Of course, Ser Spike," Duncan replied, "I would not dream of separating you from Twilight Sparkle. From what I have been told, you have proven a wonderful friend to her since the day you were hatched. You are as much a part of her strong spirit as anything. I look forward to the journey south with both of you."

Duncan left, allowing Twilight to gather her dizzying thoughts. She was actually going to leave the Unicorn Tower for the first time in her life. She could barely remember even coming to the tower as a little foal, and the familiar and routine was going to go away completely in favour to become a Grey Warden and fight the ponyspawn.

Now Twilight was starting to regret her decision. She had read of the battles against the ponyspawn, but never dreamed she would be on the battlefield herself. Before the unicorn could say anything, Wise Eyes spoke up. "It is good you accepted so quickly," he said, "Duncan was very intent on having you in the Wardens. I argued against this since you had only just recently undertaken the Harrowing, but he threatened to use the Right of Conscription."

Twilight had almost forgotten about that. She read in the books concerning the Grey Wardens that they could conscript whoever they wanted into service. She had never heard of anyone refusing being conscripted but

there was probably a good reason for that as well, considering who the Grey Wardens were.

“Twilight Sparkle,” said the First Enchanter, his horn aglow, “I have something for you that will be of some use in your journeys. Take this staff, and know that it will help as a second focus for your magic. It floats on its own power, and will aid you in channelling magic between the focal point and your horn.”

“Thank you, First Enchanter!” Twilight said with a bright smile. The staff was simple and only carried a few engravings, but as it floated to her side she could feel warmth flowing from the top, “I’ll do my best not to let you or the Unicorn Circle down.”

Wise Eyes chuckled, but his expression quickly soured. “It is not about the unicorns anymore, child,” he said, “But about all of Equestria. The Grey Wardens only want the best and brightest individuals in their ranks, and he has made a wise decision, though I loathe seeing you go into danger.”

Twilight approached the First Enchanter and nuzzled his grey coat. Wise Eyes reciprocated as Twilight tried to blink away the tears. She was leaving her home and the only father figure she had ever known to venture into the dangers of Equestria. She was not likely to return anytime soon.

With a bow to both authority figures, the unicorn left the chamber with Spike on her back and her new staff floating to her left. “I can’t believe it, Twilight!” Spike said with a large smile, “You’re going to be a Grey Warden! You’ll be saving all of Equestria from the ponyspawn!”

“Now Spike, let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” Twilight returned to the dormitory and began packing her saddle bags with such essentials as healing poultices and rations, “The ponyspawn are no joke, and we don’t know much about the outside world beyond what we are told by the templar and visiting unicorns. Now help me find some books to bring along.”

“More books? We’re going on a big adventure and you want to bring books?” Spike looked at the large bookshelves that the apprentices used, wondering what sort of books Twilight would want to bring.

“I’m not going to bring the entire library, just books on the ponyspawn and Equestria. Never underestimate what you can learn from a good book. Oh and find some maps while you are at it.” Instead of maps, Spike dumped a good helping of semi-precious gemstones into her bags.

“I’m going to get hungry,” he said as Twilight rolled her eyes. Pointing her staff at the bookshelves, she concentrated on the maps she wanted just as she would with her horn. Surprisingly, the staff took most of the focus and the map scrolls floated with ease down into her bags.

“This staff really will be helpful,” Twilight smiled.

“You should give it a name,” suggested Spike, “All great adventurers name their stuff. How about ‘Blight Blaster’, or ‘Ponyspawn Punisher’, or how about ‘The Thunderstick!’”

As Spike rattled off every cheesy name he could think of, Twilight bit on a cloak and wrapped the warm cloth over her. With one tug on the clasp the hooded cape sat comfortable over her back. Her saddle bags were loaded and ready, and once Spike was on her back again, she made her way down the tower steps.

At the bottom of the steps gathered most of the unicorns in the Tower, Trixie and Hubred included. While those two turned their heads away from her, the other unicorns began asking questions about the Grey Wardens, when Twilight was going to come back, wishes for good luck and prayers to Celestia and Luna to protect her. The violet unicorn could already feel her eyes brim with tears as she tried to express her thanks to everyone, but seeing Duncan stand before the large iron door leading into the Tower entrance gave her a sense of urgency. Waving her hoof goodbye to

everyone, she watched as the iron door opened before her eyes for the first time in her life.

As the door was sealed shut, she could see that they were surrounded by earth pony templar guards. They only watched as Duncan and Twilight approached the door that lead to the outside world. "This will hurt your eyes for a moment," Duncan said as he nodded to the door guards, "Just give your eyes time to adjust to the light."

The doors opened slowly with a grating creak and both Twilight and Spike had to cover their eyes. The light from the sun stung after being in the dark tower for so long, it made Twilight's eyes water. Or perhaps her tears were happy ones when she was looking at the sun for the first time, to see the full glory of Celestia for the first time in her life.

"It's...it's beautiful," Spike said in her place. He had never seen the sunlight as well.

"It is precious, yes," Duncan agreed in a voice that spoke of understanding, "It is why we Grey Warden's fight the ponyspawn; to save such simple pleasures as seeing Celestia's gift to all ponies."

They crossed Lake Blackwater in a small ferry boat the templar used to get to the tower. Twilight and Spike were both amazed at the water and the fish that swam in the lake. They looked up in awe at the clouds that hung above their head and the blue sky that carried them. Everything was brighter and more wondrous than Twilight could have ever imagined, it was hard to believe that it was all under threat by the ponyspawn.

Everything was much bigger as well. Twilight had never realized just how tall the tower was until she saw the structure from the outside. Mountains and hills beckoned across the small lake as the ferry approached the dock.

"Come," said Duncan as they began to trot on the path southwards, "We are going to the ancient Imperium ruins of Ostequus. There we will meet

with the King and his army. I will teach you about the Grey Wardens as well as many skills you will need. But before that..."

Duncan opened his bag and lifted Twilight's phylactery in his teeth. Setting it on the ground, he smashed the phial with his hoof. The unicorn and dragon gasped at the act.

"What did you do?" Twilight looked at the broken remains of her phylactery with horror, "Now I'll be considered an apostate!" Apostates were rogue mages who were more often considered maleficar: Dark Art practitioners. Not only were they more feared and hated, but the templar actively hunted down apostate and maleficar alike.

"You are to become a Grey Warden," Duncan explained, "And the Grey Wardens do what we must, sacrifice what...and who...we must to beat back the Blight. You are no longer a unicorn under the thumb of the Chantry but a pony in an order that has one objective: to defeat the ponyspawn. I cannot have a Grey Warden worried about the ponyspawn as well as the templar. You will learn these lessons about being a Warden, and they will be harsh ones."

Twilight looked on at the broken phial and saw the small sliver of her horn still there amongst the shard. The fragment floated on its own, and moved towards the unicorn's horn. She did not resist as it resumed the same place where it was shaved off when she was a little filly and felt completely at ease. A feeling of becoming whole enveloped her.

Duncan turned back towards the road and resumed his canter south with Twilight and Spike following behind him. As they journeyed, they met only a few other ponies on the roads, amongst them travelling merchants bands of earth pony knights from the local Arl's barracks. The old Warden spoke with them when he felt necessary, asking only for Twilight and Spike to remain silent as he talked. He did not explain such, but instead continued teaching Twilight about the history of the Grey Wardens, as well as such skills as survival in the wilderness and against the ponyspawn.

As they travelled, Twilight encountered much more exotic travellers on the road, including donkeys and pegasi. Duncan taught Twilight about the nearby donkey city-state of Orzamule, as well as the Pegasi of the Eastern Dales. Twilight wanted to know more about Duncan's first hand experiences, but the old stallion simply said she would have as much knowledge as he in a short amount of time.

They stopped for the night in a clearing. Before the sun set, Duncan pointed out a large ruined fortress in the distance. "That is Ostequus," he said, "An ancient Imperium ruin where we will be making our stand against the ponyspawn with King Blueblood and his army, as well as the rest of the Grey Wardens. There is another Warden there with other recruits waiting for us. I believe she is around your age as well."

"Duncan," Twilight said, "Can I ask when you were recruited in the Grey Wardens?" She hoped the question was not too prying.

"When I was a young colt, I was found on the streets in a city in Filais. My mentor took notice at my skills in fighting and stealth, and thought I had a better future with the Grey Wardens." He chuckled. "There were was much resistance to my joining, but she made sure that the Right of Conscription would not be ignored by such an impetuous youth. I had studied much since then, including one thing above all others which you should know: The Grey Wardens protect the entire world, not just one nation. Now get some sleep, we will be at Ostequus in the morning."

The thought of a young Duncan was amusing at first, until the looming stone towers of Ostequus made their presence known. Quietly Twilight lowered her head on the blanket with Spike sleeping noisily by her side. "Duncan," she started again, "Would you have used the Right of Conscription on me?"

Duncan looked over the fire he had made, not turning to regard Twilight. "Yes. The Grey Wardens do what they must." He remained in silent vigil against the darkness, and Twilight at last let sleep take hold.

* * *

The ruins of Ostequus were even more impressive up close than from a distance. Twilight and Spike marvelled at the work of the Imperium and how it still stood after millennia. Ostequus, as Duncan explained, was built by the Unicorn Magisters of the Imperium to prevent further incursions of the Bronco Clans of the southern wilds. Unfortunately, the ponyspawn were not Broncos.

As Duncan and Twilight approached, they saw four ponies gallop across the massive bridge leading into Ostequus. Flanked by his three earth pony guards, King Blueblood stood like a majestic statue. His white coat and blond mane were flawless, while his golden armour shone in the sunlight. His gold helmet made Twilight flinch; it was adorned by a single spiralling horn. She wondered if the king knew the significance of such and simply did not care.

Duncan, Twilight, and Spike all bowed towards the king of Equestria who approached with a large smile towards the elder Grey Warden. "Duncan!" he exclaimed, "Good to see you made it to the field of glory at last! And this must be your newest recruit!"

"Indeed, your majesty," said Duncan, "This is Twilight Sparkle, a gifted unicorn from the Circle of Unicorns. She will be aiding us in the battle against the ponyspawn."

Blueblood turned his brilliant smile to Twilight who felt herself blush at the attention from the king. "A unicorn, you say? Your magic will prove very handy against the enemy, of that I am certain. I have never been to the Unicorn Tower myself, how is it there?"

Twilight found herself tongue-tied, unable to answer the King's question. Spike jumped up on Twilight's back and looked the king in the eye. "It's big and boring and full of books," he said, "Now do you have anything to eat, like some rubies? I'm starving!"

The king laughed, letting the violet unicorn breathe in relief that he was not offended. "How curious! A talking baby dragon! I will have to hear all about your tales in due time. But I really must be going back, or else Teryn Loghoof will be sending out a search party. More battle plans and such."

"Arl Macintosh sends his regards, your majesty, and will be sending soldiers soon." Twilight looked at Duncan, who had never mentioned the Arl or his soldiers.

"Arl Macintosh is probably too busy with his orchards to know where true glory is to be had." Blueblood turned on his hooves and began to make his way back to the encampment. Twilight and Duncan began to follow as he continued to speak, "I am not certain we are facing a true Blight. We have caught a few scouts, but there have not been any sightings of the Archdemon."

Duncan's face turned dour. "This is a Blight, your majesty, of that I am quite certain."

"Then we will meet it head on and have our names sung for generations." Blueblood trotted with purpose, his eyes blazing with dreams of glory. "Just like the stories of old, where the King of Equestria and the Grey Wardens fight side by side to end the Blight. But enough talk, you will want to get your Wardens ready for the coming battle and Loghoof must be rearing in his stable. Farewell!"

As the king and his entourage left Twilight and Duncan at the entrance of Ostequus, the old Warden turned to the unicorn. "I want you to go around the camp, get accustomed to it," he said, "But also keep an eye out for the other recruits as well as the Warden I mentioned earlier. Her name is

Applejack, and I'm sure you will find her close by. Check the small orchard to the east."

Twilight nodded and with Spike headed east through the ruins. She had never seen so many ponies in one place in her life, ever. Earth ponies in heavy armour ran drills, checked weapons, and discussed battle strategy as she walked through the army camp. Chantry priests offered prayers of hopes to those who assembled around them, and nearby to Twilight's surprise were unicorns preparing spells of protection for the army.

Everypony looked confident as they went about their business in the camp. Twilight wondered where she would be positioned in the coming battle. She was still a newly harrowed Unicorn with no combat experience. The Wardens would no doubt be on the front lines, and if she was to become one, that is where she would be.

Twilight turned the corner and saw a gathering of earth ponies. As she approached, she let out a gasp at what they were surrounding. Dead on the ground was a grotesque creature, vaguely resembling a pony. Its hide was chitin instead of a proper coat and the mane was made up of bony spikes. The eyes were bloodshot, while the teeth were jagged with two large tusks protruding from the sides of the jaw. The hooves ended in sharp claws and the creature still bled black blood.

"This is a thelock," said an earth pony, possibly an officer, "A common kind of ponyspawn. Their blood is lethal, so try to keep your wounds covered as best you can, to stop the blood from entering your system. They are savage monsters, all of them, who don't know anything about bargaining or mercy. There are other kinds of ponyspawn as well, including the ornlock emissaries, who can cast spells."

"Magic?" questioned another pony soldier, "But are they not animals? How can they cast magic?"

Twilight wondered the same as she kept her eyes on the corpse. Nothing had prepared her for the monster before her and this was merely a dead

ponyspawn. What would she do when it came time to confront a live one? The unicorn turned away from the soldiers and the example of their enemy and entered a quick canter.

As she wandered the camp, Twilight saw the orchard where she was supposed to meet Applejack. The trees were tall and grand, their branches filled with bright green leaves and scores of apples. "Hey Spike, you hungry?" Twilight asked with cheer as she began to channel the magic in her horn to bring down a pair of delicious fruit.

"I'll get that!" A shout resounded in the orchard, followed by the sound of galloping hooves. An orange coated mare with a blonde mane wearing splinted armour and a farmer's wide brimmed hat came dashing towards them. Before Twilight could voice an objection, the mare turned around quickly and struck the tree with her hind hooves, shaking the tree with a heavy tremor. The apples fell harmlessly to their sides, much to Twilight's confusion.

The mare crossed her front legs with pride. Twilight took note of the cutie mark, three red apples on a grey shield. "You must be Applejack," she said, "I'm-"

"And you must be the new unicorn recruit!" Applejack began shaking Twilight's hoof as strongly as she shook up the tree. "Ah'm Appplejack alright, been right waitin' to meet yer acquaintance. We could always use more Grey Wardens, and I can't wait to hear about your time with Duncan. Say, you were hungry right? We can talk over some apples, lemme just buck some more for ya and get the the recruits."

Applejack kicked another tree with a hard kick, letting the apples fall to the ground harmlessly. "Soup's on, every pony!" She hollered with a hoof to her mouth. Galloping towards them were countless hungry soldiers, chantry priests and various other ponies. Rushing up to Twilight and Applejack were two earth ponies, a slender brown coated pony with a dagger hanging

by his side and a much larger pony with a pale blue coat and a large sword slung over his back.

“Meet Digger and Ser Magni,” Applejack introduced, “Two other Grey Warden recruits just like yerself.”

“Pleasure is all mine,” Digger said, “And what a lovely young filly we have with us now. Haven’t seen you around Trotterim, and I know most of the ladies.” Applejack gave Digger a stern look to tell the colt to back down.

“Ser Magni of Red Apple Acres, miss,” said the pony knight, bowing his head, “I hope we both get into the Grey Wardens. They are very selective with their recruits, I heard.”

Twilight smiled at all three ponies. “I’m Twilight Sparkle, and this is Spike,” she said, “Duncan told me there would be other recruits. I have to say, I’m glad I’m not the only one. “

Suddenly Applejack lifted her right hoof to her chest in a salute. Twilight, Digger, and Ser Magni turned to see Duncan approaching. “Good, you are all here,” the elder Warden looked at the three recruits and Applejack, “You have all been chosen due to possessing talents and skills deemed useful to the Grey Wardens and to our battle against the ponyspawn. And while you have all come far to Ostequus and the front lines of the conflict, there is a task that will test you to see if you are truly fit to bear the title of Grey Warden.”

“Deep in the Potpourri Wilds, there is an ancient Grey Warden fort. Inside this fort you will find important documents ages old, detailing treaties the Wardens have made with the Circle of Unicorns, the Donkey Kingdoms, and the Pegasi of the Eastern Dales. You will go and bring these treaties back to me, as well as seek out the ponyspawn in the Wilds and collect six phials of their blood.”

“Applejack,” Duncan turned his attention to the blonde-haired mare, “As the senior Warden, you will go with them and do what you must to ensure that the task is successful.” Applejack saluted again as Duncan returned his attention to the recruits. “This will be a dangerous task, but no more so dangerous than anything else you will face against the ponyspawn. I have faith that you will succeed. May Celestia’s light protect you.”

Duncan turned back towards the camp as Applejack lead Digger and Ser Magni towards the Potpurri Wilds. Twilight swallowed as she looked to Spike. “Stay here in camp Spike, where you’ll be safe,” she said, leaving Spike cross, “If anything were to happen to you, I don’t know what I’d do.”

Spike was about to object, but then relented. “You’re the one going to be the Warden after all,” he said, “I’ll just take a nap somewhere. Maybe with the war dogs.” The baby dragon moved towards the camp as Applejack called for Twilight to hurry along. As they left the camp, Twilight looked on towards the Potpourri Wilds, nerves shaking her from hoof to horn. Even the shadows seemed to beckon towards the wilds like a hungry animal, waiting for their next meal.

Chapter 3

Bound in Blood

Twilight shuddered as the four ponies travelled through the Potpourri Wilds. While the lake was beautiful and the hills and mountains majestic in the horizon, the Wilds were a marshland where every tree seemed to glare at the intruders with murderous intent. A gasp would escape the unicorn with every broken twig and every hiss of nearby serpents. At about the fifth squeak, Ser Magni stopped and looked at Twilight with exasperation in his eyes.

“By the light of Celestia,” he said, “It’s almost as if you have never seen any of this before. Don’t they let you unicorns out for some exercise or practical knowledge?”

“Well, we can’t leave the Tower until we pass our final tests,” Twilight explained, turning her shame away from the knight. Digger slowed his pace to stand next to Twilight.

“Don’t be so hard on her, ser knight,” the roguish pony said with a sly wink, “We all get weak knees when we first venture out alone into harm’s path. It’s a good thing you have such a brave colt like me to lean on when the going gets rough.” Twilight rolled her eyes at Digger’s advances, but a sharp word from Applejack straightened him right quick back into line.

The blonde pony looked back with a stern look in her eyes. “That’s enough out of everypony,” she said, “Ain’t no need to go on to fill Twilight’s head with nonsense, ya hear? Let’s try to keep our heads clear, we have a long way ahead of us.”

No pony said anything as they continued down through the marsh. There were no signs of ponyspawn or even other ponies, which concerned Twilight. Was Duncan right sending them into the Wilds? And more importantly, what did he want with old documents and ponyspawn blood? Twilight's head spun with the possibilities on what Duncan would do with ponyspawn blood and every conclusion she thought of ended in Dark Arts. Perhaps that was the secret of the Wardens, that they used the feared Dark Arts to fight effectively against the ponyspawn.

New fears arose. This excursion into the Wilds was supposed to be a test for the Grey Warden recruits, what if Twilight failed? What would become of the unicorn since Duncan smashed her phylactery and she would now be considered an apostate throughout Equestria? Not even during the Harrowing did she feel so much doubt.

She then looked towards Applejack who was already a Warden and had probably gone through the same test as Twilight and the other ponies were under now. She seemed so brave and so sure of herself as she led the party through the Wilds. A short sword hung in its sheath at her side in neck's reach, while a sturdy wooden shield was strapped to the young Warden's left foreleg. With her armour, Applejack seemed to give the appearance of a skill warrior. Twilight hoped she was not far from the truth.

"This quiet ain't helping any pony relax," Applejack said out of the blue, "Hey Digger! How'd ol' Duncan find some colt like you to bring to the Wardens?" Digger looked surprised that Applejack was addressing him at all. "Well, it's not much of a story. Was caught by the Trotterim guards after breaking into an old arl's tomb. Lot's of traps to protect a dead man's buried goods, but I got passed them all and left a few surprises of my own for the guards.

"They were about to have me knackered on the spot if it were not for dear old Duncan," Digger sounded rather pleased with himself while Twilight could only look at the colt in horror for grave robbing, "Said my skills would be put to good use towards ending the Blight. Have to say, I agree with the old horse. Someone has to put an end to the ponyspawn, why not join up

with those ponies that make it a living. Certainly should be better than going into more tombs and finding dusty scraps of cloth.”

Twilight felt even more sheltered after hearing Digger’s story. In the tower, she had everything she needed or wanted: a roof over her head, simple food, and plenty of books. Outside of the tower, she wondered how many thieves who were like Digger, stealing not just from corpses but other ponies as well. There was hardly ever any theft from the Tower, since every unicorn there knew each other, as well as being under the scrutinizing eyes of the senior enchanter and the templar.

Was it necessity or greed that drove ponies to steal from each other? Likely both, Twilight thought as she continued on the march through the marsh. If Duncan wanted a thief like Digger as a Warden, then either the order was desperate for recruits, or he really was the best Duncan could find.

“Well unlike that knave, I have a much more valorous upbringing,” Ser Magni said as he stood up to appear taller, “I and my wife recently moved to Red Apple Acres and I was to serve with the other knights under Arl Macintosh. When Duncan arrived looking for fine warrior to recruit, we held an impromptu tournament. I won of course, and was sent to Ostequus.”

“My wife is with child, so if I can do anything I can to give them a peaceful and safe Equestria, I will.” Ser Magni’s story seemed to paint a better picture of the knight than Digger’s, and the large pony had a very good reason to fight the ponyspawn. At least the knight and the thief had one thing in common: they both wanted to end the Blight. Twilight appreciated that they shared that much.

Twilight caught a glimpse of Applejack’s face as they slogged through the muck of the marsh. The orange earth pony seemed sad, her eyes and ears drooped low though her gait was still confident. “What about you Applejack?” the unicorn asked, “You’ve actually been a Warden. How did you get recruited?”

“Ah, ain’t much of a story to tell sugarcube.” Whatever melancholy had a hold of Applejack disappeared in an instant, revealing her cheerful nature once again, “I was a servin’ filly for the Arl of Red Apple Acres well before Big Macintosh took the title from his pa. Treated me like a sister, he did, and was I glad to have a colt like that for a brother figure. After a while though I was sent to become a templar and let me tell you, ah’d never want to go through that again. Duncan found me before I could take the final oaths and not a moment too soon, lemme tell you.”

“Ya’ll shoulda seen the Chantry Mother’s face!” Applejack laughed, a hearty yet cheery sound that added a bit of light to the gloom, “She was right mad when Duncan wanted me in the Wardens, she tried to stop him. But ain’t nopony gonna stop a Warden use the Right of Conscription and I never looked back on that day. A year later, and here I ahm!”

Before Twilight could say anything about Applejack being a former templar, the orange pony winked at her. “Now don’t you worry your head none. I’m not like all those other fussy templar. Unicorns are just another pony to me, after all.”

Twilight, Digger, and Ser Magni all stopped. Applejack looked back, confused. “You’ve only be a Warden for a year?” Ser Magni sounded concerned, “All this time and we’ve been following an inexperienced templar turned warden?”

“I have plenty of experience!” Applejack turned to look at the recruits, “But if ya’ll want to snip at me, Twilight here can lead. Ah’m just supposed to make sure ya’ll finish Duncan’s task.”

“Wait, me?” Twilight had never ‘lead’ anything before, but once Applejack nodded in agreement and Digger joined in with an enthusiastic grin, she found herself the center of attention. “Well I did do some work in the Unicorn Tower...alright, then. Applejack, you and Ser Magni take point. Digger and I will follow close. Keep an eye open for any ponyspawn as we keep going.”

That decision was instantly regretted as Digger happily fell back to stand by Twilight's side. Still, his bow was needed at range, and it was better to have the fighter's in the front. They continued their walk into the Wilds until they came upon a wounded earth pony soldier lying in a patch of grass. Immediately Twilight rushed over to the soldier's side as Applejack sprang forward, her eyes scanning the distance as to what happened.

The soldier's wounds were dirty and deep, but his breathing was still good and he had no broken limbs. Twilight dug into her saddle bag and pulled a poultice with her teeth. Once the bottle was open, she poured the contents on the soldier's wounds, watching as the red liquid worked into the slash marks and began to mend the flesh quickly.

Once the last of the poultice was consumed by the soldier pony's skin, he let out a sharp gasp of air as his eyes opened wide, scared. "It's ok," Twilight said in a calm tone, "You're with friends here. What happened?"

"Ponyspawn," gasped the soldier as he got to his hooves, "The locks, donlocks, and...flyers. They ambushed us a furlong from here. If you are going that way, pray to Celestia and Luna to give you protection. You'll need it."

The soldier hobbled off as Applejack returned to the party. "He's not foaling around," she said, "I can sense ponyspawn in the direction he said. It's something you can do once you become a Grey Warden. Not a lot, sounds like a scoutin' group. That doesn't make them any less dangerous. Let's go, we needed to find them anyways."

The marsh gave way to very old Bronco ruins in the distance. Stone pillars of ponies rose from the ground, acting as way points in the Wilds. The old relics were covered in moss and other floral growths. Twilight kept her eyes opened, but relied on Applejack's senses to point them in the right direction.

“I don’t understand,” Ser Magni said, “Why do we need ponyspawn blood? It sounds too much like Dark Arts to me. I am no coward, but anything to do with the Dark Arts smells foul.”

“Duncan said find ponyspawn blood, so that means we find ponyspawn blood,” Applejack looked up at the sky and the trees, possibly if she could spot the flyers that were mentioned, “There...I see ‘em. Stay low, and don’t make a sound.”

Twilight looked and saw the ponyspawn. They were worse alive than the corpse back in Ostequus. Two thelocks were accompanied by two other pony spawn, much shorter and stouter. They must be the donlocks, Twilight thought. Her gaze went upward and she spotted the flyers the soldier spoke of. If the donlocks and thelocks were horrid, the flyers were worse. They hardly resembled ponies at all except in shape. They had a pair of large bat wings, clawed talons instead of hooves, and a single but ever present eye looking for something to attack. Amongst the ponyspawn were the half eaten remains of the patrol group.

The unicorn wanted to look away from the horror. These were the creatures she was supposed to fight? These monsters who not only killed but ate ponies? Twilight turned away from the cannibalism and started to gag.

One of the flyers looked up at the sound of Twilight’s retching. The solitary eye looked at the ponies and gave out a long screech that warned the other ponyspawn. The monsters all began to roar as they charged further, fangs and tusks ready to kill.

“Shoot,” Applejack said as she backed up into a fighting stance, “Get ready everypony, we got company!” She pulled her sword out of its sheath and brandished the weapon alongside Ser Magni.

“Digger!” Twilight shouted, forgetting her sick stomach, “Get to high ground and help with the flyers!”

Digger nodded and galloped towards a hill. One of the flying ponyspawn dived towards the thief, teeth gnashing and claws outstretched. *Think Twilight, think!* the unicorn had to summon a spell. She had to think simple, yet effective. Her staff and horn started to glow as she summoned a blast of arcane energy to fly against the winged spawn.

A violet orb of energy emerged between both magical foci and with a thought Twilight sent it hurling towards the flyer. The concussive blast was enough to knock the creature out of the skies and in front of Digger. With his teeth clenched on both arrow and bowstring, Digger pushed the bow with one hoof, taking aim at the downed ponyspawn. With the arrow released at close range, the point entered the flyer's head with a heavy smacking sound as grey black blood oozed out.

Twilight wanted to feel sick again, but the other flyer was still about and screeching while the thelocks and donlocks were pushing Applejack and Ser Magni back. With a quick leap, the young Warden landed on top of one of the thelocks. The monster tried to buck its unwanted passenger, but Applejack was quick with her blade as she sunk it into the thelock's neck. Ser Magni also faired well, slicing a donlock's throat open with a downward swing of his massive sword.

Digger began firing arrows at the other flyer, but it was too quick and evasive. "Don't worry about that one!" Twilight shouted, "Give support to Applejack and Magni!" The archer pony must have heard her, as he turned his bow and arrows towards the remaining thelock and donlock. The flyer must have heard her as well, as it turned and swooped low, claws ready to rip and maim flesh. The unicorn only managed to duck out of the way in time, though the creatures claws did tear into her cloak.

Before the flyer could make for another pass, Twilight summoned another spell, this time one of blistering cold. The air around the sky bound monstrosity began to freeze, the wings slowing down until they eventually could not fly anymore in the cold. The flyer crashed in front of a nearby tree, yet despite it's frozen wings appeared no worse for wear. Craning its

neck around, the ponyspawn let out a terrible shriek before charging towards Twilight. Her eyes grew wide as the monster closed the distance, her mind racing for another spell to summon.

Thankfully she did not need to. Applejack charged forth and just like in the orchard in Ostequus, pivoted on her front legs followed by a powerful buck from her hind hooves. A sickening crack echoed as the flying ponyspawn was driven against a rock, the neck clearly broken.

Despite all the ponyspawn dead, Applejack lifted a hoof for everyone to remain still. She turned her head around, appearing to be listening or using her heightened Warden senses to detect if there were more ponyspawn. Eventually, Applejack was able to let out a sigh of relief as well as a smile.

“Good work everypony,” she said sincerely, “We took out them ponyspawn like a fly gets on an apple pie. Now we just need to collect the blood to fill Duncan’s phials, and we can be on our way towards the old fort. Twi? Wanna help with the collection? It needs a careful hoof.”

Twilight begrudgingly agreed. As she approached the flyer, she tried to avoid looking into its single eye. She turned away from the disgusting business as she used her magic to levitate a knife to cut open a gash in the ponyspawn’s side. “I thought they smelled bad on the outside,” she muttered to herself as she magically lifted the six phials and filled them with the black blood.

“This isn’t good,” Applejack said as Twilight rejoined the party, “Even if it was a small group of those varmints, they had those flyin’ screamers. Usually that means a much larger force is near, and I have no doubt it’s the horde of em. We have to find the fort, and quickly.”

They looked at the map and with Ser Magni’s help, Twilight was able to plot out a good course of action. With Applejack’s assurance that there were no more ponyspawn here, the party continued deeper into the Potpourri Wilds and Twilight gave Luna a request. “Could Celestia be merciful and keep the ponyspawn at bay for just a little while longer?”

"It ain't here!" Applejack shouted out in frustration, running frantically around the remains of the old fort. While Ser Magni watched for intruders, Twilight had sent Digger to search the lower levels of the fort as she and Applejack scoured the remains. Every broken chest and damaged shelf was scoured for the documents, but time and thieves had emptied the old ruin of everything, valuables and scraps alike.

"I ain't finding' any treaties or documents, or even a buckin' scrap of parchment!" The Warden kicked a old chest in frustration. The chest burst into splinters as Digger made his way back to them.

"Not much luck down there either," he said, "Whatever wasn't buried by cave ins was nicked well before we got here."

Ser Magni shouted for the party to come to him. They quickly ran to the knight, who was brandishing his great sword in his mouth. Standing before them was a white coated unicorn with an immaculately curly violet mane. She wore a striking vest of purple feathers.

"What have we here?" she said as she trotted around them, "Thieves looking for easy prey amidst the chaos of the ponyspawn, or scavengers looking to pick the last remnants from this ugly husk. Speaking of which, have you ever seen yourselves in a mirror? Or even a reflection in the water? I have never seen such a ragtag group of ponies, and the Bronco tribes always look like they rolled around in mud for a few days."

Applejack was about to object before Digger stepped in front of her. "Don't you know what she is? She's a Mare of the Mire, she is. She'll turn us into toads!"

"Toads?" the unicorn said with a disgusted look, "All those warts, and that tongue? Ugh, if I could turn you into something, it would be ponies with a

decent sense of fashion. Do you know how silly you look in that armour and that peasants hat?"

"Now wait an applebuckin' minute," Applejack said, pushing Digger away, "You don't go around insulting a pony's pappy's hat like that! And who the hay are you supposed to be anyways?"

"I am Rarity," came a proud response, "And I've been following you since you entered the Wilds. And let me tell you, I only felt pity for all of you. Besides poor aesthetic tastes, you came all this way to find that your fort is empty of anything and everything."

"Likely because you probably stole everything!" accused Applejack, "Not only are you an apostate, but some kind of sneaky...witch...thief!"

Before she could continue, Twilight raised a hoof in front of Applejack's mouth. This was no way to treat anypony, especially if Rarity knew anything about the lost treaties. Twilight stepped forward, looking Rarity straight in the eye in a hope for a more diplomatic solution.

"Miss Rarity," the violet unicorn began, "I am Twilight Sparkle, and this Applejack, Ser Magni and Digger. Please excuse us, but we travelled a long way from Ostequus to find lost Grey Warden documents. If you know anything that could help us, we would be in your debt."

"Ah, a pony with some manners," Rarity smiled, "And you look like a mare who would appreciate a good makeover. If you must know, Mother sent me to deliver those same documents which you seek. She found them many years ago and kept them safe in our home."

Rarity's horn glowed and from her saddle bag rose a bundle of scrolls. As they levitated towards the group, Twilight could see that the seals were long gone, but the scrolls did not have crease marks to show that they were opened. Whoever Rarity's mother was, she seemed to respect the privacy of the former owners of the documents.

The white unicorn carefully placed the scrolls in Twilight's bag. Applejack looked only mildly satisfied, but still untrusting of Rarity. Digger and Ser Magni still held a look of worry that any moment they would be turned into frogs and start eating insects.

"I will show you an easier path back to Ostequus," Rarity said, "I like you, Twilight Sparkle. We are both unicorns, after all, and with a little care, I'm sure I could make you look absolutely stunning."

"Be careful," the young Warden said to Twilight, "First it's 'I like ya' then wham, yer a frog. Or a newt. Or some other creepy crawly."

"You and I will get along famously, of that I am sure. You really should not complain when someone does you a favour out of the kindness in their hearts," retorted Rarity, "Or would you prefer to travel the long way back? The ponyspawn become thickest at night, and I have to wonder how you'll survive ambush after ambush in the Wilds."

"Any way to get out the Wilds faster is fine by me," Ser Magni said as he followed behind Rarity, with Digger closing the distance. Twilight shot Applejack a look before shaking her head and joining the rest of the group. Applejack only muttered took stride in the rear.

The path Rarity knew did cut a lot of time from their travels. As they cut through the foliage, Twilight noticed that Rarity was not getting dirty at all, despite the muck from the marsh and the plants with their sap and resins. She noticed that the fellow unicorn's horn only glowed slightly, but considering the length of time that had passed meant that whatever spell she used to keep clean was in full and constant effect. Either it was a simple spell, or Rarity was a much more powerful user of magic than Twilight gave her credit.

Eventually the party made their way through the Wilds, with Digger and Ser Magni giving thanks to Goddess Sisters when they could see the torchlight of the Equestrian camp. Twilight smiled at Applejack as they joined them in

the front. Before she could thank Rarity, the unicorn was gone, with no obvious signs of where she disappeared into.

“Figures,” mumbled Applejack, “Sneaky witch thief wanted to make a clean getaway.

As they entered the camp, they were greeted by Duncan and Spike. “Twilight!” the baby dragon jumped onto Twilight’s back, embracing her neck with his short arms. “You were gone for a long time! Did you fight any ponyspawn? Come on, I need to know all the details!”

“I’ll tell you soon, Spike,” Twilight said, nuzzling her baby dragon companion. She turned her attention to Duncan, using her magic to lift the documents and the phials of ponyspawn blood towards the Grey Warden. He nodded as each item was placed into his own bag.

“You have all done well,” he said, “And now we can begin the ritual that will integrate you all into the Grey Wardens. Wait in the orchard until both myself and Applejack arrive.”

Applejack followed Duncan towards the Grey Warden’s camp. Twilight, Digger, and Ser Magni went off towards the orchard as Duncan had said. She wondered what kind of ritual the Wardens did. The idea of rituals never came up in her studies in the tower, and those few times they did mostly involved the Dark Arts and Maleficar.

Twilight distracted herself from the waiting by retelling everything to Spike. The little dragon enjoyed the stories a bit too much for Twilight comfort, and he kept asking questions about the “cool” parts, such as the fighting. The unicorn wanted to forget about the fighting and the killing, but her instincts told her that it was merely the beginning.

What seemed like a couple of hours passed and Spike was fast asleep against Twilight’s side. Ser Magni was pacing as Digger seemed lost in

prayers to Celestia. "By Luna's mark," Ser Magni swore, "I grow tired of this waiting. We were chosen for the Grey Wardens, we went into the Wilds and finished Duncan's task. Why are we not Wardens ourselves yet?"

"Maybe this is another test?" Digger spoke up, "Patience is a virtue after all, ser knight."

Ser Magni snorted and resumed his pacing. Twilight shook her head as she laid a blanket over Spike. The waiting was nerve wracking, but if there was one thing she knew and knew well, was that patience is a virtue. Only fools rush in and when it came to the Wardens and the ponyspawn, Twilight did not want to rush in in any capacity.

Applejack soon appeared in the orchard, looking sombre. "Hey everypony," she said in a low voice, "It's time. Follow me."

Twilight looked at the sleeping form of Spike, hoping he would be fine for a little while in the orchard. They left the orchard together, following Applejack to a small clearing away from the main ruins of Ostequus. Duncan was waiting for them in the clearing with a silver chalice sitting beside him on a stump.

"In peace, vigilance. In war, victory. In death, sacrifice," Duncan said, "This is the oath of the Grey Wardens. You have all proven yourselves many times over, but there is one last rite that must be passed."

He motioned a hoof towards the chalice. "This is the Joining, that which makes us Grey Wardens. The Grey Wardens were founded during the First Blight, when ponies stood on the praecipe of annihilation. The founding Grey Wardens drank the blood of the ponyspawn and mastered the Taint. This is the source of our power. Our victory."

Ser Magni balked. "We have to drink the blood of those...those monsters!?" Fear dripped from every word as he looked at the chalice.

“As it has been since the First, as we have done before you now.” Twilight listened to Duncan’s words, but could scarcely believe them. Ponyspawn blood was lethal to anypony who somehow got the vile substance into their own blood and now Duncan wanted them to willingly drink the Taint.

“Ponyspawn blood is what makes a Grey Warden,” Applejack said, “This is how we can sense the ponyspawn, and become immune to their Taint. It also let’s us fight the Archdemon, otherwise that critter is near unstoppable.”

“Not all who drink the blood will survive,” continued Duncan, “And those who do will be forever changed. Our cutie marks are the most noticeable to outsiders. This is why the Joining is a secret. It is our sacrifice we make to stand against the evil tide.”

Duncan bowed his head. “Since the first Joining, these words have been spoken during the ceremony. Applejack, please.”

The orange earth pony bowed her head. Her words were clear, proper, and most important, reverent. “Join us, brothers and sisters. Join us in the shadows where we remain vigilant. Join us as we carry the duty that cannot be forsworn. And should you perish, know that your sacrifice will not be forgotten. And that one day we shall join you.”

Ser Magni looked over to the chalice nervously then back to Twilight and Digger. Applejack’s words resonated to all of them. *The duty that cannot be forsworn*. Once a Grey Warden, always a Grey Warden. She looked at Applejack’s cutie mark, the three apples over a grey shield. The unicorn swallowed as Duncan stepped aside to allow a clear path to the chalice. It was time.

“Digger,” Duncan said “Step forward”. The tomb robber slowly approached the chalice, looking down on the contents. With both hooves holding the chalice, Digger brought the blood to his lips and drank. He set down the cup then turned towards Twilight and the others.

Digger suddenly convulsed, holding a hoof against his chest as he coughed and groaned in pain. He fell to his knees, holding his hooves to his head before looking up at Twilight. His eyes rolled back into his head as he growled in his suffering.

"I am sorry, Digger." Twilight heard Duncan speak but could not look away as the brown earth pony stretched out his hoof, begging for help before finally collapsing. The unicorn breathed heavily as she looked at Digger's chest, hoping for a sign of life. But there was none, and Digger was dead. She looked to Applejack for reassurance, but the young Warden said nothing, only looking on with a stern face.

Duncan turned his attention to the blue coated knight. "Step forward, Magni," he continued, motioning towards the chalice. Unlike Digger, Ser Magni took a step back, drawing his large sword.

"I can't do this," Ser Magni pleaded through the sword-bit, "If I had known...I have a wife...I will soon have a child!"

"There is no turning back, Magni." Duncan advanced towards the knight slowly. Never had Twilight seen Duncan's eyes like this, eyes filled with duty as well as remorse well hidden, but still there.

"I can't sacrifice myself...This is too much, you ask more than I can give! Please!"

Duncan drew his sword and continued to step forward. Twilight wanted to stop him, but Applejack's strong hoof held her back, while her strong eyes told her not to interject. Ser Magni attacked, swinging his sword towards Duncan's neck, but the old stallion parried it away easily before moving in for the kill. His sword found its mark, sinking into the earth pony's chest.

"I am sorry, Magni," Duncan said into the knight's ear before pulling his sword out of Ser Magni. Magni gasped his final breath before falling into a

pool of his own blood. The elder Warden turned to Twilight. Her heart raced as he motioned towards the chalice.

“Step forward, Twilight Sparkle.’ Twilight looked at Duncan, then to Applejack, then to the chalice. Death by the Taint, death by Duncan or become a Grey Warden. It was now, or very truly never.

Twilight took the chalice in her hooves. The black blood swished about in the cup as she looked down at the contents. Holding her breath, the unicorn drank from the cup, feeling the thick fluid slowly make its way down her throat. Every taste was foul and painful, as if a thousand knives were scraping their way down her neck into her stomach.

Her entire body felt like it was on fire. But she did not wretch or cough, instead feeling a fierce pain in her head. She held a hoof against her forehead before her eyes rolled back and the pain increased tenfold. Her vision blurred, then faded into the sight of a large battlefield.

Twilight looked on at the image of a great and terrible beast. A monster with long bat wings, a powerful tail, and sharp fangs. A dragon fully grown and horrible, yet also twisted, the malice from the dragon permeating the air around it. The dragon looked at Twilight Sparkle and roared before she fell into oblivion.

“It is finished. Welcome.”

Chapter 4

The Battle of Ostequus

“Twilight? Twilight, are you alright? Can you hear me?”

Twilight groaned as she slowly opened her eyes to see the sky lit red by the setting sun. Standing over her were Spike and Applejack, both looking concerned as she wobbled to her hooves. Her vision was blurred and she could still taste the foul ponyspawn blood on her tongue. She gagged again at the thought, before realizing what had happened.

Digger died when he drank the ponyspawn blood. Ser Magni was killed by Duncan for refusing to drink. She remembered putting her lips to the chalice and feeling the taint enter her blood. She remembered the hot flashes, seeing images of a large black tunnel filled with ponyspawn. She remembered the face and especially the roar of a twisted dragon. Above all, she remembered the pain that overpowered all her senses.

The unicorn looked at Spike feeling regret for what she would have put him under if she had not survived the Joining. Twilight saw Digger die horribly, slowly, painfully. Ser Magni refused to drink forcing Duncan to kill him to preserve the Grey Warden secrets. If she had refused to drink, or if the taint had killed her, what would have happened to Spike? Would he even know what had killed her?

Applejack was calling her name, but Twilight ignored her as she wandered about the orchard in a daze. So many emotions rushed over her: fear, anger, happiness. What was she supposed to feel? What was she supposed to think? All the death she had witnessed was too much, and soon there would be more. Much more.

A soft hoof laid itself on Twilight's shoulder. The support was enough to bring the unicorn back to reality. Applejack's soft smile allowed Twilight to breathe steadily again.

"I know a lot happened to ya in the last couple a days," she said, "But you have to get a hold of yerself. I know you saw a lot, but everything was necessary. Duncan's been doing this for a long time; he knows how the Joining goes about. He didn't want Digger to die, he wanted recruits. He didn't want to kill Ser Magni, but the secrets have to be protected, ye hear?"

"Do you want to know what Duncan did after your Joining, after making sure you were alive? I saw him pray. An' not just some weak oath, but actually recitin' the Chant of the Sun and Moon. He only does that when someone fails the Joining."

"Look at your cutie mark," Applejack pointed at Twilight's flank, "Because you are a Grey Warden, and that means you're family now, to me and to Duncan."

Twilight turned her head to look at her cutie mark. Her stars were still there, but now they were the emblem of a grey shield, a reminder of the Joining and the mark that would be recognized throughout the world that she was a Grey Warden. Now it was her calling to bring the battle to the ponyspawn and do whatever it takes to end the Blight once and for all.

Duncan's words echoed in Twilight's head. *We do what we must, sacrifice what we must.* Now those words rang true and gave greater appreciation as to who they Grey Wardens were and how much they lost simply by becoming Wardens.

"Applejack, thank you," Twilight said sincerely, "I...never felt so conflicted. But I'm fine now. I hope."

Applejack shook her head. “Shucks, darlin’, I’m just trying to help my friends. But I know you ain’t fine, I wasn’t after my Joining. You probably felt some things you never wanted to feel, and saw some things that you wish you never laid eyes on. Duncan and me and the rest of the Wardens, we’ll help you get through it all.”

Just then Twilight’s stomach growled, with Applejack giving a short giggle. “Now that is something I remember real well about the Joining,” she said, “And that’s a huge appetite! Hey Spike, bring over a couple baskets of apples!”

Spike pushed a large basket of apples towards Twilight before going back for another. At the sight of the fruit she became hungrier than facing the Hunger demon in the Harrowing. Twilight dove into the basket of apples, happily munching away and savouring the juices from the feast. For a moment, all the violet unicorn could think about was eating.

“How long was I out?” Twilight asked in between her apples.

“When I woke up, you were still shaking in your sleep,” Spike said, “What happened to you? Applejack won’t tell me anything except you’re now a Warden. Did they do some magical stuff or something?”

“You could say that,” responded Twilight, “Let’s say they have something very similar to the Harrowing.”

After her stomach was filled with delicious apples, Applejack motioned for Twilight to follow her. With Spike on her back, Twilight kept up with her fellow Warden through the army camp. If it was bustling when she first came to Ostequus, then the pacing now was frantic. Soldiers sharpened their swords, reinforced their armour, and found their officers as they returned to their proper formations.

They moved through the camp quickly until they arrived at the tent where King Blueblood, Duncan, and others were looking over a map, likely

discussing strategy. “King Blueblood is gonna attack the bulk of the horde before they get to Ostequus,” Applejack explained. “Duncan argued that they should wait for the reinforcements from Arl Macintosh, but the King won’t listen. Duncan gathered the rest of the Wardens for the battle, but he has something else in mind for us.”

They approached the leaders who turned to greet the Wardens. Standing tall before them was Loghoof Mac Tir, the Teryn of Glenwell. He stood larger than Duncan and Blueblood with a grey coat and a black mane tied in braids, framing his harsh eyes. His cutie mark, two crossed Equestrian flags, showed themselves prominently on his hide. He looked Twilight over, silently judging her in a manner not of praise, but of great expectations for the coming battle. She had never felt so small than right now, to be judged by a hero in the war against the Filesians.

“You are the new Grey Warden, yes?” Loghoof asked, “I have known unicorns who could reduce entire armies to dust, and create such wonders that you lose breath just by gazing at them. I am not a religious pony, but a pragmatic one. I know that unicorns have a use, but are also ponies themselves, and should be treated as any other Equestrian. I look forward to the coming battles along side you.”

“Good, you are both here,” Duncan said, taking Loghoof’s attention away. Twilight gave thanks that he did not mention the Joining, not knowing what she would say to the elder Warden. “We are preparing to attack the ponyspawn directly. There is still no sign of the Archdemon, but if we can cause enough enemy casualties perhaps their dreaded master will reveal itself.”

Blueblood cantered about with pride. “Isn’t this going to be glorious? The king of Equestria and the Grey Wardens fighting side by side, just like in the legends!. Our names will be sung for all time from the highest towers in Trotterim.”

“Your majesty,” Loghoof interrupted King Blueblood’s cheer with a stern eye, “All this talk of glory and legends will be your undoing. We must account for reality.”

“Yes, yes,” the King almost dismissed Loghoof’s words, but instead turned to the map of the battlefield, “I have heard the strategy many times. I shall lead the army in the front lines, with the Grey Wardens covering the eastern flank. When the beacon in the old Imperium observatory is lit, your armies will join us from the west, to complete a pincer formation. Quite boring-”

“Quite practical,” Loghoof corrected, his irritation made known, “As long as the beacon is lit on time, the strategy will work.”

“In that case, we will not need Arl Macintosh’s knights or the chevaliers from Filais! I can’t wait to see the looks on their faces when we beat back the Blight on this night!” There was something concerning about King Blueblood’s bravado, Twilight noted. Cocky, rather than overconfident. He was not expecting anything to go wrong and with such a chaotic foe as the ponyspawn, pragmatism would likely win the day.

Loghoof seemed to agree, though mention of Filais filled his eyes with anger. He had fought a bloody war against the Fillesians and no doubt wanted nothing to do with them. The idea that they were sending their armies to reinforce Equestria likely had the Teryn fuming inside.

“Twilight Sparkle, Applejack,” Duncan called for their attention, “Lighting the beacon for the Teryn’s forces is of the highest priority. That is why I trust the both of you to go to the observatory and light the beacon fires on time. There should not be any ponyspawn incursion in that area, but be ready for anything. It is important that you succeed.”

Twilight looked at the map where they discussed their battle plans. It was a sound strategy, and the observatory was just over the large bridge she and

Duncan had crossed to get into Ostequus. She turned to look towards the observatory, taking in the grand scale of structure.

Movement was seen on the top of the observatory by earth pony soldiers. There was no doubt that a significant enough flame could be seen all around Ostequus and beyond.

Applejack also looked at the map and then turned to Duncan. "I know it's a big job for us," she began, "But shouldn't all of us Wardens stick together? You need all the numbers you can get out there, and if the Archdemon appears-"

"You will leave the Archdemon to me." Duncan's words struck hard, brooking no argument. "This task needs to be completed, and I can only trust you two with this task. The soldiers of Equestria have their duties, as we have ours. We do what we must, and what you must do is light the beacon. Is that understood?"

Applejack stared hard at Duncan, but eventually relented. "If you say so," she said, "We'll make sure all of Equestria can see the beacon, come bad apples and high water!"

Duncan nodded, returning his attention to the king and the teryn. Dismissed, the young Wardens bowed and left, returning to the orchard. Twilight looked up, and could see Luna in the sky, as well as all her stars. She gave a quick prayer of protection to the Alicorn Sisters, hoping that they would see the Warden's battle through the night.

As they waited for the King's warhorn to sound, signalling the start of the battle, Spike sat himself on Twilight's back. "You don't think you're going off into battle without me this time, do you?" the baby dragon asked.

"Spike, you can't come, it's too dangerous." Twilight already had the beacon to worry herself over, making sure Spike was safe would not help matters.

“Think about it Twilight,” Spike continued, “What if the ponyspawn get through into Ostequus. I’d rather be safe with two Grey Wardens than in the middle of some old ruins and a battlefield. Also, you’re going to the observatory, and what better place than that to have the best view of the action?”

While Twilight could not doubt that he would be most safe with her and Applejack, she was not pleased with the little dragon’s infatuation with the upcoming battle. Still, it was better to bring him with them to the observatory than leave him in Ostequus. Twilight agreed, and the group made their way towards the bridge from the ruins towards the derelict tower.

* * *

Everypony was ready as they stood in the rank and file. Looking over the Wilds, Duncan and King Blueblood watched for the first sign of the invading hordes. The Grey Warden looked at the Equestrian king, who appeared the very image of regality and courage in the face of evil.

He made for a good picture, but one who’s words could be counted on one hoof, rather than a thousand. Pompous. Foolish. Cocky. He expected the battle to be won like a child expects a hero to vanquish the dragon and rescue the damsel. Thankfully, the bulk of the Equestrian forces were being led by a much more sensible stallion. Teryn Loghoof knew his way around the battlefield better than many generals, though his reluctance to accept Filesian reinforcements, even Filesian Grey Wardens, proved troubling.

At last they saw movement in the Wilds. The first wave of ponyspawn galloped through the foliage, trampling over every blade of grass as they rushed towards the waiting Equestrian army. Hundreds of screamers filled the sky, screeching in unison in a terrible medley. The King shook as he watched the tide of monsters advance ever closer.

“Your majesty,” Duncan said calmly, “You must give the command.”

“I know!” Blueblood barked back, his eyes wide. “War dogs! Go! Go!”

The snapping of the war dogs surged forward, biting and killing any ponyspawn they could get their powerful jaws around. However the hounds were quickly felled as the ponyspawn gave no heed for their fellows but only to their desire to kill and feast.

“Archers!” Blueblood shouted. The earth pony archers readied their bows and let loose a volley of arrows. The piercing rain crashed first into the screamers, sending their bodies down onto their monstrous cousins as more arrows sailed towards the ponyspawn. But still they charged ever closer, their hungry fangs now in sight.

Ponies drew their weapons as the ponyspawn drew nearer. Duncan looked to his Grey Wardens and nodded to his fellows, each Warden ready to fight to the last. “For Equestria!” shouted the King, enticing his soldiers to roar with him as they charged to meet the hellish foe. Despite this, King Blueblood fell back closer to rear lines.

Duncan cursed as he unsheathed his sword. The king was not only a glory hound but a coward. No matter, he thought as he charged with his fellow Wardens, the day can only be won with sacrifice, not glory. He looked up to the observatory, still unlit. Celestia and Luna protect you both.

* * *

“I thought Duncan said there wasn’t supposed to be any ponyspawn!” Twilight yelled as she and Applejack rushed through pony soldiers and ponyspawn beasts fighting on the way to the observatory.

“They’re monsters, but that means they ain’t stupid either!” Applejack shouted back. “We have to get to the tower and light the beacon!”

The observatory towered above the two Grey Wardens as they galloped towards it. Despite the battles being waged around them or because of them, Applejack continued to surge forward, with Twilight looking desperately at the soldiers being overwhelmed by ponyspawn.

“We have to help them!” Twilight shouted over the noise of combat.

“Ain’t any time!” Applejack called back, “We have to get to that tower and light the signal fire. They have their duties, and we got ours!”

Inside the observatory was no better than the outside. The locks and donlocks were ravenously eating the soldiers in the tower, but the sounds of galloping hoof steps averted their attention to new prey. With a shout, Applejack and the other soldiers charged towards the enemy, while Twilight began to channel spells.

“Those are the ponyspawn?” Spike shouted, sounding afraid for the first time in his life. A pang of regret for bringing the baby dragon to the observatory distracted Twilight only for a moment, but the ponyspawn would not wait for the dragon to calm down. As she concentrated her staff to fire bolts of arcane energy at ponyspawn archers, the unicorn began casting a spell of ice to blast in front of her.

Before the cone of cold was unleashed, Twilight wanted everyone out of the way. “Move!” she shouted, and as Applejack and the rest of their soldier company rushed to her sides, she blasted the ponyspawn with a powerful gust of magical cold energies. Any of the creatures not frozen solid or made brittle by the arcane ice was slowed to a crawl, making them easy targets for swords and maces.

With the enemy dead, the soldiers galloped to the door to seal it against further attacks. The barricade would not last long, but it was hopefully enough to slow the ponyspawn. Twilight, Applejack, and a few other soldiers began a mad rush towards the top of the observatory. Corpses of ponies and ponyspawn alike littered the ground of the tower as they

climbed the staircase. At the top of the of the observatory was the beacon ready to be lit, as well as a dozen ponyspawn being lead by one much different than any Twilight had seen so far.

This ponyspawn resembled a pony much more closely than the other breeds. The monster still had the same chitin hide and sharp teeth, but its eyes were clear and focused compared to its savage brethren. What was most striking was the single horn upon its head, curving upward and already pulsing with magic. The ornlock emissary, as Twilight remembered it was called, snarled and hissed at the ponies before rearing on its hind legs and letting loose a torrent of magic fire.

Applejack and Twilight moved out of the way, while two other ponies were not so fortunate. The fire engulfed them whole as they burned alive, their screams and prayers to Celestia and Luna being unheard. The other ponyspawn began their attack, charging forward into the soldier's lines, fangs eager for flesh.

The ornlock's horn began to glow again as a large orb of fire formed in front of its horn. Twilight immediately began to counter the spell, raising a barrier around that engulfed Applejack, the soldiers, and some of the ponyspawn as well. The fireball crashed into the arcane barrier, flooding the area with fire and consuming many of the ponyspawn not inside the shielded area.

The shock of the attack left Twilight gasping as the shield failed. Applejack slew a donlock nearby, but they were still outnumbered. Another soldier fell as a thelock jumped and bit into his neck. The ornlock was also preparing another fireball to be launched, not caring if it burned friend and foe alike.

"Applejack!" Twilight yelled, realizing just who the other Warden was, "Forget the grunts and help me deal with the emissary!"

"How?" Applejack called back, parrying a blow from one ponyspawn before bucking another that was trying to flank her.

“You were a former templar! Do something!”

Applejack turned her attention to the ornlock. As she galloped towards her, the irises of her eyes changed colour from brilliant green turned pitch black. Twilight had seen other templar do the same when they used their abilities against rogue unicorns and was grateful that the blonde-mane Warden had not forgotten her templar training. She was using a nullifying magic that only templar knew how to use, something separate from the magic of the Fade. The fireball fizzled out of existence and the emissary looked at its attacker with surprise.

Before the ponyspawn could bring another spell into being, Applejack swung her body with her sword in her mouth, piercing the ornlock's neck. As black blood flowed from the monsters mouth, Applejack wrenched her sword free. Twilight turned to see the last of their soldier companions fell, while only two more ponyspawn remained on their hooves. A moment's thought brought forth two arcs of magical energy from her horn and her staff, blasting the ponyspawn and sending them flying into the wall.

When she was certain that the magical attacks had done their work, she walked over to Applejack, who was covered in her own blood as well as that of the ponyspawn. “Are you OK?” she asked.

“Right as rain,” Applejack answered, though her heavy breathing betrayed her fatigue, “Hurry over to the beacon, we need that fire lit!”

Twilight rushed over to the large stack of logs and began to channel a small flame from her magic. Fire was never her specialty, but she could create enough to set the beacon alight. The fire quickly blazed as light covered the entire room and spilled outside of the observatory.

Celebrations were short lived as the floor and walls around them began to shake. The door suddenly burst open as ponyspawn spilled through the entrance, followed by the largest creature she had ever seen. It did not stand on four legs like the rest of the ponyspawn, but instead stood on two hooves. With massive muscles ending in heavy hands, the beasts head let

out a howl that shook everything. The head was adorned with large curled horns, and through its nose was a metal ring.

“By Celestia,” Applejack gasped, “A minotaur.”

Not even in her nightmares in the Fade had she ever seen a creature as terrifying as the minotaur. Twilight wanted to scream, but was too frightened to even breathe. All she could think about was its massive hands, horrid teeth, and prayers to Celestia for a way to escape.

Twilight said nothing as both Wardens backed away from the large force of ponyspawn. Their archers began to fire, one arrow embedding itself in Applejack’s side, felling the pony instantly. Another arrow found its way through Twilight’s robe. She already felt faint as the pain was overwhelming her senses. Poison, she thought as she fell to her side.

Spike called her name as the ponyspawn advanced, the minotaur’s razor sharp teeth soon in close view.

As she looked out towards the night sky, a brilliant flash of light shone through, with the shadow of great wings flying towards the observatory.

Twilight couldn’t help but smile as she faded away. Celestia would not abandon them. She couldn’t...

* * *

“My lord, the beacon has been lit. What are your orders?” Ser Sunsword looked at Teryn Loghoof obediently. The old stallion warrior looked across to the battlefield, to where the Grey Wardens were fighting the ponyspawn. They would soon be overwhelmed. He saw King Blueblood issuing orders to his army, but he too would soon be overwhelmed. They would all be overwhelmed if Loghoof’s army did not move to join them.

“Signal the retreat,” he said at last.

“My Lord?” Ser Sunsword looked at the teryn with surprise. Loghoof’s fierce eyes bore down on his chosen knight, allowing no discussion.

“Do as I command.”

Ser Sunsword appeared stricken, but carried out her lord’s order. “You heard the teryn!” She shouted to the gathered army, “All units fall back. We return to Trotterim. Move out!”

The loyal knight gave one more look to Loghoof before joining the retreating army. The teryn continued to watch the battle unfold, not allowing his inner rage to show on his face.

I am sorry, old friend. He thought back on Blueblood’s father, his comrade-in-arms, his sworn brother who he had fought and bleed and suffered beside during the days of the Filesian occupation. Your son would give Equestria to our enemies. I cannot allow that to happen. When it is time to meet my punishment at Celestia’s hooves, I will accept it. But for now, I do what I must to protect Equestria.

Loghoof turned his gaze to where the Grey Wardens were fighting, and losing. “Die well, Wardens,” he said before rejoining his army to the march back to Trotterim. There would be much to do, and little time to do it.

* * *

Duncan had been a Grey Warden for over twenty-five years. He had fought against ponyspawn as well as fellow ponies in his lifetime. He had trained Grey Wardens, and had seen them fall in the line of duty. All that kept pushing Duncan forward during his life was the knowledge that he was putting the darkness to the sword and that he was giving respite to a world plagued with evil, a world that did not need the assistance of the ponyspawn to help it in the downward spiral.

But even he was a simple mortal pony, who put his faith into others. He wanted to believe in Digger and Magni and that they would pass the

Joining and become full Grey Wardens. Despite his dislike of the colt, he wanted to believe King Blueblood would see this battle to its end. He trusted that Teryn Loghoof would bring the much needed reinforcements and force the ponyspawn back into the Wilds.

The beacon fire in the observatory was blazing. The flame could be seen for furlongs around. Ponies cheered as the light shone across the battlefield. Teryn Loghoof's soldiers would descend and help them rid the land of the ponyspawn. The battle would be won, and the Archdemon would reveal itself.

Teryn Loghoof's soldiers did not come.

The battle plunged into utter chaos. Whatever progress they were making was broken as morale shattered. Ponies turned tail to flee, but were chased and killed by the ponyspawn. The battlefront was replaced by mayhem as the monsters pushed their attack.. Duncan and the rest of the Grey Wardens fell back as they tried to hold the line.

A thundering roar signalled the beginning of the end. From the trees came a monstrous minotaur, as large as any tree, rampaging towards the front lines. Crushing ally and foe alike, the minotaur made its way to Blueblood's position, the king desperate for an escape route. The king made a feeble attack with his sword, only for the giant ponyspawn to bat the weapon away.

Duncan rushed forward, sword in his teeth trying to reach the monster in time to save Blueblood. But as the minotaur's giant hand closed in on the king, the elder Warden knew it was too late. With the king held in its grasp, the minotaur roared into Blueblood's face, his intricate golden helm falling to the ground. Blueblood whimpered, desperate for a way out the creature's grasp.

The minotaur squeezed, crushing Blueblood in his hand. With a careless toss, the king's body sailed over the field before landing in a crumpled

heap. Duncan leapt forward, sword in his mouth as he pierced the minotaur's chest. The massive ponyspawn hollered in pain, swinging its arms at it's chest to get rid of the old earth pony. Duncan swung with the creature's own momentum, driving his sword ever lower towards the monster's heart.

With a shout, Duncan seized the opportunity, plunging the sword deeper into the minotaur's chest cavity as black blood gushed from the wounds. The minotaur gave one last gurgling shout before collapsing. Duncan released his hold on his blade, but did not move in time for the foul beast to land on top of his hind legs.

Duncan gasped as he struggled to pull himself forward with his front hooves. His hind legs were broken and his sword was lost. He looked up to see the last of the Grey Wardens and King Blueblood's army struck down in front of his eyes as more ponyspawn charged into the battlefield. He looked up to the observatory, and to the flame that should have signalled victory.

Twilight Sparkle. Applejack. By Celestia and Luna, please live. Duncan turned his gaze towards the advancing horde. A thelock galloped towards him, a savage blade in its teeth.

May the light of the Sun and Moon protect you both. You must not fai-

Chapter 5

You Must Gather Your Party Before Venturing Forth

Twilight slowly opened her eyes to see a haze of white around her. *This is it*, she thought as she looked up to the blur that was the white roof, *I've died and gone to meet Celestia. Not even a week since the Harrowing and it's all over. I should have never have joined the Grey Wardens. I should never have listened to Spike and left the Tower.*

Spike. The unicorn opened her eyes wide, looking around for the baby dragon and praying that if she really was dead, he did not suffer the same fate as well. But as her vision cleared, Twilight saw that she was not in a simple white void, but in a beautifully decorated room. Sleeping in a basket was Spike who had only minor scrapes along his scales. The violet unicorn looked down to see that she was in a bed with white sheets and fluffy pillows. To her side was the apostate Rarity, sipping from a levitating tea cup.

"Do you often find yourself in a situation where you need to be knocked unconscious to fall asleep?" Rarity asked before lifting another tea cup and moving it towards Twilight with her magic, "Drink this. You'll feel better after a quick pick-me-up, darling."

Twilight took a sip of the tea, its affects working immediately. She felt calm as she tried to recollect what happened. Applejack was with her in the observatory and she was able to light the beacon fire. Then came the minotaur and the ponyspawn archers. Then the brilliant flash of white as large wings swooped towards them.

"What happened to us?" asked Twilight as she rolled off the bed onto her hooves, "And where's Applejack? Is she alright?"

“Your boorish friend is outside with Mother,” Rarity answered, “I think she is contemplating falling on her sword. I certainly hope she does it well into the Wilds where I don’t have to find it. As for what happened, you can thank Mother for your rescue. She turned into a great eagle and swooped into the tower and brought the three of you here in her talons.”

As Twilight stretched her legs, her staff floated from the corner of the room to her side. Though her smile was weak, it was genuine that the staff was not destroyed in the fight. She would have to thank Rarity and her mother for the timely rescue and for nursing the Warden’s health.

“What about the battle?” Twilight asked as she laid another blanket overtop of Spike.

“Of Ostequus, you should know the battle was lost.” Disbelief filled her eyes as Twilight took in the information. The battle was lost and everypony was dead? King Blueblood, Teryn Loghoof, all of the Grey Wardens...

Celestia’s sun, Twilight thought, *Duncan*. Before Rarity could say anything Twilight rushed out of the decorated room and into the complete contrast. She barely registered the difference in the way the room looked before finding the door leading outside. As she stepped out into the Wilds, Applejack stood there looking out into the distance towards Ostequus. The blonde mare looked defeated, but when she turned to see Twilight the earth pony leaped forward, embracing Twilight with her legs.

“By Celestia’s an’ Luna’s an’ every other holy ponies hindquarters! I thought you’d never wake up!” Despite only knowing Applejack for a couple of days, Twilight knew there was a bond between them simply by both being Grey Wardens. The blood was their strength and Twilight could feel what Applejack was feeling as if it were ambient noise. She could feel Applejack’s sincere gratefulness that Twilight was still alive, but also the despair at the loss of the Grey Wardens in Ostequus.

Knowing of the defeat at Ostequus, Twilight wondered what Applejack and she would do now. Was there anything else Duncan was supposed to teach Twilight about being a Grey Warden? Were there anymore Grey Wardens in Equestria, and if not, would it be up to two ponies to defeat the entire Blight?

“Everypony’s gone,” Applejack said at last as she let go of Twilight, adjusting her farmer’s hat, “The King. The Wardens. Duncan. We’re the last of the order in Equestria, Twilight, and I don’t know how to make heads or tails out of any of this.”

Anger now surged inside Applejack. Twilight took a step back as the earth pony let loose all her frustrations. “Rarity’s ma told me all about what happened. Loghoof quit the field! We lit that beacon and he ran off like a coward! It’s because of him that we lost! It’s because of him that the King and the army and the Wardens are all dead! It’s because of him that Duncan...Duncan...”

Applejack slumped to her knees, her head low. “I owe everything to Duncan, ya hear? He was a good pony, who deserved better than the end he got at the hooves of a traitor. Oh, when I see Loghoof, I’m gonna buck him right into the ponyspawn, just you wait!”

“I understand you’re angry, but we need to calm down and think before we do anything brash,” Twilight said, “We need to figure out what we are going to do next. Do you know of any other Grey Wardens near to us who can help? What about the Filesians?”

“No can do,” Applejack shook her head, “Rarity’s ma said she saw Loghoof’s messengers turn away the Filesian reinforcements both chevyleer and Warden alike. We’re in worse shape than a rickety barn, and the ponyspawn are creeping north.”

Twilight thought hard on their predicament, but the situation seemed hopeless. The greatest force that existed solely for the purpose of fighting

the ponyspawn was no more in Equestria, and Loghoof was preventing their fellows from Filais to assist against the Blight.

"I don't know what we can do," Twilight said, "We are just two ponies against the ponyspawn."

"Is this the character of the Grey Wardens these days? I had expected ponies with a bit more...mettle. Ah but so much changes in the years."

Both Wardens turned to see an older unicorn approach. Like Rarity, the unicorn had a white coat and a violet mane, but age had taken its turn. In contrast to her daughter, the elder's eyes were yellow and haggard, and she was dressed in a ratty cloak. She carried a saddlebag to her side, filled with mushrooms and roots. Her cutie mark was an odd one; a red silhouette in the shape of a winged dragon.

Twilight backed away at the sight of Rarity's mother. Her sensitivity to magic peaked around the elder mare, the very air around her crackling with magic. Rarity's mother was old, but also very powerful. She remembered what Rarity had said, how her mother turned into a giant eagle to rescue them from the observatory in Ostequus. None of the books Twilight had read in the Unicorn Tower had ever spoken of a pony changing their shape.

The old legends in the books mentioned the "Mares of the Mire", an old Bronco tale of unicorn witches who lived in the Potpourri Wilds, snatching up foals and putting them in soups. The presence of such an old mare made Twilight wonder if the legends were true.

"Thank you for your assistance," Twilight said, "It's a pleasure to finally meet you, miss..."

"Names are pretty, but useless," the mare answered looking both Wardens over, her yellow eyes disturbing Twilight the most, "I have had many names in my life, including 'That cursed witch' and 'the old hag who talks too much.' The Broncos had a name for me once. They called me 'Flemeth'. If you must call me by name, that will do."

“Flemeth?” Applejack stared wide with Twilight doing the same. The name from the books, from the legends. Apparently Applejack had heard the stories too. “As in THE Flemeth? By Celestia, Rarity wasn’t the Mare of the Mire, you are.”

Flemeth laughed, a haunting laugh that left Twilight cold. “My daughter is skilled, and I have taught her what little magic I can impart to her, and that same magic I used has served you. ‘Mare of the Mire’ or not, you have been saved. What more could you ask.”

“I could ask why everything went to hay in a hoof basket,” Applejack scowled as she turned back towards Ostequus, “Why did Loghoof betray us, betray the King?”

“Perhaps this Loghoof believes the Blight is just another army he can outmatch, like playing pieces on a game board,” Flemeth spoke as she made her way towards the hut, “But he does not know the true threat of the Blight. Does not know the true evil that drives it onward with every step of their hooves. But this is only theory. No pony, no magic can truly tell the shadows within a pony’s heart, for those have greater depths than the deepest chasms of the Dark Tunnels.”

The Archdemon. The violet unicorn remembered all too well the vision she had seen in the Joining of the monster. The controlling force of the ponyspawn horde was still out there, but no one had said anything about its appearance. The dread leader of the evil army was still unaccounted for, and as long as the horde won battle after battle, it would likely not appear at all.

“If we are going to stop the Blight, then we are going to have to find the Archdemon.” Twilight knew her words were shaky at best, but she needed to put on a strong appearance not just for Applejack but for herself.

“Are you a few apples short of a bushel Twilight?” the earth pony said, “It’s just the two of us against an entire buckin’ Blight. The Grey Wardens in the past had the backing of entire armies from dozens of pony nations. And...and I don’t know how!”

Flemeth watched the two carefully before speaking. “How to raise an army, or how to kill the Archdemon. Two different questions, but the answers could turn the away the tide. I am sure there are some Grey Warden resources available to accomplish both.”

“Arl Macintosh!” Excitement rang in Applejack’s voice, “King Blueblood marched before the Arl’s reinforcements could arrive. He still has all his knights. We could petition him for help, I just know it. There’s no way no how he’ll stand for what Loghoof did.”

Realization struck Twilight as well. “What about the treaties that Duncan had us collect? Maybe we could use those as well!”

“Now there is a smart filly,” Flemeth said, “You’re welcome by the way.”

Applejack’s courage seemed to have been restored as a strategy was being formed between them. She dug out the old scrolls from her bag, grateful that they were undamaged from the battle, unfurling the contents. Twilight looked and read the contracts between the Grey Wardens and those who had signed the treaties.

“Good thinking there Twilight!” said Applejack, “We can go get help from the pegasi, the unicorns, the donkeys, and from all of Equestria itself! They’re right obligated to help us during a Blight! We can do this Twilight, we can raise an army and stand up against the ponyspawn.”

Twilight wanted to believe those words, but the task ahead was daunting. To raise an army against the Blight while Loghoof still had control of the land. To go to the furthest reaches of Equestria and into dangers unknown. Twilight levitated the treaties closer to herself so she could read them in

detail, but then a small diagram fell from scrolls, landing against Flemeth's hoof.

Before Twilight or Applejack could say anything, Flemeth picked up the diagram with her magic and brought it before her eyes. Surprise marked the old witch's features as she studied the parchment.

"Intriguing," she said at last before tucking the diagram back with the rest of the scrolls, "It would seem the Grey Wardens have access to much more than I gave them credit. That was an old diagram for a much older spell, so ancient I do not even know the words of such. Indeed, the words seem to come from the time of Luna, before her ascension."

Twilight looked at the diagram herself, but could not read the words. The ancient markings were much, much older than the treaties, and all she could make out were six points in a hexagram.

"This has to be important," she said after tucking the scrolls into her saddle bag, "We'll have to find a scholar of some sort who can read ancient Imperium or other dialects from the time of Luna. Before we go, thank you again for all your help Flemeth. If it weren't for you, we'd never have the treaties or our lives."

"No need to thank me, young one," Flemeth said with a smile that frightened Twilight more than assured her, "The Blight is as much a threat to me as it is to the rest of Equestria and the world. I simply made sure that the path you walk was not cut short. There is one more thing I can offer, to aid you in your quest."

As she spoke, Rarity left the little hut followed by Spike. "Twilight Sparkle!" Rarity called, "Your dragon was eating all my sapphires, and when I found him he only gives me these wide eyes."

"I apologized, milady," Spike said trailing behind, "I'll dig up more sapphires, and rubies, and even diamonds! Anything for you. Oh, hey

Twilight! Glad to see you awake. I was still conscious when Flemeth picked us up. She's pretty cool."

Twilight gaped while Flemeth laughed, this time a bit more jovial. "It would seem little Spike has taken a liking to Rarity. That is good, because she will be joining you in your journeys."

Everypony's eyes were wide with disbelief at Flemeth's statement. Twilight knew that Rarity was competent with her magic, but their journey would take them throughout Equestria. There would certainly be a lot of dirt, mud, and blood to tread through.

"Are my words mumbling in my old age?" Flemeth's smiled, "Besides young filly, you have been wanting to leave the Wilds for years, ever since you had one look at a Filesian noblewoman's gemmed dress. I have taught you everything I can, now is the opportunity you have waited for, and it is with these Wardens. They need you."

"Now wait just an apple buckin' minute," Applejack said, "I'm mighty grateful for all you've done for us Flemeth, and I'm not trying to look you in the mouth here, but we have enough troubles without adding an apostate to the list. Besides, what does miss fussy flank know about fighting ponyspawn?"

Rarity narrowed her eyes at Applejack. In response to the challenge, her horn glowed and the most exquisitely crafted staff floated from the hut to her side. Both magical foci glowed bright before an arc of lightning erupted, frying a nearby tree to cinders.

"Right. Point taken." Applejack took a step back as Rarity turned towards her mother.

"Mother, I'm not ready. I still have much to learn, and besides, going out there, with all the blood and the ponyspawn and who knows what other foulness will ruin all my hard work."

“You must be ready, child,” Flemeth said, “The Grey Wardens will need your help in defeating the Blight, lest it consume everything, including me. As for you Wardens, understand that I am sending with you that which I hold most dear, my only daughter to go into the dangerous world with you. This is not something I do lightly.”

Twilight understood completely what Flemeth was doing and appreciated the gesture, though she was still hesitant due to Rarity’s own reluctance. Still, she would not turn down aid now and Rarity had shown herself a capable unicorn. She had to be living in the Wilds and facing the dangers that hid in the wilderness.

“Mother, I disapprove of this course of action.” Rarity still resisted.

Flemeth laughed. “Of that I am certain,” she said, turning her gaze back to the Wardens, “And I am sure these two will not hear the end of that by journey’s end. But it is done, and you all must go. You have appointments to keep, and a Blight to stop. I’d offer you luck, but it would seem more prudent to ignore such fancies, and simply write your own fate.”

Rarity hanged her head in defeat, only to immediately steel her gaze northward and walk with a steady gait towards the edge of the Wilds. With Spike on her back, Twilight followed the white unicorn, with Applejack trailing behind her. Flemeth watched as they left before turning back towards the hut, a smile on her lips.

“Go Wardens. You have your appointments to keep...as I have mine.”

The party travelled north through the Wilds, which were mercifully uneventful. They were also silent as Rarity cleared the path to the edge of the Potpourri Wilds. No pony said anything as they moved forward, keeping their thoughts private. Twilight gave more thought to the magical diagram.

Flemeth had said it was as old as the time of Luna, so it was a good estimate that the diagram was written in the old Imperium dialect. Twilight hoped they could find a scholar who could decipher the old text.

As they travelled on the road, the lavender unicorn looked over at Applejack. She was still looking back at Ostequus, likely still thinking back about the battle and the loss of Duncan. Twilight wished there was something she could do for Applejack, but the best she could come up with was to forge ahead and keep the Grey Warden's duties the priority of the group. It would be what Duncan would want.

The dirt path from the Wilds lead to a remnant of the old Imperium Road, a paved road with some stone pillars where shelter used to be supported. Now it was just another ruin, similar to Ostequus, old but still used. On the other end of the road sat a small village, which according to Twilight's map was the township of Ponyring.

"This quaint little village is where I went to get all my materials for my work," Rarity explained, "We can gather supplies here as well as information. Although I believe we should be quick."

Rarity pointed her hoof towards the village. Many ponies were hitching carts and loading them with all their belongings. Word must have spread of the defeat at Ostequus, and now the ponies of Ponyring were forced to abandon their village before the ponyspawn claimed it as well. Earth ponies young and old were preparing their wagons for their journeys to escape the horde. Twilight wondered where exactly they would go.

The village of Ponyring was bustling with activity as refugees rushed about, getting ready for the roads ahead. Guards tried to maintain order as tempers flared, no doubt fuelled by fear and worries. The Chantry had a line up in front of its doors, and priestesses flanked by the templar gave blessings of protection to anypony who sought it. Faith was a powerful motivator and everypony needed whatever reassurance they could find during uncertain times.

Silver and gold were also powerful motivators. Merchants who hawked their wares in Ponyring were charging exorbitant prices for the necessities of travel, such as food and healing poultices. Twilight wanted to stop the extortion, but Applejack stopped her and shook her head sadly. They had to help everypony from the greater threat.

“Let’s try the tavern,” Applejack suggested, “Lot’s o’ travellers stop by hankerin’ for some sweet apple cider. We might be able to find out what’s goin’ on around Equestria.”

The tavern was packed, filled with ponies of all kinds with the smell of cider thick in the air. Many ponies were discussing where they would go during the Blight and about news from the bannorns. Twilight overheard two ponies talk about Bann Braeburn heading to Trotterim with the rest of the nobility after being summoned by Loghoof.

“Loghoof’s trying to get the support of the nobility,” Applejack explained, “With the king gone, he’ll likely prop himself as regent, unless Teryn Highland steps in to stop him.”

Two armoured ponies approached Twilight and the others. They wore the emblem of Loghoof’s cutie mark and both had sinister grins on their faces. “Well look what we have here,” said one, “The last of the Grey Wardens. Teryn Loghoof has declared you all traitors for killing our beloved King, and that means quite the bounty is on your hides.”

“Traitors!?” Applejack reared, placing herself in front of Loghoof’s soldiers, “It was Loghoof who betrayed the king! Who betrayed the Wardens! I should tan your hide for even thinkin’ like that!”

“Um...excuse me...”

Before Twilight could interrupt, a pony in a yellow coat dressed in the robes of a Chantry sister approached. There was a bow and quiver of arrows hanging to her sides. She flipped her pink mane back as she looked at the

soldiers. "These ponies are probably just more refugees," she said in a quiet voice, "It would be nice if you could just leave them be. Please?"

"They are traitors to Equestria and should be punished as such," the larger of the two soldiers responded, "Stay out of our way, Sister, or you will meet the same fate."

"Are we threatening the Chantry now?" said the smaller, "I don't know about you, but that seems like attracting the wrath of Celestia by attacking her priestesses."

The yellow pony nodded. "Your friend is right," she said, "Also you are outnumbered. Two unicorns and an armed earth pony, and though I abhor violence, I've learned that sometimes it is necessary."

The larger soldier grimaced as he realized the implications of his situation. With a loud snort, he and his fellow turned tail and left the tavern peacefully. Applejack shouted oats that Loghoof would pay for Ostequus, but Twilight was more interested in the Sister who helped them.

"Thank you for assistance Sister..."

The pony turned away, her cheeks flushed with colour. "I'm Fluttershy," she said at last, "I was looking all over Ponyring for you, but didn't know how to approach you all."

"How did you know we are the Grey Wardens?" Applejack asked after she was done yelling at Loghoof's minions.

Fluttershy pointed a hoof towards Spike. "They said the Grey Wardens have a baby dragon with them and not many ponies have baby dragons as companions."

Spike smoothed his head scales as he smiled. "It's good being one of a kind. Though I suppose we do stick out like a sore thumb thanks to me."

Twilight rolled her eyes, then looked over Fluttershy once more. Why was a Chantry Sister following their group? Did the Chantry as a whole want something from the Grey Wardens, or was it something of a personal interest? While Twilight had no ill will towards the Chantry, their priestesses and templar often had ill will towards unicorns and magic in general due to the actions of the Imperium.

There was something else off about Fluttershy. Her soft spoken nature was a contrast to that of the loud and brash forcefulness of Equestrian ponies. Then there was the way she talked, something akin to a hint of an accent long hidden away, but still accompanying the speech every few words.

“Oh how lovely!” Rarity exclaimed, interrupting Twilight’s thoughts, “Fluttershy dear, you must be from Filais! I can see it in the way you move. Such poise, such grace! I can also hear it in your voice. Oh I can’t wait to hear about Filais.”

Fluttershy blushed again from Rarity’s attention. “That just adds more to my question,” Twilight said, “What does a Filesian Chantry Sister want from the Grey Wardens.”

The yellow pony bowed her head low, looking away and muttering something Twilight could not hear. The lavender unicorn inched closer, asking that Fluttershy speak up. Fluttershy looked up to see she was surrounded by three ponies and a baby dragon all staring at her. She squeaked before inhaling a lungful of air.

“I’ve lived in an Equestrian Chantry cloister for three years and just before the battle of Ostequus I had a dream, a vision given to me by Celestia and she said that I had to find the Grey Wardens and help them defeat the Blight so I travelled all the way to Ponyring but when I heard that Ostequus was lost but there were Grey Warden survivors I stayed hoping you would come by and you did because I saw your baby dragon and then I came into the tavern behind you and here we are.”

They all blinked as Fluttershy turned her eyes back to the ground, her cheeks redder than ever. Twilight was at a loss for words. How could this pony say Celestia talked to her directly? The Chantry said that Celestia turned away from the world after the Imperium corrupted her golden city of Canterlot and put her chosen sister Luna to the torch. The Chantry also taught that it was thanks to Luna's ascension that Celestia even bothered to turn her gaze back on ponies.

Now this yellow pony was saying that Celestia had sent a vision to her personally. Twilight felt it to be more than dubious at Fluttershy's claims. Then there was the sight of the bow which raised further concerns. Chantry priestesses were known for bad tempers, but not for violence. The appearance, equipment, and mannerisms of Fluttershy suggested the opposite.

"I know you have no reason to believe me," Fluttershy said, "But it's something I feel I have to do. I'm not a defenceless pony either; I can use a bow as well as any archer. But whatever you want to do is fine."

Twilight beckoned the others to group up before deciding. "What do you all think?" She asked.

Applejack shook her head. "I dunno, Twi," the former templar looked over at the shy pony, "Her story seems off, but we do need the numbers. Maybe it'll look good having a Chantry sister in the group as well. I'm just afraid of what will happen when we come across trouble like ponyspawn."

"I think we should bring her along," Rarity said, "She obviously has more skills than that of a priestess, considering her choice of arms and that she talked two of Loghoof's soldiers to back away."

"You just want a clothes horse to doll up in frou frou dresses," Applejack challenged, "We need to think practical like."

Twilight agreed. "We bring her along, and hope that bow isn't just for scaring ponies away."

Spike smiled and gave a short cheer. "Alright team! We have a plan! Break!" The party looked at him before he turned away, cheeks flushed violet. They turned back to Fluttershy who was waiting for them patiently near the fire.

"If you still want to, you can join us," Twilight said. Fluttershy's face lit up and she gave a small smile, "Just remember that we are fighting the ponyspawn. It's going to be a dangerous road ahead. Are you ready for this?"

Fluttershy nodded. "I'll be ok," her quiet words belied a hidden confidence, "Filais is not so different from Equestria. Well, except for all the ponyspawn. And the smell of wet dog."

Applejack snorted at the mention of Equestria's smell, but said nothing as the now larger party left the tavern. They walked towards some of the merchants, looking over their supplies for what the party would need for the journey. Rarity did most of the shopping, where a single bat of her long eyelashes saw the merchants lower their prices. It seemed almost like theft, especially since they were getting the bargains while the other ponies had to suffer with high prices.

Once they were done, Twilight lifted a map of Equestria with her magic and looked over it, with the other ponies gathering around her as they walked. Red Apple Acres was to east along the southern shore of Lake Blackwater. They could go see Arl Macintosh and get his support. The Unicorn Tower still stood on its small island in the northern part of the lake itself, and Twilight would have little trouble persuading Wise Eyes to lend aid.

However, there was still the issue of the other two points on the map that the other ponies were unsure of. The Everfree forest was very far to the east, the supposed home of the largest clan of Dalish pegasi in Equestria.

Twilight did not know much about the pegasi of the Dales, except they had access to magic that could manipulate the weather, build structures from clouds, and even commune with wildlife. The idea of seeing such feats excited Twilight, but the clans were also known to be reclusive and untrusting of other ponies since the Chantry lead an Exalted Gallop against them years ago for not giving tribute to Celestia and Luna.

It would be a challenge to negotiate with the pegasi, but at least Twilight could fill the gap also being an oppressed pony. The donkeys of Orzamule would prove a different challenge altogether. The books in the tower that did have something about the donkeys only spoke of their resistance to magic, their inability to wield the arcane, and their daily struggles against the ponyspawn for living so close to the Dark Tunnels. How could she reason with the donkeys if they didn't have anything in common?

Twilight sighed. "Well girls," she said, "We need to head out in a direction soon. I think we could easily get the unicorns to help us, since I know the First Enchanter, then we can cross the lake over to Red Apple Acres and get the help of Arl Macintosh. Anyone have any suggestions?"

A bubbly voice different from any pony in the party's chimed in. "Ooh! Ooh! I have one! Pick me!"

They all looked around to see a pink earth pony with an incredibly curly pink mane inside a metal cage. She was bouncing up and down in the cage as the ponies approached out of curiosity.

"Uh...I'm sorry, but who are you and why are you locked in a cage?" Twilight asked. The look in those blue eyes gave the unicorn pause for concern. There had to be a reason to lock up a pony when the ponyspawn were fast approaching the village.

"I'm Pinkie Pie!" the pink pony exclaimed, "I was a guard in Ponyring while my family lived in one of the farms outside, but then the ponyspawn came and we got separated! I was all 'Oh no!' but my mom said 'Pinkamena Diane Pie, we are leaving Ponyring for...' For...Hmm...I can't remember!

Greenwall? Bluewall? Redwall? No wait that last one is filled with mice. Oh well, I'll remember later."

"Anyways! We were separated and I didn't know which way they went so I said to myself 'Pinkie! You have to do something to tell your family that your still in Ponyring.' So I did the only thing I knew would send the right message! I had a big fun party! With cakes and treats and games and everything!"

Twilight had begun to regret asking about Pinkie Pie. "So you got locked up for holding a party?"

Pinkie giggled, then shook her head. "Of course not, silly! I got locked up because the party was so loud, it attracted the ponyspawn and brought them over to the outlying farms before Bann Meyer and her soldiers could arrive. They said I wouldn't be in here very long, but it has been a few days and I have another party just bubbling inside!"

"Twilight," Fluttershy said, walking up to the violet unicorn's side, "We can't just leave her here for the ponyspawn. Maybe she can help us on our journey?"

Twilight sighed as she looked towards Pinkie. Their group was already consisting of a shy Chantry sister, an apostate fashionista unicorn and two fugitive Grey Wardens. How could one more crazy pony hurt the party?

"If we help you out, can you give us some help against the ponyspawn?" Twilight asked, "Like, what can you do for us?"

"Well, I know how to swing a mace!" Pinkie said, her bright smile seemingly planted on her face, "But I don't really like using it unless I have to. I am good at mixing things though! Cakes, muffins, sweets, potions, poultices, grenades..."

"Wait a second," said Applejack, "What was that last one?"

“Grenades!” With a cheer, she pointed a hoof over at a nearby discarded barrel, “I put all my stuff in that barrel. I can show you some of fun grenades I made! I even made a song about it!”

Before any objections could be made, Pinkie opened her cage and rushed towards the old barrel. She dug inside the barrel until she emerged with a case filled with all sorts of different powders, extracts, phials and metal casings. Twilight’s eyes grew wide as Pinkie began to sing while making a grenade:

*All you have to do is take a cup of sulphur,
Add it to the mix
Now just take a little lyrium
Not a lot, just a pinch*

*Making these toys is such a sinch,
Add a teaspoon of saltpetre
Add a little more to the count of four
And you’ll never have your fill of...*

*Grenades! So fun and splodey!
Grenades! Don’t stand so closely!
Grenades! Grenades, Grenades, GRENADES!*

Pinkie nudged the small metal bomb over to Twilight. With a ginger tap of her hoof, she looked at the grenade, then to Pinkie nervously. “Is it safe?”

“Of course it’s safe now!” she giggled, “The fuse isn’t lit, and it’s very important to time these things right. Just like any party has to be timed right!”

Twilight raised an eyebrow before looking over at the cage then back to the pink grenadier. “How did you get out of the cage?’ she asked, now very sceptical about everything concerning Pinkie.

“Oh, the cage was not very well built.” Pinkie demonstrated this fact by opening the cage and getting right back in it. Just as quickly as she was in the cage, she opened it back up again, bouncing in front of Twilight with that infectious smile. “So, can I come with you? Can I? Can I?”

Applejack just gave the same look that she did when Fluttershy asked. *We need the numbers*, was the wordless exchange and somepony with Pinkie’s skills would be a good addition to their adventuring troupe.

Twilight offered her hoof to the earth pony. “Welcome aboard,” she said with a faint smile, still considering if it was a good idea to let on such an unhinged pony. Pinkie took the hoof and shook it with it surprising strength. As the dizziness from the shaking faded, Twilight saw that Pinkie was now dressed in leather armour, her grenade tool kit packed away in her saddle bag.

“Ooh! That reminds me of a song!” Twilight groaned as Pinkie Pie burst into her lyrics as they made their way northward, back towards Unicorn Tower.

“We’re off to the see the wizards, the wonderful wizards with horns! We’ll find they are the wiz of a wiz! If ever a wiz was born! If ever oh ever a wiz was one...”

Chapter 6

Rainbow Encounters

Loghoof walked over to the balcony overlooking the palace hall. The floor was filled with the nobility, mostly the earth ponies who ruled the fertile mainland, the Bannorn. The teryn of Glenwall had spent weeks preparing for this day and his fellow conspirator, Arl Rendon Maim of Amareathine, stood beside him looking over the crowd. The sight of the tan earth pony made Loghoof's gut wrench. Maim was a scheming, greedy stallion, but necessary for his plans to keep Equestria safe.

Equestria was divided into regions ruled by the nobility. The Bannorn were divided into nine regions, ruled by the local Banns. Of the Banns, all but Bann Meyer of Ponyring were present. The five Arlings were strategic areas that fielded a large battalion of soldiers. Including Arl Maim, Arl Greywolf of West Hills and Arlessa Cheerilee of South Reach were accounted for. The Arl of Trotterim was dead due to sickness and his son "missing", and thanks to Maim, Arl Macintosh would not make it to this gathering.

A shame, but it had to be done. Macintosh was too loyal to the old bloodline to see Loghoof's grand strategy. King Blueblood was going to open the gates of Equestria wide open for the Filesians, and he did not fight a bloody war for the majority of his life just to see the old king's impudent son let the land he loved fall to the enemy. He would not let his children be under the hooves of a tyrant again.

Teryn Highlander of White Fortress would also not be appearing, once again thanks to Arl Maim. Of all the Equestrian nobles, Highlander would have been the one to stop Loghoof's one opportunity to hold Equestria's

borders secure. It was regrettable that Maim had to massacre White Fortress itself, but Loghoof needed unity amongst all else.

“Nobles of Equestria,” he began, his voice booming throughout the hall, “Know that we face dark times, the likes of which we have not seen since the Filesian occupation. Our noble king Blueblood is dead and Ostequus is loss, but we must still stand united to face-”

“And why is Blueblood pushin’ daisies?” Bann Braeburn shouted towards Loghoof, “You still have your army, and not a single pony had a scratch on ‘em! If I were a bettin’ colt, I’d say you let King Blueblood bite it!”

Arl Maim stepped forward, about to let loose a verbal attack of his own but was held back by Loghoof. Of course Braeburn of Appleoosa would be a problem; the young noble was devoted to Macintosh and shared many of his ideals, though he did not share the same wisdom as the Arl of Red Apple. Still, many of the Bann would side with Braeburn, as long as Loghoof held power. There would be little chance to avoid civil war, though he had the strongest position with the largest share of the army, as well as the support of the Arlings.

“Understand this,” he said aiming his harsh eyes towards the assembled nobles, “As regent, I will brook no threat to Equestria. Not from Filais, not from the ponyspawn, not from you or anypony! Stand against me, and you stand against Equestria herself.”

The banns murmured dissent as they left, Braeburn last as he steeled his gaze on Loghoof. The teryn of Glenwell left the balcony and returned to the inner halls of the palace, followed closely by Arl Maim. Before he could retreat to his quarters, his daughter Armeria approached. Dressed in the regal robes of the queen, the widow to King Blueblood held anger and sorrow in her beautiful face draped in her golden mane.

“Father, is it true?” she asked standing in front of Loghoof. He sighed as she opened the door to his quarters.

“King Blueblood’s death is his own doing, my flower,” he said, “He relied too much on fanciful dreams rather than reality. Until the Filesian and ponyspawn threat are no more, I will protect your throne, you, as regent. When the time comes, you will be queen of Equestria again proper. Until that time, let your father handle the affairs of war.”

Loghoof leaned forward to kiss his daughter’s forehead, but she backed away. She had the same strong eyes as her father, but the soft features of her mother. She stormed off towards her bedroom, leaving only a pained father to fall back to his room.

“Have her watched, Maim,” the teryn ordered, “WATCHED.” Maim’s cutie mark, a bloodied dagger, spoke all too well of his tendencies. If Maim touched a single hair on Armeria’s head, Loghoof would show the Arl of Amaerethine true fury.

“But of course, your Grace,” Maim said with a bow, “I also found a solution to the Grey Warden problem.”

Loghoof turned at the mention of the Grey Wardens. He turned his ears upward to show that he had the Arl’s full attention. Maim opened the door to the chamber as a servant poured a goblet of wine for the teryn. A rainbow maned pegasus in leather armour carrying multiple daggers walked in behind Maim. She had a proud smirk on her face as she bowed to Loghoof.

“The Pura Razan Wonderbolts send their regards,” she said, though she spoke like an Equestrian rather than one from Pura Raza. Loghoof’s snorted as he drank a good helping of wine, but not even that could get the distaste from Maim’s choice out of his mouth.

“Assassins.” He looked at both the pegasus and Maim with contempt. How many lows would he sink in order to protect Equestria? May Celestia protect his soul, his hooves were thick in the mud now.

The cyan mare rolled her eyes. “Not just any assassins, but the best of the best!” she boasted, “Once we find those Wardens, they won’t last ten seconds.”

Again, Loghoof stared at the assassin with harsh eyes. “See to it that they do not.” The pegasus bowed and left, followed by a bow from Maim. With another drink of wine, Loghoof looked out the window of the palace towards Trotterim.

Celestia protect his soul indeed.

* * *

The Unicorn Tower could be seen in the horizon, but Twilight judged the distance between the Tower and their party was still many furlongs of travel at a good pace. They also noted that as long as Loghoof’s soldiers and other bounty hunters were travelling the roads, they would have to take detours to avoid the constant harassment.

They walked during the day and rested at night, both Twilight and Applejack sharing the evening watch and keeping their senses ready for any ponyspawn. The party set camp in a small clearing, with Twilight taking first watch alongside Fluttershy and Rarity. With Spike safe asleep in his basket, Twilight took the opportunity to go around the camp and talk with those in her party.

Of the group, Twilight wanted to get the perspective from Rarity the most. Not just about their task to fight the ponyspawn, but also how she learned magic from Flemeth. Twilight was very curious about the differences in teaching and wanted to contrast how she grew up in the Tower and how Rarity was raised by the Mare of the Mire.

Rarity was sitting away from the fire, mending Pinkie’s leather armour while the pink earth pony was cooking something over the campfire. Twilight laid

herself on a blanket next to the white unicorn as she fixed the right foreleg. It came to a surprise that Rarity was doing the repairs by hoof, rather than with magic.

“Mother always says to remember the little details,” she explained, looking up to Twilight’s quizzical expression, “Yes I have magic, but if I do not know the fundamentals behind the magic, then my knowledge is flawed. Then I will not understand. Is there anything I can help you with, dear?”

“You were raised outside of the influence of the Unicorn Circle,” Twilight began, “And I’m just curious how you learned magic from, well, a living legend like Flemeth.”

Rarity laughed, something akin to a noblemare rather than a pony who grew up in the Wilds.

“While it is true that my mother raised me, the Wilds were just as much a teacher as she was.” She looked over Pinkie’s armour, satisfied with her work before continuing. “First, know that Flemeth is not my real mother. She made that very clear when I was a little filly and that she found me in Wilds cold and alone. Then the education started.”

“As I mentioned before, I had to learn the fundamentals of living in the Wilds before I could learn Flemeth’s spells. Before I could spark a fire, I had to make one with sticks. Before I could mend my clothes with magic, I had to use needle and thread. After a while, I began learning to use magic in ways that would serve me. My spell that prevents dirt to cling to me was one such discovery and let me tell you, any unicorn can fling a fireball, but it takes a pony with a careful eye to make sure she is never dirty again.”

Much of Rarity’s words made sense to Twilight and she was impressed that such knowledge was not known to the Unicorn Circle. They always relied on the teachings of the elder unicorns, or what could be gleamed from books. It made Ser Magni’s comments about her own lack of outdoor experience. Add to how often Rarity cast her “dirt spell” and how clean she

always appeared, Twilight wondered if the white unicorn was growing in power with every piece of dirt vanquished by her magic, if very slowly.

“What about your mother’s ability to change shape?” Twilight asked, “You said she turned into a giant eagle. No book in the Tower ever mentioned magic that can do that. Can you do the same?”

“Nothing as grand as what my mother can do, I assure you,” Rarity answered, “And what few forms I do take, I prefer to be at least pleasing to my own eye: a beautiful bird, a stunning white cat. Creatures that allow the average person to look on in awe for a moment then just as quickly forget about them.”

“I used that magic to watch the residents of Ponyring every now and again. It was there that I saw the Filesian merchant family and their wonderfully tailored dresses. It was love at first sight. The silks, the velvets, I simply had to shed the old leather and cloth clothing that likely belonged to my mother and make my own works of art. My mother resisted, of course, but she saw that I was learning how to make clothes the same way I learned her magic.”

Rarity’s smile soon turned as a sad expression shadowed her face. “When I was confident enough, I brought my designs to Ponyring and began to sell them. Ponies were surprised at what the marsh mare was bringing to them, but loved them all the same. I made a few gold coins here and there from the dresses and robes, which I brought to the Filesian merchant. They were selling the most exquisite golden mirror, with the frame etched in Filesian poetry. I loved that mirror more than anything in the world, because I could clearly see myself rather than just in murky waters of the Wild.”

“Mother found the mirror, and was furious,” Rarity continued, her eyes now filled with both sadness and anger. “She took all my dresses, my materials, the money and the mirror, dumped it outside our hut and burnt it all in front of me. ‘Watch!’ she had shouted as they burned, ‘Watch as your vanities and luxuries become ash. Only power is permanent.’ Given time, she only

allowed me to recreate my efforts if I used magic, but even then she had a look of disgust with the beauty I created.”

Flemeth was not raising a daughter, but instead raising a sorceress who did not want to be one. Twilight wondered how Flemeth could be so callous to the filly she called her daughter. She also wondered what purpose Flemeth had in mind for Rarity once she had become very powerful.

“Do you hate Flemeth for what she did?” Twilight asked. Rarity shook her head, before adding the finishing touches to Pinkie’s armour.

“While we have our disagreements, I cannot hate her for what she did,” the white unicorn answered, “I learned how to become more powerful with my magic. I learned how to survive in the Wilds. But most of all I learned who I was from that mirror, from my work. I have to say, I was shocked when Mother asked me to accompany you, but now I’m glad. I can see the world outside of the hut in the Wilds, really get to see the beauty of everything around me, even if the land does smell like wet dog.”

Twilight laughed at the joke towards Equestria. Before she returned to her tent, Rarity stopped her with a raised hoof.

“Twilight,” she said, “Thank you for listening. I’ve not met many other ponies, and Mother was not always the best conversationalist. It feels good to have someone to confide in. Now if only we can confide in Applejack some decent aesthetic taste.”

They shared a laugh before both retired for the night. Twilight was right, that she and Rarity had a much different education when it came to learning magic, and that there was much they could learn from each other. Gazing up at the night sky, Twilight gave thanks to Luna. Maybe they could beat the Blight after all.

Night turned to day and the party continued their trek north to Unicorn Tower. On the way there Twilight was explaining about life in the Tower, about its collection of books, about Wise Eyes and the rest of the senior enchanter. She avoided topics like the Harrowing and the templar, due to the former being a secret and the latter being a possibly sensitive to the former templar Applejack.

As they travelled, Rarity was showing Twilight her spell for mending simple cloth. Her practical knowledge of needlework made the magic seem much simpler than it would appear, but Twilight was having difficulty with all the different names for stitches. The spell seemed to involve much more than simply moving the needle, instead making the frayed cloth repair itself with the assistance of magic.

Pinkie Pie was bounding up the road until she tripped on a piece of debris. While Applejack helped her up, Twilight took a look at the wooden rubble. Around them sat what appeared to be a cart, marked with slash marks of swords. Or claws.

A shrill scream rang out from a hill. The ponies turned to see a red pegasus flying down towards them, breathing heavily. "Help!" she called as she landed in front of them, "Please, you must help me! Bandits attacked our wagons, and they are chasing my family! I managed to get away, but we are unarmed!"

Before anypony could respond, Pinkie leaped forward towards the frightened flying filly. "Never fear!" she announced, "The Grey Wardens and friends are here! We'll save your family from those bad bandits!"

"This way! Quickly!" The red pegasus flew off towards the hills, with Pinkie following close behind her. The rest joined their pink companion, with Twilight noting the wreckage of more wagon parts along the way. Two broken wagon wheels lay against some rocks, and another was spotted beneath the shadow of the hill.

The presence of a fifth wheel raised concerns to Twilight. She knew that anypony with a wagon would have a spare wheel, but then came the sight of a sixth wheel that caused the unicorn to stop. "Wait!" she yelled out, "We're galloping into a trap!"

It was too late. They were already in a rocky crescent with no way easy way out except for the way they came. The red pegasus smirked as she back away, while from the shadows of the rocks came eight other pegasi, each armed with blades and bows, arrows trained on the ponies.

The last to appear was their leader, Twilight guessed. A blue pegasus with a bright rainbow mane, clad in well kept leather armour adorned with daggers. She looked down on the party with her fuchsia eyes, a devious smile growing on her lips. Twilight began channelling a defensive barrier, just like the one she used against the orinlock in the observatory. It would give them valuable seconds to either reason with these ponies, or counterattack.

"I told Loghoof that I'd take the Wardens down in ten seconds flat!" the leader of the assassins called out, "And when I say I'm going to do it, I'm going to do it! Get them!"

That was the moment Twilight needed. Her horn glowed bright as she raised the barrier, her friends readying themselves as the pegasi arrows bounced harmlessly off the shield. With each hit against the magic barrier though, Twilight felt her energy being sapped trying to hold up the shield.

The rainbow pegasus glowered as the other assassins looked to their leader. "You ponies took longer than ten seconds!" she complained, "Get in close and finish them! Do I have show you all how it's done?"

With a long, thin dagger clenched in her teeth, the cyan mare leapt into the air and charged towards the shield, the blade slashing against the arcane protection. The other assassins joined in with their own weapons, following the lead of the rainbow pegasus. Each attack was drawing more energy out

of Twilight. The barrier's strength held, but the blue shimmer was fading quickly.

"Sugarcube," Applejack said as she drew her sword, "Drop the shield. We'll take care of these varmints."

"Applejack is right, darling," Rarity said as her eyes crackled with electricity, "You don't have to defend us all by yourself. They picked the wrong ponies today."

Twilight looked up and saw each of her allies armed and ready to face the assailants the moment the shield was down. Pinkie had her mace in her mouth and a lyrium explosive ready, while Fluttershy had prepared an arrow. The lavender unicorn did not want to fight other ponies; her mission was to fight against the ponyspawn after all. But the steel in Applejack's eyes made her realize that this battle could not be avoided, and these opponents could not be reasoned with.

Her horn stopped glowing, allowing Twilight to take a breath as her friends launched a counter-attack. The pegasi were not prepared for the barrier to suddenly cease, flying through the air and missing their targets completely. A lightning bolt from Rarity caused the pegasi to disperse as one received the bolt square in the chest. Twilight looked at the white unicorn with new eyes before turning to see the rest of the fight.

Everything slowed down around Twilight. Rarity was channelling another bolt of lightning from her horn and staff. Applejack was about to slash one of the assassins's throat. An arrow from Fluttershy was going to sail through the air and pierce an enemy archer. Pinkie was bringing her mace in a downward arc, about to crush a fallen pegasus's chest. The pink earth pony's mane was no longer curly but straight as she fought off the attacking party.

She turned slowly to see the rainbow assassin diving right towards her. Twilight ducked, but still felt the sharp dagger slice her skin. Her staff fired

a few blasts of energy at her attacker while she looked her cut over. Not lethal and not burning. There was no poison on the pegasus' blade. Twilight then turned to see the red pegasus that led them into the ambush gallop towards her with her own dagger ready.

Concern for Spike overruled everything. Twilight's horn glowed bright as she channelled the spell to let loose a cone of magical cold point blank into the attacking pegasus. The effects were the same here as they were in the observatory at Ostequus; the pegasus froze in place, a fearful expression iced over her face.

Twilight's breathing grew heavy and rapid as she realized what she had done. She had learned offensive spells in the Tower due to her teacher's insistence. They had said that in the event of a demon possessing another unicorn through the Fade, she would be grateful that she knew such spells to save her. Indeed, she was grateful as the spells did save her against such monsters as demons and the ponyspawn. But now she had just taken the life of pegasus pony with her magic. The violet unicorn grew numb as she slowly backed away from the frozen carcass.

Her magic did that. The same magic Rarity used to cast lightning bolts. This was the same magic that the Chantry and the templar and everypony feared and hated. Now Twilight realized that they had every reason to fear magic when it could do more than create. It could kill as quickly as a thought.

Before she knew it, two hooves where on her shoulders, keeping her steady as she heaved. To her left was Rarity and to her right was Pinkie Pie, holding her steady as she looked around the battlefield. Her friends had scratches and bruises, but were no worse for wear. The assassins on the other hand, were all dead except for the rainbow pegasus who had Flutteryshy and Applejack standing over her, weapons drawn.

"I..." Twilight could not find the words. Instead she fell against the embrace of the two ponies as Spike held on to her neck. She began to sob into the forelegs of her friends, the iced corpse still haunting her.

Rarity tried to calm Twilight down, stroking her mane gingerly with a hoof. "It was the first time you took another pony's life," she said, not as a question but a statement. Though her face was covered in tears, Twilight was able to nod. Pinkie tried to help, but her hair was still straight and not in bouncy curls, offering the same confident words. It was a strain to try to hear them.

"It's bad," the pink earth pony said to Twilight, "It's a bad feeling, but if you feel like you do, it means you aren't turning into the monsters you fight."

"But they weren't monsters!" Twilight almost yelled back, but her throat felt strained, and instead her protest was a silenced scream, "They were ponies, like the rest of us."

"They were ponies who didn't give us much of a choice," Rarity was doing her best to console her, but Twilight couldn't stop trembling, "And sometimes, a pony can be a worse monster than any ponyspawn. But this is what the world is: dangerous and cruel. You have to be hardened to survive."

Twilight looked up at the two ponies. Rarity had likely killed before, living in the wilds as an apostate under Flemeth. Pinkie would be no stranger to violence, serving as a guard in Ponyring. Applejack had displayed great skill in battle many times over. Fluttershy's knowledge of the bow was odd for a Chantry sister, but now Twilight was grateful she was on their side.

There was one question she had to ask. The lavender unicorn looked up to Rarity and Pinkie, her eyes red and puffy from crying. "Does it get easier?"

They looked at each other for a moment before nodding sadly. "Yes," they said in unison. Their answer sparked a new wave of sobs. Twilight was a Grey Warden, which meant she would fight and kill ponyspawn. But this

also meant she had to fight and eventually kill any pony that stood against her again.

We do what we must. She heard Duncan speak to her in her memories, of what it meant to be a Grey Warden. But right now all she wanted was to return to Unicorn Tower, to be somewhere familiar and have a sense of safety once again.

After a few minutes had passed, Twilight picked herself up and levitated a cloth from her bag to her eyes. The assailants had set them back, and they needed to get back precious time. Before the party could move, there was still the matter of the rainbow pegasus prisoner.

As Twilight walked over to Applejack and Fluttershy, she noticed that Applejack had tied the assassin's wings together with rope, keeping her sword ready for any quick movements. However, the pegasus did not struggle or even make any attempt to escape. Defeat was laced on her fuchsia eyes.

"Well, I'm knackered," the pegasus said flatly as Twilight looked down on her, "Make it quick Warden, I'm already dead."

Twilight raised an eyebrow. "Who are you and why are you already dead?" she asked.

"Name's Rainbow Dash," the pegasus answered, "And I'm dead 'cause I failed the job. You were the job, and you're not dead. The Wonderbolts never fail. Do the math."

"I would do the math if I knew who the Wonderbolts were." Twilight was not in the mood for guessing games. Her staff floated closer to the Rainbow's head, but she didn't flinch.

"What about all your friends?"

Rainbow laughed. "Those weren't my friends," she said, "Just other Wonderbolt hopefuls like me. They sent us because Arl Maim was offering a meagre pay day for the Grey Wardens, so they thought they didn't need their experienced assassins."

Twilight turned away from Rainbow Dash as she mentioned Arl Maim. They now had another enemy other than Loghoof and the ponyspawn to contend with. Would they have to fight off the rest of the Equestrian nobility? She didn't want to think about how many more ponies would have to be put to the sword. Those who perished today seemed too much already.

"What are we gonna do about her?" Applejack asked. Twilight looked at the bound pegasus before turning away, back to the direction of Unicorn Tower. She had taken her fill of death today.

"Let her go," Twilight said, "We wasted enough time."

Applejack looked concerned as she untied Rainbow, but said nothing as she returned the lasso over her shoulder. The rest of the party fell in line behind Twilight as they walked to the path. They only made it a furlong away until a shout echoed in the sky.

"Wait!"

The group looked up to see Rainbow Dash flying above them, landing in front of Twilight. The unicorn felt tired as she watched Rainbow lower her head towards her. With fatigued eyes, she tilted her ears upwards to show that she was listening.

Rainbow had a feeble smile, as if appealing to Twilight's better nature. A nature I feel like I have to struggle to keep, she thought to herself.

"I know you have no reason to trust me...wait that's a bad start," Rainbow appeared to be having difficulty finding the words for her case, "Argh! Just,

let me come with you! I could be a real help against the ponyspawn! And Loghoof and Maim!"

Twilight's eyes narrowed at the assassin. How dare she even suggest such a thing? Before she could say anything, Applejack interrupted. "Are you a few leaves short of an apple tree?" The Wardens seemed to have been sharing the same thought as Applejack stared down Rainbow with her green eyes, "You ambush us, and now you want to be all friendly like? What's stopping you from stabbing us in the back the moment we turn away?"

Now Rainbow rose up meeting Applejack's stare. "I took the job so I could get out of Pura Raza!" She shot back, "I was born in Equestria and lived here before my mother took me to Pura Raza because she felt it was a better life for pegasi. When Maim had the job posted for assassins, I begged the Wonderbolts to let me come here. I was hoping that this would be the last job to get into the Wonderbolts and stay in Equestria."

"I never thought I'd actually lose. I never thought I'd be spared! Let me make it up to you. I can fight, you just saw that! I'm the fastest pegasus you'll ever meet, I know my way around traps and poisons. I'll even swear an oath to you, which I'll never turn against you."

Anger flushed Twilight's features as she looked down on Rainbow. Yet she made very excellent points. She was skilled in battle and if her claims were true, her other skills would be useful. They could also use a pegasus pony as a scout and as part in hit-and-run tactics.

But then there was the fact that she would be reminded of this day every time she looked at Rainbow Dash. Twilight was not sure she was prepared to be reminded of her first kill in the eyes of another pony. Then she looked at her staff, a symbol of her magic and thought of her horn. There would be plenty of reminders of shedding first blood all around her.

With a heavy sigh, Twilight turned to the rest of the party, wanting to hear their thoughts on Rainbow Dash. "I don't know Twilight," Applejack said, "I don't trust her as far as I can throw her, but we do need the numbers, and a pegasus would be handy."

"Besides having a mane that appears never to have heard the words 'brush' or 'comb', I am not too inclined to trust Rainbow Dash as well." Rarity kept her distance from Rainbow.

Pinkie Pie bounded up to Twilight, her main back to its bouncy curls. "You shouldn't stay mad at Dashie," she said, surprising Twilight by already having a nickname for the assassin, "It will make you unhappy. I know! If you bring her, we can almost complete a whole party! She'd be the snarky rogue, while I'm the comedic relief, and Applejack can tank! Now if only we could find heals..."

Before Twilight could make sense of Pinkie's babbling, Fluttershy approached her. "Um..." she began as usual, not making eye contact with Twilight, "The Chantry doesn't say much, but they do say forgiveness is part of Celestia's light. And, um, it would be nice to have a pegasus in the group. If you want."

Once again it was up to Twilight to make the decision for the party. She wondered how she got caught up in the leadership role when she would have been more comfortable following a capable pony like Applejack. She heard her friends' opinions on the matter and had concluded what she would do.

"Alright Rainbow Dash," she said to the cyan pegasus, "I'll let you join us if you swear an oath of loyalty, as much as that is worth. Just remember that we are fighting against not just ponyspawn, but Loghoof and his supporters as well."

Rainbow's face lit up in a bright smile. She spoke with pride as she gave a salute to the Twilight. "I, Rainbow Dash, best flyer ever to come out of

Equestria AND Pura Raza, so swear my loyalty to the Grey Wardens!
Cross my heart and hope to die, stick hot Lyrium in my eye!"

Pinkie nodded in agreement to the oath, while Rarity had a look of disapproval amusingly matched by Applejack. As Rainbow made her introductions to the rest of the party, Twilight returned her eyes towards Unicorn Tower in the distance. It would take until nightfall to reach the tower, but now more than ever she wanted the guidance of her teachers, especially Wise Eyes.

There was still one more task that needed to be done. The dead should not be left alone for the crows and the ponyspawn to find and desecrate. With her magic, Twilight levitated pieces of the broken cart and began to lay them out. She would use the debris from Rainbow's trap to make funeral pyres for her attackers. Wordlessly, the others helped including the assassin pegasus.

One by one, each corpse was placed on a pile of wood, ready for the torch.

Twilight looked over to the pegasus that she had froze with her ice magic. She beckoned to Applejack to help her lift the frozen body up and onto her own pyre. Gently they laid out the pegasus as Twilight whispered for forgiveness. Her thoughts went to the pegasus and if she had family, to them as well.

What if she had foals? What if they sought Twilight out in the future, vengeance in their hearts? How could she tell them that she was forced to slay their mother in defense of herself as well as Equestria? So many questions. So many answers Twilight did not wish to know.

The ponies gathered around the pyres before Fluttershy stepped forward. As a Chantry sister, she would be the one who knew the right prayers to send off the dead on their way to be judged by the hooves of Celestia. Instead of speaking the words, Fluttershy began to sing, a soft hymn filled with sorrow of loss but still holding hope for mercy.

The ponies kept their heads low as Twilight's staff ignited a spark towards the first pyre. As Fluttershy sang the hymn, the unicorn moved from pyre to pyre, setting the wood aflame. Twilight watched as the bodies burned, taking note that Rainbow Dash was standing by her side. She felt cold despite the flames, but said nothing as the assassin began to recite names.

"Skywind. Roof Hopper. Cloudburst. Redwing. White Streak. They were all like me, in this job. Just looking for a way to survive outside of Pura Raza. I'm sorry, Twilight. If it means anything to you."

Twilight would remember those names. Especially Redwing. With one hoof in front of the other, the now larger party resumed their journey to the Circle of Unicorns. Hopefully they could enlist the aid of the unicorns there quickly and cross Blackwater Lake into Red Apple Acres in a short amount of time. Somehow, though, Twilight could feel that danger was lurking under every shadow.

Still, Twilight could put all thoughts of danger and death away for a moment as she saw the group of ponies she would be travelling the long road with. With Spike at her side, she allowed herself a small smile before returning to the path towards the Tower.

Never had Spike felt as horrible as he did now. He knew the dangers of magic all his life, seeing unicorns lift objects with their minds to creating violent storms of ice and fire, but had never seen it actually used against a pony. It was alright against the savage ponyspawn, but seeing it cast against a pony and knowing that it was Twilight who flung the spell made him uneasy.

It was his fault entirely. He was the one who pushed for Twilight to join the Grey Wardens. He was the one who suggested it in the first place and all for a life of adventure outside of the Tower. The look on Twilight's eyes, the sheer terror at what she had done, made Spike consider what he had

wrought. It killed him to see his best friend, the only pony he had ever felt love from in so much pain.

No matter what, Twilight, I'm going to make it up to you, Spike thought, No matter the cost, I'll make sure you're happy.

Chapter 7

Return to Unicorn Tower

Twilight tried to focus on something else, something to get her mind off the battle with the assassins. She tried to think about Unicorn Tower, and their books. *Books about wars and battles and death. Tomes with spells to reduce a pony to dust.* She felt ill just from considering such thoughts.

She then turned her thoughts to kindly old Wise Eyes, somepony who could give her counsel. *Counsel like how best to freeze a pony's heart from the inside and shattering it into a million pieces.* Twilight needed something to keep her mind off the killing. Ironically, even a ponyspawn attack would help. Or another Pinkie Pie song.

Night fell over Lake Blackwater, the moon and stars shining in the sky as the party approached the ferry docks. It was a strange contrast with the bright night sky and the murky waters that gave Blackwater its name. The ferry could be seen travelling back towards the docks, where much to Twilight's surprise she could see that several templar were waiting for the small boat to return.

Several scenarios played out as to why there were templar waiting for the ferry. Perhaps it was a changing of the guard, maybe some sort of training exercise. But all the templar were well armed and armoured, and held the same look Twilight had seen so many times. They gave a look hinting at thier fear of magic, and thier presence indicated the danger they would soon face. There was trouble in Unicorn Tower.

Twilight galloped at full speed, ignoring the calls from her friends. The thought that the only home she had ever known was in danger from either the templar or something within made her heart race faster.

"Excuse me!" she called out toward the templar, "Excuse me! What's going on, what's happening in the Tower?"

A young templar reacted to the sight of Twilight and Rarity by drawing his sword bit. "Apostates!" he called out before being held back by another templar.

"They are with the Grey Wardens," he said, pushing the young templar back and pointing at Twilight's cutie mark, "Their apostates are protected under their banner. For now."

One of the larger templar turned to face the unicorn. His eyes were filled with disgust at the prospect of even exchanging greetings with a pony of magic. "Listen here," he began, "Knight Commander Hornshield sent out missives to Trotterim and other Chantries. His message says that there has been a unicorn uprising and that they are using Dark Arts. Blood magic, demon summoning, the whole works."

An uprising? There had always been mutterings of dissent among the unicorns about throwing out the templar overseers, but Twilight always had thought Wise Eyes kept the tempers in check. What had happened between the time between her leaving the tower, the battle of Ostequus and now this? How could she enlist the aid of the unicorns now that they were fighting a battle with the soldiers of the Chantry?

The others quickly grouped up around her, concerned looks in their eyes. With the exception of Pinkie, who was bouncing up and down excited to be around so many ponies in one place. "Is it a party?" she asked with that bright smile, "I can cook up some tasty treats in a pinch! Or maybe put together some fun grenades!"

Twilight shook her head. "It's not a party Pinkie." She took a deep breath before continuing.

"There's some kind of rebellion going on inside the Tower. The templar are fighting against Dark Art sorcerers, who are using Blood Magic and summoning demons from the Fade."

"D-d-demons?" Fluttershy squeaked in surprise, "As in, evil corrupting monsters who take delight in torturing ponies with their sadistic magic, who will also try to possess your body and do the same thing to your very soul?!"

“That’s about right,” Twilight answered. Fluttershy sunk to the ground, head low and trembling. The lavender unicorn turned back to the tower. “Lesser demons like Shades and creatures of Rage don’t need a pony to possess, just enough of a tear in the Veil to sink through. More powerful demons like Sloth and Desire do need a pony, which only adds to the problem.”

Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie raised their eyebrows in mutual confusion. “The Veil is the barrier that separates the physical realm from the dreamscape of the Fade,” explained Rarity, “Death, violence, very negative thoughts about last summer’s fashions are ways to weaken the Veil. Unicorns are sensitive to the Fade already, which makes us excellent targets for demons, but they are known to possess anything they can reach, just to be a part of the physical world.”

Twilight was glad there was another unicorn to explain things like the Fade with her. “That’s not all,” she continued, “A unicorn who is possessed by a demon becomes an abomination, a twisted pony who is hardly recognizable due to all the changes they are under, physical and otherwise. Abominations are dangerous, and will fight to the last for the body they have claimed.”

Fluttershy lifted her head from under her hooves. “Is there any way to cure an abomination?”

Her eyes closed, she said but one word: “No.” Twilight remembered the first time she had come face to face with a possessed unicorn. He was like the other magic users taking part in the rebellion, angry at the templar for their strict watch over the unicorns, and angry at Wise Eyes for not allowing him to pursue more powerful spells. In the dead of night, a demon of Rage took his body, shifting the form into a hideous and perverse mockery of a pony.

Twilight was awoken during the attack and feared for her life until the templar burst into the dormitory, with Hornshield himself slaying the abomination. After the attack, there were weeks of questioning and months of the templar not allowing any magic to be cast. Until the past week with the Wardens, Twilight had never been so scared in her life.

She had to steel her resolve. Turning to her party, Twilight pointed a hoof towards the Tower.

“We are going to save those unicorns,” she announced, “And we are going to stop whatever demons incited this uprising.”

“Pinkie,” Twilight said as she began to organize their efforts, “We are going to need flashing grenades to distract the demons and Dark unicorns from casting spells. Fluttershy, you hang to the rear with myself and Rarity and help us deal with enemies from range. Applejack, Rainbow, you two will be our front line. Hold off any demons and abominations that charge towards us. We’ll keep a loose wedge formation to support each other.”

“What about me?” Spike sat up on Twilight’s back with a salute. Twilight sighed.

“Keep out of trouble, and stay close to us.” Ignoring Spike’s disgruntled rumblings, Twilight turned to her friends, looking them over. “Everyone ready?” The party stood tall with her, even though Fluttershy could not stop trembling. With a nod, Twilight turned back towards the docks.

The other templar crossed the water while they were talking, but the ferrypony was making his way back across Lake Blackwater. The old earth pony looked up, his expression grim as Twilight and the others approached him.

“I remember you,” he said to Twilight, “The unicorn that left with that Grey Warden. You’ll wish you never came back, the Tower is in a right mess.” The ferrypony was about to tie the ferry up to the dock before the unicorn stepped in front of him.

“I’m sorry, but we have to get across to the Tower. It’s urgent we speak to Knight Commander Hornshield.” With her magic, Twilight levitated the Grey Warden documents so the ferrypony could see them. With a sigh, the old earth pony removed the rope from the dock post and stepped into the boat.

With their group as large as it was, Twilight decided that she, Rarity and Applejack would go across the lake first, followed by Pinkie and Fluttershy with Rainbow Dash flying over to the Tower. While the ferrypony was busy sailing the boat across the lake, Applejack shook her head as she looked towards the Tower.

“Never thought ah’d come back here again,” the blonde earth pony said, “Only been here once, but once was enough. Was just a squire then, but the templar brought me in to watch a Harrowing. Worst thing I ever saw, until Ostequus. The unicorn they brought in...” Applejack looked down, but Twilight knew what she meant. Not every unicorn survived the Harrowing.

Applejack looked at both Twilight and Rarity. “Ah know we needed the templar powers to beat that ornlock back in the observatory, but it’s stirred up something fierce. Something Ah was hoping to forget. Being a templar and learning all their skills ain’t easy. Especially when they use lyrium to make the magic come out.”

Rarity appeared puzzled by this explanation. “Lyrium? That brings out magic in even the most mundane of ponies. What do the templar do with their recruits that involves lyrium?”

Twilight was also interested in Applejack’s answer. Having lived with templar watchers for so long and not being privy to their secrets, she wanted to know as much as any unicorn about how they were able to nullify magic.

Applejack took a deep breath before continuing. “You ain’t hearing any of this from me,” she said, “But the Chantry gives us lyrium to put into our blood. Then we’re taught how to see the flow of magic and stop it, like a dam in a river. Takes a lot of effort to do that, let me tell you. Also it feels good to have the lyrium inside you. When a templar is done training, they give the pony a much larger amount of the stuff to get them hooked. Since the Chantry controls the legal lyrium trade, they can also control the templar like a barkeep control a drunkard with his cider.”

“Ah was so glad when Duncan came to take me away from that life. I still have the lyrium in me to do the fancy tricks of the templar, but not enough to shrug off, say, a fireball. And now we’re going to the Tower. It feels like I woulda came here no matter what happened in my life.”

As the boat approached the Tower’s dock, Twilight felt sorry for Applejack having to go through all the training of the Chantry, including the dogma. Thankfully, the earth pony did not seem to hold a hatred for unicorns or their magic. Just a cautionary eye around apostates like Rarity, and Dark Arts users like those who were inciting the rebellion inside the Tower now.

Twilight looked up towards the Tower as they waited for the ferry to bring Fluttershy and Pinkie over. When she left with Duncan, the Tower had looked grand in the sunlight, but now it just loomed over her like a haunting shadow. Inside the structure waited demons and Maleficar alike, with the templar fighting a losing battle against the denizens of the Fade. If they were going to get the aid of the Unicorn Circle, the party would have to struggle against nightmares they never thought possible. They were, after all, the greatest weapons in the demons' arsenal.

After showing the treaties to the templar guards at the front entrance, Twilight and her group made their way to the main foyer before the iron doors that lead into the rest of the Tower. The templar situation was much worse than she imagined. Many of the earth ponies were wounded, lying on blankets as their apothecaries did their best to heal the wounds with salves and poultices. Many of the wounded were covered in burnt flesh, likely caused by Rage demons, while others had gashes and ugly scares caused by abominations and shades.

"By the light of Celestia," came a familiar voice, "Twilight Sparkle. You've returned to a dire situation, young one." Never had Twilight seen the Knight Commander look so tired and old. With so many templar down, he had likely never seen such a disaster strike his watch over the unicorns.

Hornshield turned towards the iron door, his head low. "The attacks started a few days after you and the Grey Warden left. Hubred and his ilk unleashed their Dark Arts on my templar, unleashing demons and blood magic against us. First Enchanter Wise Eyes tried to reason with Hubred, but he and the rest of the senior enchanters were captured by Hubred and his demons. I fear the worst."

"I fear Unicorn Tower is lost. There are too many demons and Maleficar for this force of templar alone. I have sent word to the Chantry of Trotterim, requesting for the Right of Annulment, may the Sisters have mercy on my soul."

Twilight gasped as she heard the Knight Commander mention the Right of Annulment. As her friends gave her questioning eyes, she did not know if she could face them and the dangers of the Tower. If Hornshield had

deemed it necessary to call for the Right, then the situation was not just dire, but near hopeless.

“Listen everypony,” Twilight began, “The Right of Annulment is the act of purging the Unicorn Tower completely. Demons, Maleficar, unicorns, anypony the templar find they will put to the torch.”

“If the Chantry agrees, and ah’m right sure they will,” Applejack added.

Hornshield looked away from Twilight, almost ashamed. “Every one hundred years in Equestria has the Right of Annulment been used to purge the Tower. I had hoped during my service I would not have to resort to such measures. If the First Enchanter stood before me and told me the threat was passed, I would call off the Right.”

There it was, the only opportunity to save the Tower and the unicorns. “Knight Commander,”

Twilight said, “Let us go into the Tower, rescue Wise Eyes and stop Hubred. Your templar are in no shape to face the demons, but we are. We need the help of the unicorns against the Blight, and I know you don’t want the Right of Annulment brought down on the Tower. Please, Hornshield. We won’t fail.”

The old templar looked at Twilight, respect shining in his battered eyes. “I will allow it,” he said, “We have not had any demons attacking the iron doors for the past day. Perhaps things are finally getting under control. But once you cross the threshold, the doors will remain closed until I am certain the First Enchanter is with you. Is that understood?”

Twilight nodded to the templar commander before she looked to her party. They all stood ready to enter the Tower, though Fluttershy was still shaking and Pinkie was still bouncing around merrily. Still, there was no turning back now. They needed to begin their ascent up the tower to find Hubred and Wise Eyes.

The iron doors opened, revealing a serene and calm scene that was the entrance to the Tower proper. The sight was a contrast to what Hornshield had described. Nothing was out of place and there was no sign of battle. No blood stains from blades or scorch marks from fire.

“Spike, stay with the templar,” Twilight said as she bumped the baby dragon off her back, “It’s too dangerous for you.”

“But Twilight!” Spike complained, but could do nothing as she and the rest of the ponies turned towards the inner tower. Hornshield nodded as he beckoned for Spike to come see an assortment of gemstones.

True to the knight commander’s words, as the last of the party entered the Tower, the heavy doors were closed behind them. “This place is too confined!” Rainbow Dash complained, “How am I supposed to use my amazing acrobatic aerial assaults in a place like this?”

“Ya don’t,” said Applejack, “You stay close just like Twilight said. Where to next sugarcube?”

“We have to begin to climb the tower,” the lavender unicorn pointed a hoof towards the stair case, “The second floor has all the classrooms for the younger unicorns. We’ll be able to get to the dormitories and the libraries after that.”

The party quickly galloped up the stairs, opening the door to the classrooms. Unlike the entrance to the island spire, the classrooms appeared to have been struck by a whirlwind. Books and parchment were strewn about and ruined, with burn marks from spells and demons scarring the ground and walls.

As they continued, Twilight could feel a stinging in her horn. Magic was clashing against magic. She looked to Rarity who was in obvious discomfort, likely feeling the powers of the arcane slamming against each other. The ponies surrounded the door, with Applejack and Rainbow taking the lead. Carefully, Twilight opened the door to the classroom, moving forward to meet the threat.

They were instead met with the surprised look of wounded unicorns and templar. In the archway leading into the classroom, a blue unicorn with a silver mane was struggling to keep up a magical barrier under assault by several Rage demons. Her horn glowed bright, channelling energy into the shield protecting the unicorns behind her.

Twilight was impressed by Trixie's magical aptitude. Hornshield had said the attacks were relenting somewhat and after seeing Trixie fight back against the demons, Twilight wondered how much of the "Great and Powerful" title was true and not just bravado. However, keeping up such a barrier was greatly taxing and it would only be a matter of time until she faltered.

"Trixie!" Twilight called as she galloped over to the blue unicorn's side. Trixie turned her head only slightly, eyes wide in shock.

"Y-you?" she said as the Rage demons continued to claw at her shield, "What are you doing here? The Great and Powerful Trixie did not ask for your return! She can handle these demons herself!"

The magical bulwark shimmered a bit as Trixie cried out in pain. The demons would soon cause its collapse, and their hatred was focused on the pony who had hindered them for so long.

"Trixie, you can't keep that barrier up forever," Twilight said. She looked down and saw Trixie's star headed staff on the ground, snapped in two. "Drop the shield and let us help you! I can see that you are incredibly gifted for magic, but you've been fighting demons for days!"

Trixie grimaced as she looked to see her shield begin to falter. "OK!" cried the silver maned unicorn, "Trixie will drop her barrier but you have to defeat the demons. Trixie...I only know a few fire spells, everything else I know is defensive! Impressively defensive, but still no use in banishing demons!"

With a gasp, Trixie fell to her knees and the barrier was gone. The Rage demons surged forward, their flaming maws opened wide as they made a burning path towards Trixie. Twilight and Rarity stepped forward, their horns and staves glowing in sync as they channelled their energy into arcane blasts, forcing the monsters of the Fade to avert their attention to them.

Applejack and Rainbow Dash moved to help them, but stopped as Twilight raised a hoof. The Rage demons were creatures of living fire, and getting close to one was similar to sticking one's hoof into a forge. Thankfully, with Rarity's help, their magical barrage did not cease, and the demons were dispelled from the physical world, too weakened to maintain their bodies.

Trixie got back to her hooves, dusting herself off and adjusting her large pointed hat. The starry hat and cape she always wore was now in tatters, the edges were frayed and burnt during the attack. She immediately regained her usual composure as she walked over to Twilight.

“The Great and Powerful Trixie may indeed be grateful for your timely arrival,” she said while looking over her hoof, “Trixie has been holding off the demons for days, protecting her young charges from the madness that was her former mentor Hubred.”

“About that,” Twilight looked past the doorway to where the stairs led to the libraries, wondering what the demon controlled areas of the tower looked like, “What happened? Hubred was your mentor, but now he’s summoning demons and leading Maleficar against the templar.”

“The Great and Powerful Trixie would not associate herself with demons and Maleficar.” With a huff, she looked at her broken staff sadly. Twilight almost caught a glimpse of a tear as Trixie put the broken pieces on a table. “Trixie made a promise to become Great and Powerful on her own, and she has succeeded at that. When Hubred came to Trixie, she knew that her mentor had made a deal with a demon. Many unicorns were suddenly using Dark Arts, including blood magic. Wise Eyes and the rest of the senior enchanters went to confront Hubred in the Harrowing Chamber.”

“What are you doing here?” Trixie looked at Twilight with narrowed eyes, still holding that same rivalry the two had shared as fillies as top priority. Twilight explained her task to save Wise Eyes and stop Hubred before the templar could enact the Right of Annulment. The mention of the Right made the colour in Trixie’s face fade.

“They can’t!” she called out, “All the young unicorns...I mean, the Great and Powerful Trixie is still in the Tower! Well if YOU are going to go into the Tower, then so will the Great and Powerful Trixie. You should thank Celestia while you’re at it.”

With her snout in the air, Trixie walked over to the door. Applejack groaned, while Rarity shook her head. The others simply murmured as Twilight sighed before following the braggart up the stairs towards the library.

Things were as bad as Hornshield had said. Unlike the lower floors, the library was a ruined warzone, covered in fleshy pustules on the floor and walls. This was the work of several demons, corrupting what they could to create an ideal habitat. As Pinkie was poking one of the globules with a hoof, Twilight called out to warn her away.

“Stay away from those!” she warned, “Those...those were ponies. Ponies who can’t become full abominations become this. As far as anypony is concerned, they can’t be saved. We should move on.”

The shape of the library was a nightmare to Twilight. How many years had she spent in this hall, reading as many books on magic as she could get her hooves on, taking in all the lessons her elders had to teach? Now all of that was being burnt away by a mad unicorn’s hunger for power. Did Hubred not realize what the templar would do in this situation? Or did he even care?

Fluttershy let out a sharp gasp as they turned towards the staircase. A group of abominations surrounded a wooden cabinet, smacking against the drawers with their hooves. At the sound of Fluttershy’s cry they turned towards the party, their full grotesque visage in view. If it were not for their four legs and hooves, they would hardly have been considered ponies at all; their bodies covered in twisted flesh and blood filled boils. Their teeth were sharp and jagged, and their eyes a dark crimson.

With a roar the abominations charged, their teeth gnashing for flesh. Applejack and Rainbow pushed forward, delivering sharp blows with their blades. Too confined for her grenades, Pinkie also leaped into the fray, swinging her mace against the twisted creatures. Fluttershy also joined in, firing arrow after arrow into the abominations. Twilight, Rarity and Trixie held back though, not wanting to attract the attention on the abominations with their magic.

Trixie stepped forward however, and began to chant as her horn glowed bright. As the words flowed from her lips, the spell she was casting began to take form, causing the attacking ponies to glow with energy. Twilight watched as her friends began to fight quicker, striking stronger blows with their weapons until the last abomination fell. Each look surprised at how well they did, for not one had suffered a scratch against the abominations.

“Did the Great and Powerful Trixie not say she was a master of defensive spellwork?” Hearing the pride in Trixie’s voice made Twilight consider if Trixie was possessed by a Pride demon, but instead gave a weak smile of agreement as they approached the cabinet. As Twilight neared the cabinet, she overheard two quiet voices.

“Hey Snips, can we get out of here? It smells bad, like old cheese.”

“Not yet, Snails! You don’t want to be a demon’s lunch, do you?”

“Mmm...lunch.” Though the voices were muffled, Twilight recognized them immediately as the two unicorn colts Snips and Snails. They were not the brightest by any stretch, but still did not deserve being trapped in the Tower with demons. With her magic, the lavender unicorn forced the cabinet open, revealing the two scared unicorns shaking and covering their eyes with their hooves.

“Please don’t eat us!” Snips cried out, “We don’t taste very good! We taste like...like...Snails, help me out!”

Snails thought for a moment before looking up. “Taste like green beans and yams!”

“What if they like beans and yams?” Snips retorted before finally seeing who had opened the cabinet. A wide smile of relief formed on the chubby colt’s face. “It’s the Great and Powerful Trixie! She’s come to save us and vanquish the evil Hubred!”

Trixie gave a weak laugh at the praise and expectation from Snips. She looked to Twilight who simply raised an eyebrow and gave a wave of her hoof; her way of saying they’re all yours. “Of course the Great and Powerful Trixie will save the Tower,” she said, “We just need to know what happened since Trixie made a, how can we say, tactical retreat.”

“Bookworm was here digging for something,” Snails said, “A scroll or something. The Liter...Lida...Lemon...”

As Snails struggled to remember, Twilight looked to Trixie as they both realized what he was trying to say. “The Litany of Dawn!” They shouted in

unison, quickly shooting daggers at each other with their eyes. The rest of the ponies offered only puzzled expressions.

“The Litany of Dawn was a chanted spell written by a unicorn named Dawnstride several hundred years ago,” Twilight explained, “It’s a spell that when chanted allows a unicorn to stop the Dark Arts from being used. It’s not effective against demonic possession, but it does work well against mind control.”

“If Bookworm had the Litany, then he’s likely gone to try to stop Hubred by himself,” Trixie began to pace, walking back in forth as she appeared deep in thought. “We have to keep going up the Tower before Bookworm gets to Hubred and loses the Litany!” Without warning Trixie charged up the stairs, leaving the party behind.

“We’ll just stay in here,” Snips said before closing the cabinet. Twilight let out a noise of exasperation before joining Trixie up the stairs towards the dormitories. As they climbed, the walls were increasingly covered in more flesh and blood, the abominations spreading their filth everywhere they could.

Trixie was waiting by the archway leading into the centre room. She pointed a hoof towards the centre of the room, her eyes wide with fear.

The room looked like a crowd of ponies exploded, leaving their entrails and corrupted flesh on the walls and floors. Only the torn robes of unicorns and the battered armour of templar told who had fought in the room. In the centre of the room was a large abomination, much more twisted and deformed than the others the party had faced.

Twilight looked over to the group, before motioning for the others to take their positions behind her. Before they could enact any plan of attack, a low warbling voice shook in the lavender unicorn’s mind.

“I know where you are, little fillies. Come out. I have much to offer, and I don’t want to be a bad host.”

A cold chill resonated throughout Twilight’s body as she recognized the voice. It was the same Sloth demon that had tried to tempt her with promises of restful sleep inside the Fade during her Harrowing. The demon

had manifested itself in the physical realm, likely taking the body of a Maleficar.

Twilight stepped towards the Sloth demon, keeping her mind sharp by looking the demon straight in its eyes. The others followed, with Trixie trailing behind the farthest, her veneer of courage now faded in the presence of a powerful beast from beyond the Veil.

At the demon's hooves was a brown unicorn Twilight could only assume was Bookworm. A scroll, likely the Litany of Dawn, hung outside of the poor scholar's saddlebag. The demon stood still, its eyes unblinking as it watched the ponies surround it.

"Welcome, ponies," the Sloth demon spoke directly into their minds, its low voice oddly soothing,
"I was so hoping you would come join me. You have struggled for so long, don't you all deserve a moment of rest? Just rest your eyes, take a nap."

The Sloth demon began to glow, the air becoming hazy and intoxicating. It was worse in the real world than it was in the Fade, as Twilight felt every ounce of energy being sapped. She turned to see Trixie fall to her knees, the hat sliding off her head to the ground.

"The Great and Powerful...Trixie..." the blue unicorn mumbled as her eyes drooped, "Is so tired. Fighting the demons for days, she needs...to sleep."

Trixie fell into swift slumber with the other ponies unable to resist the spell as well. "I'm just so...sleepy..." Fluttershy let out a soft yawn, "I don't want to be trouble...I just can't stay...awake."

"Come on..." Rainbow Dash tried to move forward to attack, but fell like the others, "I have way too much...energy...but I do like a good nap."

Pinkie Pie was trying to do some sort of dance, but even that was slowed by fatigue. "Just dance..." she said, eyelids low, "The pony pokey. You put you right hoof...in, you put...your right hoof out..."

"I can't fall...here..." Rarity squealed, "The ground is icky...it will ruin my...hard work on my mane..."

“Everypony...we gotta hunker down...resist...” Applejack pulled her sword, but let it drop, not having the strength to wield it.

One by one, the ponies fell into a deep sleep by the Sloth demon’s spell. Twilight tried to resist as well, but failed as she too let her eyes close, the magical sleep overtaking her as easily as it did the others. The Sloth demon laughed and then yawned as it set itself down on the ground.

“Nighty night, little fillies.”

* * *

Twilight awoke with a start, tossing her blanket off as she looked around her treehouse bedroom. Her head throbbed as the images of a nightmare bounced around in her mind. An oppressive tower filled with cruel earth ponies in cold armour bearing wicked swords. The fearsome visages of indescribable monsters resonated at the periphery of her thoughts as she made her way to a nearby water basin. She submerged her head in the cool waters to clear her troubled mind.

She levitated a towel to dry herself as she looked around her bedroom. Spike was sleeping soundly in his basket as the morning sun shined through the windows of the bedroom. Not wanting to disturb the baby dragon, Twilight made her way to the main floor, each hoofstep echoing in the silent library.

As she walked, Twilight noticed a strange wrongness to the start of her day. She could not recall what she had planned to do, and a studious and well organized unicorn such as herself would not have let her day be decided on a whim.

Twilight then tried to remember what she did yesterday, but only a stinging headache came as an answer. Nothing seemed right, except she had a large collection of books that she could spend months studying.

“There,” Twilight said aloud, as if to reassure herself, “I can study. Nothing in particular, just choose a book and read it.” But the task became more daunting as she found that she did not know what to read at first. Agitation grew as even the desire to read felt wrong. There was something else she was supposed to do.

A knock at the door interrupted her thoughts. Twilight walked over to the door, opening it with a small push from her hoof. Standing before her library was a familiar, brown coated stallion. His cheery smile was more unnerving than anything to the unicorn as he stepped into the library, eagerly looking around at the bookshelves.

“Twilight Sparkle,” he said, “It has been quite some time. I hope you are well? I seem to find myself with quite a bit of free time, so I was wondering if you have any books I would be interested in. Perhaps something about history, or birds?”

Twilight stood agape as she saw the earth pony look over her collection of books. It simply was not possible for him to be here.

“Duncan?”

Chapter 8

Familiar in the Fade

“Twilight?”

Twilight?”

Is everything alright, Twilight Sparkle? You look like you’ve just seen a ghost!” Duncan chuckled, browsing the extensive library before her. Twilight stood by, her mouth agape. She couldn’t believe her eyes. Had Flemeth lied to her and Applejack about what happened in Ostequus? Was everything that had occurred in the observatory just some bad dream?

No! It couldn’t have been! That didn’t make any sense! Twilight would have *felt* the dream. She would have *known* she was inside the Fade.

Her head throbbed painfully, everything slowly seeping back into it as she tried to remember. Meeting Flemeth in the Wilds. Ponyring. Fluttershy. Pinkie Pie. The battle against Rainbow Dash. They had been in the Tower, trying to save the unicorns from certain destruction...

Were these memories just the fading afterimage of some horrible nightmare, or were they true? This could just as easily be the Fade as it could be the real world, cocooning her in some elaborate ruse. She had to know. It was too dangerous not to.

Still, the magic of the dream was something that she was particularly sensitive to. She would have *known* if it was the dream world. She would have felt it right away. But something still wasn’t right.

This *couldn’t* be real... but how? Unless...

A demon. Creatures of the Fade, they could manipulate it to construct whatever sort of fabrications they liked, constructing entire illusionary worlds out of a few stray memories if they so desired. They had the power to recreate places, ponies, and even feelings and physical sensations such as pain, pleasure, grief and happiness weren’t beyond their abilities.

But there was always a flaw. Demons forced their uncanny dreamscapes onto ponies, and those who did not fall victim to their temptation could find a way to upset the imagery, or to anger the malign spirits who made this realm their hunting ground. Demons never want to let go of their prey, and quickly turned to force at the slightest provocation when subtlety failed them.

Twilight swallowed hard as she approached Duncan.

She had the utmost respect for the Grey Warden, but Twilight simply had to know if everything was real or a very elaborate hoax formed by a demon. “Duncan,” she asked, lifting random books from the shelves with her magic, “What exactly happened in Ostequus? Flemeth said everypony died after Loghoof quit the field.”

“All part of Loghoof’s grand strategy, I assure you,” answered Duncan, his large smile more forboding than comforting, “Never mind about the battle! The Archdemon was slain, and the Grey Wardens are heroes once more! If it were not for your participation, we would not have won the day. You earned your place in this peaceful village.”

“Village?” Twilight looked out the nearest window to see a small colourful town, bustling with activity from all kinds of happy ponies. She had not been outside the Tower for long, but the town held the same feeling of wrongness that the treehouse and Duncan had around them.

“This is the town of Ponyville,” Duncan explained, “It was built near Ostequus after the battle. All of your friends have found peaceful, fulfilling lives here. You would not want to ruin that, would you?”

The lavender unicorn narrowed her eyes at the image of Duncan. The smiling face was so outside of the Duncan she had known, it was too surreal. Mentioning Loghoof’s grand strategy was completely different from the practical general pony she had met. When he mentioned that she would ruin her friends’ happiness, it was then that Twilight knew it was not Duncan. The elder Warden cared only for duty, not for the happiness of ponies.

“Duncan died in Ostequus,” Twilight said with a challenging tone, “even if the battle was won, the Duncan I knew would not have sat on his haunches looking for books to read. He would have been looking for more Wardens to recruit, or took the fight the ponyspawn in the Dark Tunnels. You are not Duncan!”

The false Warden quickly turned from jovial to furious, an angry snarl escaping his lips. “How dare you!” He shouted, “I fight, I suffer for peace and this is how you repay me! By spitting me in the face! I will show you to be grateful, little filly!”

“Duncan” reared, drawing his sword and charging towards Twilight. With a thought she channeled a spell of ice to consume the fake earth pony, but he managed to avoid the freezing spell. Twilight then remembered that the demon would have access to everything Twilight knew, including her knowledge of spells both offensive and defensive and would quickly discover counters to them.

The false pony took a swipe with his sword, but it was clumsy and random compared to the true Duncan’s expert swordplay. Twilight had to come up with a different offense and quickly however. The Fade was the demon’s natural hunting ground, and it would soon be joined by allies as long as its rage was strong and fierce.

Twilight turned quickly, taking a nod from Applejack’s repertoire, slamming both hind hooves into the demon’s chest. The swift applebuck kick caught the demon by surprise, leaving the Fade creature stunned. It was now time for another unexpected attack.

Her horn began to glow bright as Twilight began channeling the very magic of the Fade into a new spell. In front of the false Duncan a large orb of ice formed, its power lashing out against him. All around the orb, violent arctic winds ripped the library apart, yet harmlessly lashed around Twilight. Duncan cried out in fury as he was being battered by mystical ice, screaming out curses until at last he fell to his knees.

“You won’t escape foal,” the demon cursed as his very form began to crack like glass, “You will never find your friends in the Fade, and you will never defeat Sloth on your own.” Duncan spat one last time before shattering into

pieces. The shards of the demon dissipated, leaving Twilight alone in the treehouse library.

“Alright,” Twilight breathed as she looked out the door, “I’m in the Fade, but it feels real. I’m in a place called Ponyville which seems like an ideal town for everyone’s wants and needs. All I have to do is find all my friends and put a stop to a powerful Sloth Demon. What could possibly go wrong?”

With caution, Twilight opened the door leading outside. It was a bright summer day, with nary a cloud in sight except for a large nimbus hanging low over the town. As she walked through town, many of the other towns ponies greeted her happily, their smiles disturbing rather than friendly. It was as if they were being forced to be cheerful.

Twilight made her way to the centre of Ponyville towards the crossroads. There, a large sign post stood proudly, with multiple signs pointing in different directions. She looked up at the signpost, reading off the names of places.

“Carousel Boutique, Sugar Cube Corner, weather control, Riverside meadow, Red Apple Acres,” Twilight said aloud, “This must be where the demon took all my friends. But why make it so obvious?”

There was no time to thank good fortune or wonder about the machinations of the Fade. For all she knew, it was the will of her friends that had helped create such a useful signpost. Or it was likely a demon trap.

Twilight galloped at full tilt all the way down the beaten path towards Red Apple Acres. Soon she was in front of a large barn with huge tracts of ploughed land and hundreds of apple trees in all the hills and valleys as far as she could see. The sweet smell of apples and baked goods wafted through her nostrils, followed by a rumbling in her stomach.

“Well howdy there Twilight!” came a cheerful voice. Twilight turned to see Applejack with a large smile on her face as she carried two heavy baskets of apples. The blonde earth pony set the baskets down in front of the barn before wiping the sweat from her brow with a hoof.

“Ain’t nothing like a hard days work all done, am I right?” Applejack laughed before turning towards a water basin for a drink. Unlike the smile that the

demon forced on the face of Duncan, Applejack's smile seemed genuine and happy. It would be difficult to convince her fellow Warden that this was all just a dangerous fantasy.

"Applejack, we need to talk," Twilight began, "All this isn't real, and we're in the Fade. You need to reject this dream and..."

"Now hold on to yer apples." Applejack began to look around, darting her head back and forth as if she was searching for something important. Twilight felt glad that maybe her friend figured out where Applejack pushed her towards a small table next to the barn.

"I heard yer stomach rumble from tree to tree," Applejack said, "And no way we can do anything runnin' on empty! Soup's on everypony!"

Before Twilight could object, a venerable herd of earth ponies rushed over to the small table. "Meet the family!" Applejack announced, "This here's Big Macintosh, and Apple Bloom, and Apple Tart, and Apple Pie, and..."

As Applejack went on introducing everypony, Twilight looked up at the huge stallion before her. Before her was the Arl of Red Apple Acres, as large as any boulder and appeared to be just as strong. With his red coat, orange mane and simple horse collar, he looked like a rustic earth pony that could move the land with a simple pound of his hoof. However, like Duncan, he and the rest of the "family" had that same unnerving smile.

"Isn't it great Twilight?" Applejack beamed, "This is the life. A simple one, but a good one. Just buckin' apples, living with my family, what more could anypony ask for?"

"Applejack," Twilight tried to get her friend to snap out of the dream but it was proving difficult to dispute, "You have to listen. None of this is real. None of your family here is real. We are in the Fade, can you remember where we were before you saw all this? Do you remember Ostequus?"

The former templar pony held her head in her hooves, reeling from what appeared to be the same headaches Twilight had suffered when her memories clashed with the falsehoods the demons constructed. As Applejack struggled with her memories, Twilight noticed a few of the eerie earth ponies begin to vanish into thin air.

"I...I remember we were in a tower," Applejack propped herself up against the table for support, "I remember Ostequus. I remember the ponyspawn. But we fought them off, we won! I see that, we're here aren't we? Oh Twi, what's goin' on? I can't keep my head on straight."

The little filly Applejack called Apple Bloom looked up to the mare with big eyes. "Hey Sis?" she said in the same way as Applejack did, "Yer not gonna leave us are ya? Ya just came back from war. Me and Big Macintosh would be sad if we lost you."

"Eeeeeyup," said Big Macintosh. Applejack grimaced at the sounds of their voices, her confusion and frustration clearly showing as she struggled between realities. Twilight looked to see more ponies disappear, but not enough. She needed to end the demon's charade now.

"Applejack, I know this is tough but you have to think of who you really are. You're a Grey Warden like me. We have a duty to fight the ponyspawn, to save Equestria from the Blight. Remember who you are, remember Duncan. Remember what Duncan taught you about being a Grey Warden."

At the mention of Duncan, Applejack opened her eyes, revelation shining in her eyes. She mouthed Duncan's name before looking at Apple Bloom and Big Macintosh. She shook her head at the two before stepping away from the family herd.

"Twilight's right," she said, though she gasped for air and choked on the words, "Duncan always said we have a duty, an' as much as I want nothin' more than to be with my family, any family, I just can't brush off the duty Duncan trusted me with."

With Applejack's clarity of the situation, Twilight smiled as the rest of the phony ponies disappeared leaving only the demons in the form of Apple Bloom and Big Macintosh. Like the false Duncan, the demons did not take Applejack's rejection well. Their faces contorted into rage as they took steps to stare Applejack down.

"We just wanted you to stay with us!" Apple Bloom shrieked, her voice now piercingly high and unnatural, "We were gonna be a great big happy family! But all you want is yer duty! Well to hay with yer duty, and to hay with you!"

“Eeeeyup!” Big Macintosh moved with surprising speed for a pony of his bulk, but Applejack was faster. Anger flashed in her eyes over the actions the demons took to trick her, and she reared high with a shout, swinging her hooves towards the Arl of Red Apple Acres. Apple Bloom’s teeth grew large and jagged and she moved to bite Applejack’s favoured hind legs.

Twilight breathed deep as she channeled arcane energy into two energy blasts. With a shout, she flung the blasts towards the demons, both orbs slamming against their hides and breaking them like glass. Applejack took a couple of sharp gasps before offering a weak smile.

“Thanks Twilight,” Applejack said, “If it weren’t for ya, I’d be stuck in there. I’ve got a lot to think about after we get outta here.”

“No worries Apple-” Before Twilight could finish, a blue ring of energy surrounded the earth pony Warden. The ring glowed bright before vanishing, taking Applejack along with it.

Twilight stomped her hoof in frustration. The Sloth Demon surely knew she was going about freeing her friends. She felt her coat stand on end as the chilling laugh of the demon echoed in her mind.

“I know what you are doing, little Filly,” said the Sloth demon, “And I find it amusing. How long will it take for you to realize that your friends like the realities I have given them. Please stop resisting.”

She ignored the mockeries of Sloth as she ran down the dirt path away from the acres towards town. She looked up at the sign post, taking in the words of “Carousel Boutique.” That sounded like a place Rarity would have wanted, and the support of another unicorn in the Fade would be immensely helpful.

As she opened the door to the boutique, Twilight looked to find herself in the very lap of luxury. She was surrounded by the most exquisite and beautiful of equine dresses, each appeared lovingly hoofcrafted with every minor detail accounted for. Gemstones of all kinds were strategically placed, and the embroidery on many of the works seemed to have been spun with silver and gold. The actual room itself was no less impressive, a

grandiose structure of immaculate architecture Twilight only ever recalled from books about Filais.

It was quite a surprise to see Rarity in the center of the room, dressed in likely the most stunning of gowns looking downright miserable. As Twilight approached, her fellow unicorn lit up immediately, getting up to her hooves while discarding the perfect dress.

“Oh Twilight, thank goodness you’ve come!” Rarity exclaimed, “It’s just awful here!”

“I don’t really understand,” Twilight looked around the boutique, a puzzled look on her face, “I thought this would be what you wanted?”

“It would be,” the white unicorn said, “And the demons did do a lovely job. The dresses are simply to die for, and this boutique is everything I ever dreamed of. But they had to add one tiny detail, and ruined the whole fantasy.”

Rarity pointed a hoof towards a stairwell. If Rarity was the epitome of elegance, then the bizarre Flemeth was the very avatar of gaudiness. The demon that took the form of the Mare of the Mire was smiling and dancing on her down the stairs, laughing haughtily in a bright orange and green dress with far too many bows.

The elder unicorn trotted happily up towards Twilight and Rarity, that same forced grin on her face as with all the other demons taking the shapes of ponies. “Guests, how lovely!” Flemeth laughed as she twirled around the room. Rarity rolled her eyes before giving heading to the door.

“You are not my mother,” she said, with more conviction in her voice than Twilight ever guessed, “Even if Flemeth ever had an inkling to wear my work, I would never be caught dead being near such hideous rags. I’m leaving.”

“How could you say such things to your dear old mother?” Flemeth’s face began to contort, only to receive a lightning bolt from Rarity’s horn. The demon broke into pieces, followed by Rarity’s own dress. Rarity sighed, looking wistfully around her, then back to her old feathered vest.

“That was the easiest thing I ever did and the hardest,” she said, “That dress. My boutique. If only the demons had not added her. Ah well. I suppose we should be finding the others. Though I wonder if I could stay, take a look at some of the other designs...”

As she finished, the same blue ring that had whisked away Applejack formed around Rarity. Twilight gave a shout but could do nothing as the ring teleported Rarity to another location. The Sloth Demon echoed it's frustrations inside the Fade.

“I am becoming rather upset at your actions, little filly,” the Sloth demon spoke into her mind directly, “I am just trying to be a good host. If you would be so kind as to stop breaking my gifts to your friends, I actually worked hard to give them the realities that would put them at rest.”

She opened the door of the boutique and looked around, noticing that the amount of ponies meandering about was smaller than before. They still held that eerie smile on their faces. Demons always tried to appear natural, but many did not know what the real world was like, and instead tried to force their own vision of what reality was like on ponies trapped in the fade.

There came the question as to why the blue ring did not capture her like it did Applejack and Rarity, but Twilight decided it would be prudent not to look too deeply into good fortune. She focused her thoughts on getting to the crossroads where the signpost was standing.

Twilight looked up to the signpost and noticed that the ways pointing to Red Apple Acres and Carousel Boutique were gone, leaving only the meadow, Sugarcube Corner, and the weather control directions. The sign pointing to the meadow seemed like the best way to go next.

Twilight cantered through the town, acting as natural as she can past the false ponies around her. Their eyes and their smiles were unnerving, but they said and did nothing as Twilight passed them by. The unicorn mage did not know what was more disturbing: their expressions or the fact that they were ignoring her.

She made her way over down the road, revealing a meadow filled with flowers and all manner of small birds and critters. Near the meadow was a small stream and in the side of a hill was a cozy little home built as part of

the land. Twilight walked through the meadow, confusion on her face as she wondered why Trixie would dream of such serene scenery. When her ears picked up the sound of a pony singing from the house, Twilight realized that it was not Trixie's dream she was in, but rather Fluttershy's.

The door opened and Fluttershy trotted out happily with a basket of assorted nuts and vegetables in her mouth. Twilight looked at Fluttershy in shock. Gone were the robes of the Chantry and instead of the yellow pony she knew, there stood a pegasus with three butterflies for a cutie mark. It made sense the more Twilight thought about it; most Chantry sisters were earth ponies, and if Fluttershy wanted to be accepted in the cloister she would have to hide her wings.

The light pink maned pegasus looked at Twilight before lowering the basket to the ground, a small smile on her face. "Hello Twilight," she said softly, "Isn't it a beautiful day? I was just going to bring some food to all my little animal friends. Would you like to join me?"

Twilight followed behind Fluttershy as she began to distribute food to all the animals. Carrots for the bunnies, lettuce for the hedgehogs, nuts for the squirrels, and seeds for the birds were all delivered with care. Fluttershy hummed a happy melody as she worked, leaving the unicorn to feel bad about having to break the dream as she did before. It needed to be done though lest other demons took over their bodies and made it impossible to return to the real world.

"Fluttershy, we have to get out of here," she began, "This is the Fade. None of it is real. Not the sun, not the animals."

She could see Fluttershy's ears droop as explained the falsehoods of the environment. "Why do you have to say such things?" the yellow pegasus asked tears already brimming in her eyes, "This is where I belong, with all the little critters, in a nice quiet home where I don't have to worry about bandits or ponyspawn or Filesians?. Where I can be my own pony and not be ridiculed because I have wings?"

Twilight knew that she would have faced similar rapprochement for being a unicorn, and had felt the wary eyes of earth ponies during her travels with Duncan and being at Ostequus. But even then, she had lived most of her

life in the Tower with other unicorns. What sort of life had Fluttershy lead in Filais? How long had she had to hide her wings?

“Do you know what it’s like to never know what a night of safety is? Where you have to sleep with one eye open because of some game the nobles of Filais play?” Fluttershy’s expression turned to anger as she flew in a circle around Twilight. “We are just playing pieces for the Filais Game, to be moved around at the whims of ponies who never had to suffer once in their lives. I left that life to be free of it all, but they hunted me. They said I knew too much. They hurt me.”

“I’m sorry Fluttershy,” Twilight said, cradling her friend with her foreleg, “You lived a hard life simply by being born with wings, and the scorn that comes with them. I don’t know much about Filais, and I’m sorry they hurt you. But I know that the Sloth Demon is giving you something you want, but it’s all false, a dreamworld. It will just hurt you worse than anything you faced before. Please Fluttershy. Remember your dream, the one from Celestia. We can’t stop the ponyspawn without you.”

Fluttershy looked over at the small animals that surrounded her. “The dream,” she muttered before turning to the assembled animals, “I’m sorry little ones. Maybe there is a nice demon who can take care of you.”

“Don’t leave us, Fluttershy,” the animals said, in unison. Fluttershy gasped and took a step back as the small critters moved closer, “We love you Fluttershy. We want you to stay with us. We want you to be happy and safe.”

“Fluttershy! Get back!” Twilight dove in front of the yellow pegasus, her magic already flaring into a protective barrier as the animals grew large fangs and rushed forward. They bounced off the shield, but it was beginning to grow more and more stressful to maintain her magic.

The animal-demons hissed before going around for another attack. Suddenly three arrows struck the incoming assault, shattering the demons as their fellows before them were broken. Twilight turned to see Fluttershy wearing her Chantry robes and armed with bow, firing arrow after arrow into each demon with conviction in her eyes.

“You are not my friends!” She said between each volley of arrows, “You are just mean bullies and thieves!” The demons smashed like glass with each arrow, until at last the very scenery itself broke into pieces around them. Twilight rasped for air as she lowered her shield, but looked to see Fluttershy standing close with a faint smile.

“Thank you, Twilight,” she said as she put away her bow, “I’m glad Celestia guided me to you. It’s good to know-”

The blue ring that stole away Applejack and Rarity formed again around Fluttershy. This time, Twilight tried to interrupt the demon’s spell with her magic, but was easily rebuked by the demon’s arcane feedback. In an instant the yellow pegasus was gone, leaving only Twilight alone in the Fade.

“What do you want!?” Twilight cried out to prismatic sky of the dream realm, “How long are we going to keep fighting like this!”

“As long as it takes for you to submit,” the Sloth Demon answered, an edge in its voice hinting at its frustrations. Twilight ignored the demon and began to gallop into Ponyville towards the signpost that had helped her so far. Less ponies milled about the idealist town, but now they were starting to take notice of Twilight and more importantly, staying away from her.

She looked over at the signpost, specifically the sign that read “Sugarcube Corner“. Another one of her friends would be waiting there. Suddenly Twilight realized something; all her friends matched one location, with Applejack at the farm, Rarity at the boutique, and Fluttershy at the meadow. If Pinkie Pie and Rainbow dash were at the two last signs, then where was Trixie?

Twilight let out an exasperated sigh as she walked down the street. Standing before her as the sign indicated was a house seemingly made from sweets. She thought she was going to have a toothache simply by looking at the structure. The very walls seemed to have been built from gingerbread, and countless candies and other goodies made for the décor.

Pastries and cakes decorated the shelves and displays, and the aroma of baked sweets made for a pleasant picture. Twilight could only surmise that she was inside a bakery. It made sense, what with Pinkie’s love of baked

treats and mixing ingredients in general. She was able to give a sigh of relief that her grenades were no where in sight. Yet, Twilight reminded herself.

Twilight could hear the sounds of Pinkie Pie's easily recognizable signing from the kitchen, as well as the warbled sound of demons trying to emulate the song. Twilight was not sure what she would encounter when concerning Pinkie's inner desires, but she was certain that seeing the pink earth pony dancing the pony polka with two Rage demons which were not even in disguises.

"Hi Twilight!" Pinkie called with her usual good cheer, "You're just in time! We were about to do another round of the pony polka! These two big softies were all 'Rawr!' and stuff, but then I started to dance like I said I would to try to stay awake, and they joined in! We are having a great time!"

The two Rage demons looked over at Twilight then back to Pinkie who started to sing and dance again. They surged over to the unicorn, but before she could attack they started to not only speak, but instead sounded like they were whimpering. "Please!" warbled one, "We cannot take anymore of the dancing, of the singing. She is too fleet of hoof, her voice too cheery. We do not think she has rage within her."

"Sloth wanted us to attack, but we cannot!" said the other, "Before she started her infernal song, we numbered four. She vanquished two of our kind so quickly with her ability inside the Fade. Her mind knows not of limits!"

Twilight was impressed that Pinkie's imagination had overcome the strength of demons. It was not unheard of; any pony with an incredible imagination could manipulate the land of dreams and nightmares as easily as if they were asleep. As the group of Rage demons learned, an intrepid dreamer even without a mastery of magic could still be a challenge to possess as long as their imagination was vibrant.

The two Rage demons vanished rather than shattered, fleeing from Pinkie Pie as she bounded over to Twilight. Seeing Pinkie bounce around the empty building, Twilight had an idea and had to explain it quickly to Pinkie before the Sloth demon captured her with his blue ring of magic.

“Pinkie, I need your help,” Twilight said, “A blue ring is going to take you away just like it did Applejack, Rarity and Fluttershy. I still have to find Rainbow Dash and Trixie. Wherever the blue ring takes you, I need you remember this: Get all our friends to my location.”

“But how will I know when to dream really, really hard?” Pinkie asked. Before Twilight could answer the blue ring appeared, wrapping itself around the pink pony.

“I trust you Pinkie Pie!” called Twilight, “I trust you! I know you can do it!” Pinkie disappeared, leaving only a tired Twilight in the bakery, fatigue and stress weighing her down. Only two more from the party remained to be found, but the fact that the Sloth Demon was able to snatch up all her allies so easily gave Twilight pause. There was just so much she did not know about demons or the Fade, especially in regards to actually fighting against them in their domain.

Twilight took a deep breath as she burst open the door of Sugarcube Corner. There was little else to do but move forward and try to rescue Rainbow Dash and Trixie from their illusionary worlds. As she approached the center of Ponyville again, a swarm of demons surrounded the village, their true forms revealed. Rage demons and creatures of smoke and shadow moved throughout Ponyville, snapping at each other as they hunted for Twilight.

She quickly moved to a corner and watched as one of the demons snapped at each other, never speaking but letting loose guttural growls. Before, the town was filled with ponies. Now it was simply being swept by very small groups of demons. They were losing control of this section of the Fade.

Twilight was now alone in a hauntingly empty village. Without a second thought, she thought hard on the last location on the signpost, weather control, and channelled her own teleportation spell. With the demons now actively looking for her, she would have to expend what energy she had to traverse the Fade.

The violet unicorn stepped through the gateway to find herself in the middle of a wide expanse of land. The sun was shining and there was a light breeze from the wind. High above her sitting in the sky was a structure almost entirely made of clouds. A river of water with all the colours of the

rainbow flowed from the cloud building to the ground below, disappearing into a shimmer of light as soon as the rainbow hit the ground.

The demons had likely used the dreams of Rainbow Dash to build this from the forgotten ways of cloudbuilding, an old pegasus art thought long lost to the years. The Pegasi of the Dales used to span a huge empire both on ground and in the air, but centuries of constant war and abuse of Dark Arts had grounded the mighty flying ponies. It was interesting to Twilight what she would encounter such imagery of the pegasi in Dash's dreamscape.

Twilight was still uncomfortable of the idea on relying on Rainbow Dash, but even an assassin from Pura Raza did not deserve to be left at the mercy of demons. With a shout the unicorn called out Dash's name towards the cloud home, hoping the cyan pegasus would hear her.

Dash poked her head out from high above the clouds. She gave a wave with her hoof as she flew from the top of the building with dramatic flair, diving around clouds with incredible speed. Her rainbow mane made her appear to be a streak of colour in the sky. With finesse Dash landed in front of Twilight on her hind legs, her body in a striking pose.

"Pretty sweet, huh?" The aerial display was very impressive and Twilight had to wonder how much of the show was Dash's actual ability or just another illusion of the dreamscape. Dash laughed as she fluttered about, not seeming to have a care in the world. "This is the life! No worries, no stress, just flying as much as I want to, as fast as I want to!"

The rainbow pegasus zoomed up to her cloud home and pushed a small puff with her head, bringing it down to the ground. Dash then lay back on top of the cloud, pretending to be dozing. "All the naps I could ever want as well," she said as the cloud rocked back and forth like a cradle, "But that's not even the best part!"

Rainbow Dash turned back to cloud structure, calling out names Twilight did not recognize. From the nimbus house soared two pegasus ponies, a mare with an orange coat and a mane like fire, while the other was a stallion with a blue coat and indigo mane. They landed to Dash's side, and she confidently wrapped her forelegs around the two pegasi's shoulders. Oddly, they did not have the same smile as the other demons that took the shape of ponies. Twilight grew worried; the demons were learning.

“Meet Spitfire and Soarin!” Dash announced, “Not only are they Pura Razan Wonderbolts, but they are THE Pura Razan Wonderbolts! The best of the best, I have wanted to join them since I saw them perform for the nobility when I was just a little filly, and now they are hanging out. With Me!”

“You wanted to hang out with an assassin group all your life?” Twilight asked, incredulous. At the mention of assassins, Rainbow Dash put a hoof to her head, the headaches of memory causing her obvious discomfort.

“Assassins?” Rainbow Dash grimaced, “No...no, you’re wrong! The Wonderbolts are daredevil flyers, who perform for ponies all across the world! From Pura Raza to Equestria, to Filais!”

“They’re assassins who sent you and a bunch of other pegasi to kill Grey Wardens! To kill me!” Twilight’s own frustrations were being let out, but she did not lose her focus on trying to snap Rainbow Dash out of the dream, “This is all fake, all a twisted reality made by demons! Try to remember!”

Without warning, Spitfire and Soarin struck. The demons taking their forms had learned enough from other encounters with Twilight that they were leaving nothing to chance. Never had Twilight felt such pain before, each attack causing more and more pain. Twilight tried to counter their assault with spells, but could not focus long enough to cast anything. They struck with blows to her eyes and to her chest, causing her to become dizzy, winded, and bloody.

Twilight fell to her side as Soarin and Spitfire continued their brutal beatdown until they revealed their true forms as two Rage Demons. The heat from their molten bodies burnt at Twilight, who could do nothing as their assailment kept going. Rainbow Dash was still incapacitated as the demons illusions and her own memories clashed.

“I can’t!” Rainbow Dash yelled, eyes shut as if hoping to ignore everything around her, “I can’t go back! You all hate me, and for good reason! At least here I’m living a dream. Living the dream! If I go back I have to face what I’ve done.”

“Rainbow,” Twilight said as the demons leaned in for the kill, “I don’t hate you. You said you wanted a better life, so you took what the Wonderbolts offered. I would have done the same in your horseshoes. To go home. To leave a place you don’t want to be. I forgive you Rainbow Dash.”

Twilight took a deep breath. She had to get through to the pegasus, had to break through the wall of despair she had made for herself. “Skywind. Roof Hopper. Cloudburst. White Streak. Redwing. Do you remember those names? You said you didn’t care, but you still remember those names. Please Dash. Remember our names.”

Rainbow Dash looked up from wallowing in her own woes to see the two Rage Demons paused above Twilight’s body. “Applejack,” she said as she stepped forward, “Rarity. Fluttershy. Pinkie Pie. Twilight Sparkle. I remember. I remember everything!”

The demons shifted back into their Wonderbolt forms. “Hey Dash! Don’t listen to her! We’re your real friends!”

Without a word, Rainbow Dash flew into both demons from a surprising start, taking their pegasus forms high into the air. With a grunt, she turned in the air, aiming to slam both demons into the ground with her. They struggled, but could not escape from Dash’s incredible velocity. With downward momentum on her side, Dash let go of the Fade creatures before quickly ascending upward.

The demons smashed into the ground, their bodies bursting into shards and taking Rainbow Dash’s dream with them. Dash landed next to Twilight and helped the violet spellcaster up to her hooves.

“Do you really forgive me?” Dash asked, still ashamed. Twilight wobbled nervously on her legs, but was able to lift one forehoof to her friends shoulder.

“I do,” Twilight said, only to be on the receiving end of Dash’s embrace. Before they could say anything more, the blue ring engulfed Rainbow Dash and quickly teleported her away. Twilight’s ears drooped as she looked around the Fade; she barely had any strength left to stand and hardly any magic left to cast more spells, only enough to call on one last teleportation spell to find Trixie.

Her horn sparked with weak magic as she channelled the spell to bring about a Fade door. As she stepped through, instead of the white light she saw that she was in another landmass in the Fade. Standing before her was the same Sloth Demon that had trapped them all in the fade, with Trixie holding a magical barrier against the creature.

The Sloth demon took notice to Twilight as she staggered over to Trixie's shield. His hushed laugh echoed throughout the Fade. If Twilight felt battered and weak, then Trixie looked ravaged, bloodied and bruised from her battle against Sloth. The blue unicorn's eyes were closed tight as her lips weakly continued to recite a chanting spell, one that Twilight could not recognize.

"Twilight!" came a call from above her. She looked up to see Applejack and the others being held aloft in bright blue rings. The Sloth Demon laughed as his form shifted from an abomination to that of a powerful ornlock emissary.

"You have made me very, very sad, little filly," the demon said, "I tried to give you and your friends everything they wanted. To be happy, safe and restful. But instead you cling to the darkness that is the real world. Why is that, I wonder? Why refuse the gifts I have so painstakingly made for you, to avoid such suffering. Avoid hatred. Avoid war."

"The blue one was the first to break my gift. Something akin to 'I must be Great and Powerful on my own', or some such nonsense. Then she started to cast that horrible chant, the one that protected you from being captured like your friends. Even her magical shields proved impressive to my own abilities. But alas, she will soon fall. You know of the same fatigue she is feeling, don't you?"

Twilight looked at Trixie with new admiration. Now everything was making sense as Twilight realized what her counterpart was doing inside the Fade. Trixie had cast a spell that had prevented Twilight from being caught with the blue rings, allowing her to move through the Fade and rescue her friends. Not only that, but she had manage to fight off a powerful Sloth Demon at the same time.

But the demon was right. Trixie could not maintain both of her spells any longer and Twilight could not face the demon in her own fatigued state. There was still one more chance though. She hoped her friends were ready for it.

"Tisk tisk tisk," the Soth Demon continued, "You unicorns should learn that your power is finite. Whereas in my domain, I am boundless. It is a shame it has come to this, but I must ask you all to perish now. So sorry."

"Trixie," Twilight whispered, "Drop the shield."

"Are you crazy?!" Trixie exclaimed, "It's the only thing separating us from that!"

"Please, trust me." Twilight nodded to Pinkie who returned a smile. Eyes closed tight, Pinkie began to tremble in her blue ring, before disappearing with a pop. One by one, the other ponies popped out of existence as well.

"What!?" Sloth shouted, "I have bound all of you! I have you all under my power!"

"You're right demon," Twilight said, "Some unicorns do overestimate their abilities. We also make the same mistake demons do, and that's underestimate the abilities of other ponies!"

The party reappeared beside Twilight, armed and ready to strike. The Sloth ornluck reared in anger. "You will all suffer! I will devour you slowly! Painfully!"

The monster's horn began to spark with magic, a wreath of flame sprouting from the tip. In its rage however, it did not notice Pinkie tossing a small grenade between its legs as the rest of the fighters circled around it. The grenade burst in a medley of fire and noise, sending the ornluck high into the air before landing in front of Applejack with a thud.

"This is fer insultin' my family!" Applejack shouted, kicking Sloth with a firm buck.

"Disgusting creature!" Rarity's horn glowed, and a bolt of lightning fell from the sky onto Sloth.

“How DARE you try to hurt my friends!” With a flurry of arrows, Fluttershy launched her most vicious attack into the hide of the demon.

Rainbow Dash flew around the demon, slicing the demon’s skin open with her long dagger. “You think you can confuse me that easily? I know who I’m standing with, thick and thin!”

Trixie made it to her feet just in time to see the Sloth demon writhing in pain. Twilight smiled at her as her horn began to glow, summoning an arcane blast. “A bolt of energy is a pretty easy offensive spell,” Twilight said to her fellow unicorn with a smirk, “Think you can do better?”

Trixie returned the smirk with her own, but beneath it was a genuine smile of gratitude. “The Great and Powerful Trixie can certainly begin to show you up in offensive magic.” In unison, they launched their respective bolts of magic, violet and blue, into the Sloth Demon. With a scream it shattered like all the demonic minions it had sent before.

“At last,” Twilight said with a sigh of relief, “We did it.” The ponies smiled at each other as the dreamscape around them broke into pieces, a white light now surrounding them. The light of the Fade doors began to engulf her again, but this time she was not worried. This time she would wake up.

Chapter 9

Of Pride Demons and Ponies

Very slowly, Twilight opened her eyes to look around her, head pounding with a splitting headache as she regarded her surroundings. She was back in the center passageway leading to the libraries. Carefully she lifted herself up, her head and body throbbing with aches and pains. The damage done in the Fade may have not been real, but the pain would linger for a while.

Around her the other ponies were stirring. Each awoke with a look of bewilderment on their faces, as if they could not believe what had recently transpired. With the exception of Rarity and Trixie, each pony looked ashamed and downtrodden after their experience in the Fade. Twilight could only guess that the Sloth Demon's illusions had struck several nerves, none of them pleasant.

With a deep breath Twilight stepped forward, hoping to ease her friends' worries. "I know what we saw in the Fade was painful for all of us," Twilight said, doing her best to keep a smile for everypony, "But we made it out of there together. We defeated a powerful demon and its illusions."

"Twi," Applejack said, eyes cast to the ground in shame, "It sure wasn't easy, but you unicorns are always conscious in yer dreams. I don't know how ya'll do it every night, with demons in every nook and cranny. But for us simple ponies, that was more of a nightmare, especially when the illusion was gone."

Twilight didn't understand, but Applejack continued, "What that demon did to us just felt so real an' so right. I don't know about the rest o' them, but there was a part of me that really wanted you to be wrong. Illusion or not, that Fade critter gave me something I always wanted. Some Grey Warden I turned out to be, if I can't keep my head on straight and give in to a demon."

Applejack was right. Even though Twilight's illusion felt real, it still felt wrong and she was able to dispel it. Rarity also felt the same about her

illusion, and Trixie had resisted hers and stood against the Sloth Demon. But the other ponies were not unicorns, and what they were given was their realities as far as they were concerned. It was only thanks to Twilight's insistence and their memories of the truth that they resisted.

Yet it seemed the effects of the illusions still lingered in their hearts. Even Twilight had to admit that her dream was something she desired rather than constant battle against ponyspawn, demons, and other ponies. The Sloth Demon made promises of restful, safe lives and had delivered, but only in falsehoods. Dreams that the other ponies likely wondered if they could ever achieve for themselves.

"C'mon," the blonde earth pony called before heading to the door leading the staircase, "We still have a job to do, and not a hay of a lot of time to do it."

The party agreed, but before they could leave, Trixie levitated the scroll they had sought from Bookworm's body. It was a grisly business, taking an item from the recently slain, but they needed the Litany to stop Hubred. Twilight offered a quick prayer to the unicorn that was lost, and asked for forgiveness that she and the others did not come sooner. The seal on the Litany of Dawn was still whole, but a moment of magic later and the wax was broken by a simple thought from the blue unicorn. She unfurled the scroll and began to read the contents in earnest.

The scroll was old, the parchment yellow and the writing faded, but still in very good, readable condition. Twilight looked over Trixie's shoulder to see the contents of the document, but could not understand the strange symbols. As studious as she was, Twilight never took up the lessons on old writings since her focus was on more practical spell work.

"Why would the Litany of Dawn be written in code?" She asked. Trixie rolled her eyes before closing the scroll and placing it safely in her saddle bag.

"For a pony whose talent is magic, the Great and Powerful Trixie is surprised that there is something you don't know." Trixie motioned to the party to wait, and then nodded to a corner at Twilight. Making sure that no pony would eavesdrop, Trixie spoke, her voice wavering and eyes low.

“The Sloth Demon came to me directly,” Trixie began, “Offered me power beyond all imagining, etcetera. I refused, as I made a promise to become truly Great and Powerful on my own merits. The demon attacked, and all I could do was raise a magical barrier to stop it’s assault. Then it opened a ‘window’ of sorts showing you and that Grey Warden that came to recruit you. He then gave me a different offer: to get rid of you.”

“I resented you, Sparkle. You had the attention and the adoration of unicorns several times your better. And for what, because you’re special talent was magic itself? While ponies like me had to pour over every dusty tome they could just to catch up? And then you stuck your muzzle in those same books, and became even more powerful. You even hatched a dragon egg when you were a filly! How can any unicorn hope to compete with that?”

Twilight had no idea Trixie resented her so much. She never intended to go over Trixie, she just wanted to be a scholar in the Tower. She wondered what it would be like to overshadowed by another unicorn at every step.

Trixie’s blue eyes grew strong and confident. “I told that Sloth Demon off by saving you, Sparkle. Of all the magic you did not study, I noticed you never did choose to study the arcane chanting spells. When the Sloth Demon would try to capture you, I’d make sure to stop him so you could rescue your friends. So I am the reason you succeeded in the Fade at all. No, I want you to be around when I am truly the Great and Powerful Trixie!”

There was only one acceptable answer to Trixie’s little confession. Before the blue unicorn could object, Twilight wrapped her forelegs around Trixie’s neck, holding her in an embrace of gratitude. Trixie’s cheeks turned flushed with colour at the unexpected display of affection.

“I’m sorry you felt so overshadowed,” Twilight said, “I never wanted to be your rival. And if it’s worth anything to you, after the Fade I do think you are pretty Great and Powerful.”

Once Twilight let go of Trixie, she smiled as the blue unicorn could only stare agape. Quickly she reset to her usual bragging persona. “The Great and Powerful Trixie appreciates your sentiment, Sparkle,” was her haughty response, “But know that one day Trixie will outshine you in all things magical and arcane!”

“Challenge accepted,” Twilight gave a smirk as they returned to their waiting companions. The door leading up the tower would take them to the senior enchanters’ quarters, then finally to the Harrowing Chamber at the top of the tower.

The carnage the Tower had faced in the demon invasion only grew more horrid with each step. Parts of ponies were strewn about, and the door leading to the quarters was covered in blood. That which lay beyond the door was worse. Several abominations shambled throughout the centre room, casting their magic on the bodies of templar and unicorn alike and weakening the Veil further. The bodies warped and twisted into new abominations, as hooded unicorns watched over the demon’s work.

Maleficar. Unicorns that had turned to the Dark Arts of the arcane, who sought the easiest and most vile way to gain power for themselves. Blood magic, the use of turning one’s blood into a focus for spells such as mind control. Demonology, to summon and make pacts with demons. Necromancy, the act of instilling lesser demons into the corpses of ponies. False Horns, the magic to grant a pony who was not a unicorn a horn so they too could cast magic. Such spells was not only forbidden by the Chantry but by the Unicorn Circle due to their dangerous natures, reckless use, and addictive qualities. Maleficar were the reason the Templar existed.

Twilight swallowed a nervous breath. These unicorns no doubt would fight to the last and why wouldn’t they? When the templar attack with strength in numbers and lyrium, they wouldn’t be taking prisoners. They had already broken enough laws on magic and its use to warrant the death penalty. The templar would show no mercy when they encountered the Dark Art users, just as the Maleficar would not show any quarter to any pony who stood in their path.

Now she would have to kill again. Not ponyspawn, or demons. She would have to kill ponies, fellow unicorns who Twilight had shared the halls with, maybe even spoken with at some point, shared meals and knowledge with. Even if she did not land the final blow herself, she would have had a hoof in their eternal demise. Just like the assassins though, it was either them or her. Kill or be killed. How could she live with such a mantra?

“Alright,” Twilight whispered. Her breath was shallow, and her heart was racing. She didn’t want to do this. She didn’t want to kill. But she had to. *She had to.*

“Here’s the plan,” she said, trying to shake the nervousness from her voice, “Pinkie, toss one of the flash grenades in, buy us some time, then join Applejack and Rainbow Dash to help against the Maleficar.”

It seemed like cheating her way out of direct confrontation with the ponies. She reminded herself that she was still very much a part of the upcoming battle, and was using her friends as weapons.

“Fluttershy, you and Rarity will be helping me give support by attacking the abominations. Magic won’t do much good against them, but it will distract them long enough for your arrows. Trixie, we are going to need some protective spells, like the one you used before.”

The ponies nodded in understanding, Pinkie already holding a small explosive in her hoof, a lit igniting stick in her mouth. The fuse was set aflame and with a small giggle, the pink alchemist tossed the bomb into the chamber.

The enemy had little time to react before the center room was engulfed in a blinding flash. Abominations roared and unicorns cursed in pain and frustration, holding their hooves to their eyes in vain, as if trying to block out the light. The party descended on their foes, Applejack giving a rallying shout as she charged through to the Maleficar. Dash and Pinkie followed suit, their bodies glowing from the effect from Trixie’s spell. Together with Rarity, both unicorns began to launch spells onto the arcane horrors, while Fluttershy launched a volley of arrows.

The abominations fell with ease to blade, bow and bomb, but the Maleficar proved more difficult with their mastery of magic. While one was felled by Applejack and her templar abilities, the other three strengthened their magic together to form a shield. One of the unicorns stepped forward through the shield, eyes glaring at the group before levitating a small dagger from his robes. The sharp blade sliced his right foreleg open, blood pouring from the wound.

“Blood Magic!” Twilight called out. But her friends did not understand or know how to avoid the spell that was to come, a flurry of red energy erupting from the Maleficar’s staff and horn. The Grey Warden unicorn rushed forward, calling upon her magic to do something to deflect the incoming blood storm.

Violet sparks flew from her own horn and staff, arcs of energy meeting the Maleficar’s violent spell head on. An explosion far greater than any of Pinkie’s grenades erupted from the clash of magic, sending all the ponies involved flying to the walls of the center chamber. Both Twilight and the Maleficar screamed out in pain as their magic backfired back into their horns.

It would seem Twilight would experience new levels of pain often. As the magic coursed through her body, it was like every nerve was set on fire and shocked with lightning. Her horn glowed white hot from the energy, and was the central focus of this new anguish that flooded her body from head to hoof.

Applejack rushed to her side, her eyes already black with the anti-magic of the templar. “I gotcha!” she called, holding Twilight steady, “Whatever happens, Twi, I gotcha!”

Twilight continued to scream as the magic rushed out of her. She tried to help the process by dissipating the energy somewhere. Despite her blurred vision, Twilight could see the red arcane barrier of the Maleficar, as well as the unicorn who was suffering as she was. With a cry, she forced the magic out of her horn into a single beam of power, having enough focus to drive it into the shield before she collapsed.

The beam worked on two occasions: Twilight felt the pain leave her body as quickly as the spell was flung, and the barrier shattered, unable to hold back her attack. The Maleficar who was channeling the protective spell fell, her horn shattering from the onslaught of the attack while his partner gasped and ducked away. The other Maleficar could not contain the magic that had attacked both him and Twilight, his eyes rolling back into his head as he fell. Blood oozed from his mouth, signaling his death.

As Dash and Rarity kept watch on the last surviving Maleficar, Trixie looked over at Twilight with a look that mixed both concern and amazement. "Do you know what you just did?" she asked.

"Magical feedback," Twilight coughed her answer as she stood upright, "When two opposing, yet equally powerful magical energies meet and create a perfect flux." Such occurrences of feedback were rare, and most likely lethal to both unicorns involved. The shock of the event still made Twilight feel like she was run over by three carts carrying massive slabs of granite at incredible speeds.

Trixie could not contain her amazement at what she had witnessed. "You matched the power of blood magic, took in the energy into your own horn, and fired it back at the Maleficar. If that isn't the epitome of magical aptitude, I don't know what is."

"It's thanks to Applejack that I was able to control the magic," Twilight said, smiling at her fellow Warden, "But all I wanted to do was get rid of it, not..."

Twilight looked over at the two dead Maleficar. Her magic had killed again, even if it was in self defence. Fluttershy approached, giving Twilight a sad look before administering last rites to the dead. The unicorn was glad that Fluttershy was there to give some sort of peace that the templar were not likely to give once the bodies of Maleficar were found.

"I envy you Trixie," she said quietly, "Sometimes I wonder why I learned such harmful magic at all. Against demons? Of course. Did I ever see myself fighting ponyspawn? Maybe, the books always said they were still around after Blights. But other ponies...I don't know if I can ever get past that idea. Maybe I'm scared that I will."

Trixie made no response, only watching her fellow unicorn as she walked over to the cowering rogue mage being guarded by Rainbow Dash. Her red hood was thrown back and Twilight could see the fear in her eyes, her body shaking. The violet sorceress did not recognize the face of the Maleficar who was young, but teemed with a powerful crimson aura from her use of blood magic. "Hubred allowed you to do all this." Twilight said. It was not a question.

“Hubred tore the Veil,” the Maleficar answered, her voice cracking in at her own hopelessness, “Hubred said he would call an army of demons to help us. He said he would free us from the Tower, from the templar!”

“And look what he and the Maleficar have done!” Twilight shouted, her anger ruling her voice, “How many unicorns and templar have died? How many more will die because the templar have called for the Right of Annulment? Why did you do it? For power?”

“For freedom!” The mare Maleficar’s eyes were wide and manic. “Some of us are not given the opportunity to leave the Tower. Some of us cannot stand to stay in this prison, with the hateful eyes of the templar just waiting, waiting for any excuse to slit our throats! Hubred found us ”

“Hubred is in the Harrowing Chamber. He is more powerful than the senior enchanters combined. You will never stop him. You’ll die trying, and he will come for me. He will come for all unicorns and set them free, make them powerful. And then he will make the templar pay. Make the entire world pay for shackling the true ponies of power in this world.”

Twilight had heard enough. She was not going to kill the mare, but instead raised her staff and snapped it in two. The Maleficar laughed as the party turned away from her towards the staircase leading to the Harrowing Chamber, Twilight’s heart chilled by the mad cackle of the blood mage unicorn.

Before the party resumed their climb to the top of the Tower, Twilight noticed Rarity’s horn begin to glow a pale red. The white unicorn followed the direction her magic was taking her towards one of the secured bookshelves, the wards protecting the contents long since shattered when the demons and Maleficar made their first attack.

Rarity focused on the bookshelf, looking through the various tomes that had pulled her attention away from the task at hoof. Her horn glowed brighter as a very large black grimoire slid out of the shelf and landed before her with a loud thump. The black book was dull and plain, save for a familiar symbol on the front cover and on the spine.

It was the red silhouette of a winged dragon, just the same as the cutie mark on Flemeth’s flank. “Oh dear,” Rarity said as she looked over the book, not even opening its pages, “This is one of Flemeth’s tomes, I just

know it. But what is it doing here, in the Unicorn Tower? She never spoke of her travels outside of the Wilds.”

“Maybe this is why Flemeth sent you with us?” Twilight offered some sort of hypothesis, “To recover her lost book?”

Rarity shook her head, looking doubtful before tucking the grimoire into her saddle bag. “I just don’t know, Twilight,” she said, a look of concern on her face, “This just seems too...coincidental. Flemeth believed in power, and her books were filled with all manners of spells. Leaving one behind for the unicorns to peruse just does not sound like her.”

“We can ask the First Enchanter about Flemeths’ grimoire once we save him from Hubred,” Twilight offered with a wan smile, “I’m sure he knows why its here. I’m sure Wise Eyes can help us all.”

The large double doors separating the Harrowing chamber from the rest of the Tower loomed over the ponies. The door both beckoned and repelled Twilight as she slowly channelled a spell to open the path to the stairway. It beckoned to her because Hubred and the core of the demonic invasion was waiting in the chamber, waiting for more unicorns to fall to his power. The repulsion came from the same unicorn wizard waiting with incredible and deadly spells and monstrous demons.

“Do we have a plan, Twi?” Applejack asked.

“Hubred probably has some demons or abominations with him,” she answered, “And he was second to Wise Eyes in magical knowledge. Expect only the most dangerous of spells. We’ll use the same plan as before, but we have to be careful. The rest of the senior unicorns will be in that room, and if he is as powerful as we’ve been told, he might also be controlling the enchanters with blood magic. Trixie will be busy reciting the Litany of Dawn to break the hold, but we need to be ready for anything, especially the worst.”

Twilight did not want to say that she was feeling weak. There was no reason to worry everypony, no reason to bring their concern down on her. But even now, she felt her knees buckle and her horn sting from over use of magic. Part of her wanted to curl up in a corner and die.

Instead, the unicorn led her friends up to the large door leading into the Harrowing Chamber. With a quick spell, the doors flung open and the party charged into the room, weapons brandished and staves charged with powerful magic.

The Harrowing Chamber was the same as Twilight remembered it. The grand room was mostly empty save for the lyrium chalice, Hubred, his abomination servants and the entire council of senior enchanter's snared by magical blue rings. Two abominations flanked an enchanter as they brought him towards the bald unicorn.

Hubred's wicked smile left Twilight feeling cold. Hubred was always respected in the Tower if not outright feared for his brutal teaching methods and knowledge of Dark Arts. Many templar had requested him specifically to hunt down Maleficar and apostates outside of the tower, and he was often seen chiding the students. Not even Trixie was immune to his anger, when he was not praising her due to his teachings. It was now no longer a surprise that someone so boastful and well versed in the Dark Arts would prove to be a powerful Maleficar and consort with demons.

The abominations forced their prisoner to his knees in front of Hubred. The Maleficar leader smiled as he lifted the senior enchanter's head upwards. "Accept the gift we have given you," his voice like the slither of a serpent.

The unicorn began to scream out in to deny whatever Hubred had to offer, only to choke and gasp for air as Hubred's eyes turned red with magic. The unicorn's cries grew distorted as his mouth began to shift, teeth turning jagged and coarse as boils grew to massive size all over his body. Muscles and bones grew in size as the body lost all recognition of the pony that was, mutated postules taking shape from within the body of the suffering unicorn. An abomination was born.

"Hubred, you are mad," Wise Eyes shouted through his arcane prison. Hubred merely chuckled as he watched the new abomination bow to him.

"Wise Eyes old friend, it is not madness that drives us but the pursuit of power. Power that has long been denied us." He turned his attention to Twilight and the party, his cheerful expression unable to contain his disdain to towards the ponies. "Ah, we have been expecting you, Twilight Sparkle. And Trixie, our dear student. How utterly disappointed we are in you."

Trixie shrank as her old mentor stared her down. Twilight marshaled her confidence before stepping forward to face Hubred. "We've come to stop you and the Maleficar, Hubred," she said, her voice shaking at the sheer pressure the Dark Arts master effused around him, "Look around you! Unicorns and templar are dying because of you and your madness!"

"Stop us? You?" Hubred let out a high pitched laugh, "You may have defeated Sloth, our abominations and our Maleficar foals, but you will not stop us! We hold more power in one hoof that you will ever know in your entire lifetime. We felt your feedback, Warden. We know the limits of your power, and that you are reaching them. How can you hope to battle us?"

"And you have come with the Litany of Dawn, in hopes that my former student would use it against us and our blood magic? She would have made an excellent host for one of our brothers, but instead chose her path to walk separate from our offer, separate from the true might that is demons, the masters of magic. No matter, we will make you all vessels for our kind soon enough!"

Hubred's face contorted and shifted violently. His yell echoed through the Harrowing Chamber, sending shockwaves through all of the ponies around him. Like the abominations, Hubred's form changed completely, his limbs becoming longer and covered in spines. Gone was his pale grey coat, replaced by indigo scales and yellow spikes of bone. From his back sprouted two long tentacles ending in clamping pincers. Only his cutie mark remained unchanged.

The face took on the most drastic morph. Hubred's snout extending into something more reptilian than equine, and from his mouth came several rows of razor sharp teeth. His eyes changed from dull yellow to violent crimson, brilliant yet terrible power emanating from the orbs. The horn was sharp and jagged, smothered in a red aura that pulsed with murderous energy.

Twilight stared at the demon before her in shock and realization. It was the same Pride Demon that had made its presence known to her during the Harrowing. Hubred must have made a pact with the monster to expand his power exponentially. Now that demon was standing in front of her in all it's terrible glory.

“Hello again, little mare,” the demon hissed, though his mouth was unmoving, “It seems we meet again. You have grown much more powerful since we last met. So much more worthy of possessing my power.” That last instance when the demon said ‘my’ triggered an alarm for Twilight. Hubred was no longer working with the demon, but fully possessed by the monstrosity of the Fade. He was just another unicorn who fell for the schemes of demons.

“You can feel the power, can’t you?” The demon continued, his red eyes meeting Twilight’s, “Think of what we can do together. We can end the Blight, destroy the Archdemon. I can make you a queen, no, an empress with our magic combined! The entire world will tremble at our magic, at our power!”

The harrowing chamber disappeared, leaving Twilight and the Pride abomination alone in total darkness. The violet unicorn felt herself lost in the red pools that were the demon’s eyes as they pulsed with magic and power.

Twilight saw images of splendour and luxury form around her. Whatever she was doing was soon forgotten as her eyes gazed at the wonders that the demon was offering to her. Surrounding her was a palace decked in cloths that sparkled like the night sky, a beautiful throne surrounded by armoured guardsponies. Her palace, her throne, her guards.

This is wrong. This is right. Two voices conflicted within Twilight’s mind. She looked again to see all sorts of ponies from far and wide on bended knee to her. Sitting on her head was a grand crown adorning an even grander horn. To her sides were two majestic wings, gorgeous and elegant. The demon would do more than just make her ruler of the world, but make her an alicorn, a goddess!

All of it could be hers, power overwhelming any foe that stood against her. All she had to say was ‘yes’.

*Sunlight, sunlight, bring your shine,
Clear this pony’s cloudy mind.
Sunlight, sunlight, help her see,
Past the dark and onto me.*

*Sunlight, sunlight, show your might,
Turn the shadows, make things right!*

Trixie's voice resounded in her head as rays of sunlight pierced through Twilight's palace. One beam of light shone directly onto her, transforming her beautiful alicorn body into that of the possessed Hubred's. Twilight screamed at her own transformation before seeing the illusion fade to the Harrowing Chamber, and an angry Pride Demon snarling at her.

"Hubred taught you well, Trixie," the Pride Demon growled, "Too well. The Litany of Dawn may have protected you from blood magic, but I still have enough power in one hoof to crush you all!"

Twilight looked around, still dazed and confused. The Pride Demon had attempted to cast a mind control spell on her, and nearly worked if it were not for Trixie and the Litany. All around her there was fighting as her friends battled the demonic abominations. The Pride Demon itself was looming over Trixie, a deadly spell being channeled through its horn. Mustering every remnant of her strength, the violet unicorn rushed into Trixie, tackling into her and narrowly avoiding a stream of blue fire incinerating the spot.

There was no direct way for Applejack and Rainbow Dash to get to the Pride Demon as long as its pincers swayed wildly around its body, preventing any direct attack. All of Fluttershy's arrows and Pinkie Pie's bombs did nothing to the monster's powerful and magically reinforced scales. "Rarity! Here!" Twilight called. The white mage rushed over to Twilight and Trixie's side as the others continued to fend off the demon's assault.

Only magic could defeat a force of magic as powerful as the corrupted Hubred. "I have a plan, Twilight said to the crouched unicorns, "I need to create another feedback, this time with Hubred. As powerful as he is now, a powerful enough feedback with destroy his horn, leaving him exposed for you to attack."

"You can't!" Trixie called out, "The last feedback nearly killed you! You'll never be able to match Hubred and the Pride Demon's raw magical power. If you tried to do a feedback with Hubred, all you would be doing is killing yourself."

“She’s right, Twilight,” Rarity said, “There has to be another way.”

Hubred did not allow them time to prepare another strategy as he approached, another powerful spell wrapping itself around his horn. A mighty arc of indigo fired from the tip of his horn, meeting Twilight’s counterspell partway. The two bursts of energy met, but this time Twilight could feel the immense magical pressure bearing down on her. She thought her horn was going to break just as the Maleficar she had fought.

Her magic was no match for the combined might of Hubred and the Pride Demon, and the creature knew it. He pressed his attack with unbridled ferocity, pummeling Twilight with incredible magic. She was tired and weak from her climb up the Tower, from facing demons, abominations and Maleficar. It was a foolish idea to try to match magic with so powerful a demon. And now she was going to pay for that mistake.

Rainbow Dash provided an answer to the battle. “This room is pretty big!” she shouted, flying around Hubred’s head, “Watch what an awesome pegasus like me can do!” With a long dagger held firmly in her teeth, the assassin stabbed the blade deep into the mighty abomination’s neck. Hubred roared in pain, and his lock in the feedback was disrupted.

Trixie and Rarity stepped forward, nodding as they joined their magic together with Twilight’s. They struggled at the initial shock of the feedback, but gritted their teeth as they pushed with all of their power.

“No!” Hubred shouted, “I will not fall! I am powerful! I am almighty!” The pincers on his back swayed violently, one clasp around Rainbow Dash’s hind leg, slicing skin and tendons. The cyan pegasus shouted out in pain, struggling to become free from the Pride Demon’s monstrous appendage.

Rainbow Dash was in trouble as long as Hubred had a hold of her. Twilight redirected an arc of energy towards the tentacle, severing it completely and releasing Dash from its hold. The loss of one of his limbs sent Hubred into a fury, roaring like a beast as he focused more of his anger and magic into the feedback.

The shockwave generated by the demon’s power brought the unicorns to their knees, but they still held the feedback steady. It would only be a matter of time until they would break under the arcane pressure.

Suddenly, Twilight could feel the energy being lifted, slowly, as if somepony were lifting a weight off her shoulders. She looked around to see Wise Eyes and the other senior enchanter adding their magic to feedback. Moment by moment, more of the burden of maintaining the feedback was taken from Twilight and her friends. Without Hubred to direct his attention at the binding rings, they had faltered and allowed the other unicorns to be free.

"We stand with you, Twilight Sparkle," Wise Eyes said, his eyes steeled with determination, "Let us end Hubred's threat together."

All the unicorns focused their magic into the feedback, causing more ripples of power to generate from the connection of the arcane. Hubred cursed as he tried to push back, his body shaking as the power overwhelmed him. Cracks burst along the Pride Demon's horn, the Fade beast howling in pain and frustration.

"Magic exists to serve ponies, never to rule over them," Twilight said, echoing the words spoken to her during her Harrowing. How true were those words now in the face of a unicorn ruled by a demon of magic. With every ounce of magic inside her horn, Twilight directed the feedback into the horn of the Pride abomination.

Like the sound of the thunder, Hubred's horn burst into shards, all of the remaining energy from the feedback being released into white light. Twilight and the others averted their eyes, but could still see the mighty Pride Demon fall. Without a source of magic or a link to the Fade, there was nothing to maintain the abomination. The giant fell with a loud thud, shaking the Harrowing Chamber.

All around Twilight the senior unicorns cheered and cried, glad to be alive and free from Hubred and his demons. Wise Eyes approached his former students, a gleam of happiness in his eyes. "I am so proud of you," he said to Twilight and Trixie, "You and your friends have saved us all. We had all but given up hope once Hubred and the Pride Demon joined together."

Pinkie rushed over to the downed Rainbow Dash, immediately taking a bottle of healing poultice and putting it over her damaged leg. The pegasus

had made a reckless move against such a powerful foe, but it was the move that saved them.

“Heh, maybe I over did it a bit,” Dash said as she laid on her side. With a smile, Twilight helped the pegasus back to her feet. Rainbow Dash winced as she steadied herself. Things had certainly turned around between Dash and Twilight, and while to others it would seem odd to trust a pony who had made an attempt on their life, Twilight saw that Rainbow Dash really believed in her oath of loyalty.

Once Twilight was sure that Rainbow Dash was in stable health, she walked over to Wise Eyes, hoping to gain his counsel. “First Enchanter,” Twilight said, wanting nothing more to vent all her troubles on her kindly teacher, “There is so much I want to ask you...”

“In due time, child,” Wise Eyes looked to the staircase, “First we must tell Hornsheild that the danger is passed. Curse this tower. Next time, the Unicorn Circle should be in a large bungalow. I’m getting too old for these stairs.”

The iron doors opened wide into the foyer of the Tower, with several templar drawing weapons as the unicorns approached. At the sight of the First Enchanter and Twilight, Hornsheild barked for his soldiers to stand down. Spike immediately rushed towards Twilight, leaping onto her back and holding on to her neck as if it were his lifeline.

“By Celestia’s sun, Wise Eyes old friend, you made it!” For the first time in her life, Twilight saw the taciturn knight-commander smile, “I will send word that the Right of Annulment is to be...annulled.”

“And you, Twilight Sparkle, you and your friends saved us all from catastrophe. You have my eternal thanks.” Hornsheild saw to his templar to provide aid to the unicorns and to send help to any stranded in the Tower. Everypony could now offer a sigh of relief.

“Twilight Sparkle, Trixie,” Wise eyes said as he looked over the two younger unicorns, “I would like to commend you both for all that you have done. Hornsheild has told me that you came here as part of your duty to

the Wardens, Twilight, and that you sought the aid of the unicorns against the Blight. Know that when the time for battle comes, the unicorns shall lend their magic to the Grey Wardens.”

“As for you, Trixie. I believe you have proven that underneath your bravado, there is a good heart and legitimate power behind your words. As such, I would like to replace the staff you lost to the demons with one fit for a senior enchanter of the Circle, and invite you to our council. We will need all the help we can muster to rebuild our order, and I would be honoured to have the Great and Powerful Trixie to serve beside.”

Trixie watched as her new staff floated to her side, an arcane instrument made from fine oak and crafted into work. Twilight felt happy for the blue unicorn who had gained the recognition she sought. They would likely never see eye to eye proper, but the budding respect that was forming towards Trixie had grown to a full appreciation of the blue unicorn and her ability.

“Wise Eyes,” Twilight said as she approached her old mentor, “I’ve encountered so much in the world in such a short amount of time. And some of the things I’ve learned scare me.”

The old unicorn nodded, motioning for Twilight to come with him to a corner of the room. Once they had a moment of privacy, Wise Eyes began to speak. “You have killed with magic, haven’t you.” Not a question, but a statement. Twilight felt ashamed at what she had done with her magic, but when she felt the comforting hoof of the First Enchanter, her tension eased if only for a moment.

“Listen to an old pony, child,” Wise eyes continued, “The world we live in is a harsh place, as I am sure you are well aware. There are many dangers that frighten or break the most stalwart of ponies, whether its demons, ponyspawn or more often other ponies themselves. But as long as you acknowledge your role in these painful events, as long as you feel remorse for your actions and take responsibility for the great power you use on a daily basis, then you are not a monster like those you fight.”

“You will still be a pony, my dear, and one with a large heart. I have never been more proud of you than I am right now. Rage, hunger, sloth, desire and pride have no hold of you, but instead I see a unicorn of virtue destined

to accomplish great things. I fear the road ahead will only become more harsh, but if anypony can do it, it will be you. And you have the support of a great assortment of friends who will aid you in your endeavours. You are not alone in this road, Twilight Sparkle. Never forget that.”

Twilight wrapped her hooves around Wise Eyes’ neck, as happy as she can be with the guidance from her teacher. *I’m not a monster*, she confidently told herself, *I’m not a killer. I’m a pony on a mission who has to do what she must. I am a Grey Warden.*

It was then Twilight remembered the old writing that was found with the Grey Warden treaties. With a flick of magic levitating the piece of parchment from her saddle bag, Twilight brought the writing towards Wise Eyes who took up the page in his own magic.

“We found this in an old Grey Warden fort,” Twilight said, “But we can’t figure out the writing. We’ve been told it was from the days of Luna.”

The First Enchanter looked over the parchment with a critical gaze, his eyes regarding all the markings, lines and the six points on the diagram. However, he looked back at Twilight before returning the sheet to her bag. “I’m afraid I cannot make heads or tails of this,” he said sadly, “It appears to be an old ritual of a sort, involving six foci of magic, as well as the possibility of more foci to be added to give the ritual strength. But what these foci are, where they are, or what the ritual even does, I cannot say.”

It was worth a shot, that much Twilight knew. Perhaps another pony out in Equestria could decipher the ritual that the Grey Wardens hid so long ago. While Wise Eyes was thanking Rarity and the other ponies, fatigue hit Twilight as she let out a loud yawn. “We’ve had a long day,” Twilight said to her group, “We should find a place to rest before heading to Red Apple Acres.

“Then allow us to offer one final service,” Hornsheild said, “There is an inn on the other side of the docks. I’m sure you’ve seen it. Please tell the innkeeper that I will pay for full amnesties while you rest there. He should be more than happy to oblige.”

Twilight and the others thanked Hornsheild for the gift of rest. For once since the journey began, above all other concerns, everypony just wanted a good night's sleep and sweet, demonless dreams.

Chapter 10

Origins

"I do hope that the inn has some sort of bath," Rarity said as the ferrypony carried the party over Lake Blackwater, "So many dreadful memories, all the blood, filth and dirt is going to need a very thorough scrubbing."

Twilight agreed, a good bath would be nice after the horror that was the demonic attack on Unicorn Tower, a bath to wash away all the grime and soothe the pain. However, the others in the party were less than talkative. She remembered what Applejack had said, that the illusions felt more real to the ponies not used to encounters in the Fade, and that a part of them wanted Twilight to be wrong. Twilight wondered if that sentiment was reflective on all her friends, and the despairing looks on their faces only helped confirm this.

Once the small ship had docked, the group trotted over to the small inn sitting on a small hill. It was nothing grand by any stretch, but a cozy little building with the lights of flickering fires could be seen through the windows. A rotund earth pony sat in front of the door, smoking a pipe and letting the smoke hang around his head like a wreath.

"Excuse me," Twilight said, "Knight-Commander Hornsheild said we could stay here for a short while. We won't inconvenience you."

The innkeeper smiled as he stood up straight. "I'll be sure to send the old colt the bill then. Come in, come in! I'll fetch y'all a round of cider and some apples straight from Red Apple Acres. And don't be thinking yer a pest or nothin', the only other guests I have are a pegasus trader and a youngun, and they went out and about for a while."

Applejack's face lit up at the way the innkeeper spoke. As the ponies sat around a large table, the innkeeper hefted a large basket of bright red apples onto the surface while a donkey jenny, a female of the mountain dwelling equines, poured cider into drinking bowls. Rarity declined to joined them, rather seeking out the nearest bath tub.

“There’s an old wooden one out back,” the innkeeper told the white unicorn, “Water comes from the lake, and so you might want to heat it. Got a stove out back for that.”

“That will do fine, good sir, I believe I can manage.” Rarity left for the bath, leaving Twilight with four dejected ponies and Spike. She wondered how it would be best to approach the sensitive topics of what they faced in the Fade.

“Hey Pinkie Pie, we won against the demons, doesn’t that call for a party?” Twilight grinned at the pink earth pony, who only returned the smile with a heavy sigh.

Twilight looked over to Applejack. “A.J., thanks again for helping me with that feedback,” she said, “You saved me and helped figure out a way to stop Hubred! And we have the help of the unicorns against the Blight!”

“Sure thing, sugarcube,” replied Applejack, her tone flat. Looking cross, the violet unicorn turned to Fluttershy, hoping to get a better response.

“You did a great kindness to the Maleficar, Fluttershy. I’m sure they feel the same way, even after the uprising. The templar would not have given them final rites.”

Fluttershy merely mumbled as she stared into her cider bowl, as if expecting the meaning of life to come from the beverage.

Narrowing her eyes, Twilight looked to Rainbow Dash, expecting a similar answer. “So, Rainbow Dash. Those were some pretty impressive moves against Hubred. They were pretty cool.”

Dash looked up as if trying to fill her voice with passion, only to fall flat. “Could have been better,” she said, batting an apple around with her hooves, “I bet I could have done a percentage cooler.”

With an exasperated sigh, Twilight drank from her cider bowl. The warm liquid was certainly good, much different than anything she had ever had before. This was becoming frustrating, and Twilight didn’t know how to snap her friends back from their melancholy.

“What is wrong with everypony?” She asked with a bit more force than she intended, “You are all acting like some tragedy happened. I know the illusions felt real but they were not. If you could all please just tell me what’s wrong, maybe we can find a way to help each other.”

Fluttershy looked up at Twilight, her eyes holding an unfamiliar sorrow. “I wanted to be somewhere safe,” the yellow pegasus began, “Somewhere I wouldn’t be hunted by ponies bent on finding me, punishing me for a crime I did not commit. That’s what the Sloth Demon showed me, what it gave me in the Fade. Someplace safe surrounded by little animals that I could care for. It’s only fair for all of you know to know who I was in Filais, before I joined the Chantry cloister.”

“In Filais, I was a bard, a pony who was both a travelling troubadour as well as a spy. Bards were the pawns of the Filesian nobility, who conspired against each other for power, prestige, and personal vendettas. I wasn’t a very good bard, I mean, I knew a lot of stories and songs, but I didn’t like being put in front of crowds of nobles. But I was very good at listening, and noticing even the smallest of details. The Bardmaster sent me to spy and retrieve information from a powerful noble, who she claimed was a traitor the Empress of Filais...”

“Miss Fluttershy, Miss Fluttershy!” came the calls of the nobleman’s little foals. Fluttershy turned around and smiled at the two young ones; they loved hearing their nurse’s bedtime stories and songs. It was time for bed, and they were eager for another melody, or another tale of wonder and amazement.

“Come now, little ones,” Fluttershy said, soft and gently to the foals, “It’s time to lay down your sleepy heads. I’ll tell you a nice story about how Lunar Blossoms got their name. Or a nice little lullaby, would you like that?”

“Tell us a story about the Mare of the Mire!” piped Magnifique. The little unicorn always loved tales of powerful sorceresses, and any tale of Flemeth were her favourites.

As with every night, however, Glorieux wanted something different. “No!” she cried out, “Tell us the story about the first mare chevalier, Bon Bon!” As the first daughter of Chevalier General Puissant, the young earth pony

yearned for nothing more than stories of Bon Bon and her tales of heroics, wanting to be a chevalier herself one day.

Fluttershy smiled down on the small ponies, "How about a song that my mother sang to me when I was your age?" Their eyes grew wide in anticipation, then both sisters bounded over to their beds, wrapped warmly in fine linen blankets, resting their heads on soft feathered pillows.

*"Hush now, quiet now,
It's time to lay your sleepy heads,
Hush now, quiet now,
It's time to go to bed..."*

The yellow pegasus continued to sing, watching over her charges as they drifted into peaceful slumber. They looked like little angels as they slept under the watchful light of Luna leaking through their bedroom windows. With a careful hoof, she gingerly stroked the manes of Magnifique and Glorieux, sighing as she looked up to the full moon.

If it were not for the Bardmaster, would she ever have such a place in Filais? Fluttershy often wondered this, as she closed the door and walked through the halls of the estate. She was put in place to spy on General, but the only secrets the ranking officer had was an enjoyment of Equestrian cider and dancing on the roof of his home with his wife. Nothing nefarious or treasonous. He was a good pony, one who treated his servants with respect and fairness.

Maybe I can go appeal to the Bardmaster, Fluttershy thought as she made her way to Puissant's study. I can bring her my report on the General, and then ask if I can stay on. This is a good life. Everyone is so kind. I can stay here

She creaked open the door of the study to see the General and his wife playing chess. Keeps the mind sharp, Puissant would explain. Fluttershy had never had the opportunity to the play, but she wondered if this game was connected the The Game of the nobility in some form.

"Excuse me, sir," Fluttershy said as she stuck her head into the study, "But the foals are fast asleep. Is there anything else you wish of me?"

"Oh Fluttershy, do come in and join us," Madame Elegance left her husband and the game board, motioning for the filly-in-waiting to enter, "You have been such wonder to the little ones. They love you dearly; I wanted to do something to repay you."

"Quite so," was the gruff response from the General. He did not like his games of chess to be interrupted, but his eyes were filled with the same gratitude as his wife. Elegance pushed Fluttershy towards a large object shrouded by a cloth. The noble unicorn had a wide smile as she directed her magic to remove the cloth, revealing a bright yellow and green dress.

The pegasus gasped as she looked on the work of art. "It may be last season's fashion, but I think it would look absolutely marvelous on you," Lady Elegance said, "Although I couldn't rightly cut such fabric to make room for you wings."

"It's wonderful!" Fluttershy had never been given such a gift before. Most pegasi could never afford such dresses in their lifetimes, and now she was being given one for herself. She had to appeal to the Bardmaster after this. She wanted to stay.

"I am so glad you like it," Elegance cheerfully said, "Husband, do leave us. I want to see Fluttershy in this dress."

The General huffed as he was shooed out of his own study, but made no more objections as soon as he was out the door. Quickly Fluttershy put on the dress with the Lady's assistance, until she was standing in front of a large mirror. Yes, her wings were hidden, but it was a small price to pay.

The dress really was wonderful. It was rather uncanny how close of a body shape she shared with Lady Elegance, but the dress fit perfectly. The Filesian Haute Couture style was everything Fluttershy dreamed of. Every hem and weave matched her body, and the shoes felt like she was walking on clouds.

"Oh thank you my lady, thank you!" Uncharacteristically, she embraced the Lady of the household close, who laughed as she returned the gesture. When she realized what she had done, Fluttershy let go, her cheeks flushed with colour.

Elegance laughed again, the usual laugh of noblemares. "My dear, you have been such a treasure to us. Pegasus or not, we consider you family here." The door opened, revealing General Puissant with a scroll hanging gently in his teeth. He approached the desk, setting the scroll down on the surface before turning to Fluttershy.

"Messenger brought this," he said, "Says it is from your grandmother." Fluttershy's eyes widened at the mention of the 'grandmother'. It was the code that the Bardmaster used to identify herself. She broke the seal on the scroll and scanned the contents quickly for key words. The letter was written as it would be from an elder doting on her granddaughter, but some key words would indicate that the Bardmaster was summoning Fluttershy to her location.

She looked to the General and his wife, bowing her head low. "My grandmother is very sick," Fluttershy lied, hating every word that she had to say, "May I please go see her? It's very important."

Lady Elegance nodded her head, with Puissant following suit with a grunt as he sat back down in front of the chessboard. Fluttershy curtsied on her way out before heading to her quarters. As much as she wanted to show the Bardmaster the dress as more evidence for her appeal to stay with the family, the location of the meeting was a secret and a brightly coloured dress like this would only stand out at this time of night.

The night air was cool as Fluttershy trotted quickly through the Capitol's streets. The roads were barren save for a few guards and migrants, who paid no heed to a hooded mare travelling through the districts.

She approached the doors of a tavern's cellar where the letter said the meeting would take place. Fluttershy knocked on the door three times, before seeing a single bar of wood sliding over, revealing two bloodshot eyes.

"Password," said the rough voice on the other side of the door.

"Equestria smells like wet dog," Fluttershy responded. The door guard laughed before closing the slider. The door opened wide enough for the pegasus bard to slip into the cellar unnoticed. She followed close behind

the guard as they travelled the torchlit underground until they arrived into a much bigger and much busier room.

The room was filled with ponies and materiel used by the bards as they milled about with other rogues and scoundrels-for-hire. Weapons lined several tables, while others were adorned with detailed maps and reports. In the centre of it all stood the Bardmaster, directing her own army of shadows as she saw fit.

The Bardmaster was a blue coated earth pony by the name of Artistic Finish. Her white mane was cut prim and proper, and she always hid her eyes behind violet tinted goggles. The first time most ponies met her, they would think the goggles were silly. They did nothing but hid her eyes. But after a while, most bards found exactly that to be most unnerving thing of all. They could not see the Bardmaster's eyes.

Artistic Finish noticed Fluttershy's approach, ignoring everypony around her to meet her agent. "Ah, Fluttershy, my finest bard has returned to ze nest!" She spoke with such flourish, all the pegasus could so was meekly smile, "I have been so anticipating your return. I need you to create ze magickz again!"

"Uhm, Bardmaster," Fluttershy said, barely above a whisper. She had to make the appeal now, "I came to deliver my report. But if I could say, General Puissant has done nothing to warrant attention, nothing about treason or-"

"Ah, forget about Puissant," the Bardmaster ushered Fluttershy closer, "I have a new, very important task for you. A new role zat needs someone like you, Fluttershy. It needs your magickz. Zen you are done!"

That didn't sound too hard. One more job with the bards, with the nobility, with The Game. She would ask for a leave of absence from Puissant's household, just enough to take care of her 'sick grandmother'. Then she could and see Magnifique and Glorieux grow up, sing the songs they loved and tell them stories.

Artistic Finish leaned close to Fluttershy's ear and whispered: "I need you to play ze role...of patzy."

Fluttershy let out a sharp gasp as Filesian Soldiers quickly surrounded her, coming out of the shadows from every rock and crevice, swords drawn and waiting for an excuse to use them. How could the Bardmaster have done this? With every blade and arrow alike trained on her, there was no hope but to submit to Finish.

Quickly her hooves were bound by shackles, and a rope was tied around her neck. The humiliation she was facing was not hers alone to bear, as other bards were being rounded up and arrested. Filesian soldiers were pushing their captives through the caves only to be joined by more soldiers bearing a new insignia: the crest of the country of Pura Raza.

Her ears drooped as everything spiraled out of control. Artistic Finish was the traitor, and was going to use her as a distraction for some plan, likely against the Empress. The worst part of it all was that there was nothing Fluttershy could do about it.

In the morning she and the rest of the bards were being paraded around the Capitol like true villains, with Fluttershy being touted as the mastermind of a conspiracy against Filais. The ponies of the city booed and jeered at her, throwing rotten vegetables at her and her unfortunate compatriots. Artistic Finish took on all accolades for their capture, further securing the trust of the Empress and her court with that of the traitor. Thankfully, General Puissant and his family had not joined the crowd.

There was no trial. All of the bards who Finish had betrayed were sent into the prison of La Détention Criminelle. Every day, another prisoner was taken into the courtyard to be mocked, to be “judged”, then to be executed. Fluttershy could see every execution from her cell, when the guards were not being ordered by the Bardmaster to beat her...

Fluttershy broke down into sobs as painful memories were brought to the forefront. Feeling awful for drudging up a painful past, Twilight laid a hoof on the pegasus' shoulder. In a short amount of time, the former spy had everything she wanted and then nothing. From a peaceful existence to facing the executioner's block. It was amazing just how much Fluttershy had suffered in Filais, but moreso the strength she showed to overcome it all.

“I’m sorry,” she muttered, “It’s been so long since then. I escaped Filais during a prison riot and was able to come to Equestria, in hopes that the Bardmaster would never find me. It’s why I hid in the Chantry and covered my wings with the sister’s robes. After a while, I began to get used to living in the Chantry. It is very calming, and the gardens of the cloister were simply lovely and so peaceful. I felt happy for the first time in years.”

“But when the news of the Blight came to the Chantry, it was then that I received the dream from Celestia.” Twilight leaned in closer, her desire to hear about a dream from a goddess her top priority. “I was in the gardens, taking care of all the little critters that called it home, when a sickly bird fell from the sky. I tried to nurse it back to health, but no matter what I did, the bird’s health would not improve. The other sisters said that the bird was doomed, but I wouldn’t give up on the little creature.”

“One day, I had a dream that the bird flew towards the Celestia’s sun and burst into flames. I was scared for the bird at first until it flew down, a magnificent creature with wings of fire. It bowed as if to thank me for all its help, and then flew off towards Ostequus. I knew then that I had to follow it. Without thinking I flew after the firebird, until it landed on top of a grey shield. I knew then that I had to leave the cloister and come find you.”

The dream still sounded off, but Twilight was glad to have Fluttershy with her group. She was a pony with a new sense of purpose, and nothing motivated somepony than feeling that they belonged.

“Oh my,” Fluttershy squeaked as her stomach gave off a loud rumbling, “I was going on for so long, I interrupted the meal. I’m sorry.”

The other ponies quickly laid the pink-maned sister’s worries at ease as their own stomachs began to sing out in unison for sustenance. They began to munch happily on the fresh serving of apples, as well as consume a healthy amount of cider.

“Mmm,” Pinkie Pie said with cheer, “These are nice and juicy! Definitely from Red Apple Acres. They’d make for some great apple pies! Or apple fritters, or apple tarts...”

Pinkie trailed off as eyes became downcast. Twilight watched as Pinkie began to sniffle, eyes welling up in tears of her own. “The bakery from the

Fade,” Pinkie revealed, “It was all I ever wanted. That mean demon showed me what I wanted, made me want to give up this adventure to have that bakery.”

“No, not just the bakery,” Pinkie amended, “That meanie was showing me a life where I wouldn’t have to fight anymore. I hated being a guard in Ponyring, I hate every time I have to lift my mace, or use my grenades to hurt ponies. That bakery was what I wanted to really be; a pony who could spread happiness to everypony everywhere! Then the Ponyspawn came...”

Pinkie Pie bounded down the road towards the Pie Homestead near the village of Ponyring. She had a spring to her step and a song in her voice ready for everypony to hear. After saving enough bits for months, she had finally been able to afford the book she wanted to buy to learn new recipes for her baking and alchemy. The book was large and heavy, but with a heart full of cheer, the pink earth pony needed no more motivation to carry the big tome back home.

‘All You Needed to Know About Mixing Ingredients but Were Too Afraid to Ask’. A long title for a big book, but every time Pinkie saw the book she knew she had to have it. All the recipes her mother taught her were...okay, but they weren’t fun! Not like learning to bake delicious cakes, or learning how to mix poultices and draughts that brought back that ‘oomph’ in a pony’s trot.

She was making a comfortable living off her work, selling the stamina draughts and lyrium grenades to bring in extra income. Ever since Papa Pie passed away, things had been rough on the farm, so Pinkie started doubling as a guard for Ponyring under Bann Meyer as well as work on the farm. Her sisters, Inky and Blinky, also had to take on other jobs, but in the end, life was still as stable as ever.

Being a guard was okay. Pinkie liked the uniform chainmail she was given, and many ponies went to her for help like directions. It made meeting new ponies easy, and she felt good when they smiled at her. It was the actual fighting she didn’t like. Every once in a while, a group of bandits would accost some poor pony, she and other guards would have to chase them off. More often than not, casualties were involved.

Still it was the good life. A stable life and stable was boring! It was time for another Pinkie Pie Party! Not for any reason except to celebrate that the family was still together, through good times and hard times. Tonight was going to be a wonderful night for a party: the moon was full with Luna's light illuminating the night sky.

There was a buzzing noise in the distance, like the sound of hundreds of stones hitting the dirt road. Pinkie quickened her pace until she was at a full gallop to see what was making the noise.

Over the edge of a foothill, Pinkie gasped as she saw the biggest progression of ponies she had ever seen. Hundreds of soldier ponies were marching together south towards the old ruins of Ostequus in the Potpourri Wilds. Banners of the King of Equestria as well as the Terynir of Glenwell waved in the light breeze.

Pinkie bounced down to the side of the marching army, until she was side by side with one of the soldiers. Mimicking the soldiers movements, she couldn't help but begin a conversation with the armoured earth pony.

"Hi!" She chirped, eyes pleasant and lips curled into a bright smile, "I'm Pinkie Pie! I'm a guard from Ponyring. What's going on? Are you all heading to a party? I love parties! I bet Ostequus would be a great place for a party!"

The soldier rolled his eyes and sighed. "This is not a party," he said, "We are marching with King Blueblood and Teryn Loghoof to fight the ponyspawn. Please return to your home. With the King and the Teryn, as well as the Grey Wardens, you won't have to worry at all."

Pinkie dropped her march as the rest of the assembled army continued past her. More fighting? Why couldn't ponies just focus on having fun and enjoying life? And what was all this about ponyspawn? They haven't been seen in Equestria for over a hundred years.

"He's right," Pinkie said to no one in particular, "I don't have to worry. The Teryn is a hero, and the King is the King! Maybe on their way back from Ostequus, we can have a really big party! Now I can't wait!"

With a new incorrigible smile on her face, the pink guardspony bounced back home, humming a tune she had just wrote for her love of making cupcakes. As she neared the farm, she could see the fires in the hearth burning bright through the windows. Mama Pie was home and probably busy making dinner.

"I'm hooooome!" Pinkie called as she opened the door wide. Mama Pie was already there to greet her daughter with a wan smile.

"Welcome home, Pinkamena," she said; ignoring her daughter's very audible gag at her full name, "Inky and Blinkie should be home soon. Why don't you tell me how the day has been?"

And so Pinkie did and with great gusto. She described everything from the old Filesian family dealing with that pony from the Wilds again, to her buying her very large book of recipes, to seeing the marching army head for Ostequus. As Mama Pie listened, the door opened and Pinkie's two sisters entered the house weary from another day of hard work.

Pinkie rushed over to her siblings, grasping them both in a large hug. She was always happy to see Inky and Blinkie, and they always returned the affection they received. "Pies are we, together and forever till the end," Pinkie said, their sisterly oath recited every night they were together. It was one of the few things Papa Pie left behind.

"Till the end, forever and together we are Pies," responded the sisters, giggling as they let go to join their mother for dinner. Pinkie repeated her day's events to her sisters, only to be stopped by Inky at the mention of the marching army.

"I've seen the army too," the light grey mare said, "Mama Pie, maybe we should consider heading west, to Trotterim, or even Amarethine. We are awfully close to the Wilds and to the ponyspawn."

"We've built a life here!" said Blinkie, her voice rising in anger, "We can't just leave it all behind! Papa Pie built this farm with his bare hooves. The army is going to beat the ponyspawn, and everything is going to be fine."

Pinkie hated it when her sisters fought. She just didn't have the heart to agree or disagree with both of them, and they both made good points. They

couldn't stay at the farm if the ponyspawn were invading, but the army was going to stop them. Wouldn't they?

"Calm down, girls," Mama Pie said, "We'll pack some essentials and be ready to leave if we have to. Let's just pray that it does not come to it."

Mama Pie was always there to help ease Pinkie's worries. As long as they were together, there was nothing to fear. Wanting to change the subject, Pinkie dashed off to her bags, pulling the large book she bought and bringing it to her family to see.

"Don't worry about some mean old ponyspawn," Pinkie chimed, "When the army marches back, we can have a big party to celebrate! Won't that be great?"

The two sisters laughed as they joined Pinkie Pie and her large book. They poked at certain recipes for cakes and pastries, talked about where to find ingredients for bizarre potions and poultices and other strange concoctions. There were even instructions on how to create a "healing grenade". Pinkie didn't know how something like that would work, but was more than excited to find out!

On the second day, more soldiers arrived for the battle of Ostequus.

On the third day, all was quiet. At night, a light could be seen from the old ruins.

On the fourth day, the army left the wilds. Their numbers were fewer, and the banner of the King did not fly.

On the fifth day, the ponyspawn attacked. When Inky spotted the screamers above the treetops, she shouted out to the rest of the family to escape. Before Pinkie knew it, several thelocks and donlocks were already descending on countryside, tearing apart the land and the farmers alike.

"Hurry!" Blinkie shouted as she lead the family through the hills, "We have to get as far away as possible!"

“Where?” Pinkie looked behind her to see a swarm of thelocks rushing towards them. She pulled a grenade, a simple exploding variant, and twisted the timing mechanism to five seconds. With a powerful twist of her neck, she sent the grenade flying into the monstrosities, watching as the bomb sent them flying with and without limbs.

Inky was firing a volley of arrows at the ponyspawn while Blinkie was guarding their mother with her sword. Shouts of battle could be heard all around them as other families and Bann Meyer’s soldiers were fighting and losing ground quickly. Pinkie looked around and saw a crevasse they could slip through if they were swift.

“That way!” Pinkie called out. The rest of her family quickly galloped over to the hillside ridge, while Pinkie backed away, tossing grenade after grenade towards the ponyspawn. The rocks looked old and brittle, and one good explosion would bring the rocks down on the ponyspawn and block the passageway.

She had to give her family the opportunity to escape. Priming another grenade, the pink alchemist was going to use it to cause the landslide until a screamer sailed into her, dropping the grenade and pushing her towards the ponyspawn. The screamer leered at Pinkie with its single massive eye before letting out a bone shaking screech.

“Pinkie!” She could hear Mama Pie crying out for her, but she couldn’t do anything with the screamer clawing at her. Looking at her fallen grenade, she had to make a decision, and quickly.

With a sudden rush of adrenaline, she slammed her hoof into the eye of the screamer, watching the beast recoil in pain as it clutched its large eye with its talons. Time was running short, as the ponyspawn were rushing forward. With one hoof, Pinkie armed the grenade to detonate in two seconds.

She grunted as she kicked the grenade towards the ridge. Blinkie’s eyes widened as she realized what her sister had done. “No!” she cried, but was soon muffled by the explosion. The rocks followed suit collapsing into the crevasse, making passage impossible for pony and ponyspawn alike.

Pinkie looked up to see more rocks breaking. The explosion worked too well, as the stones fell and crushed the screamer that had attacked her. Pinkie ducked, her forelegs covering her head.

"Together and forever, till the end," Pinkie whispered, her eyes shut as the rocks fell on top of her, until there was only black...

"And then I woke up to see Bann Meyer's soldiers clearing things up, but they didn't see where Mama Pie or my sisters went either." Pinkie's mane had deflated just as it did every time she was forced to use her mace. Twilight could see anger rise in Applejack's features as Pinkie finished her story, and she could feel her own emotions rise to match. Another life ruined because Loghoof had quit the battle of Ostequus.

"I'm so sorry you lost track of your family Pinkie," Twilight said, but how much comfort could she give? She didn't even know her family, having only remembered living in the Unicorn Tower since she was a foal. Pinkie's mane poofed right back up though, and her bright smile, though wavering, appeared once again.

"Don't worry!" she said with typical Pinkie Pie cheer, "I'll see my family again. I'm sure they went to that place with wall in its name. If only I could remember. Was it McCoywall? That just sounds silly. Scottywall? Oh! Spockwall! No, that's not logical."

"Anyways, I'm sure they wouldn't mind if I help my friends save all of Equestria! You girls are like my new family now! Together and forever, till the end!" With that, Pinkie embraced all her friends over the table, rocking the bowls of cider around as she held them close. There was something infectious about Pinkie Pie's happiness, something Twilight didn't know how she did without.

They all enjoyed another round of cider as the jenny took away the apples, replacing them instead with a bowl of cut daffodils and daisies. As they ate, Rainbow Dash laid both hooves on the table, her eyes fierce and a smirk on her lips.

"You haven't heard nothing yet," she said, "My story is made of awesome. Just you wait. Yeah, the demon showed me what I wanted, but it wasn't an

old cloud house or hanging with the Wonderbolts. No, what he gave me was freedom, or at least a dream about it.”

“See, everything goes much farther than my time in Pura Raza. Like I said when we first met I was actually born in Equestria and even when I was a little filly, I knew I was destined for greatness...”

A mother and her filly flew through the air of Amarethine in the dark of night, the moon full and Luna’s moonbeams covering the city in pale light. As they flew, they were being chased by dozens of armed guards, both earth pony and pegasi alike. They swirved and dived between the buildings as the guards shouted for a typhoon of arrows on the two.

Hundreds of arrows filled the sky; if it were sunny it would be like fighting in the shade. But even thousand arrows could never hope to strike such a dynamic pair as they landed before the docks. With amazing skill, the pegasus duo dodged the arrow assault with ease. Their ship was already drifting away in the currents, as the captain waved a hoof towards them.

But now there was nowhere to run, nowhere to fly as the parent and child were surrounded by hundreds of guards. The mother looked over to a young yet awesome Rainbow Dash, with a sly smile on her face.

“Think you’re a bad enough pegasus to handle all of these clowns?” she asked, brandishing her awesome daggers. The little filly rubbed her hooves together and gave a sharp laugh.

“They might as well have brought the entire circus,” Dash said before joining her mother in a brilliant display of daring, of bravery, of-

“Now wait an applebuckin’ minute,” Applejack had a raised eyebrow as she looked to Dash, “How come I have a feeling you’re just pulling all our legs at once in here.”

The cyan pegasus rolled her eyes. “Well duh, I’m trying to tell the awesome version of what happened. But if you really want the boring version, I suppose I could give you that one.”

Despite Rainbow Dash's insistence on the "awesome version", Twilight could see in the assassin's eyes that she did not want to tell the truth. "Dash, if you don't want to tell us, you don't have to. We understand."

Dash's ears drooped, her fuschia eyes almost begging to Twilight that she didn't have to tell her story. With a heavy sigh, she straightened herself out, and began again.

"It's not that I don't want to tell you, its just difficult to put into words. It...hurts to remember. But if Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie could do it, so can I. I may have tweaked some of the events, but if you all really want to know, here it is..."

A mother walked slowly through the dark alleys of Amarethine City in the dark of night, the moon full and Luna's moonbeams covering the city in pale light. She carried her sleeping filly in one foreleg as they made their way through the muck of the poorly maintained city. They just had to make their way to the docks without being noticed by the patrolling guard.

It was a small blessing that her daughter slept so soundly despite the journey and the mother knew she had to count her blessings when they came, including finally finding safe passage away from this slum of a city. Arl Rendon Maim spent more bits on his own personal fortress and its luxuries than on Amarethine and the countryside, and the city had decayed into a cesspit of smugglers and thieves to show for his negligence.

No, thought the mother, my daughter will not grow up like this. It had cost her much more than just bits to book passage, but it would all be worth it if Rainbow Dash grew up free. Not some servant to a lord or worse, an outlaw to be hunted. Rainbow Dash would not make the same mistakes she had.

They were so close to the docks, she could already smell the salt in the air. She just had to make it to the crate they were supposed to be waiting in for the captain of the ship. The shadows were her best allies, and she used them to hide from the patrols of guards. There was a large tempting bounty on her head, a bounty she had accrued throughout her life that now put her child in danger.

Odd how one small foal could make a difference in a pony's life? One moment she was the bane of guardsponies in all Amarethine and next she was scared witless of them, if only to keep and protect her daughter. Her past self would have chided her for growing soft. Her past self died when Rainbow Dash was born.

The docks were quiet, the ships rocking gently against the current. There near the "Siren's Chastity" was the crate she was told to hide in. Even on three hooves, she moved with silence and grace from shadow to shadow. From the corner of her eye she noticed a patrol, two armoured earth ponies making their way down to the docks.

Carefully, she opened the crate marked 'Cider to Pura Raza' and gently laid the sleeping Dash inside first before climbing in herself. With the lid of the crate closed, she could finally breathe a sigh of relief. She just had to wait for the captain-

"Mom? Where are we?" Her shock was plain to see on her eyes as she moved a hoof to Rainbow Dash's mouth, hushing her daughter as she listened intently.

"What was that noise?" said one of the guards. Hoofsteps on the wooden docks, though muffled, sent the mother's heart racing. Hoof still tight on her daughter's lips, she took one shallow breathe of air and could do nothing but wait.

"What's in the box?" She swore she could hear the breathing of the two guardsponies. They were so close. She was so close. Everything was going to come crashing down around them. Softly, she drew a dagger from her side, and held the mouthbit tight between her teeth. They would not take her daughter without their blood being spilled. Without her blood being spilled.

"Scared of boxes now?" said a different guard. The first guard stammered for a moment, collecting his words for a rebuttal.

"I ain't scared of no boxes. Forget it, Arl Maim doesn't pay us enough for this." Still not time to take a breath, but her heart beat slower as she heard the guards hoofsteps echo into the distance. She brushed Rainbow Dash's mane with a hoof as she waited for the guardsponies to finally leave before

taking a look outside. She hoped the ship captain had not taken the money and ran, or sailed as it were.

KNOCK. KNOCK. KNOCK.

The mother froze as she heard the three knocks against the side of the crate. The captain said he would signal when to emerge from the crates. She wondered if this was the signal she was waiting for. Little Rainbow Dash shook in her hooves, scared witless of the uncertainty of everything around her. This was not how she wanted her daughter to live, but it was the only way to escape.

Slowly she pried the top of the crate open, looking out to see the ship captain waiting. The captain was an old earth pony, with a pale blue coat, white mane, and far too many scars on his hide. He looked over to the crate before motioning for the mother to join him.

She and her filly left the crate and stood before the old pony. "Hurry up," he said, his voice hoarse, "We ain't got all night." He looked down to see Rainbow Dash under her mother's cloak. His lips curled in a vile smile, many of his teeth rotting or missing.

"You must be little Rainbow Dash. A pleasure to meet ya-"

Before he could say another word, the mother rushed forward, dagger in her mouth and blade pressed against the captain's neck. "Never speak to my daughter," she hissed through the handle-bit, "Never look at her. And by everything under Celestia and Luna, if I even suspect you or any of your crew have laid a hoof on a single strand of her mane, I will kill every last one of you. Slowly."

Rainbow Dash whimpered as she looked up to her mother, frightened at the transformation that seemed to occur. Sheathing the dagger, she cradled her daughter close while keeping an eye on the captain. He huffed, but eventually relented. In silence, the pegasi boarded the ship and headed into the lower holds.

"Where are we going?" The blue filly asked. Her mother shushed her, then began stroking her mane again as she stared blankly at the ship's hull.

“To a place called Pura Raza,” she answered, “A place where you can grow up to become whatever you want to be. Don’t worry, little Dash. We’ll be together and safe, always.”

Rainbow Dash took another gulp of cider. “I didn’t learn until later that my mother was a killer,” she said, “She was hunted in Equestria for a lot of murders.”

“Apples don’t fall far from the tree.” Applejack muttered, but immediately regretted it. “Sorry Dash. Ah’m just not over the fact you were sent to kill us.”

“What is Pura Raza like?” Twilight asked. Rainbow Dash laughed, but it was a cold laugh, with little mirth.

“Worst. Place. Ever. Sure, Pura Razan’s don’t care if you have wings or a horn, but one rule overtakes them all. The one with the bits makes the rules. Nothing mattered in Pura Raza but how to best make the gold. Things looked like we were swimming in daisies, but what I didn’t know was that everything went downhill the moment we left the boat. Even after ten years of living in Pura Raza, old habits die hard after all...”

“Now Rainbow, I know you don’t like it...”

“I hate it! I makes me look lame!” Rainbow Dash sat on her haunches, forelegs crossed as she glared at her mother. She was dressed in a frilly pink dress that was supposed to all the rage in Pura Raza for young mares. All she wanted to do was show the pink monstrosity all the rage she had. “I can’t fly with this thing on! And why do I have to wear it anyways?”

“Because Lady Avispado wants her students to look their best before they perform in front of the Merchant’s Guild.” Dash’s mother shook her head as she tightened the laces on the girdle. The multicoloured pegasus grunted as the bodice tightened around her chest. Now she couldn’t fly and breathe!

There came a knock at the door. Dash’s mother moved to open the door only to be met with a scrawny messenger pegasus holding a scroll in his mouth. Without a word, a bit was exchanged for the message. Her mother

opened the scroll, quickly scanning the contents before closing it and packing it away in one of the back pockets of her long jacket.

“My little Rainbow,” her mother said, as if ignoring what the scroll had to say, “You’re all grown up. You’ll be a mare soon, and I couldn’t be happier. I’m so proud of you, of the kind of lady you’ve become. Your beautiful, strong, and still have that fire in your eyes like I did when I was your age.”

She always got like this whenever a scroll came to the door. What was up with that? Dash didn’t dispute the words though. She did endure years of Lady Avispado’s classes because it was what her mother wanted. She wanted her mother to be proud of her.

“Aw mom, stop it,” Dash nuzzled her mother’s neck. When she noticed the position of the sun in the sky, she gasped and immediately headed to the doorway.

“Loveyoumomgottagobye!” Moving her hooves as fast as she could, Rainbow Dash sped off towards Avispado’s school. After all, it wouldn’t make her mom proud if she was late to the performance.

She travelled through the streets of the city with ease, stepping around ponies with grace as she moved through crowds. Only a block away sat the fussy elder pegasus’ school for sky dancers, the best flyers to come out of Pura Raza. They performed for lords and ladies all across the world, and Dash’s mother had paid a lot of money to get Dash into her classes.

Not that Dash hated the lessons, but the rules Avispado enforced were stifling. There were specifics to every motion; hooves had to be in the right place, wings had to move to the right beat, even the way she had her face had to perfect. All Rainbow wanted to do was fly as fast as her wings would let her. Then fly faster still.

Lady Avispado stood with the rest of the class as Rainbow took her place with the other pegasi. She said nothing, turning towards the center of the city to the Merchant’s Guild. All of the pegasi began to prance behind their teacher, eyes half open and all dressed in frilly gowns much like Rainbow’s.

The Merchants Guild was a colossal building, home to the Council of Six who ruled over Pura Raza with iron horseshoes and deep moneybags. All

trade in Pura Raza was regulated by the Guild; the only illegal goods and services were those who did not give the Guild a cut. They managed the mercenaries who made up the army and guard force of Pura Raza, as well as the laws of the land. They also kept the king of Pura Raza fat and happy for political purposes outside of their direct control.

While the Merchant's Guild was an administrative building, it was thanks to their love of luxuries that it was also the largest arena in the city, as well as the most exclusive. Only the Council of Six and their guests were given invitations, and only the best performers were ever considered. That, or one of the Six's fillies were in the class, and they just wanted to show off.

"Listen, everypony," Avispado called as they entered a dressing room of sorts, "This is the most important performance I will have ever have given in my entire career. All of you up to this point would have passed with flying colours, but now you will all fail if you ruin my chance to impress the Six. So don't knacker this up!"

Rainbow Dash swallowed hard as she heard Avispado's warning. No pressure, she told herself, just show them how awesome you are.

One by one the pegasi left the dressing room, emerging from behind velvet curtains onto a grand circular stage. Surrounding them sat the Council of Six and all their guests, applauding the arrival of the sky dancers. Everything was hushed as they took their positions, waiting for the music to play. Rainbow could feel a drop of sweat form on her head.

The minstrels began to play, a dynamic tune that involved incredible movement of both hooves and wings. Timed jumps and dives were performed with impressive dexterity. Finally getting into her own timing well, Rainbow smiled as she and the other pegasi danced, their movements as if one colourful motion of the wind.

Once their performance was over and they bowed towards the Six, the arena erupted in the applause of stomping hooves. "Brava! Brava!" the cheers resounded. Rainbow Dash smiled as she looked around the arena; she only wished her mother was here to see all this.

One of the Six rose up from his seat. A unicorn with a brown coat and red mane, Lord Despiadado raised a hoof in silence. "You have performed

spectacularly," he said, his voice carrying throughout the arena, "We would very much like to see you again for the Summer Sun Celebration. I am sure Lady Avisado has nothing else arranged."

Even if she did, Avisado said nothing, only stuttering as she fainted to the ground. Lord Despidado chuckled before turning away, although his eyes lingered on Rainbow Dash for a moment. She felt cold as his gaze stayed on her before joining the rest of the Six.

Before the pegasi could leave to celebrate such a successful performance, the walls shook all around them. Mercenary guards rushed into the Guild Hall, ignoring the young mares as they headed towards the Six, weapons drawn as they formed pairs with their employers.

"There has been an explosion, Senior," one of the guards said to Despidado, "A shipment of lyrium direct from Orzamule. The Shadowbolts claimed responsibility, and are fighting our stallions in the streets, but they will be dealt within the hour."

"Good." Despidado turned away from the mercenary captain and towards the pegasi dancers. "The streets are dangerous at the moment, with all this unpleasantness going on. Please, accept our invitation to stay until the guards have the situation under control. They will escort you home as soon as they are able."

The Six retreated amongst themselves, talking in rapid Razan before separating in different directions of the Guild Hall. Rainbow Dash looked towards the doors leading outside, flanked by two well armed and armoured guards. She knew an explosion like that would hurt somepony, but all she cared about was if her mom was alright.

Out of the corner of her eye, the rainbow maned pegasus saw Despidado speaking with her teacher. Avispado pointed a hoof in Rainbow's direction as both spoke in hushed tones. The merchant lord levitated a small leather pouch from the side of his long coat, moving the pouch with his mind into Avispado's waiting hoof. The linen bag disappeared in an instant as she made her way to Rainbow Dash, who feigned interest in a ceramic pot rather than watching the exchange.

Exchange of what exactly? Rainbow was certain she did not want to know, but was about to find out. "Rainbow Dash," said Avispado as she looked down on her cyan student, "It would seem Senior Despiadado would like to speak to you in private. Please follow him to his office."

Rainbow wanted to say no, but one did not refuse a request from one of the Six. She followed the master merchant up a large flight of stairs until she found herself in a luxurious office, filled with all sorts of fine silks, bottles of imported wine, and above all was a stained glassed window depicting the sun in all her glory. The light from Celestia's sun, however, did not shine through the stained glass sun.

Despiadado used his magic to lift two delicate crystal glasses from a nearby cabinet, followed by one bottle of red wine. "Imported all the way from Filais," he said, pouring the expensive liquor into the glasses, "Please, join me for a drink, Senorita Dash. You have earned such."

Dash smiled to keep up appearances, but politely shook her head. "I'm not much of a drinker, Senior."

"Ah. A shame." Despiadado downed the liquor in one gulp before turning towards Rainbow Dash, his eyes looking the young mare over. "I found your performance, as well as yourself, quite fetching, my dear." His voice oozed with desire, that much Rainbow Dash knew. She backed away from him slowly towards the door.

"Uh, thanks and all, but I really should be going home." The room was too small, too compact, and the door was likely to be guarded on the outside. The only way out would be to smash through the stained glass window, but she didn't know what kind of magic a unicorn like Despiadado had in his horn.

"But I wanted to get better acquainted with you my dear." He leered closer, until his mouth was dangerously close to Dash. She could feel his breathing on her mane, and smell the wine in his breath. "I could make you rich, you know. Rich, with all the luxuries you could ever desire. All you have to do is say yes. Or don't say anything at all. No pony will know."

"No," Dash said weakly, until she was pressed against a wall with Despiadado looming over her, a wicked grin on his face. "NO!" came a

much fiercer shout and with a flap of her wings, she gained enough leverage to swing her hooves into the offending unicorn's face. He staggered a bit, but as he recovered, his eyes and horn began to glow, a face of rage contorting the once serene looking merchant lord.

"No one denies Despiadado, bruja," he cursed before levitating a dagger towards Rainbow Dash, "I will have you whether you want it or not!" The dagger slashed against Dash's clothes, slicing the laces of the girdle free as well as cutting the ribbons in her hair. The blade moved again to cut, when the stained glass window sun behind Despiadado burst.

Shards of broken glass fell forwards, slicing the hides of both Despiadado and Rainbow Dash. Standing on the desk was a pegasus, covered head to hoof in leather armour, her face obscured by a cowl except for the eyes. A long dagger was held in her teeth.

"The Six have called for your resignation, Despiadado, and those of...of..." The assassin looked up at Rainbow Dash. Neither could believe that they were looking into similar fuchsia eyes.

"Mom...?" She could scarcely believe what she was seeing. Her mother was an assassin. It explained everything, and yet so little. The money she had earned to send Dash to school, to buy their home and their clothes and their food. It all came from killing.

Sadness flushed over her mother's eyes until she looked to Despiadado. Her face contorted in fury as she charged towards the unicorn, her blade seeking flesh, seeking to spill blood. "You monster!" She cried as she forced Despiadado onto his side, "You will never harm my foal! Never touch her! Never again! Never again!"

Rainbow Dash looked on in horror as her mother stabbed Despiadado with every furious curse, his blood flying everywhere until both mares were painted in his gore. They both breathed heavily for a moment until there was a knock on the door. Then the door was being pounded by heavy hooves. Then there was the shouts for alarm.

"Fly away Dash," her mother said, standing before the door, "Fly away and never look back. Fly home; I'll be with you soon." Dash wanted to say something, to shout, cry, anything, but all she could do was swallow a lump

of air and fly through the broken window. Tears streamed from her eyes as she flew faster than she ever had, wanting nothing to do with the Guild Hall, or anypony inside. She just wanted to be home, in the hooves of her mother, her gentle voice saying everything would be alright.

No. Nothing would be alright, not after this. Dash could never look at her mother the same way again. She was an assassin, a hitmare, a pony who traded lives for money. Everything, from the clothes she wore to the food she ate, was paid for in blood bits. Never had Dash felt so sick.

There was still fighting in the streets, with the mercenary guards fighting ponies in black leather armour while others in blue leather joined the fray to create a deadly three way dance. Fires sparked by the lyrium explosion caused plenty of panic and chaos for the various pony factions to focus on the immediate dangers around them, rather than a pegasus in a bloodied dress. Not while they had their own hides to worry about.

“Stop!” The sound of a heavy voice behind her as she landed in an alley startled Dash, who quickly turned to see a guard rush up to her, a spear hanging from his saddled levelled at her chest. The guard looked her over for a minute before flipping the spear upwards to a ready position.

“You appear to have been in the troubles, senorita,” the guard said, noting the blood and the dress, “You should return home as quick as you can. The streets have turned violent, no place for a young mare such as you. I will escort you home.”

Dash wanted to object, but the guard was the one with the spear. Thankfully, this guardspony seemed to be one of the few honest ones, asking only how Dash had gotten herself into such trouble and believed the lie that she was caught near the fighting.

When she returned home, Rainbow immediately stripped off the ruined pink dress and drew herself a bath. The lukewarm water did little to ease her tension. The blood was difficult to wash off.

After drying herself off and dressing in a simple cotton tunic, Rainbow Dash readied a fire in the hearth. Despite huddling in front of the blaze, the cyan pegasus had never felt so cold. She simply stared into the fire, as her mind flew dizzying thoughts into her. About her mother, about Despiadado, about

the explosion only to come to the same conclusion: nothing made sense anymore.

A knocking noise sent Dash into alert. She looked to the door, but then turned to her mother's room. The sound of the knocking was coming from there. Then there was the sound of a door creaking open, followed finally by a slump.

Dash pushed the door ajar, looking in only to throw it open and rush inside her mother's room. Down on the floor in a pool of her own blood laid her mother, her breathing ragged and eyes half open. She was covered in blood as well as gashes and deep cuts. Three arrows jutted out of her side, and one of her wings was broken as it lay limp against her.

"Mom!" Rainbow Dash shouted, before holding her mother in her hooves, "I'll save you! I just need to find a poultice, or go find a healer. Don't leave me, please!" Her mother being an assassin was quickly forgotten. It didn't matter; all that mattered now was that her mother was dying.

Her mother laughed, or tried to, but only coughed up blood. "I told you I'd see you soon. It seems like only yesterday, I was holding you like this. I'm sorry, little Rainbow. I love you."

Rainbow Dash did not let go, simply holding her mother's body in her arms as she rocked back and forth. "Why," she whispered into her mother's ears, "Why do all this? I didn't need any of this. I didn't want any of this. I just want you to be proud of me."

But of course, no answer would ever come. She didn't know how long she stayed with her mother until a knock at the front door startled her. Grabbing her mother's long dagger in her teeth, she leaned close to door.

"Who is it," she flatly stated. She didn't want anyone to see her mother this way.

"Friends of your mother," said a voice, deep and male. He had an Equestrian accent. "Soarin and Spitfire will watch the house. I mean no harm. I just wish to see your mother."

"She's dead!" Dash barked. There was a few seconds of silence until the stallion spoke again.

"I'd like to pay my respects then." Dash was still unsure of the stallion waiting outside, but finally relented, opening the door to her home. Standing before her was a tall green pegasus with brown eyes. He wore simple garb covered by a brown cloak with the hood drawn back. Outside, a blue and orange pegasi were standing guard, each equipped with daggers and leather armour much like Dash's mother.

"My name is Reinhardt," said the pegasus, bowing his head, "I knew your mother well. She was one of us. May I see her?" Dash nodded, leading Reinhardt into her mother's room, where the body still lay, appearing as if she were asleep. Reinhardt looked down on Dash's mother with sad eyes, before offering a prayer to Celestia.

"What do you mean 'one of us'." Dash said as she pulled a sheet from the bed and began to wrap the body like a death shroud.

"Your mother didn't want you to know," Reinhardt explained, "But she was a member of the Wonderbolts. Before you say anything, yes, we are assassins and killers. But she only wanted the best for you. She wanted you to live happy and safe."

"We Wonderbolts have stood against the Shadowbolts and their masters for a long time. We have tried to make Pura Raza a better place, but have been hindered by their greater resources. Lord Despiadado was one of the Shadowbolts' masters. Her task was to assassinate him, to bring the Six under Wonderbolt control. The Shadowbolts could not stop your mother from her mission, so they attacked her."

Dash said nothing as she stood up. A new fire burned in her eyes: a fire that demanded vengeance for the death of her mother. "I want to be a Wonderbolt," she said at last, "I want to end the Shadowbolts. All of them."

Reinhardt nodded. "Then we will teach you."

"Reinhardt and the other Wonderbolts taught me everything I know," Rainbow Dash concluded, "About stealth. About poisons. About fighting."

About killing. And we did exactly what I wanted. Not a single Shadowbolt remained in Pura Raza.”

“It was then that Reinhardt offered me and a bunch of other Wonderbolt hopefuls one last job to be fully in the group. That job was in Equestria, and I jumped on the chance. I didn’t want to stay in Pura Raza anymore. So yeah, Applejack. The apple really doesn’t fall far from the tree.”

Twilight levitated a cloth napkin and helped dry Rainbow Dash’s eyes. The pegasus didn’t resist, rather she kept her tears flowing for the memory of her mother. Or the memory of happier times.

Everypony around her had lost someone or something dear to them, Twilight realized. This was why Sloth’s illusions in the Fade were so difficult to confront, to resist. He had shown them all what they really wanted from their lives: that which was cruelly taken away from them by fate.

“Heh,” Rainbow Dash laughed, blinking away the last of her tears before looking like her confident self again, “I do feel better. Actually, I feel great! I feel like taking on a minotaur! You girls are the best friends a pony could have. I needed to get that off my shoulders.”

“We can help each other carry the burdens,” Twilight said, “Just don’t over indulge on the cider, Dash.” They laughed as Dash pushed her empty bowl away, all of the ponies agreeing that a hangover the next morning would not be in the best interests of the journey.

It was only when the donkey server took away the cider bowls did Twilight noticed that Applejack took her leave of the table and was already making her way to the bedrooms upstairs with nary a word. Her faced was marked by the same despair Twilight had seen after Ostequus.

Applejack ignored Twilight’s calls, not even turning to look at the violet unicorn or her friends. “I’m hitting the hay early, partners,” she said, each hoofstep echoing in the empty inn, “We have a long ways to go to get Red Apple Acres, and not a lot of time to do it. Good night, everypony.”

They watched in silence as the blonde Warden went out of sight. “What’s her problem?” Dash asked, “We spill our hearts out on the table, and she just skips out?”

"Maybe she had nothing to say?" Fluttershy added. Twilight was not so sure. Applejack was visited by a throng of demons in her illusionary world, apparently her 'family'. She did have a story, but it was not Twilight's or anypony's place to pry it out of her.

"When the time comes and Applejack is ready to tell us, she will," Twilight said, "Don't push the issue. She's right, anyhow. We do need to get up early so we can make the journey."

The rest of the ponies agreed, thanking both the donkey and the innkeeper for their service. As they made their way up the stairs, Rarity made her appearance, all tightly bound in linens after her bath.

"That was simply divine," she said with a smile, "Although it did take some effort to get the filth out from those abominations. You all look much better than when we first arrived! Did I miss something? Tell me!"

Twilight chuckled before Rarity could begin her complaining. "Don't worry Rarity," said the purple spell caster, "We'll get you up to speed."

For once since her Harrowing, the night was not plagued by dreams or fears. Just simple, uneventful rest.

Chapter 11

Between Shale and a Hard Place

A dull grey overcast sky made a still-sleepy magical mare not want to get up from bed, even though the journey to Red Apple Acres called out to her. Not even bothering to stifle a yawn, Twilight looked up to be face to face with two bright, baby-blue eyes.

“Hi Twilight!” Came a high pitched cheer of morning greetings. Twilight gave a yelp of surprise as she fell out of bed. Pinkie Pie giggled while helping Twilight to her hooves, “Silly filly, it’s only breakfast! No need to get as excited as I do. Look, I made breakfast muffins!”

Balanced perfectly on Pinkie’s hoof was a small platter with two delectable muffins covered in blueberries. Twilight couldn’t help but feel her mouth water as warm steam floated from the tips of the baked goods. With a smile, the pink earth pony placed the platter on the bed before moving downstairs to get more.

The muffins were delicious, with the perfect balance of heat and moistness. The blueberries were especially good, many still holding their juice, just waiting to explode their flavour with every bite. As Twilight happily munched away on the muffin, there came a knocking sound from nearby. The door was wide open and nopony was standing outside. The knocking wasn’t coming from the floor either, but it still persisted.

“Um...Twilight?” Fluttershy said with her soft voice, pointing at the window. Twilight turned to be face to face with a pegasus, whose bright yellow eyes were completely off, going in two different directions. Twilight yelped again in shock at the sight, falling over backwards.

The pegasus had a grey coat and a blonde mane, though the colour was brighter than Applejack’s. She was dressed in a white linen shirt and a jacket covered in pockets, as well as two large saddle bags on her sides. On her flank was a cutie mark of rising bubbles, appearing to be floating upwards from a soapy bath. The wall-eyed pegasus pointed at the window,

as if asking to be let in. Twilight opened the window wide and allowing the grey flyer into the inn.

“Hi there!” she chimed, not unlike Pinkie Pie, “I smelled some of Pinkie’s delicious muffins, and had to come see for myself. I haven’t seen her in Ponyring for a while, but I can smell her baking a furlong away. Can I have a muffin, please?”

Rarity stepped forward, smiling as she levitated one of the muffins Pinkie made for her towards the pegasus. “You can have one of mine, dear,” she said, “I’m watching my figure.”

Never had Twilight seen a pony so happy to receive a muffin. The grey mare held the muffin close in her hooves before taking a small bite, savouring every moment. “Mmm...blueberry. May not be oatmeal, but still yummy in my tummy!”

Twilight couldn’t help but smile as she watched such simple bliss. The rest of the party was just finishing up their own muffins, with Fluttershy offering one of hers to their guest. Pinkie Pie bounded her way up the stairs, and at the sight of the visitor squealed in the delight.

“Ditzy!” she called, before rushing forward and embracing the pegasus, “Your nose knows, all the time! If you wanted a muffin, I could have made you some.”

“That’s okay! Your friends were nice enough to share theirs!” Ditzzy’s eyes straightened for a moment, as if she realized something before sticking her head into one of her saddle bags. She pulled out three small pouches before depositing them into Pinkie’s own saddlebags.

“Oh my gosh!” Pinkie exclaimed, “Are these what I think they are?”

“Yup!” Ditzzy smiled, her eyes back to their unusual positions, “The ingredients for your healie grenade! It took me a while, but I found them!”

Pinkie cheered before opening the small bags, babbling endlessly about how the sarsaparilla leaves worked in unison with the rhubarb and the pinwheel roots. Alchemy was not Twilight’s forte, so she decided it was best to leave the two giddy ponies to their discussions.

Rarity was in a corner, fussing over Fluttershy's Chantry robes with Fluttershy still in them. Twilight noticed that the white unicorn had perfectly altered the robe so that Fluttershy's wings could be free and comfortable. The pegasus looked happy that she could freely have her wings out without ridicule, even if her cheeks turned a few shades of orange.

Rainbow Dash and Spike made their way over to Pinkie and Ditzzy's little area, apparently either interested in what Pinkie had to say about alchemy, or were simply more interested in her supplies of muffins.

Applejack, however, looked to be in no mood for any conversation. She was adjusting her favourite hat when Twilight walked over to her side. "We need to git over to Red Apple Acres lickitysplit," she said without looking to her fellow Warden, "We gotta get help from Arl Macintosh, then mosey over to the donkeys and pegasi. Blight isn't just gonna end itself, so let's hit the trail already."

Without another word, Applejack left the room, heading down the stairs to the main floor. The other ponies said nothing as they watched their friend leave with new focus. Not new focus, Twilight corrected herself, trying to stay on course. The Sloth demon's illusions and the loss of Ostequus had taken a toll on Applejack, but she was not letting anypony help her lift the burden.

Twilight turned to speak to the rest of the group when she came face to face with Ditzzy again. "You really have to stop doing that," she said after flinching from being so close with such awkward eyes.

"You're going to Red Apple Acres? I can take you there on our boat," Ditzzy said, pointing a hoof towards the window. Twilight looked outside to see a much larger vessel docked at the pier, dwarfing the little ferry they used to get to the Unicorn Tower.

"Are you sure?" Pinkie asked, "We wouldn't want you to miss your rounds around the lake."

"No problem at all," Ditzzy reassured, "I'll even do it for some more muffins, for Dinky too!"

At the mention of this new name, Twilight could have sworn Ditzzy's eyes grew even brighter, and her smile even wider. "She's my little muffin," explained Ditzzy, "Smart as a whip, just you wait and see!" With that, Ditzzy flew off out of the window towards the boat.

Once everypony was ready to go, they made their way down the stairs, giving thanks to both the innkeeper and barmaid before heading outside. Despite the slight chill in the air, the weather was fine enough for travel, and Twilight especially looked forward to her first trip on an actual boat with a sail.

As they approached the dock, Twilight spotted an all too familiar pointed hat and starry cape with a senior enchanter's staff floating proudly at her side. Twilight shook her head in disbelief. What was Trixie doing outside of the Unicorn Tower?

They walked closer to Trixie, noticing that she was not alone, but also having a conversation with a little filly unicorn, although from the volume in the blue mage's voice, it was an argument she was losing badly. The filly was grey, like Ditzzy, but of a slightly darker shade, thought they shared the same coloured eyes and mane. She had the same bright smile as the pegasus, and seemed to be enjoying herself at Trixie's expense.

"The Great and Powerful Trixie demands that you tell her who owns this boat!"

"Enchantment?"

"You've said nothing but 'enchantment' since Trixie made the mistake of conversing with you, and Trixie does not make mistakes!"

"Enchantment!"

Twilight couldn't help but laugh, seeing Trixie getting flustered by a little filly. Still, she grew concerned that a unicorn so young was outside of the influence of the Unicorn Circle. She would have been declared an apostate and hunted by the templars, but she seemed not to have a care that she was so close to the Tower, or the templars inside.

The grey filly laughed as Ditzzy landed next to her. “Hee, you should see the look on your face. Look, Mom! I got another one!” Both grey ponies giggled at what apparently was a prank they played many times. Trixie huffed in indignation as she turned to Twilight.

“Sparkle,” being her best greeting to date, “It should be known that The Great and Powerful and Senior Enchanter Trixie will be accompanying you on your journey. She has convinced the First Enchanter that if your mission to defeat the ponyspawn fails, then there will be no point in rebuilding the Tower, as the Blight will no doubt consume all of Equestria. Trixie has thus come to ensure your success.”

Twilight raised an eyebrow before breaking into a smile. All she did in response was raise a hoof to Trixie, a gesture of goodwill. The blue unicorn would surely be a great help against the ponyspawn, and she had already proven her bravery and arcane skill against the demons and Maleficar.

Trixie looked at the offered hoof before smirking at Twilight. Blue hoof met violet as they shook on their newfound and rather unlikely partnership. “Welcome aboard Trixie,” Twilight said, “We’ll do much better on the journey with you in our party.”

“As if there was ever any doubt.” A sharp whistle from the boat broke the challenging stare the two unicorns were sharing. Rainbow Dash flew over from the boat, where Twilight could see the rest of the party waiting for them.

“Hey, Twixie,” Dash joked, “We’re waiting on you.” Both magical mares made their way onto the boat, Twilight slightly blushing at such a silly nickname. The ship was much more impressive than the ferry, though the sail was patched with several different colours of cloth, and boards creaked with every hoofstep.

Ditzzy was dashing about in the sky, adjusting ropes and the sail, checking instruments for measurements before finally untying the boat from the docks. They appeared to be in luck, as the wind was flowing southward towards Red Apple Acres.

The boat ride was much smoother than the ferry to the Tower, and the wind felt nice on Twilight’s face. As she and Spike stared out towards the south,

she felt a small tug on her robes. Looking down, she spotted the little grey unicorn looking up at Twilight with her large yellow eyes.

“Hi! I’m Dinky!” she said, her smile almost as infectious as Pinkie’s, “You’re a unicorn too, just like the pretty one and the loud one. Follow me, I’ll show you something magic!”

Twilight looked at Spike and shrugged as Dinky made her way to the cargo hold. They both followed her leaving the rest of the party topside. The cargo hold was impressive, if cramped. Chests, barrels and crates were packed inside the hold, making it easy for a little filly to maneuver, but giving Twilight a bit more trouble due to her size. Spike hopped off, snout in the air before opening a chest full of precious gemstones.

“Mmm...” drooled Spike as he held up a rather impressive looking ruby, “Hey Dinky, how much for the ruby? I’m starved!”

“Two bits!” the young filly called. Spike’s shined with excitement as he reached into Twilight’s saddle bags and pulled out two shining coins. The violet unicorn gave Spike a look, who returned it with his own begging gaze. “Spike, that’s the same price as a shave and manecut.”

“Come on Twilight, I’m tired of pony food. I need something real!” Spike pleaded. It was enough to make her relent, as she turned to see Dinky returning with a large gemmed rod tight in her mouth. After Spike deposited the coins into Dinky’s bag, Twilight looked down on the instrument Dinky had found. She could feel the flow of lyrium in the rod, faint, yet still holding power.

“It’s a golem control rod,” Dinky explained, “We got it from a pony in Stablesire. The golem was even in the middle of town! But the golem wouldn’t move, so we kept the rod because it’s pretty.”

Twilight levitated the rod, looking the device over. Nothing about it seemed extraordinary besides the story of its origin. She had never even heard of a creature called a ‘golem’ before. “What is a golem?” Twilight asked.

“It’s supposed to be a pony made completely out of stone,” said Dinky, “And it really is! Although maybe it was just a statue. Like I said, the golem didn’t move when we tried to use the rod. Maybe you can fix it?”

She wasn't sure, but seeing the little filly so curious about magical devices made Twilight smile. They sat together in the cargo hold as Spike continued to devour his ruby, talking about the rod, then magic in general. Dinky had a good grasp on spellwork at such a young age. Such magical aptitude was apparent at a young age, after all, Twilight herself had shown talent when she was a filly much like Dinky.

It was interesting; for some reason Dinky would not cast spells. Perhaps it was due to being raised by pegasus mother and having little exposure to other unicorns, but Dinky did not levitate objects, and was likely not able to fire a magic missile or even spark a simple light. When asked what sort of magic she could do, the grey unicorn smiled and ran deep into the cargo hold.

When she returned, it was with a small stone slab with a strange symbol on it. A rune, if Twilight was not mistaken. Dinky then dashed off to find something else, making a loud grunt as she returned dragging a heavy sword with her tail. Once again she darted away, this time bringing back a small closed bowl. She nudged the lid open to reveal the essence of magic: lyrium.

"Enchantment!" The Warden and her dragon companion watched as Dinky closed her eyes, horn glowing bright. The lyrium slowly began to flow from the bowl, wrapping blue tendrils around the sword and the rune. Both lyrium encased objects began to glow, until the stone was flush against the blade's side. The rune then appeared to melt into the metal, until all that was left was the symbol.

Once Dinky's horn stopped glowing, both Twilight and Spike peered closely at the weapon. The blade suddenly erupted into flames. Surprisingly, the fire did not burn the wooded hull of the ship, or even singe Twilight's mane, but rather danced harmlessly on the sword.

"No kidding about the enchantment," Twilight gaped, still not believing what one so young had just accomplished, "How come it's not burning the boat?"

"It won't burn unless it's used, silly," Dinky was bouncing up and down, proud of her enchantment, "That's the rule about runes! You can have it! On the house, er, boat!"

Twilight watched as Spike tried to lift the flaming sword, only to turn her attention towards the rest of the boat's cargo. Dinky had retrieved lyrium from the hold, and as Twilight focused her senses, she found where she had taken the rare material. Every crate and box was filled with the same bowls, all stuffed with the material of magic. Such cargo would have been considered lethal if not for the precise care in storage and transport of lyrium, though accidents were sure to happen. One such accident likely explained the case of Ditzzy's eyes.

"That is very impressive, Dinky," said Twilight as Spike waved the sword around, "How did you learn to manipulate lyrium like that? It takes years of training of training to do that sort of enchantment. Did your father teach you?"

At the mention of her father, Dinky's eyes became downcast. "I never met my daddy," Dinky explained, "Mom said he was very smart, but one day disappeared. Not before saying he loved me and wanted me to grow up happy. Mom also said that I have his gift with lyrium, so every time I enchant things I think about my daddy."

The lavender unicorn gave Dinky a sad smile as the filly turned her attention to Spike and the sword. As she left the cargo hold, Twilight was once again face to face with Ditzzy. The grey mare was no longer smiling, instead sitting on her haunches, blocking Twilight's way. It was almost surreal, seeing the normally cheery pegasus have a sorrowful expression on her face.

"She showed you the lyrium," Ditzzy said. Not a question, but a statement. Twilight nodded.

"You're a lyrium smuggler." Another statement, but there was no malice or judgement in Twilight's voice. Just concern over having such a dangerous material on the ship as well as an apostate for a child.

"Just to keep the templar away! To stop them from taking my little muffin!" With Ditzzy pleading before her, Twilight was reminded of Rainbow Dash's story of her mother, how she did whatever it took to protect Dash. Though the situations were different, the core of the matter was the same: a mother trying to protect her filly.

"I won't tell the templars," Twilight promised, "But I am concerned that she is very gifted magically. The templars won't be bribed and ignorant forever, especially after what happened in the Tower with the Maleficar."

"Oh thank you, thank you!" Ditzzy stood up, her smile genuine and grateful, "Don't worry about us. Once we have enough bits, I was planning to move us to the Free Plains across the sea. We'll be fine once we get there."

Before Ditzzy could fly back to the helm of the ship, Twilight put a hoof forward to gently hold the pegasus back. "Her father," she said to Ditzzy, whose eyes drooped lower at that mention, "He was taken away, wasn't he? He was an apostate too."

Ditzzy's eyes focused properly on Twilight who glared with gritted teeth. "They took her father away. But they will never take Dinky. Never take away my little muffin." With that she turned away and flew to the helm, hooves planted firmly on the wheel.

Twilight wanted to hope for the best, but as long as the memory of the attack at the Tower was fresh, apostates such as Dinky would only be met with harsh treatment, if not outright hostility and violence.. She wondered what she would do if she had a filly of her own, if she ever had a foal to call her 'mother'.

First deal with the ponyspawn, Twilight reminded herself, and then you can think about families and what you are going to do after. Both mares resumed their place on the top of the deck. They sailed in silence as the wind picked up, filling the small boat's sails with air.

The chill of the wind as well as the spray from the lake made Twilight shiver. She focused some magic into her staff to produce some measure of heat. It was a comfort, seeing the soft light and the warmth emanating from her staff. Pinkie joined Twilight on the deck, keeping close as the wind blew even stronger. The perky pink pony sniffled in the cold, but kept close to Twilight and her magical heating element.

Soon the rest of the party were huddling together for communal warmth, as Rarity and even the detached Trixie used their staves to match the spell Twilight had cast. A triangle formed with all three floating arcane

instruments, providing heat to all the ponies packed together as the howling cold grew greater.

Ditzy was struggling to hold on to the wheel of the boat as she flipped the hood of her jacket over her head. Twilight was thankful that Spike and Dinky were safe in the hold. Looking up, the violet pegasus could see that they were approaching land quickly.

Too quickly. The ship was being pushed by the strong winds and it would slam into the docks on the other side. "Prepare for impact!" Ditzy shouted, her hooves holding on to the helm for dear life. The boat slid onto the sandy beach, the hull scraping against the pier as it snapped wooden boards of their posts. The ponies all slid across the deck until they piled atop each other on the other end.

"Ugh," was the unanimous opinion of everypony on the boat. Dinky and Spike had left the hold, with the little unicorn heading towards her mother as Spike tugged on Twilight's tail, still holding the burning sword. "You alright Twilight?"

"Just fine Spike," Twilight said flatly as she struggled to get out of the pony mess. As she looked around, she was expecting to see apple trees everywhere, farmland, anything resembling an agricultural community. There wasn't even the sight of Red Apple Castle.

"Horsefeathers!" Applejack cursed as her hooves hit the rough shore of the lake, "This isn't Red Apple Acres at all! Where the hay are we?" Never had the ponies seen Applejack so riled. Ditzy looked around and tried to give a reassuring smile.

"I may have sailed west when I should have sailed south," she said, "But don't worry! Once we get the boat ship-shape, I'll bring you right to Red Apple Castle. Promise!"

Twilight sighed, stepping off the boat and looking around her surroundings. The trees and shrubs were withered, with red and black bloodstains marking the dirt road. She stopped suddenly with Applejack doing the same; she could 'hear' the slow beating of hearts, pumping the bile that was ponyspawn blood, and Applejack was likely hearing the same. It was grotesque, sensing the ponyspawn, hearing their heart beat as if it were her

own, just as it was in the vision during the Joining. When she had first heard the ponyspawn, there was at least the chaos of battle acted as ambience to distract her thoughts. Now there was nothing to pull her mind away, only the sound of sludgelike blood.

"I hear it too," Applejack focused her attention northward, "Not a lot of them, but even a small group can really buck a pony's day. I can feel them further west down this path."

"Let's go," Twilight and Applejack took the lead as the others scrambled out of the boat. Looking at the members of the party, Twilight noticed that Fluttershy and Trixie looked hesitant. They had likely never encountered the ponyspawn before, and would not know what to do. They needed direction, leadership.

"Everypony!" Twilight called as they galloped, "Stay close, and attack with everything you've got! The ponyspawn are monsters, but they can be killed. Fight them like demons, like...ponies. Keep your distance, and don't let their blood get inside you. It's poison."

They arrived at a small town that appeared to have been painted red. Blood slathered the ground and the walls of homes, while half-eaten corpses of ponies littered the ground. In the centre of town was a large stone statue of a sturdy pony rearing upwards. Sure enough, the town was crawling with ponyspawn, thelocks and donlocks snarling at each other as they approached a large building near the statue. Two screamers patrolled the sky, their large singular eyes watching for prey. A thelock much larger than the others and adorned in rusted metal for armour shouted at the others in a gargle-like speech.

"They have a basic organization hierarchy," Twilight muttered to herself, "The biggest seem to lead when an Ornlock Emissary is not around, though I wonder where the minotaurs come into the command structure..."

"Are ya really analyzing the critters that look at us like a bushel of apples on a silver platter Twi?" Applejack asked as if Twilight was more concerned with studying the monsters rather than killing them, "They'll spot us in a moment. We can sense them, they can sense us."

True enough, one of the screamers looked in their direction and cried an echoing shriek. The two flying monstrosities descended on the ponies as their ground-based brethren roared and charged, some holding rusted blades in their mouths, while others simply gnashed their teeth.

With a shout, Applejack drew her own sword and charged forward, quickly being followed by Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie. They clashed with the ponyspawn as Rarity launched spells of lightning from her staff, staying in the back. Fluttershy followed suit by aiming her arrows towards the screamers.

Twilight and Trixie channeled their spells in unison, creating a spiral of blue and violet arcane power towards the lead thelock. Grateful that Trixie was getting the hang of a simple yet potent offensive spell, Twilight focused the stream to hit the thelock.

She did not expect one of the screamers to slam into her. The spell was broken, igniting a burst of light in the air as it sent Twilight, Trixie, and the screamer flying. Spike fell off her back as the screamer clawed at the unicorn, slashing her hide with long claws. Twilight struggled against the ponyspawn, but it was much stronger than the smaller pony. She was not much of a fighter in hoof-to-hoof combat.

The screamer craned its long neck, biting Twilight's neck. She couldn't help but scream as the creature twisted its neck, making the wound worse as its teeth shredded skin.

"Twilight!" came a small cry. Spike jumped on top of the screamer, brandishing his new magic sword, swinging the blade at one of its wings. Like Dinky had said, the flames grew intense as the sword was used, easily severing the wing from the ponyspawn's shoulder. The screamer belted out its namesake, clawing at baby dragon on its back. It turned its head, glaring with its large eye and snapping its jaws at Spike as the dragon waved his sword towards the monster.

Twilight struggled to get to her hooves, but the burning pain from the bite made her clumsy and weak. *I won't let them take you*, Twilight thought as she fell to one knee. With clear focus, she began to fuel another spell with anger just as she was with magic. A large icicle began to take shape above her as her horn glowed bright. With a shout, Twilight launched the frozen

missile at the screamer, taking satisfaction as the sharp edge impaled the crane-like neck.

Mustering her strength, Twilight hobbled over to Spike's side, concern for her oldest friend the only thing on her mind. Not even the battle with the remaining ponyspawn mattered. "Spike! Are you all right?" Twilight said, holding Spike close, "I should never have let you so close to a battle. Did any of the ponyspawn blood get into you?"

"Don't worry about me, Twilight!" Spike raised his voice, pointing the sword towards the still ongoing fight, "I have thick scales and now a great flaming sword. Our friends need our help most of all!"

Twilight looked aghast as Spike quickly ran off to join the fray. That was the first time Spike had ever raised his voice to her, the first time he had ever been openly defiant. And now Spike, her little dragon who she hatched when he was just an egg, was rushing off into battle where he could be hurt or worse.

She fell, though whether it was due to the wound or the feeling of helplessness as she watched her friends fight the thelock leader, Twilight did not know. The other ponyspawn were dead around them, with arrows, gashes, and scorch marks across their bodies. The party surrounded the massive ponyspawn, who swung its heavy rusted blade at the ponies, missing completely. Applejack twisted her body around, slamming both hooves into the skull of the thelock. The head was bucked sharply, with the body following its path upward. As Applejack turned to see her hoofwork, the thelock leader landed with a loud thud onto its side.

As the dust around the thelock settled, the disgusting black tongue of the thelock rolled out from its fanged mouth as the neck sprawled at an unnatural angle. Twilight breathed a sigh of relief as she could hear the ponyspawn's heart stop beating, even though she was still very much unnerved that she could hear the beats at all. Rousing herself to her hooves, she hobbled over to her friends, who immediately rushed to her side. Their concern was always touching, and Twilight managed a weak smile, though she winced as the wound still burned.

"Oh my gosh, Twilight!" Pinkie yelled as she fussed over the wound, "We have to treat this really quickly! I have some poultices, just wait!" With that,

Pinkie dug into her saddlebag and lifted a small red bottle of red liquid. Twilight closed her eyes as her friend applied the poultice to the bite wound. Healing the bite was almost as painful as the actual bite itself, as her flesh regenerated with the aid of the poultice at a rapid rate. She didn't exactly like the smell of the concoction either. Why couldn't it smell like cherries?

"Are you going to be all right Twilight?" Fluttershy asked, watching the wound heal, "You said to watch for their poison blood. What about infections?"

"She'll be doin' dandy," Applejack said, making her way back to the pier, "She's a Grey Warden, and that means immune to the Taint. We beat the ponyspawn, now let's make sure Ditzzy has the boat all ready to git goin'."

Applejack's reactions didn't seem right, and Twilight wanted to know why. Maybe it was something to do with what they were all talking about last night. "Listen Applejack," Twilight said, confident that the damage to her shoulder had properly healed, "We should look around the village, see if we can't find any survivors. They've been hit by the ponyspawn pretty hard, we should do what we can to help them, at least tell them the danger has past."

Twilight then turned her attention to the pony of stone in front of her. She had seen many statues before, always those of Celestia and Luna, but never of a plain pony. This one was also incredibly rough, unlike the pristine condition the Chantry demanded in works of the alicorn sisters, and covered in what appeared to be bird excrement. The statue had no cutie mark painted or chiseled on its flank, but rather a large rune in the shape of a hoof shining on the forehead. The rune was still glowing bright blue.

Could this be...? Channeling her senses, Twilight could begin to feel the flow of lyrium throughout the form of the statue. "Rainbow Dash," Twilight called, looking at the statue more intently, "Could you go get Dinky from the ship? And ask her to bring the control rod."

Dash gave a salute before flying off towards the dock. Applejack did not look pleased, which Twilight was all the more prepared for. "Applejack, can I talk to you for a minute?" she asked, wanting to get to the bottom of her fellow Warden's rushed behavior.

Applejack grumbled but made her way to Twilight's side as Trixie and Rarity studied the statue. Maybe they could discern something Twilight couldn't. In the mean time, Pinkie Pie, Fluttershy and Spike moved from house to house, looking for survivors.

"Applejack, I need to know what's wrong with you," Twilight said, perhaps bluntly but it was needed to be said, "You haven't been the same since the inn, and I'm worried for you."

"It ain't nothin' worth workin' yerselves over," Applejack responded, attempting to move past Twilight, but the violet unicorn stood her ground. They locked stern gazes at each other, both not budging an inch. Twilight was not going to let Applejack simply walk away from this. Not if it was going to affect her judgment.

"Ah, horseapples," Applejack cursed, casting her eyes downward, "Listen Twi, after last night, and hearing how much our friends lost not just to ponyspawn, but also other ponies, I just felt like my problems were seeds compared to their full apples."

"When I was sent to the Chantry to become a templar, I was right angry at Arl Macintosh for letting me go. Said it was for my best interests and such. I guess I just wanted to see him, get the help, and get going as soon as possible. We have a big quest to git done, and maybe..."

"Maybe I wonder if we can do it at all." Applejack looked ashamed, as if she had said unspeakable words. "The Fade was where it all started, Twilight. I wanted that family. I wanted that feeling of simplicity. Then the dream broke, and we're fightin' demons and Maleficar, not including what happened in Ostequus. I just wish Duncan were here. He'd know what to do. What to say, and how to say it."

Twilight didn't know what to say to reassure Applejack. Yes, they had defeated ponyspawn and demons, but there was still so much to complete, so many enemies to encounter and defeat. Danger lurked around every corner, from the claws and teeth of the wretched creatures to the blades of Loghoof's army. Despite their victory in Unicorn Tower, the task set before them was still daunting. Doubt would certainly nestle into the minds of

everypony. Twilight felt it was her responsibility to keep morale up, to keep everypony focused on the mission.

But why did she feel the need to lead? That was something she had never considered before now. Perhaps somewhere down in the Potpourri Wilds, when Applejack had appointed Twilight leader of the group of Warden hopefuls, did Twilight take the reins of leadership but never seen an opportunity to hand them back. Now, seeing Applejack in the throes of self-doubt, she realized that being a leader was more than standing up against the monsters of the world, or the challenges brought on by ponies, but by being there for her friends to help them out of any situation.

“Applejack,” Twilight began, “No matter what happens, we will push against the Blight with every step. We will stop them, and we will make Duncan proud. But I’m going to need your help. If there is anypony here I can rely on to be a foundation for the rest of the group, it’s you. When the journey gets rough and no matter what, I know it will, I know there is one pony I can lean on when I falter. You can do the same with me, Applejack. I’ll be here with you until the end. You are not alone; we can all share our burdens.”

The blonde earth pony turned away, leaving Twilight feeling as if her words did not reach Applejack. But when her fellow Warden turned, a new gleam in her green eyes and a smile on her lips, Twilight couldn’t help returning the expression. “You might not be Duncan, sugarcube, but I think you could’ve given him a run fer his bits. We can do this Twilight. As long as we stick together. We can beat the Blight.”

With Applejack’s spirit restored and Twilight’s own morale lifted, they both returned to see all their friends surrounding the statue of the pony. Rarity and Trixie were casting spell after spell on both statue and the control rod, but the statue would not move. Pinkie Pie and Fluttershy also returned, being followed by a older earth pony stallion.

“Tis the strangest thing I have ever seen, darling,” Rarity said, “There is a lot of potent magic in both the statue and the control rod, but no spell I or Trixie can cast will wake it up.”

Twilight looked the statue over herself, rubbing her chin with a hoof as she lost herself in thought. *I wonder if they tried a simple animation spell*, she considered, but then retracted her thoughts. *No, if it were simple, the statue*

would have started moving. I wonder if Dark Arts are involved at all. If so, we'll just have to leave it behind. It was a disheartening thought that they may not be able to restore the golem. A look at Dinky still bouncing around the statue made her heart twist; the little filly seemed eager to see the golem move again.

"You must be our saviors," the old earth pony said, snapping Twilight's attention away from the golem, "I am the elder of Stablesire, and am mighty grateful the Grey Wardens arrived when you did. Celestia smiled on us, of that I am quite sure."

"Actually, we got blown off course trying to sail across Lake Blackwater," Twilight admitted to the elder, "But we are glad we came when we did. I'm sorry we couldn't save everyone." She turned to see more survivors leave their homes only to rush towards the desecrated bodies of loved ones, partly consumed by the offending ponyspawn. Fluttershy immediately flew off to help ease the minds of the villagers, and once again Twilight was gladdened by the sight of the bard-turned-priestess displaying such kindness.

"We will survive," the elder said, "As we always have. I noticed you and your friends have taken a keen interest in Shale."

"Is that the name of the statue?" Twilight asked. The elder nodded, but his eyes became flush with anger.

"So it is, and not just a statue. Shale truly is a golem, and has been in the village since I was just a young colt. The thing used to be the servant and guardian to a rather eccentric unicorn wizard, before Shale went berserk. Shale killed the old wizard, and then was frozen like this for well over thirty years."

"Then a few months ago, that grey pegasus with the strange yellow eyes wanted to trade for the control rod," the elder continued, "Said it was 'very pretty'. Don't know why we kept it for so long, but we had forgotten about the rod and Shale did serve as a rather impressive statue for our town. Unicorns from all around came to study it, trying to get Shale to move for them, but none have succeeded. Not that I'd like them too. Thirty years, and I still remember the crushed head."

Twilight swallowed hard as she looked up at Shale's eyes. They were a dull grey, but she wondered if they would turn red and the golem would go into another rage if awoken. She had never felt so uncomfortable performing magic, and trying to wake the golem seemed a great risk.

"Maybe Shale isn't angry anymore," Dinky said, "Maybe Shale just wants to say he's sorry? Thirty years is a long time."

A long time for a pony, perhaps, but not a long time for stone and magic come to life. Twilight levitated the control rod, looking the device over before coming up with a plan. It was a long shot, but perhaps it would work.

"I'm going to charge the rod with some energy," she said to everypony present, "Maybe then we can command Shale to awaken." With that, Twilight's horn began to glow, as she focused her arcane power into the rod. The ponies stepped back, giving Twilight a wide berth as she shut her eyes, putting all of her focus and power into the rod.

She did not expect the rod to oblige, the rod not only consuming the offered magic, but draining more than Twilight wanted to give. The violet unicorn pulled back with all her might, severing the link. Gasping for air, Twilight looked on as the now glowing rod fell with a *thunk* onto the ground. She just couldn't believe the kind of "hunger" she felt from the magical instrument.

"Try now! Try now!" Dinky chimed, bouncing up and down in front of the rod. Twilight stood up, levitating the rod in front of Shale, wondering what sort of words one used to wake up a pony of stone and lyrium.

"Golem...awaken!" Twilight said in her most authoritative voice. Everypony leaned in, watching closely to see any sign of life, or as close as life could be with a golem.

Nothing. Not even a twitch. Twilight grinned at the others before puffing herself up to appear bigger, more commanding.

"Golem, I command you to rise!" But that was still met with silence. Trixie pushed Twilight out of the way, her eyes in a confident blaze.

“Step aside and watch how the Great and Powerful Trixie brings a golem to life!” She announced. Twilight huffed, but did not argue against the blue unicorn. With a flourish from her hooves, Trixie’s voice resonated throughout the town.

“I, the Great and Powerful Trixie, hereby command this golem to awaken and serve Trixie as its one true master!” But the stone remained silent and unresponsive.

“Oh dear, neither of you have any idea how to coax such a creature, do you?” Rarity nudged Trixie away with a dainty yet surprisingly forceful hoof. “You must cater what a pony wants, even if they are made up of rocks.”

Rarity *ahemed* before fluttering her eyelashes at Shale. “Oh Mister Golem, you do look so big and strong, I would love nothing more than to see such a handsome pony such as yourself flex your mountainous muscles. Oh we could clean yourself up perfectly, maybe attach some precious gemstones to you. I’d wager we can make you look exceptionally striking with some rubies, some sapphires, hmm?”

Shale said nothing to the flattery spoken by Rarity. The white unicorn harrumphed, turning away from the golem with her nose upward as she walked off. “If that couldn’t get a pony going, I don’t know what will.” Twilight giggled as she watched Rarity walk away from Shale. No doubt that the fashionista was not used to being turned down, even by a bunch of rocks.

Dinky lowered her head, the excitement of trying to make Shale move now deflated as the grey unicorn looked up at the mighty statue. Twilight patted Dinky’s shoulder gently, knowing all too well the disappointment felt when magic simply failed. When three powerful and talented unicorns could not discover how to make the earthen pony move, not including all the arcane academicians who had poked and prodded Shale over the years, it was likely that the golem would not be able to move ever again.

The town elder shook his head before returning to speak with the ponies of Stablesire. Twilight gave a silent apology to everypony as the group turned to return to Ditzzy’s boat. As they cantered down the road, Twilight’s and Applejack’s ears perked up as they listened for a new sound. Twilight’s heart stopped as a new heart beat thundered on.

THA-THUMP. THA-THUMP. THA-THUMP. THA-THUMP.

“More ponyspawn,” Applejack said taking a few steps back, “But I can only hear a mighty big one.”

“A minotaur.” Even if there were smaller ponyspawn with the gigantic creature, she could not hear their heartbeats over the sound of the minotaur’s heart pumping the black blood throughout its massive body. “Everypony! We need to form a line here to stop the ponyspawn’s advance on the town!”

The villagers shouted and screamed as they ran into their homes, fearful of another ponyspawn onslaught. The party dug itself in, waiting for the attack to come. Trixie already raised a barrier, but Twilight wondered how much good it would do against the sheer physical power of the minotaur.

It was only thanks to Flemeth that she and Applejack escaped their first encounter with a minotaur, and even now with the support of all her friends, Twilight wondered exactly how they were going to defeat one and the ponyspawn it would attack with.

Twilight turned to see if all the villagers were safe until she saw that Dinky was still in front of the unmoving statue. “Dinky! Get to safety!” Twilight shouted, but the little filly was not listening.

“Please, Mister Shale,” Dinky looked up at the golem with eyes holding both fear and hope, “We need your help. Please.”

“They’re here!” Dash shouted from the sky, pointing a hoof. Sure enough, everything shook as a walking siege weapon of a monster barreled down the path, mouth foaming in rage as its hooves thundered on the ground. Flanking the minotaur were several thelocks and donlocks, with another pair of screamers taking the skies.

The minotaur roared, the vibrations shaking the trees and homes violently as it pounded its chest with both arms. Trixie looked up at the giant as it loomed closer, hyperventilating as black bile dripping from its disgusting mouth. With a snort, the minotaur leaned in close, sniffing the blue barrier

Trixie had created. The other ponyspawn growled and hissed, but maintained a distance away from their larger brethren.

With a shout of primal fury, the minotaur lifted both of its huge fists into the air. Twilight called to her friends to attack with arrows, grenades and spells. Fluttershy's arrows embedded themselves into the tough hide, but did nothing to slow the minotaur. Pinkie's grenades exploded around the minotaur just as Twilight's arcane barrage and Rarity's lightning struck the beast in the chest.

This only made the minotaur more angry. Both fists raised high, the monster brought slammed into the shield like hammers on nail. The shield shattered and dissipated, unable to hold off the attack. Trixie wobbled as the shock of the attack shook her, until she fainted, her starry hat rolling away from her collapsed body. Twilight gritted her teeth as she watched the ponyspawn rush their location. Without another thought, she raised a barrier of her own, but she knew that if Trixie's barrier could fall easily, her shield would not last the same assault.

Out of the corner of her eye, Twilight watched as a grey figure made their way to them. At first she thought it was Dinky, making some sort of attempt to aid them, or maybe Ditzy who had arrived on the scene to protect her daughter. It was not until the figure came into full view and revealed its true size.

Shale walked up to edge of the barrier before looking up at the snarling minotaur. Twilight could not believe what she was seeing. The golem was moved closer, standing up to a monster twice its height and staring the colossal beast down with glowing white eyes. All of their spells and commands did nothing to awake the golem, but somehow it was moving and challenging a minotaur. Was it something to do with Dinky and her skills with enchantment?

"You're big," Shale said, further surprising Twilight that a golem could speak at all. The pony of stone looked the minotaur over once more before standing taller in front of such an substantial foe. "That means you'll make a big squish."

Pony and ponyspawn alike stared, dumbfounded as Shale charged the minotaur, a battering ram into the giant's stomach. As the golem started to

trample its foe under large stone hooves, Twilight saw the ponyspawn fall back, unable to comprehend how their largest weapon was felled with ease. This was the moment to strike!

Shouting a battle cry, Applejack rushed forward, sword in her mouth as she attacked a thelock head on. Twilight followed suit, blasting one of the screamers with a spell of ice, watching as the screamer fell against the ground with a loud *thud*. Satisfied that she had taken out one of the infuriating ponyspawn that had caused her so much trouble earlier, Twilight turned her attention to Spike.

The violet unicorn was surprised that Spike was fighting so well and with so much bravery against the ponyspawn. He was working in tandem with Pinkie's own movements, both fighters surrounding a frustrated donlock and attacking him with sharp strikes. While Twilight still did not want her young charge in battle, this was what her life was now, and Spike was not going to stay cooped up in whatever haven she wanted him to stay in while charging off against all manner of fanged and clawed monstrosities.

Galloping at full speed, Twilight ducked her head low and bounced Spike off the ground and onto her back. "Twilight? What gives?" he said in objection, as Pinkie brought down her mace onto the donlock.

"I'm riding you in closer," Twilight answered, a glint in her eye, "So you can hit them with your sword." Spike's response was a loud cheer as he readied his burning blade to attack. Moving her hooves as fast as she could, they ran past a thelock archer, with Twilight blasting the ponyspawn with ice followed by a scorching slash by Spike.

Not to be outdone, Rainbow Dash had flown right into the remaining screamer, shredding the beast's wings with her dagger and letting it fall. As the screamer struggled to get back to its claws, Spike jumped off Twilight's back, thrusting the fiery weapon into its large eye. He did not notice the donlock galloping towards him, tusks ready to pierce through the dragon's scales.

"Spike! Behind you!" Twilight shouted, attempting to fire a quick bolt of energy from her staff to distract the donlock, but a shockwave knocked her concentration and balance off. The minotaur had tossed Shale away, and was making another powerful attack against the golem.

Thwunk! A sickening suction sounded over by Spike. Twilight watched as the donlock rocked, never losing its eerie fanged grin as it fell over, an arrow embedded in its skull. Fluttershy shrunk back, as she readied another arrow; it was still hard to believe that the shy pegasus had such skill with a bow.

All that remained was the minotaur, who limped on one of its hooves as it struggled to get a hold of the golem. Shale moved with surprising finesse, but the injuries incurred to the minotaur were also causing it to become clumsy and slow. The pony of stone bucked the damaged leg of the gargantuan, watching as it roared in pain before falling over.

Twilight could have sworn that Shale was smiling as it reared upwards, then dropped its heavy forehooves onto the minotaur's head. Sure enough, a loud *squish* echoed throughout the area, reverberating in Twilight's ears. All of the ponies winced and turned away from the scene, with "Ewww..." being foremost on Twilight's mind and lips. She had no doubt that the sentiment was being reflected by the others.

Leaving the fresh and messy kill behind, Shale turned and approached Twilight. The battle was over and her friends were safe, but now it seemed they would have to contend with a battle-hungry golem. As Shale stood before her, Twilight finally realized just how *big* it was. So large was the mountainous Shale that it dwarfed the image of Arl Macintosh she had seen in the Fade.

"Oh goody," Shale said, voice dripping with contempt as it looked at the party, "A union of unique unicorns, and a veritable posse of pegasi and ponies. If this were not the first day of mobility in the years since I was frozen, I would truly call this the apex of my existence."

"You, purple one." Twilight stood up straighter as Shale addressed her. She did not want to be the next one to go *squish*. "It was it that charged the control rod, wasn't it? I suppose I should thank it."

"As for the other unicorns...The blue one is too loud, and thinks it can command me? It's voice was grating, like hooves on a chalkboard. And as for the white one, flattery will get it everywhere, but please. Rubies? Sapphires? A golem of my stature needs diamonds at *least*."

While Rarity looked stricken by Shale's doubt in her talents of style, Twilight decided it was time to step forward or else Shale would berate them all. "My name is Twilight Sparkle," she began, "And it is a pleasure to meet you, Shale. Though I have to ask, how is it that you are moving around? We tried many spells and commands, but nothing helped. Was it something Dinky said?"

Shale looked down on the small grey unicorn, who was dancing around the golem and going on about how happy she was seeing Shale awake and moving again. "Once the control rod was filled with magic, I discovered I could move again, but only if a specific phrase was spoken. The little one used an ancient command, one that can drive even a golem so mighty as myself to awaken from torpor."

"She said *please*," Shale said, "Even after thirty years, I would expect manners to still be in effect. I discovered after the control rod worked again that I was not under its thrall, so decided a different test was needed for my own purposes, one of simple politeness. Not that my old master ever said any of the niceties. 'Golem, do this.' 'Golem, carry my apples.' 'Golem, squish this bandit.' 'Golem, I am tired. Carry me.' What made it think calling me 'golem' would make me respond?"

Hearing Shale talk and actually portray feelings made Twilight double back on her thoughts. Shale wasn't just a walking and very hard hitting statue, but also a pony with thoughts and obviously a personality.

"If it means anything, I apologize, Shale," Twilight said, "It was wrong to assume you were simply stone and ignorance is not an excuse."

"An...apology? To me?" Now it was Shale's turn to sound surprised, "Not, 'Listen here, golem, I make the rules.' I...am impressed by it. I suppose I will accept it's apology."

"The elder of this village said you killed your last master," Twilight remembered, still wary about the golem before her, "And by the sounds of it, you weren't very fond of him."

"The elder of this village is a squishy prat," Shale said, "Just as every villager is a prat, just as my unicorn 'master' was the biggest prat of all."

Odd though...I do not remember what happened that night, all those years ago. It was rainy, I think, and I was rearing over top the body of my old master, and then the control rod lost all its magic. Likely I had just about enough of the prat and gave him the squishing he deserved. Or perhaps it was all those accursed experiments he performed on me. I've been sitting here ever since, watching the ponies go about their tedious lives, and those dreadful pigeons desecrating me every day. How I hate pigeons."

Ignoring Shale's non-sequitor about pigeons, Twilight realized the implications of Shale's words. The golem had been frozen in the same spot for thirty years, and not only, but was completely self-aware the whole time. "That's horrible Shale," Twilight said, meaning every word. She'd have likely gone insane if she was frozen on the spot for decades.

"It wasn't so bad at first," Shale mused, "More like an extended holiday. Granted, if I had known about the pigeons, I would have froze myself under a roof. But then I saw it fighting these creatures, and I simply *had* to join in on the fun."

The flapping of pegasi wings caught everypony's attention. Up above, Ditzzy swooped down to the ground before taking Dinky in her hooves, showering the filly with kisses and tears of relief. "My little muffin, you're all right!" Ditzzy said, holding Dinky close. She looked up at the party with gratitude in her wall-eyed gaze, "Thank you so much! She's all that matters to me!"

"Shale helped too, Mom!" Dinky said, pointing a hoof at the golem, "I knew they would wake Shale up. Say hi to Shale, Mom!"

Shale seemed to be soaking in Ditzzy's gratitude, which made Twilight smile. The golem may have a hard heart, literally, but it seemed genuine emotion cracked the shell of Shale. Whether it was fate, coincidence, or Ditzzy's lack of a sense of direction, Twilight was thankful they arrived in Stablesire, not only to save the town from a ponyspawn attack, but to free the golem from eternal stasis.

"What will you do now, Shale?" Twilight asked, curious as to what a golem, and likely the only golem in all of Equestria was going to do.

"What will I...do?" Shale seemed completely off guard from the question, "I'm not sure. The control rod no longer commands me. I suppose I could

do whatever I want. Squish some pigeons. Whatever I do, I do so with my own choosing. It feels good."

"It fights these creatures voluntarily, yes?" Shale asked, pointing a hoof at the gory remains of the minotaur. Twilight nodded, and noticed the same joy in Shale's eyes as when the mountainous pony had crushed its foe. "Then I have decided. I will travel with it and its companions and lend my considerable talent of squishing undesirable creatures out of their painful existence. First ponyspawn, then pigeons. Truly a crusade worthy of a golem of my standing."

While she was certain Fluttershy would object to the painful punishment on pigeons, Twilight was more than certain Shale would be of great help in their campaign against the ponyspawn. She extended a hoof for Shale to shake, "Welcome to the group Shale," she said. Shale looked down on the offered hoof before lifting one of its massive appendages, and gave Twilight a firm yet powerful shake.

"We have an accord then." Something about the glint in Shale's eyes made Twilight uneasy, especially how Shale was looking forward to the battles. Still, better to have a trotting mountain on your side than against you.

"This is going to be fun."

Chapter 12

The Apple Doesn't Fall Far

Loghoof looked up at the bleak gray sky that had rolled in from the west and frowned. Everything about this day was going to go wrong, and it all started with the lack of good weather. The teryn made his way through the streets of Trotterim to meet with Arl Maim, flanked by his personal guard Ser Sunsword as well as a few soldiers. The streets of the city were bustling with activity, as if the populace did not know that there was a civil war going on or the attacks by the ponyspawn.

Or perhaps they were just being ignorant, and wanted nothing to do with the suffering that was going on outside of the city's walls. Loghoof could not blame the ponies who had not fought in bloody war from the moment they were foals like he did. Many did not know of the Filesian occupation, or conversely, they did not want to fight another war again.

Spotting Arl Maim and his retinue, Loghoof called for a halt with a single raised hoof. He steeled his gaze at the Arl of Amarethine, who was approaching the interim regent of Equestria with a slight grin. Seeing Maim smile at any situation certainly confirmed to Loghoof that Maim had done something distasteful, immoral, likely illegal, and completely necessary for the greater good.

At least, that is what the teryn was telling himself after every meeting with Rendon Maim.

"I have done what you asked, your grace," Maim said, bowing low to Loghoof, "Many of the Bannorn will no longer worry your forces. I have made sure they are...open to negotiation. Of the Banns I could not change are Bann Meyer of Ponyring, and Bann Braeburn of Appleloosa. I could not locate them."

"Bann Meyer is likely assisting her refugees fleeing from the ponyspawn," Loghoof explained, "It was the closest region to Ostequus. Should they arrive, I want the ponies of Ponyring to be well treated."

Maim nodded his head in acknowledgement. "Trot with me," Loghoof said before walking towards the Chantry of Trotterim, not meeting Maim's eyes once, "What have you heard from the guests you invited?" Speaking in such cloak and dagger terms made Loghoof sick to his stomach. Where was the honour in such actions? Why was he using them against his own ponies?

"I have not heard back from our 'guests' since they left to find the Wardens," Maim answered, "I fear they may have failed."

"No matter," muttered Loghoof before approaching the door of the church, "I want them found, dead or alive. They are not strong enough to challenge me directly, but I will not have loose ends wandering the kingdom and becoming a threat in the future, likely when it will be critical. Now go, I wish to pray in peace."

The roguish noble bowed to Loghoof before turning towards the road to the Arl of Trotterim's estate. The estate and title of arl he had given Maim after he had completed all of the tasks he had given him. Tasks of murder, of poison, of other nefarious deeds that Loghoof wanted to wash his hooves of. As of now he could not until he was sure the land was safe from harm.

Ser Sunsword stood at her usual place near the doors of the Chantry as Loghoof made his way inside. His presence alerted the Chantry sisters, who quickly made their way to find something else to do, leaving the Teryn alone in front of the statues of Celestia and Luna. He and the Grand Cleric had an understanding that he would not send soldiers to the converts to investigate repented fugitives they often harboured if only they would leave him be for a moment or two of private worship. There were benefits to being a regent, after all, and Loghoof would make full use of them.

All Chantries were the same, Loghoof noted as he laid himself on the ground in front of the statues. The temple had no curtains, to better allow the sun's rays and the light of the moon to brighten the place of worship naturally, even though today only the dull light that could break through the clouds gave the room a feeling of bleak depression. The statues of the goddess sisters were immaculate, Celestia portrayed in shining alabaster while Luna's was crafted from dark granite. Candles were on hoof for any pony to use, to bring their own light for the alicorn sisters to

see in the darkness of the world and perhaps aid the troubled mind of the pony who knelt before them.

As with every other day he came to the Chantry, Loghoof placed candles for all of the loved ones and friends he outlived, whether from battle, disease, or simply old age. A candle for his darling wife, who had died during the influenza outbreak, who Loghoof wished he could have one more moment to share with her every day. How closely Armeria resembled her, and how much pain he had caused when he shut his flower from his life after Ostequus. Yet he could not blame her; he was the cause of her husband Blueblood's death after all. It would likely take a lifetime before he would ever know forgiveness for such an act.

A candle for Blueblood then, Loghoof decided as he lit another pillar of wax. He did not deserve his fate, but Loghoof would do anything to protect Equestria. Blueblood was a fool, too focused on glory and his own legacy rather than the legacy of his crown and the good of the nation. Armeria was the true administrator of the kingdom, and by Loghoof's high standards, she was doing an admirable job. Still, no pony deserved to be left to the fate of the ponyspawn's jaws.

Loghoof took up another candle, this one for the his friend the old king, his most trusted friend during the Filesian occupation and after who the teryn had served with loyalty and conviction, not because of the crown but because they were sworn brothers. They had fought and bled and suffered together under the Filesians, until the day they had seen the last of the occupying force leave Equestria seemingly forever. Loghoof had shared victories, defeats, tears of joy and anguish with his sworn brother, who he had now betrayed even in death.

"A king I betrayed by abandoning his son," Loghoof sputtered, looking up at the two goddesses before him, "I betrayed the crown of the kingdom I was sworn to defend. I watched as countless brave ponies died. My own daughter rejects me. I use that snake Maim and his shadowy tactics. For what?"

"I do it all for Equestria! I do what I must to protect Equestria! Ponies fight ponies across the land because they claim I am a usurper and a traitor, when everything I do is to protect this land I love! I watched as my friend's son died because because I left him to die because he would have sold

Equestria to the Filesians! Now the ponyspawn run unchecked throughout the realm, the Bannorn wage civil war against me and now I must suffer all the slings and arrows of the regency I need to keep this land in check! If this is not a challenge to my faith, I do not know what is!"

Finding that he was up on his hooves, brimming with anger at the still visages of the sisters, Loghoof breathed deep in an effort to calm down. He was yelling at statues, as silent as the stone they were carved from. Or perhaps he was shouting at the heavens themselves, hoping that one of the alicorns would hear his cry and give him the guidance he sought.

However, statues could not speak for goddesses, no matter how much one ranted and raved. Loghoof looked on at the sculptures before standing tall and proud as usual. "I have chosen my path," he said at last, "And I will walk it with thieves, cowards, and killers if I must. I do it all to protect this land and its ponies, even if those same ponies turn against me."

He needed conviction if he was going to hold this kingdom together and beat back the Filesians and the ponyspawn. If the goddesses would not aid him, then the iron of sheer grit and determination would have to flow in his veins. Loghoof would not be deterred from his course by anypony. Not the Grey Wardens, not Arl Macintosh, not even his own daughter.

"For Equestria," he said aloud to the stone representations of the goddesses, raising a hoof in salute. With a quick turn on his hoof, the teryn of Glenwall left the Chantry, his mind more focused than ever on his duty to his nation. As he left the house of reverence, the clouds grew darker and denser as a storm brewed overhead. No light entered the Chantry windows and the statues of Celestia and Luna were covered in shadows.

"Hey Shale! Hey Shale! Hey listen!" Pinkie Pie bounced backwards in front of the golem as they walked back to the docks where Ditzzy's boat was waiting. Twilight couldn't help but smile as Pinkie made a pony of solid rock seem uncomfortable.

"What does the pink one want with me?" Shale asked, clearly bothered that it could not solve this problem with squishing. Pinkie giggled as she made

circles around Shale, her bright smile unwavering to the annoyance in Shale's voice.

"I am pretty pink aren't I? You can call me Pinkie! Ooh, Shale, I was wondering what golems like to eat. After all, at the end of our journey I'm going to have the biggest party ever and everyone is going to be invited and when you joined I was all GASP because I never met a golem before and I want to make sure everypony is happy and having fun at the party!"

Shale looked exasperated at having to deal with a pony with near limitless energy. "I have no need for food. I just need the control rod charged, apparently every thirty years or so."

"What about dancing?" Pinkie stood in the golem's path, "Do golems dance? Oh I bet you rock the dance floor Shale!"

"Did it take the pink one all day to think of that?" If a rock could sigh, Shale was certainly trying. "I have no interest in parties, only squishing as many meatsacks as possible. If I recover my memories along the way, I'll consider that an added bonus."

"All of our friends should be at the party when we stop the ponyspawn," Pinkie said, "And you are our friend, and friends should stick together, good times and bad."

"I do not know what a 'friend' is," Shale said rather bluntly as it lowered its head towards Pinkie, looking into her blue eyes, "I have only known my former master, the ponies of Stablesire who thought I was a quaint statue, the pigeons who defecated on me, and now a travelling group of ponies who will direct me to more creatures to squish. Believe me when I say I do not need friends. I am a golem after all. The only golem in all of the land of which I am quite certain, or else I would have been found by another golem."

Pinkie's eyes began to well up in tears. Twilight felt sorry for the earth pony, wondering how often Pinkie's invitations to parties were denied. "I even made you an invitation," she said, digging into her saddle bag and pulling out a detailed card. The lavender unicorn wondered where Pinkie found the time to make invitations as well as her grenades on their journey.

“It...made something? For me?” The shock in Shale’s voice was genuine, which surprised Twilight further. Shale peered at the invitation, reading the contents out loud.

“You are cordially invited as a special guest to the ‘We managed to beat the Blight and not get eaten by ponyspawn, isn’t that simply terrifically super awesome!’ party to be held at a location currently undecided by party organizer Pinkie Pie. There will be delicious treats, dancing and games such as the ever popular ‘pin the tail on the pony’. Please R.S.V.P. as soon as possible. We can’t wait to see you there.”

Shale looked up from the invitation back at Pinkie Pie. “This party...I can choose to go if I want to, yes?” Pinkie nodded sadly as the golem looked down at the invitation. “Well then, it would be unbecoming of the finest, and perhaps only, golem in all of Equestria to miss such a grand event. I do want to be the guest of honour of course, and a big banner that says ‘Greatest Golem Ever’.”

Never had Twilight seen Pinkie smile brighter than now. With a bounding leap towards Shale, she wrapped her forelegs around the golem in a big hug. As Shale sputtered for some kind of response, Twilight smiled as she and the others began to make their way on the boat. Even though they took a detour, the party could still make it to Red Apple before dusk, granted no other navigational errors from the captain blew them off course.

Spike was sleeping on Twilight’s back as she headed down into cargo hold, looking for something to put the baby dragon in. The fight against the ponyspawn likely tuckered him right out, and the least she could do for her little warrior was find a nice place for Spike to rest in. Spotting a small empty basket, she lifted the basket with her magic before placing Spike inside while covering his small form with a spare cloth, careful not to disturb his much needed slumber.

Little warrior, Twilight thought as she headed back up the stairs, *how did this even happen? I’m supposed to keep Spike safe, not encourage him to get into danger.* What was done was done though, and Spike had shown aptitude with a blade in his claws, a skill with a sword that he had never held before, at least to the best of Twilight’s knowledge. Not only did he fight, but she actually *encouraged* the dragon to hop on her back and charged towards the ponyspawn. There was no doubt that battle would call

them all to fight again likely very soon; was she ready to allow Spike to throw himself into danger for his sake again?

The young dragon would certainly protest, of that Twilight was sure. Yet as she watched over the sleeping form of her draconic ward, Twilight knew she had to do something to help Spike if even just a little. Perhaps she could speak with Ditzzy to see if there was any armour she could use, and Rarity to see if her spells with cloth could also be used with metal. As she emerged from the cargo hold, she saw that all her friends were crowding around the edge of the dock. All of them except Shale, that is.

Realization hit as she looked at Shale, then back to the boat already filled with all assortment of goods as well as a full contingent of passengers. Shale was a pony made of stone, so there was no doubt it would be too heavy to add to the boat without causing it to sink. "What are we going to do?" Fluttershy asked, looking at Twilight for some sort of solution.

Before she could say anything, Shale began to enter the water on its own. As the rock pony lowered itself into the murky depths that gave Lake Blackwater its name, Shale looked up to Twilight Sparkle, face blank of any expression.

"I will go south, yes?" Shale said, "And I will meet the party on the other side. Besides, I need a bath to remove the years of bird excrement buildup. It should expect me there, either before or after it arrives." With that Shale continued on into the dark waters, until all that remained was a ripple in the surface.

"All aboard!" called Ditzzy as she made her way to the helm, "Next stop, Red Apple Acres and Castle, no detours!"

With the sail down, the boat began to drift across the lake, slowly being turned away from the Stablesire pier. Twilight, not leaving anything to chance like before, called upon the arcane to provide a small breeze to fill the sails and help bring the ship into the right direction. Once the ponies were all settled, Twilight could see that they were all feeling tired after two consecutive battles against the ponyspawn. Trixie and Fluttershy were still huddled in a corner, clearly afraid out of their wits by what they had encountered and Twilight could not blame them at all. There were few ponies, and likely fewer unicorns from the Tower, that could have stood up

to the horrors of the ponyspawn. Especially when one of those ponyspawn was a minotaur who had easily smashed a unicorn's shield.

They sat around the deck as the boat continued to sail, with nary a word spoken. Eyes were filled with fatigue and weariness of battle that Twilight hoped Red Apple Acres would provide some sort of safe haven.

It was Applejack that spoke up first, with a new-found confidence in her voice. "Listen y'all," she said, "I'm sorry for running off and bein' all rude like back at the inn. None of you deserved that after y'all opened yer hearts to the group. I suppose what I saw in the Fade just really put a lot of bad apples in my head. All I ever wanted was a family to be with, and for a time I had it before I was taken to the templars. But I also didn't really know my folks; my ma died when I was just a little foal, and my pappy, well..."

Her fellow Warden was hesitating, but Twilight hoped she wouldn't falter when it was obvious Applejack needed to get this off her chest. Sitting next to the blonde maned earth pony, Twilight laid a comforting foreleg over her friend's shoulders. Applejack smiled at the violet unicorn, thankful for the support without speaking a word. With another deep breath, Applejack looked ready to continue.

"All right," Applejack said, "Here goes. Now I don't blame any of you if ya don't believe this. Why, some days I rightfully don't believe it myself. But it's the honest to Betsy truth. My pappy was the old king."

This new information caught Twilight completely off guard, and as she looked at the party, everypony was just as surprised as she was. No pony spoke out against Applejack's claim however, though Twilight did not know if it was simply a stunned silence or that they believed the story.

"It was a secret to everypony," Applejack continued, "Only Arl Macintosh knew, as well as some officials. They all didn't like the idea of some misbegotten filly trying to take Blueblood's crown, not that I ever wanted the thing. All I ever wanted was to stay with my big brother and little sister, but things just weren't meant to be. Not fer me, and not for a lot of folks at Red Apple Castle..."

“Get him inside quickly,” called one of the guards as they dragged a large red colt through the castle courtyard, “We don’t need to create a panic.” They made their way to the east side of grounds towards the kitchens which would lead them closer to the infirmary. Following the wounded Macintosh and the guards carrying him were several more soldiers, each armed and ready for battle. They flanked a much larger earth pony, adorned in shining plated armour and a golden crown atop his head, a symbol of his absolute authority over the land.

Little Applejack watched from her hiding spot under a wooden staircase. She had just finished her usual chores around the fortress when the main gates opened and ponies poured in with the wounded and the battered. When she saw Macintosh being pulled towards the castle with arrows in his thick hide, the small earth pony wanted to cry out, to give some words of comfort. As more soldiers filled the courtyard with the injured, Applejack instead remained quiet, holding her mama’s amulet of Celestia’s Sun close to her heart.

The king looked around with harsh eyes before motioning for a pegasus messenger to his side. “Bring this message to Loghoof with all the speed your wings can grant,” he said, his voice stern, “I want the attackers found. I want them found and shown no mercy. Now go.”

In the shadows of the stairs leading up to the main hall of Red Apple Castle, Applejack watched as the king delivered orders to his soldiers, who obeyed without question. What happened, she wondered to warrant a surprise visit from the king of Equestria? Arlessa Smith would have said something to Macintosh and Applejack, but there was no sign of the castle’s ruler making her way to greet the king. Who were the attackers the king had wanted to be found? More importantly, were these attackers the one that hurt her big brother?

The king turned around then and noticed the filly hiding in the darkness, his keen green eyes matching Applejack’s own. They stared in silence for a moment, with Applejack feeling calm despite the ruckus going on in the castle. The king’s eyes were weary but still held warmth in the very centre of his pupils. The king then began to walk towards Applejack, who stepped out from her hiding place and stooped herself into a bow.

“Yer majesty,” she said, averting her eyes from the monarch of the realm. The king said nothing as he lowered himself down onto his hooves, meeting the filly face-to-face.

“What good was all the fighting against the Filesians when our own ponies cause so much harm to the young?” he mumbled, still looking into Applejack’s eyes, “I’m sorry. You must be Applejack yes?”

Applejack nodded, which only made the king let out an exasperated sigh. He just looked so tired of everything around him. “I want you to pay close attention, Applejack,” he said with an authoritative tone, only to quickly adjust his speaking when Applejack stood up straight for the king. “This is not a command from your king but rather a request from a concerned friend. Something terrible has happened, Applejack, yet I am not going to sugar coat it. This may be cruel to say to one so young, although as much as it pains me I cannot lie about it. Honesty has always been my best policy.”

“Bandits ambushed and killed Arlessa Granny Smith. I was leading a contingent of soldiers in basic drills when I received news, far too late. Macintosh was injured but he will recover. I am sorry for your loss. I am truly sorry I could do nothing to save them.”

Her legs buckled under this new weight as she fell to her knees. Applejack could feel her eyes water at the news; she wanted to cry, but her throat was dry. She couldn’t believe what she was hearing, even from the lips of the king. The Arlessa was so kind to everypony of the Red Apple region, the ponies loved her for being fair and just. Her hollering of ‘Soup’s on!’ could have been heard from as far as the farthest tree to the bottom of the castle’s cellars, a sign of a good harvest from the fields. And now she was gone, cut down by bandits as quickly as the apples were brought down from the trees.

She could not remember the last thing she said to Arlessa Smith or Big Macintosh before they ventured away from the castle. Was it something about dinner at a certain time? To bring back fresh apples? To tell off the blacksmith who had likely had too much cider to drink yet again? Or where the forgotten words ‘Love ya Granny!’ that could never be said again?

Applejack didn't cry, despite the salty tears forming around her eyes. She was a big pony, a tough pony, and big tough ponies didn't cry. Yet when she looked up and saw streaming tears fall from the eyes of the king's stoic face, it was enough to break her dam and let the tears flow. If the king could cry, then it was all right for her, even though she did not know why the king was doing such. He wrapped a foreleg around the filly, who somehow felt safe and secure against his strong limb.

"I am a damned foal," he said, his voice wavering, "And it took tragedy to make me see it all. Please forgive me, Applejack." She looked up at the king's face, confused at what he had said. Why would a king ask a simple filly for forgiveness?

Before Applejack could get her answer, the king stood up tall and straight, his eyes drying as quickly as a puddle on a hot day, though now filled with a new determination. Or perhaps anger. "I have much to do, Applejack," his voice back to one full of strength, "I have much to repair, even if I have to do it with all four hooves. Will you do me a service, Applejack? A favour for the king?"

"I reckon I can yer majesty!" she answered, standing straight just like the regal sovereign in front of her.

"I want you to be by Macintosh's and Applebloom's side," the king said, "I want you to be the pillar of support they can lean on in the rough times all of Red Apple will have coming, for he will soon take over as Arl of Red Apple with all the responsibilities that incurs, and Applebloom will need a guardian to protect her in this cruel world. They will need you, Applejack. Will you accept this quest?"

"Ah can do that yer Majesty!" Applejack said with a smile on her face, "I can help Macintosh out. He's gonna need all the help he can get! And I'll always be around to protect Applebloom!"

The king returned the smile with a proud one of his own before turning away to his soldiers. Without a second to lose, Applejack scurried off towards the infirmary, where Healer Redheart was tending to Macintosh's wounds. The great red earth pony was bandaged up all along his limbs and the smell of healing poultice hung in the air like bad eggs. Propping herself

up against the bed, Applejack nudged against her big brother's sides, hoping to see Macintosh's eyes open.

"Excuse me," said Healer Redheart, "But you really should let him rest."

"Ah'm sorry," Applejack looked over the red earth pony, "Ah just wanted to make sure Big Macintosh could see a smiling face the moment he woke up. He's gonna need me by his side! The king said so!"

Before Healer Redheart could say another word, the blonde filly let out a sharp audible gasp. "Applebloom! I need to go see her right away! You'll take care of Big Macintosh won't you?" Redheart shook her head as Applejack rushed out of the infirmary, not even waiting for an answer as the young filly made her way up the castle stairs to the Arlessa's personal chambers.

There, next to the large bed in the room was a small cradle made of oak and blazoned with the imagery of apples. Nestled in the small cradle was Applebloom, still sleeping in her swaddling blankets and completely unaware of the havoc outside of the castle. The tiny foal was still very young, not even old enough to speak, and the sight of her made Applejack's heart break. They had first lost their mother when Applebloom was born, then their father to the influenza, and Granny Smith took the role of their caretaker for as long as Applejack could remember.

Now all they had known changed in an instant, but at least they were going to have each other for support. The king commanded it after all, and a pony did not disobey or fail an order from the king. Applejack rocked the cradle gently with a slight push of her hoof as she looked down on her little sister.

"Everything's gonna be all right, Applebloom," Applejack whispered to the sleeping foal, "The king sent me to help you and Macintosh, and that's what I'm gonna do. I'll be here no matter what."

Hours had passed and Applejack was sleeping on the floor next to the cradle when the door creaked open. The king entered the Arlessa's chamber followed closely by Healer Redheart who picked up the awakening Applebloom and stepped out of the bedroom. The king lowered

himself just as he did in the courtyard, meeting Applejack's green eyes with his own.

He focused much of his attention on the Celestial amulet Applejack was wearing before speaking. "That amulet," he said, holding it in one hoof, "I remember it. I gave it to somepony special. Did you know that? I cared for your mother, and was sad to hear her passing."

Applejack looked at her mama's amulet as it shone in the candle light that filled the room. The king had given her mama the amulet? That made the gift even more special if such an important pony gave it.

"Applejack, I'm going to tell you something important," the king continued, "And it will be difficult to believe. I would not likely believe it myself if I were in your horseshoes. I don't know the right words to say, I usually have Loghoof prepare whatever speeches I need. Or shout loud to make the soldiers follow my lead. I'll just say it right and true then."

"I am your father."

Staring at the king with her jaw open, Applejack's began to feel dizzy with this revelation. What was the king talking about, she wondered? She knew her pappy, he was a good pony who was going to be Arl before the sickness took him. Why would the king say something like this?

"You said honesty is your best policy," the filly said, scratching the ground with her hoof as her nerves felt shot. The king nodded slowly.

"I know it's a lot to take in, especially on a day like today. I realized when I saw you, I could not hide the truth from you anymore. That everything changes in an instant, and then the moment is lost. I was stupid, Applejack. I hid you away with one of my best friends because I didn't want to deal with the repercussions of my actions. I see that now I was wrong. I beg your forgiveness."

Never had Applejack felt as confused as she was now. The pappy she knew wasn't her real father, but instead was the king of Equestria, a hero who had kicked the Filesians out with their tails between their legs. And now the king was asking her forgiveness. No, begging for it.

“Well, uh...” Applejack tried to speak up, but was at a loss for words. What does one say to the king of Equestria when he just revealed he was your real father?”

“Wait,” he said, before digging into his saddlebag. Applejack watched as the king...her father, as she had to remind herself pulled out a wide brimmed hat, just like pappy used to wear. “Your pappy and I were close, Applejack. We were like brothers, and we grew up together, along with Loghoof, moving from Red Apple to Trotterim and back again. We all had hats like these, and there is many a day I’d trade wearing this crown for such a simple hat.”

“Now I want you to have it. I’m going to make things right between us, if you’d let me. I won’t be around much, but when I am here to help Macintosh become Arl, I’d like to get to know you. Please.”

Applejack felt the hat being placed on her head, with the king being gentle as he positioned the hat properly. The old hat felt good on her head, like it belonged there all along. She looked up at the king, beaming as the monarch returned the smile to the small filly before him.

Yet the smile would soon reverse as she thought back to her mama, and to her pappy. “I still miss my pappy, yer Majesty,” she said, “If your my really daddy, what do I call you? I still love my pappy, I don’t want to stop callin’ him that.”

The king thought long and hard for a moment, a hoof to his chin as he apparently consulted the ceiling for advice. “Daddy’,” he said to himself before grinning at Applejack, “I’d like that, if you don’t mind.”

“Well, there it is,” Applejack concluded, “Not as exciting as Rainbow Dash, or as recent as Pinkie Pie, but that’s my story.” Twilight and the others looked at Applejack for a moment, letting the tale sink in.

Their friend was the heir apparent to the throne now that Blueblood was dead, which made Twilight realize just how much pressure her fellow Warden was under. Not only to fight against the Blight and to bring the

treaties to the different ponies across Equestria, but they were now faced with what was likely a succession crisis that Applejack wanted no part in.

“Did you ever meet your brother Blueblood?” Fluttershy asked. Applejack smirked then nodded her head.

“We met once before Ostequus, a long time ago,” she answered, “I still remember like it was yesterday...”

“Applejack, this is your half-brother Blueblood.”

“Howdy there, Blueblood! Care fer some apples? I bucked them myself!”

“Oooh! Look at the size of that mirror!”

“We didn’t exactly hit it off. Very sad.” Applejack sighed, her head lowered and her ears drooped low. Then she looked up and chuckled, “You asked if Blueblood was my brother. That means ya’ll believe me?”

One by one, the ponies stood up around Applejack as the boat rocked gently on the waves. Twilight looked around to see all her friends offering the blonde earth pony caring smiles, with her own matching them. “Of course we believe you Applejack,” Twilight said, “You’re our friend, and we’ll always put our trust in you.”

Applejack wiped away a single tear as she looked around at all the ponies. “Well shucks,” she chuckled, “All this time I thought about how I was too lucky to die with the rest of the Wardens. But now I know how lucky I am, lucky to have met all of you.”

The party shared a laugh, enjoying the company of one another as they sat on the deck while Dinky brought up a basket of apples to share. Each pony looked at the fruit with ravenous hunger after such a long day of battles and revelations; they quickly dug into their meals with gusto.

“You looked like you had it a good life going,” Rainbow Dash said to Applejack, breaking the silence, “Your dad’s the king, you were living in Red Apple Castle safe as can be. How’d you get stuck with the templar? That has to be the biggest dive from awesome to lame.”

“I was sent to the Chantry soon after the old king died,” Applejack answered, “Some of the nobles who knew said it was to keep me safe if any of them nobles found out and thought I was a threat to Blueblood. I didn’t want to go, and I made sure I was louder than a rooster about it. Macintosh agreed with them though, said I couldn’t stay hidden in Red Apple forever, said the Chantry was safe.”

“I didn’t want safe, I wanted to stay with Macintosh and Applebloom. I went and accepted a quest from the King to be by their sides, and what would being the most dependable of ponies be if I was off in some Chantry and not there. I was mighty upset, so much so I broke my mama’s pendant. I guess I just want to go back to Red Apple, make sure the ponyspawn haven’t bucked all the ponies there... maybe make amends to Macintosh while I’m at it.”

Silence descended on the ponies as they sat on the deck, simply waiting for the ship to finally arrive at the Red Apple docks. They kept themselves busy with small tasks, such as Pinkie making more grenades, Rarity reading from the dark grimoire that belonged to Flemeth, to Rainbow Dash flying laps around the ship. Twilight found herself descending into the cramped cargo hold, checking on Spike who was still snoozing soundly in his basket, little Dinky also asleep in makeshift bedding nearby.

It was for little fillies and colts that they were fighting the ponyspawn, Twilight told herself as she sparked an orb of warm orange light from her horn. She smiled while she lowered the sphere of heat next to the two sleeping younglings as they adjusted themselves in their beds, enjoying the comforting heat from the ball of energy.

Twilight took a moment to gingerly stroke the spines on Spike’s head as she looked around the cargo for something that would help protect him. It was likely to be near impossible for anypony to find armour fit for a baby dragon, but with a careful observant eye, the lavender unicorn was able to spot a smaller fitting chest guard of chainmail. It wasn’t the plated armour that she saw knights and chevalier wear, yet it was a good start. Lifting the armour with her magic, Twilight was surprised at just how heavy the metal protection weighed, even though it did not look particularly heavy.

With the armour hovering behind her, Twilight stepped out onto the deck and made her way to Rarity, who was still studying Flemeth’s grimoire with

intense concentration. Twilight wondered if she could help with Rarity's studies as the sorceress with the white coat saw Twilight approach, flashing one of her immaculate smiles. "Is there something I can help you with, dear?" Rarity asked, regarding both Twilight and the floating chainmail.

"Yes..." Twilight floated the piece of pony protection to Rarity, "I was wondering if you could do something with this to make some armour for Spike."

Rarity closed the grimoire shut before taking the armour with her own magic. She too almost dropped the metal after being surprised at how heavy it was, but managed to keep it in the air. With a critical eye, she looked over every link in the chain and how it meshed together to form the chestguard.

"I am not a blacksmith, Twilight," she said, not looking up while continuing to examine the chainmail.

"I know," Twilight responded, "But when I saw Spike fight against the ponyspawn, I knew that he wouldn't take no for an answer the next time we're in battle. I just want him protected as best I can."

"When you put it that way," Rarity said, putting down the chainmail, "Of course I will do what I can, though it may take some time. Metal is certainly less giving than cloth and leather, but it would do some good to expand my repertoire. Don't worry Twilight. I'll do my best."

"Thank you, Rarity," Twilight said sincerely. She then looked at the dark book before continuing, "How goes your study of Flemeth's book?"

Rarity gave an exhausted sigh. "Tis a most confusing read, darling," she explained, "Most of the words and symbols just translate into complete gibberish. Then one page of gibberish connects with another to make some sense and then just makes more confusing pages that I simply cannot make heads or tails of."

"What about going back to the Wilds and asking your mother for help?"

“No,” Rarity said sternly, her eyes focused on the book, “I can’t do that. What pages I could connect, what I have discovered...makes me afraid, Twilight. Afraid of what my mother can really do with her magic.”

Twilight felt a cold shiver run up and down her spine, as if ice was being pressed against her back with force. She still remembered the aura of sheer power Flemeth held around her, how her aged yellow eyes looked down on everypony with contempt. If Loghoof made Twilight feel small under his gaze, Flemeth had made Twilight feel completely powerless.

It was the first time Twilight had heard Rarity mention Flemeth in a tone denoting fear rather than indifference or distaste in her mother’s lack of fashion sense. Not that Twilight could blame her, having such a magical dynamo for a mother would be great pressure for any unicorn. Fear of the magical unknown made Twilight wonder if she wanted to know exactly what feats of spellwork Flemeth was capable of.

“Don’t worry, Twilight,” Rarity said, snapping Twilights attention back to the present, “I’ll get right to work on Spike’s armour right away. Oh he’ll look simply dashing, oh I can just see the possibilities and they are endless!”

“Thanks again for all this,” said Twilight before realizing she just took the armour from the hold without saying anything to Ditzzy. “Oh my gosh,” Twilight said, chiding herself in private for almost becoming a thief to the pony that was giving them safe passage, “I need to go pay for that.” Without another word, Twilight sped off up to the helm, where Ditzzy kept her eyes on the horizon, or as close as her mismatched vision would allow.

Ditzzy kept her smile bright as she held her hooves steady on the helm of the ship while Twilight offered to pay for the chainmail she had brought up deck. The grey pegasus shook her head, claiming that for all Twilight had done to protect Dinky from the ponyspawn, a forgotten piece of chainmail was just the tip of a “thank you muffin”. Twilight wasn’t sure what to make of all of that, but was grateful all the same.

The shore on the southern edge of Lake Blackwater was finally coming into view, with the buildings of the Red Apple Acres community coming into complete view. The party bunched together at the bow of the ship, looking with anticipation as they sailed ever closer to the docks.

While Twilight was glad that they were soon going to reach their destination, the look on Applejack's face was the complete opposite. "Somethin' ain't right," she said, narrowing her eyes as she looked on at the agricultural community, "I don't see any ponies millin' and meanderin' about. That just ain't right, there should be somepony at the docks. We need to get to the acres pronto."

Ditzy did her best to slow down the boat as it approached the old docks of Red Apple Acres, showing surprising skill with ropes and knots as she flew about. Twilight looked upwards to the tall plateau overlooking the farmland, taking in the sight of the great fortress that stood proudly on the peak. Red Apple Castle appeared mighty atop its grand hill, like a sentry overlooking his post and watching over all the miles around him with careful eyes. Standards bearing the namesake of the Red Apple region hung from the parapets and flapped softly in the breeze. However, there were no signs of soldiers patrolling the parapets, which made Twilight wonder if Applejack was right and something was considerably wrong.

Applejack was the first to leap off the boat and onto the docks, her senses sharp as she looked around the quiet township. Twilight followed, also perking her ears forward as she looked about for anything suspicious. Perhaps they were both listening for the same tell-tale sign of a ponyspawn attack. Taking a deep breath, the violet mare listened closely for the beating of ponyspawn hearts, listening for the signs that black blood was being pumped in savaged bodies.

Only a chilling silence answered her curiosity. "I don't sense any ponyspawn," Twilight said to Applejack as the rest of the party descended from the boat, Spike following the ponies while letting out a big yawn.

"Neither can I, Twilight," responded Applejack, "Let's header on into town. Maybe we can find somepony to tell us why everything is so spooky."

Everything around them did seem stranger by the minute. Windows and doors were shut tight, and not a single soul travelled through the streets. Red bloodstains littered the area around the village, signifying a battle had occurred here similar to what had happened in Stablesire. What was especially jarring was the complete lack of bodies. If there had been a battle, there would have at least been some sign of corpses littering the ground, at the very least discarded weaponry.

Fluttershy whimpered as the sound of the wind bellowed through abandoned buildings. Tensions were high with the fear of uncertainty clouding the air around them. They needed to get somewhere safe and find out exactly what was going on in the little village by the lake. "Applejack, you know this town and the area better than anypony," Twilight said, "Where would the townspoonies go in the event of an emergency, like an attack?"

"They'd all scamper to the Chantry," Applejack answered, "Biggest building in town. Honest to Bessie, they ponyfolk likely went there! Let's go!"

The Chantry appeared to have been heavily assaulted for some time, with scratch and burn marks marring the already aged doors. With a strong hoof, Applejack knocked the door, but there was no response from inside. Applejack knocked again to no avail.

"Open this door right this second!" Applejack hollered, frustration marked clearly on her face.

"No!" Came a scared voice, "I don't know if yer zombies coming to eat our brains!"

"Zombies don't sound like angry mares," said a much calmer voice, with a similar way of speech to Applejack's. "I'm Bann Braeburn of Aaaaaappleosa! Er...Who goes there?"

"Braeburn!" Applejack shouted, "It's yer kin, Applejack! Let us in this applebuckin' minute!"

There was murmuring on the other side of the door before the pathway finally opened for the party. They entered to see the Chantry filled with soldiers and townspoonies nursing wounds. They all looked up to the open door, scared and worried of what was to come.

"What the hay is going on Braeburn?" Applejack asked with a bit more force than was usual, "What's going on with Red Apple? My home? What about the castle? And Arl Macintosh, and little Applebloom!"

“Whoa nelly, slow right down there a spell,” Braeburn said, trying to keep Applejack calm, “A lot is going and none of it good. Would ya’ll believe me if I said we had a bit of a problem with zombies?”

Chapter 13

Preparations for the Coming Storm

“All right, lemme see if I got this as straight as lines on a well plowed field,” Applejack said while pacing around the Chantry, “Yer having problems with zombies, as in, the walking dead. Braeburn, if you weren’t kin I’d swear that was the single darn foalish thing I’ve ever heard.”

“It’s true though,” Twilight interjected between the two earth ponies, “Even though I’ve never seen zombies myself, I have read that lesser demons will often possess the bodies of the dead, because they are easy to take a hold of. If this is all really happening, that means the Veil is broken here just like at the Unicorn Tower. Powerful Dark Arts are at work here somehow.”

If it wasn’t a battle against the ponyspawn, it was fighting off the denizens of the Fade. Twilight closed her eyes, focusing her senses to find the ebb and flow of magic in the area. She could see the blue strands of arcane power coalesce towards her own horn and her staff as well as similar strands twisting their way to Rarity and Trixie. She turned her head further in hopes of finding the pathways to the breach acting as a gateway to the real world from that of dreams.

There, Twilight thought as she saw several magical rivers converge on one spot. Unlike the tear at the Tower, this one was small in comparison, but large enough to allow lesser weaker demons through. The violet unicorn raised a hoof towards the point of the breach before opening her eyes, seeing that she was pointing at a wall.

“Oh dear Celestia,” Applejack’s worry marred her words, “Yer pointing towards the castle, Twi. What the hay is going on? Is that were all the zombies are coming from? Braeburn?”

“Maybe I should start from the beginning,” Braeburn said, motioning for everypony to get closer and listen, “Now see, I don’t know the details, but from I’ve heard from the ponyfolk around these parts, things went from bad to worse lickity-split. Before the calamity at Ostequus there was this unicorn feller who came into town and offered his services to Arl Mac. A couple

weeks later and Mac is sick and can't wake up. The unicorn tells all of the knights that the only cure is something called the 'Mane of Stars', so a bunch leave the castle to go look for the thing, while the rest go out to find out what happened at Ostequus and to protect the arling. Then Applebloom goes missing, the unicorn disappears and Red Apple is being attacked by zombies."

Twilight shook her head over what Braeburn had told them. It was too coincidental for a unicorn to appear and then have trouble follow. Had this strange unicorn caused the troubles facing Red Apple simply due to negligence of the power in his horn? Or was this another Hubred in the making, desiring to command the power of the Dark Arts for himself?

It was sobering now to think that she had learned how to appreciate the intrinsic might inside her horn, and how Wise Eyes had said Twilight had learned to understand the costs of having such power at her beck and call. She thought of apostates such as Rarity and Dinky who had no formal training with magic but still used their gifts wisely, while wondering how sanctioned unicorns like Hubred could fall after so many lessons on responsibility.

"Oh!" Fluttershy suddenly gasped, shocking everypony around her for such an outburst, "I remember a story about the Mane of Stars. It's an old pony tale about the remains of Luna before she ascended."

"The legend goes that before Luna was burned at the stake in the Imperium, her executioner cut off her indigo mane to keep as a trophy. It was the Exarch presiding over the execution who converted right when he saw Luna in such pain that he killed her out of mercy, and placed the mane into a silver coffin. They say the mane then became like the night sky, and the stars shone like diamonds. The coffin was moved to Equestria, birthplace of Luna, but the location of her resting place was forgotten forever."

"A legend," Applejack said, the anger in her eyes making it seem like her blood was boiling, "A tall tale. That is where all of Arl Mac's best knights went and got themselves looking fer somethin' that might not even exist while zombies pour out of the castle like applesauce!"

“Fraid so, cousin,” the Bann of Appleoosa said, “They mostly attack at night. Mostly. From what we’ve seen, they’re castle staff and a few guards, though a lot more come from the cemetery. We’ve been holdin’ them off here, and then every night they attack with greater numbers, and even with a few critters I’ve never seen before like them blobs of fire with eyes, and walking shadows. The last time we sent soldiers, they came back as more deaders. And nopony has even left the castle, at least not another zombie. We don’t even know if Arl Macintosh is...”

“That does it!” shouted the former templar, stamping her hoof down in frustration, “We’re gonna gallop right into the castle, stop this crazy demon malarkey, and save Arl Macintosh and Applebloom!”

Twilight had never seen her fellow Warden as tense as she was now. Of course she was though, Applejack was worried about the only family she had left and the uncertainty of their fates was likely eating her up on the inside. Gently, she laid a hoof on Applejack’s shoulder, giving a simple show of support. Twilight could feel the blonde earth pony relax slightly at her touch.

“I know you’re worried about Macintosh and Applebloom,” Twilight said, keeping Applejack steady just as the templar pony had done for her in the Tower, “But charging into the castle won’t help them.”

“Charging in sounds like my kind of plan,” Rainbow Dash said. A quick stern look from Twilight had the rainbow assassin silent in a moment.

“We need a plan,” Twilight continued, “A plan to get inside the castle and seal the breach in the Veil. Let’s take stock of exactly what is going on and have a strategy ready. Then we can head into the castle. Don’t worry Applejack; we’ll do whatever we have to save Arl Macintosh and Applebloom.”

Applejack closed her eyes for a moment in contemplation, her chest heaving as she breathed in deep to calm herself. A slight smile from her lips sent Twilight’s worries away as Applejack looked up at her fellow Warden. “All right Twilight. We’ll come up with a plan first.”

Taking up a scroll and quill with her magic to make an organized list of what had transpired in Red Apple, Twilight and the others went around the

Chantry and began to talk to the ponies. What they did learn proved the situation was dire. Every night, more and more zombies flooded from the castle down the western pass into the township. There were no real soldiers to defend Red Apple, instead simply a ragtag militia formed at the last minute. They were also poorly equipped as the town's blacksmith sealed himself in his smithy and refused to open it for anypony.

Morale was lacking as well, with fear becoming like a permeable cloud hanging over the heads of militia and villager alike. Many stood in huddled groups, making prayers to Celestia or trying to convince themselves that everything was going to be all right. What really broke Twilight's heart were the little fillies and colts scared and crying out for lost mothers and fathers who would never come back home.

"What happened to Macintosh's soldiers?" Twilight asked Braeburn, "They never arrived at Ostequus, so why aren't they helping defend Red Apple from the zombies?"

" 'Cause they're out in the field with my colts from Appleoosa fighting off them varmints who follow Loghoof and Maim," Braeburn answered, "I came here to make sure everything was all right, and to find out why Macintosh wasn't makin' a right racket against Loghoof. Turns out things were worse than fungus on apple tree in the dead of summer."

While Twilight was glad Loghoof did not have complete control over Equestria, she was appalled at the thought that ponies were fighting ponies while the ponyspawn threat loomed over them all. It was true what Flemeth had told her; that nopony could truly see what lay beyond the shadows in the heart or make sense of a pony's actions at any time, even in one of dire crisis.

Taking her list and a map of the Red Apple area, Twilight looked over the lay of the land to see if there was some way to muster a capable defense. Her mind began to race with all sorts of possibilities as she regarded the map and her checklist. Red Apple Castle was a well defended vantage point, as there was only one direct path leading to the main gates of the castle; the surrounding cliff faces made any other approach impossible. If the zombies were using the only path, they could easily form a defense at one point, and the party had the ability to do so.

"I got it," Twilight exclaimed, looking around at her friends while levitating the map and quill for them to see, "We need to create a defensive perimeter here, at the entrance from the ridge leading into the village."

"We tried that," Braeburn said, "But there are just too many zombies barreling down the path."

"Then we'll soften their numbers up by setting traps before nightfall," continued Twilight, "Pinkie, we're going to need you to make special grenades, something that will act like a trap for the invading zombies. Go to Ditzzy's ship to make sure you have all the materials you need to make the explosives. And wake up Spike while you're at it, please."

"Okie dokie, making smokies!" Pinkie rang out with her usual cheer. Amazingly, she was already pulling out all the materials needed for several bombs, and quickly got to work assembling her weapons of choice.

Twilight looked to Rainbow Dash next. "Dash, I need you to scout the area to find any movement from the castle. We'll also need you to fly around the shore and see if you can spot Shale. We could use all the help we can get."

The rogue pegasus delivered her signature salute before zooming off out of one of the open windows in the Chantry. Taking a deep breath, Twilight looked over at Fluttershy, knowing this task was going to prove difficult with the introverted bard. "Fluttershy, the militia is frightened of the next attack," she said while Fluttershy avoided eye contact with Twilight, "I know you're not comfortable with crowds or even small gatherings of strange ponies, but you're a Chantry Sister whose kind heart can pull them out of their depression. They need to hear the words that will make them brave in the coming battle."

"But Twilight," Fluttershy said, barely above a whisper, "I'm scared too. I've never seen a zombie before. They sound really mean, what can I do?"

"I know it's a scary thought, but look at what we've defeated so far," Twilight tried to catch Fluttershy's hidden gaze, and when the pair of cyan eyes finally met the unicorn's violets, she offered a warm smile to ease Fluttershy into a proper sense of security. "We've gone up against the ponyspawn and powerful demons of the Fade. You've shown under a meek

exterior there is bravery and strength. Show these ponies the strength inside you and that Celestia and Luna are with them. I know you can do it.”

Fluttershy smile was small, but it was enough for Twilight to know that the words had gotten through to her. “I’ll...try,” was the response as the yellow pegasus fluttered over to some of the soldiers.

“Rarity,” Twilight continued, needing everypony to know their roles quickly, “I’d like you to talk to the town’s blacksmith. Try to get him to come out and equip the militia properly. Use your...um...charm?”

“I’ll have that blacksmith wrapped around my hoof by day’s end, darling,” Rarity said. Twilight nodded, and then turned to Trixie.

“Say no more, Sparkle,” Trixie said haughtily before Twilight could get a word in edgewise, “The Great and Powerful Trixie will show all these ponies the true power of her amazing chants and dazzling spellworks!”

At least we are on the same page, Twilight thought as she smiled, watching the boastful magician head out on her own to prepare incantations. That just left Applejack and herself to plan on how to actually get inside the castle.

“If’n we’re gonna get in the castle, night might be the best time to get in,” Applejack suggested, “That way the castle will be mostly empty of zombies and we can really give whoever is pullin’ the strings a real buckin’.”

“I agree,” Twilight said, “Although that means we’re going to have to split the group up. A small group to enter the castle and another to stay and help defend the town once the attack begins. Applejack, you know the castle better than anypony, so it will be you and me to start. I think we should also bring Spike and Rainbow Dash with us. He’s proven very capable with that fiery sword and it would do my nerves good to have him nearby. Dash’s skills as an assassin might prove handy inside a fortress like Red Apple Castle.”

The problem was finding a way inside the castle. The battle at night would surely take up the narrow path leading to the castle, and Pinkie would be setting traps along the path for the zombies to rush into. Rubbing her chin

with her hoof, Applejack's ears perked up as she looked at the map, an idea sparked in her eyes.

"If I remember rightly, there's a secret hidey-hole passage leadin' from the castle to the cider brewery in town." As Applejack spoke, she trailed a hoof from the castle towards a building marked as "brewery".

Before any preparation to the plan could be carried out, another knock at the door brought the guards to full alert. Everypony stood around as the same scared guard who had thought Twilight and the party where zombies opened the door enough to peek through. A slightly ajar door was just enough for a small pegasus filly to rush her way inside.

"A pegasus?" Braeburn wondered aloud as they looked down on the orange pegasus with violet eyes, "Are ya one of the castle servants?"

The winged filly glared at the Bann before her. "I'm Scootaloo," she said in a raised voice, "And I'm Applebloom's friend! Not some servant! And right now Applebloom needs help!"

Worry returned with its marking features to Applejack's face at the mention of Applebloom. "What's goin' on Scootaloo," Applejack said staring down at the filly in front of her, "What's wrong with Applebloom. Is she okay? Is she safe?"

Whatever bravery allowed Scootaloo to make her way from the castle to the Chantry temple quickly diminished under the hard gaze of a concerned older sister. "All I can really say is she's changed since Arl Macintosh fell sick," was her answer, "She became all mean, and now she wants Braeburn to go to her in the castle, since she saw him fighting off the zombies from the top of the castle."

Applejack didn't hesitate. "I'm goin' with Braeburn then! Applebloom needs her big sister right now more than ever!" Twilight wanted to interject, that Applejack was going to put the plan in jeopardy and throw herself into a trap if she went with Braeburn. Scootaloo was faster to respond.

"No!" Scootaloo looked up at the earth pony Warden with pleading eyes, "You can't go! She said just Braeburn; no guards, no soldiers, or she would start killing the prisoners, including Arl Macintosh!"

That gave everypony pause, including Applejack who stood slack jawed as if somepony bucked her square in the face. She began muttering to herself, shaking her head furiously while trying to understand the implications of the filly's words. Twilight knew all too well that Applejack was losing control of herself again as she saw the doubt in her fellow Warden's eyes.

"Can't be...just can't...Applebloom's a sweetheart, never hurt another pony even if she were mad enough...never even consider hurtin' Big Mac...sweet Celestia's sunrays, what the hay is going on..."

It was then that Twilight could feel the familiar pull of templar anti-magic at work, but unlike when Applejack used it to help calm her over-abundance of magic, it was now used wildly and draining the magic from her horn with reckless abandon. The former templar's eyes had gone black from her templar abilities as she wretched herself in despair. The nearby tear in the Veil leaking magic and the misery held by Applejack were having an effect on her templar abilities, amplifying them to incredible levels.

"Applejack!" Twilight shouted, feeling her energy forced out of her horn, "Stop! You're losing control again!" The ponies around them yelped and moved out of the way, yet the anti-magic was making quick work of not only Twilight's magic, but Trixie's and Rarity's as well.

"Please! Calm down!" Twilight said as she fell to one knee while the magic continued to drain from her horn into emptiness. Braeburn and the less magically inclined ponies stared in confusion as to what was happening. Despite her legs buckling under the influx of the templar's ability, Twilight stepped forward to the blonde Warden.

Twilight noticed that during the unseen magical struggle, Braeburn and Scootaloo left the Chantry alone as the pegasus said they would have to. With a grunt, Twilight moved closer until she was nose to nose with the lost earth pony. She had to end this now and get her friend to see reason, even if it did take drastic measures.

Even the smallest amount of lyrium would be enough to calm down a stressed templar, especially one who was not as indoctrinated as Applejack. Yet there was still the risk that her friend would constantly need the essence of magic to maintain her templar abilities and become addicted

like the templars under hoof of the Chantry. There was no way to tell what would happen until the lyrium passed through Applejack's system.

She could not do it, Twilight realized. She would not make Applejack a lyrium addict just because her friend was losing control of her emotions during such a harrowing revelation. There had to be another way, another way of getting through to the earth pony.

An idea sparked then, something that connected both Twilight and Applejack together. "Listen AJ," Twilight said gently, "Remember who you are. You're a Grey Warden! Remember Ostequus, remember Duncan! The oath, Applejack. Help me recite the oath."

"In Peace..." Twilight spoke, hoping that if nothing else, the order Applejack was so devoted to would get make her snap out of her melancholy.

"Vigilance," replied the templar, her darkened eyes meeting Twilight's. The lavender mage took a deep breath before continuing.

"In War..."

"Victory." Applejack's eyes were resuming their usual green hue. This was working; she just needed to remember one more line.

"In Death..."

"Sacrifice." With that word, the black eyes of Applejack returned to normal, and Twilight could feel the anti-magic simply cease around her. She felt weak from such a prolonged drain, but was glad that no drastic measures were taken.

Applejack looked up at Twilight with weary eyes, offering only a small smile. "Yer awfully strong, fer such a little pony," she said before collapsing onto her side with a loud thud. The other ponies reacted in concern, but quickly discovered that their friend was merely exhausted and now fast asleep on the floor of the Chantry.

Twilight followed suit, falling to her side as the adrenaline rush ended and the drain of magic taking a toll on her stamina. She looked to Rarity and Trixie who seemed no worse for wear, before speaking again. "Don't worry

about us,” the violet unicorn said to her friends, “Applejack and I just need some rest. We still need everypony to do their part in the plan.”

As fatigue rushed over her and made her eyelids feel heavy, Twilight could still see her friends helping Applejack to her hooves before dragging the earth pony to someplace more comfortable to rest. Before she knew it, helpful hooves hefted her off the ground as they slowly made their way to some makeshift bedding. With a yawn, Twilight closed her eyes, hoping everything would be ready by tonight.

Rarity approached the blacksmith’s home, nose already crinkling from the revolting smell emanating from the workshop. *Why I ever agreed to this I will never know*, she thought as approached the door, *I’m just going to get all dirty and icky. Not even my spell against dirt is going to save me.*

The door, like many others in and around the town under Red Apple Castle was marked by scratches caused by heavy hooves. The windows were boarded up as well, which likely caused whatever undead to attack to leave this place alone. The thought of having to face rotting ponies sent shivers down Rarity’s spine. *So disgusting!*

Although Rarity did have to admit, this was likely to be no different than fighting the ponyspawn or abominations. This was going to be another battle with blood and muck to ruin all her hard work on her mane and coat. Yes, she was raised in a swamp by Flemeth who had no care for personal hygiene, but that should have made all of Rarity’s efforts that much more impressive.

The thought of Flemeth sent icy chills throughout the white unicorn’s body. As Rarity had spoken to Twilight about life in the Wilds, as she had listened to the stories of her friends and how they ended up with their group, as she read Flemeth’s grimoire, she had begun to realize just how lonely life had been when it was just simply her and the witch. Perhaps she was feeling a bit jealous at her friends.

Twilight had never known her parents, but at least knew the support of other unicorns. Fluttershy knew her mother and could even remember the flowers her mother wore in her hair. Rainbow Dash’s mother gave up

everything for her daughter. Pinkie Pie still had a family out there, waiting for her to find them. Applejack also knew her mother, and had two fathers to help her grow, with one of them being the king of the realm no less! They all seemed to have a sense of family, even if it were taken away from them; Rarity could not say the same for Flemeth.

Flemeth had never held Rarity close, never looked at her supposed daughter with warmth or affection. The old mare's eyes always spoke of expectations and more often than not disappointment when those expectations were not met. Try as she might, Rarity could never even remember a single moment where Flemeth had said "I love you."

"Now Rarity," she said to herself, "No need to get all distressed over this. You said you will get the blacksmith wrapped around your hoof, and this is exactly what you are going to do." With a breath, she brought her staff to the door and struck it with solid raps three times. There was no immediate response.

"Hello?" Rarity said, knocking the door with firmer strikes, "Is anypony home? The militia could use some armour, and I bet if we worked together, we could make them shine and dazzle!"

"Leave," was the curt answer to the unicorn outside the door. Rarity narrowed her eyes at the response, indignant that somepony would deny her entry. She knocked on the door once more, the door shaking as the staff hit its mark with force.

"I shaid leave!" The pony behind the door yelled, "I'm no good forsh anypony exshept wallowing in whatever ponies are shapped to wallow in. Right now I'm wallowing in ale."

Rarity sighed. "Wonderful, a drunkard," she muttered as the staff continued to pound away at the door to the smithy, "Listen you! This quaint little acre commune is going to be under attack again and the ponies need supplies! Now open the door this instant! I'm trying to be reasonable!"

The boarded up window burst into splinters as a large hammer smashed its way through the wood and right by Rarity's head. She yelped as the heavy metal object sailed by, before turning her horn towards the door. With a spark of arcane energy, the white unicorn launched a bolt of lightning right

into the lock of the door, blasting it to pieces. With a nod of satisfaction, her staff opened the door wide allowing Rarity to simply walk into the smithy.

Looking around the smithy made Rarity gag from the smoke from the furnace and the smell of stale ale permeating from the drunken pony sitting on his haunches. "Ya borked my door!" he shouted, hooves probing for something else to toss; "Now I'm doomed. Doomed!"

Bolstering her spell to protect against dirt, Rarity stepped towards the blacksmith with disdain in her eyes over such slovenly behavior. "Do tell why you're finding comfort drowning your sorrows, as it were. Before I consider returning that...lovely...gift you sent through the window."

"Zombiesh runnin' around," the smashed stallion supplied, "No army. Castle gone. My daughter is in that cashle! I try to ask somepony to find her, but they won't go in! They shay it's too dangerous! She's just a dainty pony, little legs and a happy shmile. Like her mother. Oh shweet Shelestia, she's all alone in that cashle with them monstersh!"

The blacksmith then began to sob, tossing his drinking bowl into the furnace while his dirty hooves made black smudges over his face. "There there?" Rarity said to give some comfort, gingerly patting the dirty blacksmith's back, "I'm sure your daughter is fine, just trapped in the castle. A little filly came down from the castle today, saying that the...occupiers have prisoner." She didn't mention that it was the Arl's sister Applebloom that seemed to be the one in command. Who knows what frenzy that would have wrought?

Remembering Twilight's plan to infiltrate the castle at night, Rarity searched for the words to get the blacksmith back to work. Perhaps she could also kill two birds with one stone. "Now listen dear," she said, putting a bit more warmth in her voice over the situation, "My friends and I are going to do everything we can to help. Tonight when the zombies attack, we are going to sneak into the castle. But for the plan to work, the defense of the town needs to be paramount, and for that the militia needs excellent gear. We will find your daughter, I swear it."

The blacksmith looked up at Rarity with a drunken yet stable eye. "Ya swear?" he said, before looking back at his forge. He sighed, the slowly got

back to his hooves. "Awright. I'll make things for the militia. Just do what you can to find my daughter."

He stumbled a bit, still too sloshed to be working with such tools as a blacksmith would, and was likely a bigger danger to himself than anypony else. "Perhaps you could use some help?" Rarity offered. The smith gave her a confused look.

"Yer a dainty pony too," he mumbled as he looked Rarity over, "Smithin' is hard work. You'll get dirty."

It was going to get her filthy, Rarity realized, but then again she felt dirty just reading from Flemeth's tome of inane ramblings. No matter what, since the start of this journey, the unicorn of such impeccable tastes was going to be stained. Whether by dirt, blood, or knowledge, it was likely going to be a good long time until Rarity could ever feel clean again.

I will get dirty to help my friends, she thought, levitating a hammer and a pair of tongs with her magic, they believe in me in ways Flemeth never did. I'll show the old crone that I do have friends, a family of my own, that care.

"Let's do this," Rarity said, determination in her eyes matching the fires of the forge.

The Great and Powerful Trixie was digging about her various spellbooks, looking for whatever impressive incantations she could use in the upcoming battle against the undead that would leave the ponies of Red Apple in awe at her magical aptitude.

For her first feat, Trixie was going to improve her magical shield. After seeing it shattered so easily by the minotaur, Trixie had never felt so many emotions from one simple act of her magic failing. It was as infuriating as it was humbling, but above all frightening. She had barely held herself together during the demonic invasion of the Unicorn Tower, relying on Sparkle and her group for help when she could no longer stand up to the demons. Facing the ponyspawn for the first time unnerved her, especially when the great horned monstrosity attacked the blue unicorn first and foremost, dispatching her barrier with ease.

These were the monsters Sparkle and her roughshod friend and every other Grey Warden fought for the rest of their lives and now Trixie had joined them in the same long journey to assemble an army to stop the ponyspawn. *What was I thinking?* Trixie asked to herself as she concentrated on her barrier spell, *what am I trying to prove by leaving the relative safety of the Tower to go out in this barbarous world?*

Trixie closed her eyes, concentrating on her protective channeling long enough for a blue dome of shimmering energy to erupt from her staff and surrounding the area she was standing in. Then she began to focus on the actual ley-work of the shield, seeing every strand of magic at work as they coexisted and reinforced each other.

That I am her equal... that I am not a coward... that I deserve my power... So many thoughts flooded Trixie's mind that it was breaking her concentration on her spellwork. The barrier shimmered a moment, requiring further power to strengthen it. *Don't get distracted, Trixie,* she chided, *just focus on the spell at hoof, make it glow like diamonds, but stronger than steel. Show everypony in this little apple farm community just how Great and Powerful you really-*

"Enchantment!"

Trixie leaped at the loud squeak of a filly behind her, caught completely off guard during her spell. As she spun around to see who dared interrupt such impressive arcane ability, her expression of shock was replaced by flat disbelief. Once again, that little grey unicorn was standing in front Trixie with a smile on her face, joined by another reminder of Sparkle's greater magical power, Spike.

"Hey there, Trixie," Spike said, holding his burning blade in one clawed hand as he stood with Dinky, "What are you up to?"

"She's trying to find the flaws in her shield," Dinky explained before Trixie could get a word in edgewise, "I can see the strands in the spell just like she can, and how she's trying to move them about to make the magic stronger. It's why I'm such a good enchanter!"

"That is certainly impressive, but right now the Great and Powerful Trixie needs to focus to make her barrier the most impressive display of

defensive magic this side of Equestria!" Trixie was honestly impressed by the knowledge and skill Dinky had with enchantment at such a young age, but was just as easily angered by it. Just like Sparkle, another filly was simply born with immense raw magical talent, while she who called herself Great and Powerful had to work for just a fraction of it all.

Trixie slumped to the ground, feeling defeated before the first zombie started to groan. How could she compete when every unicorn she knew was just that much more powerful, and that reminders of her own weakness were travelling with them made it all seem hopeless. She was a Senior Enchanter of the Tower only because there were so few of them left, not because of her ability.

Suddenly she could feel the shift in the magical lines around her, where her shield had been. Trixie looked to see Dinky's horn glowing, trying to rearrange the remnants of the spell. Spike had taken a few steps back, leaving both unicorns together.

"I'm going to see how Twilight's doing," Spike said as he made his way towards the center of town, "Dinky will stay and help you. See you later Trixie!"

Looking down at those eager eyes, Trixie raised a single eyebrow towards the grey filly. "I'm trying to fix my spells for the upcoming battle," she said, turning back to her floating staff, "I don't know how much help you can bring."

"I was gonna ask, if you don't mind..." Dinky scraped the ground nervously, trying to find the words to speak to the magical mare before her. "Miss Twilight is really good at magic, but she's a Grey Warden which means she is busy and stuff."

"I'm helping the Warden, which makes me no less busy than she is."

Dinky looked down at the ground in contemplation, before turning her head back up again. "I wanna be your apprentice!" This unexpected request left Trixie completely taken aback. She had taught the young unicorns in the Tower for a very short time, but many just slept or ignored all her perfectly sage lessons. Could she be a proper mentor to another unicorn who was eager to learn the proper use of magic, or was she going to be like how

Hubred was to her, cold and caring only for results? Not just any unicorn, but an apostate. Was she even ready to take on an apprentice?

The fact that she was considering it rather than outright saying no made Trixie more confused than anything. Yet as she looked on at those bright amber eyes, a part of her wanted to say “yes” and take on Dinky as her pupil. But for whose benefit? She had to make a decision if not for her, at least for filly before her.

“Very well!” Trixie said with a flourish of her cape, “The Great and Powerful Trixie has considered your request, and has deemed you...worthy of her expert tutelage! From this day forth, you shall be known the Small yet Eager Dinky, first apprentice to the Great and Powerful Trixie! You shall learn everything your little heart desires about all things arcane!”

Dinky jumped up and down, cheering for herself and celebrating her new given title. Trixie smiled with actual warmth at the sight, rather pleased with the events that had transpired to now. Her eyes turned stern, focusing now on the first lesson to be had.

“Lesson one!” She shouted stomping her hoof, “No more sneaking up on the Great and Powerful Trixie. Lesson two! Let’s find out how to make a magical barrier greater than steel.”

Pinkie backed away slowly from the bomb she had set on the dirt path that lead up to Red Apple Castle. It had taken some work to make the special casings out of her usual grenade material, but thanks to some leftover metal and the extra stores of lyrium in Ditzzy’s cargo hold, Pinkie was able to construct a couple dozen landmines.

Her hair was flat as she worked on trapping the path for the upcoming battle against the zombies. The pony of parties hated making mines, even though she knew they would likely save lives if the battle went according to Twilight’s plan. They just seemed so destructive and random; what if a little colt or filly stepped on one? The results would be too much for Pinkie to bear, already imagining a filly like Dinky or that Scootaloo stumbling across one of her traps meant for the monsters.

With every mine she laid on the ground, Pinkie marked the location on a map of the path. When the battle was over, she was going to do the right thing and remove all the mines. She wanted to use her alchemy to make ponies happy, not hurt them. The memories of what her explosives had done to ponies in the past were almost too much to bear.

Out of the corner of her eye, Pinkie could see a small speck in the sky, circling around the top of the castle parapets before diving down towards the earth pony alchemist. Rainbow Dash hovered above Pinkie as she worked on setting another mine, looking up once to see her pegasus assassin friend flapping her wings to stay in place.

“Hey there Pinkie Pie,” Rainbow Dash said as started floating in circles around Pinkie, “Whatcha up to here? And what’s wrong with your mane?”

“Mines,” Pinkie replied flatly, looking over her work with grim satisfaction before moving to another spot, “Like lyrium grenades, but set as traps. When a zombie steps on one, it will explode, hopefully getting the other zombies around it too.”

“How do they work?”

“Pretty good. Don’t worry about my mane, I’m fine.”

The look on Dash’s eyes saw past Pinkie’s feeble lie. Setting her hooves on the ground, Dash followed close to Pinkie as she continued to work with her bombs. “Your mane gets that way whenever your upset or angry,” she pointed out, “You can tell me what’s going on.”

“I’m tired,” Pinkie said after laying the last lyrium mine ready, “I’m tired of fighting. Ever since I joined the guard, that’s all I’ve been doing. I’m not making anypony happy as long as I keep fighting, as long as I keep hurting others. And I will keep hurting ponies as long as my know-how of mixing things is needed.”

“These landmines are something incredibly dangerous and I made them. They are indiscriminate; all it takes is one hoof and KABLOOEY! Not just monsters or zombies, but innocent ponies too. I told Twilight after...after you attacked that it gets easier to fight ponies. It is, and I’m scared of that. I

don't want to be good at hurting others. I want to make them happy. So after the battle, I'm going to clean up the mines. Every last one of them."

Dash looked over at the now very lethal path leading from the castle, to the assorted landmines dotting the way, then back to Pinkie. "I could help you out," the cyan pegasus offered, "Cleaning up the mines. As a way of saying thanks."

"Thanks?" Pinkie asked in puzzlement, "What did I do?"

"Remember back when we first met...er...clashed?" Rainbow answered, "Twilight wanted me to leave, but I wanted to join her to make up for it. You and Fluttershy stood up for me. I gotta do something to say thanks. Cleaning up these things, that's not such a big deal."

Since starting her work on laying the deadly traps, Pinkie could feel her spirits become lighter and her hair curling back to its usual poofy form. She smiled at Dash before the dynamic duo turned to return to the Chantry building. "Thanks so much Dashie!" the pink earth pony chimed, "I'm sure to get all the landmines cleaned up in..."

"Ten seconds flat, I know," Rainbow Dash replied with a smirk, "You know I really need to come up with new material."

They walked in silence together as they made their way through the town when Dash turned to Pinkie. "You still don't remember where your family has gone off to, have you?"

Pinkie shook her head. "I took a bonkin' on my noggin!" she said, "But after this adventure I'm sure I'll remember and head on right over, whether I have to hoof it or sail."

Rainbow was quiet for a while before she spoke up. "Maybe I could go with you, help you find your mother and sisters."

If anything could stretch Pinkie's smile wide, it was knowing that her friend wanted to go with her no matter where to help her find her family. She leapt onto Dash, holding the pegasus in a tight embrace. "Oh that would be super duper special amazing! I was going to be so lonely travelling by

myself, but if you're there Dashie, I know we'll find my mom and my sisters! Oh thank you so much! But why?"

"I realized I have nothing here in Equestria," Dash said, "And I don't want to go back to Pura Raza. If I travel with you to find your family, I'll be doing something good with the stuff I've learned. It would also be nice to travel with a friend."

Dash returned the hug with affection, happiness in her eyes as to actually finding friendship in the least likely of ponies. She felt stronger and more confident with Pinkie and Twilight and all of the party than she ever did in Pura Raza under Reinhardt and his Wonderbolts.

"Come on Pinkie Pie," Dash said at last, "We need to get back into the Chantry. The action is gonna start real soon and we have front row seats."

Twilight and Applejack prepared for the coming battle in relative silence, not speaking a word to each other as they readied their gear. The sun was setting, and everypony inside the Chantry were huddling in fear of the next zombie attack. Twilight steeled her resolve as she saw the fear the eyes of the yearlings; no more ponies would be taken by lesser demons this night.

A moment of rest had done wonders for both Grey Wardens; Applejack no longer seemed distracted by her worries and Twilight felt better even after being under the drain of the templar's anti-magic.

The rest of the parties had reported success in their individual tasks. Pinkie had her minefield ready to soften the numbers of the undead menace when they made their descent from the castle. Rainbow Dash mentioned that there was no movement from the outside of the castle, although she could have sworn that she saw something moving within. There was also no sign of Shale thanks to the murky depths of Lake Blackwater. Trixie also said with pride that her spellwork would rival anything Twilight could pull out of the Fade, able to bring about shields and barriers strong enough to hold off a minotaur, perhaps even two. As boastful as the claim was, Twilight could tell that her white maned colleague was brimming with a brand new confidence that she couldn't help but be happy for.

Fluttershy's report was interesting to say the least. The out of breath pegasus sounded like she was galloping all day from her new admirers in the militia, who decided for themselves that such a cute Sister of the Chantry was surely a sign that Celestia favoured them this day. Despite her best efforts to correct them, Fluttershy soon found herself surrounded by eager admirers until she was able to escape to the sanctuary of the Chantry. The officers were able to assume order then, taking the militia into formation and reassembling ranks. Fluttershy was still hiding amidst a pile of rags, wary of any other leering eyes.

Nothing was heard from Rarity, causing Twilight to assume she was still trying to convince the blacksmith to open up and give the much-needed armour and weapons. They would have to find the white unicorn before the battle to make sure everypony was in proper position.

There was no word from Braeburn of the pegasus filly Scootaloo, but those who did catch a glimpse of the two noted that they took the front entrance of the castle, the only time the main gate opened during the day for the longest time. Yet another of Applejack's relatives in danger of the corruption that seemed to have overtaking Red Apple Castle.

Twilight looked over to her fellow Warden after she clasped her cloak around her neck. "You ready Applejack?" she asked, levitating her staff to her side.

"Ready as ah'll ever be, sugarcube," Applejack responded, "Let's git 'er done."

The two wardens led the way out of the Chantry, followed closely by Fluttershy, Rainbow Dash, Trixie and Pinkie Pie. To their sides the wounded, young, and infirm wished them luck against the undead.

"Thank you Warden!" "You'll win Warden! We know it!" "Celestia and Luna bless you, Warden!" All the praise was making Twilight blush, but she hid her discomfort behind a stern face as the doors opened. All their hopes relied on victory both outside of the castle and within, and Twilight did not plan to fail anypony.

Outside of the small place of worship, the party was met with a surprising sight. The militia was surrounding a small cart loaded with weapons and

armour, each shining and gleaming in the setting sun. Handing out the equipment was a large earth pony and a very dirty unicorn covered in soot and ash.

“Rarity?!”

They all gaped as the prissy pony before them looked like she took a roll in the dirtiest pits ever conceived. The fact that it was Rarity of all ponies who could now be considered the avatar of messy was something Twilight could not get over.

“Heh heh...hello dears,” Rarity said, leaping down from the cart towards her friends, “I offered to help the blacksmith finish all his work, so the soldiers should be outfitted properly. Now... be honest. I’m absolutely filthy, aren’t I?”

Everypony, Twilight included, seemed to be at a loss for words, struggling to find the right thing to say as to not hurt Rarity’s feelings. The truth of the matter was, she was filthy, covered in the grime that was the mix of sweat and soot. Applejack was the one to step forward and look the unicorn of the Wilds dead in the eye.

“Rarity,” began Applejack as she eyed the apostate, taking in every split end on the mane and every speck of dirt, “You look... like the hardest working pony ah ever met. It takes a lot to break away from yer prissy habits and get down to the nitty gritty, but you did it. Ah’m proud of you.”

Rarity beamed at the praise from the former templar. “Thank you Applejack,” she said before channeling a spell into her horn. With a bright flash of white, Rarity stood before the party as clean as a whistle, as if the messy pony they had seen mere seconds ago was just a figment of their collective imaginations.

“What? I wasn’t going to stay dirty if I can help it.” Rarity then levitated something else from the cart, a small suit of armour with a matching helm. It was too small and the wrong shape for a pony, but Twilight smiled knowing who it would no doubt protect.

“Spike darling,” Rarity called, ignoring the hearts the little baby dragon seemed to shine towards the unicorn sorceress, “I made this dashing little ensemble just for you. You’ll really look like a proper knight with this.”

Stabbing his burning blade into the ground, Spike outstretched his arms as Rarity maneuvered the armour to fit his body. Twilight was incredibly impressed that her friend was able to get the dimensions just right, even including spaces in the helmet for his spines to go through. Once the armour was fitted properly, Spike stood proudly with his enchanted sword, appearing every bit like heroes from the old stories, if they were dragons.

“I’m a dragon with a flaming sword and my own suit of armour!” Spike called out, looking at everyone with unsurpassed happiness in his eyes. Applejack rubbed her hoof on her chin in thought before her eyes lit up with an idea.

“There’s one thing missing, Spike,” she said, “Ya look like a knight, but ya need to be given the right title. As the daughter of a king, ah reckon I can do that for ya, if you’d like.”

“Would I!” Twilight had never felt so proud of Spike as she was now, bowing on one knee to Applejack as she took the fiery weapon in her mouth, piercing it against the ground so that she could speak. The rest of the ponies stood together in silence for the occasion.

“Well, er, how would this go,” Applejack muttered before clearing her throat, “Spike! Ah do declare that you have been found worthy and all to become a knight of Equestria. But first ya gotta take an oath first, ya hear? So, uh, do ya solemnly swear to stand with yer friends come hay or bad apples?”

“I swear!” Spike responded with great enthusiasm.

“Well that’s good ta hear. Wouldn’t right know what to do if ya said no.” The blonde earth pony coughed again before continuing, “Er...I can see yer a dragon with a good heart, loyal and true to his friends of years or of days. With that in mind, ah’m hereby callin’ ya Ser Spike, knight of Equestria.”

Taking the magical method by the hilt in her mouth, Applejack tapped Spike’s shoulders twice and then laid the weapon for the dragon knight to

reclaim. As Spike picked up the sword, Applejack reared upwards, a smile of cheer on her face.

“Let’s hear it for Ser Spike of Equestria!”

The party erupted in thunderous applause, stomping their hooves for Spike who blushed at all the attention he was receiving. Twilight was so happy for her dragon charge, but the celebrations had to cease for now. Night would soon fall, and with night would come the attacking swarms of zombies.

They split into the two groups Twilight had mentioned before, with Pinkie leading the defense of Red Apple Acres. Twilight’s group made their way to the cider brewery like Applejack had referenced only to be overcome by the smell of fermenting apple juices.

“Let’s hurry and find the passageway,” Twilight said, splitting the group up to search the brewery. It was a compact building, lined with dozens of barrels and equipment used to make the favoured Equestrian export. They all searched the floor of the brewery, looking for any sign of disturbance that belied a hidden tunnel to the castle.

Rainbow Dash stopped in front of a rather large barrel, squinting at the writing on the side. “Hey Applejack!” she called, pointing a hoof at the barrel, “Why is there a barrel of oranges here?”

“Them’s fightin’ words Rainbow,” Applejack said with a scowl, until she read the words on the barrel. “Landsakes, this barrel does say oranges. Wait a minute...Stand back Dash.”

Twilight turned to see Dash leapt out of the way as the earth pony Warden turned around, readying her hind legs for a powerful buck. As the hooves struck, the barrel splintered easily into pieces, revealing a trap door underneath.

“This is it,” Applejack said, either at the trapdoor or that they would soon infiltrate Red Apple Castle. With a nod, Twilight raised the door open with her magic, allowing Applejack to step through the passageway first. They descended one by one into the black corridor under the earth, knowing all too well of the dangers the darkness held in store for them on the other side.

Chapter 14

The Dead, The Demonic, and the Desire

Fluttershy looked over the upturned cart she and Rarity were sharing as makeshift cover, watching as Pinkie Pie painted a red line only a short distance from where half of their party and the town's militia stood ready for battle. The yellow pegasus shook in fear, her imagination racing as to what the undead would look like. She had heard stories of course, but even as a bard she was not inclined to repeat them, preferring to tell the nice tales of morality and lessons of life. They were the boring stories perhaps, but they were her favourites due to their peaceful natures.

With her thick red line of paint now clearly seen against the ground, Pinkie bounded away from the dirt path behind the cart, joining the bard and the mage.

"Okie dokie," Pinkie said as she pointed a hoof at the red mark, "The zombies are gonna rush right into my minefield and it's gonna go BOOM! POW! CRASH! But if any nasties get past that red line, that means we have to get our hooves dirty."

Rarity grimaced, her face denoting that she was not particularly partial to the idea of having her hooves muddied up once again. Trixie joined the trio, taking a deep breath as she sat on her haunches behind their cover. She said nothing as she levitated a bottle of lyrium potion to her lips, drinking the diluted essence of magic in an effort to recharge herself. Fluttershy noted that they all looked tired as well as nervous, ears perked high waiting for the first landmine to explode.

"Um... Rarity, Trixie," Fluttershy spoke up, looking at both unicorns, "Where do zombies come from? Twilight mentioned something about demons..."

"Allow the Great and Powerful Trixie to educate your ignorant little pegasus mind," said the boastful unicorn, "As the inferior little purple pony said, demons often take the husks of the dead to use as vessels to cross over from the Fade into our world. Lesser demons such as Rage and Hunger are the most likely, due to them being easier for a unicorn to fight off than

Sloth or Pride. So they go into corpses, because there is no will to defeat them.”

“When they inhabit the body of a corpse, their primal urges take over; zombies of Rage are furious over having possessed a corpse long dead, while zombies of Hunger seek out anything and everything to devour. The destruction they cause helps feed the breach in the Veil of whence they came, allowing their brethren to come into our world freely. Think of zombies as the first wave of an invasion when a Veil breach has just begun..”

The idea that this could be just as horrible as the Tower was frightening, Fluttershy thought as she looked to the militia. The soldiers that had shown great enthusiasm when she went to raise their spirits with the Chant now had directed their attention towards the lonely path leading to Red Apple Castle, waiting just as the party was for the oncoming zombie assault. Doubt was still painted firmly on their faces as they looked up to the dark castle overhead.

Shaking like a branch in a typhoon, Fluttershy lifted a small amulet blazoned with both the sun and the moon from under her robes. Looking up at the sky, she squeaked in fear as clouds covered Luna’s moon, masking the area in pitch darkness.

“Torches!” somepony called out, further surprising Fluttershy as she clung to Rarity. Shapes in the dark darted from behind the cover made from debris as to set up torchlight to help see in the dark. One by one, torches were lit on poles and erected behind the red line, while Rarity sparked magical light from her staff.

All that could be heard from the night was the sound of heavy breathing and the crackling of fire, as well as Fluttershy’s rapid heartbeats. She shut her eyes tight, cradling her amulet and muttering a reading from the Chant of the Sun and Moon, hoping beyond hope that anything would calm her nerves.

“And so Luna said unto those that followed her into the Imperium, those that had followed her against their mighty walls and their draconic idols, ‘Fear not those who stand against you, for you know that Celestia lights

your path as she did mine, and that you reflect the light of the sun as the moon does.”

Everypony was staring at the Chantry sister as she prayed, but for once Fluttershy didn't seem to care about all the attention she was getting. She was afraid of this battle, just as she was afraid of the battle against the ponyspawn, against the demons in the Tower, and against the assassins hunting down Twilight and Applejack. She was afraid of swords and spears, afraid of the spells unicorns used to kill, and even afraid of her own bow and how she used it.

Twilight said I was brave, she recalled as she peeked over the edge of the cart, I have to be brave now. I have to fight for my friends, and for the Equestria I call home. I hate fighting, but I have to.

Fluttershy looked to her friends, to find some measure of comfort in their faces. Trixie looked as proud as ever, only to be betrayed as her quivering hooves spoke volumes of the fear within. Pinkie Pie had her eyes focused on the path and on the work she put into trapping it with explosives, but her mane was low and straight and even her colour seemed to have darkened to match her mood. Only Rarity seemed unfazed by it all, no doubt her apparent life with Flemeth in the Potpourri Wilds having an effect to harden the unicorn to shrug off such dangers. That, or Rarity was a very good actor.

The sound of gears grinding on chains in the distance snapped everypony's attention towards the castle. The sudden crash of a drawbridge smashing against the ground caused Fluttershy to hold her breath. The creak of heavy doors swinging open brought forth the exhale; there was no point in keeping one's breath held anymore. The time for battle had drawn near. The trembling against the cold dirt caused by galloping hooves signaled the defense to prepare in short notice.

“Defensive positions!” shouted an officer as the militia took their proper formations. Both Rarity and Trixie's horns began to glow in sync with their staves, powerful spells ready to be let loose. Pinkie had assembled many grenades, while Fluttershy was preparing a bow to fire.

Don't think, act. The voice of the pony who had taught Fluttershy to fight reverberated in her head. She pulled the bowstring back, taking careful aim

at the darkness for whatever monstrosity would emerge from the blanket of night. *Let them come to you. When you see the whites of their eyes, let fly. Don't stop to think about the arrow, or who you're shooting at. It's them or you. It's always them or you.*

"That's not true," Fluttershy whispered, still holding the arrow taught against the string. She still believed in simple things that helped other ponies such as mercy, forgiveness, and kindness, and that everypony should be shown a little light in dark times such as war. "You were cruel. You tried to teach me to be cruel to survive, but I won't let go of what I hold dear. Artistic Finish couldn't make me to be unkind, you won't either."

An explosion snapped Fluttershy back to reality as one of Pinkie's landmines burst into a blue fireball, illuminating the night in blue light. The shrieks of monsters unknown echoed, only to be silenced by more detonations. As more and more of the landmines were triggered, Fluttershy could feel her heart skip a beat with every explosive blast.

Looking about, the militia was not prepared for the peculiar percussion of the pink pony before them, many of them having their eyes wide in amazement as blue fire rose from the ground, illuminating the sky. When the last mine went off, Fluttershy expected a new wave of silence and relief to pass over the group as Pinkie's bombs made short work of the advancing undead. That would not be the case, as the militia rushed about with the officers shouting new orders as the thunder of incoming hooves resounded like a wave.

From the darkness the first of the zombie ponies surged forward. The yellow pegasus gasped at the sight of the creatures; rotting carcasses of villager and soldier alike moved with hunger or rage, mouths wide open and screeching not unlike the ponyspawn screamers. Their eyes bothered Fluttershy the most; they darted this way and that, looking all around them for easy prey to kill and consume. Several among the zombies did not even have flesh on their bones, but were reanimated pony skeletons shuffling their bones about and snapping their strong jaws.

With a shout, the militia fired a volley of arrows into the undead mob, striking flesh and bone alike in an effort to slow down the enemy advance. Rarity launched a bolt of lightning from her staff, while Pinkie was careful on tossing what few grenades she had, taking the battlefield in

consideration before lobbing a grenade with a short fuse over the heads of the zombies.

Fluttershy kept an eye on Trixie as she hid under cover, readying another arrow after firing the first, watching the blue unicorn begin one of her chartered spells. Trixie's eyes were closed, muttering the words of incantation as both her horn and staff began to glow a soft blue light. "A-all right you monsters," Trixie said, eyes opened and focused on the zombies even with the slight waver in her voice, "Show Trixie what you've got!"

Magic flowed from top of her staff like a blue shimmering river, cascading from the instrument of the arcane towards the zombies. The rush of spellwork then shot upward and expanded, surprising everypony with the brilliant display before them as the magic formed what appeared to be a great wall that divided the defenders of Red Apple with the possessed corpses. Zombie and skeleton alike bashed their bodies against the barrier, causing the light to ripple like a stone in the water.

While Trixie's protective wall was up, Fluttershy was still cautious. The unicorn enchantress was exerting a lot of energy into the spell, and the beads of sweat dripping down her face spoke volumes of the exertion of such power. What Fluttershy did not expect was for Trixie to begin to step forward, causing her arcane wall to push the undead backwards. The white-maned unicorn winced at every strike the undead inflicted, but still stood tall as she drove her spell forward to move the enemy back.

"*Foals,*" boom a voice that sounded like it was coming from *beneath* the ponies, "*The Veil is torn here! We are free to exist and devour! You will all make fine meals indeed.*"

The ground pulsed as large swaths of dirty rags rose up seemingly from the dirt itself. The rags raised themselves higher to look like an image of a pony, but the body under the ratty cloth was wispy like smoke. The creature wore a hood, yet instead of a face was a single glowing yellow orb.

"Hunger demons!" Rarity turned towards Fluttershy, staff moving to intercept the shade before it stomped a shadowy hoof on the Chantry sister. The dainty unicorn's tackle pushed both out of the path of the leering demon, only to become face to orb with another. All around them more

demons of Hunger and Rage burst from the ground, roaring and moving to attack the defending militia behind Trixie's shield.

"We have to protect Trixie," Fluttershy said to Rarity as the latter fired another lightning bolt into the face of a rage demon, "If her barrier goes down, we'll have to fight two sides."

"I'll hold them," Rarity replied, her staff floating down by her side, "I know a few of Flemeth's glyphs, they'll help. Do be careful!"

Fluttershy nodded her acknowledgement before flying off to block the way to Trixie. The white unicorn called her staff to strike the ground as her horn blazed with power and another spell. From the bottom of the staff sprang lines of magic, forming a shape of an intricate hourglass. The glyph Rarity had summoned grew large, with several demons caught inside the glowing lines. With a cry, Rarity slammed the staff down in the centre of the glyph with her magic, the lines glowing brighter around it. From what Fluttershy could tell, the glyph did nothing obvious; the demons were still whole and still moving forward. It was the speed they were moving that had changed, each demon crawling along the ground slowly rather than moving with deadly purpose.

She slowed them down, Fluttershy thought in amazement, *as if time itself was drifting to a stop.* The Chantry had always taught to fear unicorns and their magic, but Fluttershy was always astonished by magic and what it could do, even though the presence of zombies and demons did give some of the Chantry's words proper credence.

With the demons slowed by magic, Pinkie and the rest of the militia began to make swift work of their enemies, while still the undead behind Trixie's wall continued to pound away fruitlessly at the shield. The battle was far from over, as more demons sprang from the ground like daisies to join their brethren. They hissed from otherworldly mouths as they slid along the ground towards the defenders.

One of the shades lumbered towards Fluttershy and Trixie, the glowing orb for a face looming over the two as it reared upwards, shadowy hooves preparing to strike. With a quick snap from her bow, the former bard fired an arrow into one of the Hunger demon's rear legs, watching the creature fall forward with a growl.

Before Fluttershy could ready another arrow, a stiff strike from a powerful tackle knocked her to the ground. Another shade now stood tall over her, batting away her bow with a hoof as it looked over her prone form with eerie blue light. She struggled against the demon helplessly, as the Fade creature held her down, the sound of smacking lips reverberating from an unseen mouth.

"I can taste your fear, pony," the demon said, moving its orb closer to Fluttershy's face, "It is delectable. I will savour every moment, as my brothers are sure to do with every mortal here."

Fluttershy squealed as the demon began to strangle her, its powerful hoof pressed against her neck. She tried to push back, but the physical might of the demon was too much for the small pegasus. Her wings also proved useless, instead becoming a liability as flapping made her tired and the demon restricted her movement by slamming a hoof onto her feathered limbs.

Her vision was becoming hazy as the demon crushed her throat and Fluttershy choked and gasped, desperate for air. As she struggled, she could feel the ground shake under her. Dread spread across her features as images of more demons from the ground flooded her mind's eye. *Celestia wouldn't abandon us, Fluttershy told herself, she wouldn't. Not now. Not when we need it most.*

The shade turned its head to the left quickly, only to be pushed off with great force. Fluttershy rolled onto her stomach from the impact, only to look up and see the golem Shale battle ready before her. While the blue light from the Hunger demon's face was haunting, the blue glow from Shale's eyes and rune were comforting, even if Shale was a little enthusiastic about fighting.

"This is my big damn hero moment," Shale said as it looked at Fluttershy and offered its side as a brace so she could stand on her hooves, "And I plan to make the most of it."

Shale charged again, trampling Hunger demons under its hooves as they doubled back to regain their position. Pinkie gave a cheer for Shale, rallying the rest of the militia with her to follow her lead, attacking demon after

demon with bomb and mace. Rarity followed suit, blasting demons with lightning while following close behind their main force.

The pony of stone was too far ahead though, with demons of Rage now closing in on the biggest threat on the field and the newest source of agitation. As effective as Shale was against ponyspawn and shades, the Rage demons had the advantage against it, quickly surrounding the golem. Their flames danced around Shale, licking the rocky hide with flames as they struck with burning hands. Shale fought back and crushed a Rage demon under its hooves, but molten bodies of the creatures made Shale cry out in pain.

“We have to help Shale!” Fluttershy looked to her friends, who were finishing off the last of the demons. With the rest of the party still fighting and Trixie buckling under the constant attacks by the zombies, the Chantry sister was the only one who could help. Her bow would be useless, as the arrows would simply burn to ash against their lava hides. She had to do something to distract them.

The yellow pegasus watched in horror as the mighty golem fell to its side, being overwhelmed by the Rage demons and their fiery assault. Without a moment to spare, Fluttershy galloped towards the down stone pony, gasping for air as the knowledge that she was charging *towards* hellfire creatures made her heart skip.

Twilight offered Shale a place in our group, Fluttershy thought as she stopped near the demons, Pinkie considers Shale a friend. That means Shale is a friend, and I have to help somehow. “Hey...” Fluttershy tried to shout, but was too quiet to be heard over the roar of the flames. An idea formed, one that was risky and really only effective on foals and animals, but it also helped during her escape from Filais. It was the best she could come up with, and Shale needed help right then and there.

“How dare you,” Fluttershy spoke as she braced her hooves against the ground, letting all her negative emotions boil to the surface, “HOW DARE YOU!”

Shouting was not something a meek pegasus pony like Fluttershy was used to, but when she decided to shout, she made sure attention was directed to her and her alone. Thus was the case with the Rage demons,

which actually ceased their attack on Shale and turned to see who was interrupting their violence. Contempt oozed from their molten eyes as they watched the Chantry sister berate them.

“Who do you think you are, ganging up on a pony? You come here into our plane of existence just to hurt ponies like Shale, well that ends here. Don’t you have homes in the Fade that need you? All you’re doing here is making a mess and making everypony unhappy.”

The demons surged forward, ashen ground left in their wake as they headed towards Fluttershy, fury and hatred echoing in their voices. Standing firm despite the fear quaking within, Fluttershy kept her gaze on the Rage demons, listening closely behind her as the familiar click of a grenade sounded, followed by a grunt from a throw.

“Now why don’t you go back to the Fade where you belong, and do something nice for a change?” Those last words were followed by a single grenade landing at the base of the demons before they could get to Fluttershy. The bomb burst, blasting the baleful behemoths into splotches of lava, leaving nothing but a smoking hole in the ground. When there was no sign of any more demons, Fluttershy breathed a sigh of relief and promptly fell over.

Fluttershy looked up to see Trixie’s wall of magic shimmer weakly as the unicorn fed every ounce of power she had into the shield. On the other side was a veritable horde of walking dead, slamming their hooves against the protective sheen and gnashing their teeth. With a grunt the yellow pegasus returned to a standing position, watching as Trixie once again took steps forward, pushing her barrier against the zombie army.

The defenders of Red Apple were exhausted from fighting the demons, though now they looked past the unicorn’s barrier to the waiting maws of the undead. “We have to do something,” Rarity said, standing next to Fluttershy as they stood next to Trixie. The Senior Enchanter opened her eyes, breaking her chant.

“I... I think I know what to do,” Trixie motioned for everypony to stand well behind her. “It’s going to get very hot very fast. The Great and Powerful Trixie will now make all these zombies...disappear.”

Everypony listened to Trixie, standing well behind the unicorn mage. Curiosity and concern went hoof and hoof to Fluttershy as she watched Trixie's horn glow bright red with a new spell.

"If Sparkle can channel new spells, so can Trixie," the blue magician muttered as she continued to push her wall against the zombies. Her eyes then began to glow just as red as her horn, until fire flowed from her horn like a stream towards the center of her arcane shield. The moment the flame licked the shield, the entire array of magical power was ignited, a great wall of fire loomed over the undead forces. Several of the zombies who were attacking the wall passed through, only to be set alight by the shield they had spent so long in by passing. Their howls and wails resonated as they burned to their final deaths. Whatever zombies remained backed away from the fire, only to find that just as before the wall advanced towards them, engulfing corpses both mobile and stationary in flames.

The smell of burnt pony flesh was nauseating, Fluttershy wanting nothing more than to wretch her stomach's worth, but the end results were undeniable. As Trixie collapsed from fatigue over her spell, the great wall of flame dissipating into smoke leaving only scorched earth and ponies in its wake as the last of the zombies fled back into the darkness leading to the castle.

"Are you all right?" Fluttershy asked, helping Trixie to her shaking legs. The mare magician looked around her in a daze, then focused her eyes especially the charred remains of her foes. Trixie's right eye began to twitch as the widest grin she ever had spread across her face just like the fire from her horn.

"Did you all see that?!" Whatever fatigue held Trixie seemingly evaporated as she pointed a hoof at the wreckage she wrought. "The Great and Powerful Trixie is on fire! Figuratively of course, but those zombies got the literal end! Let's see Twilight Sparkle try to pull something like that off!"

"It was very...flashy," Fluttershy said in the best praise she could think of. It certainly wasn't "nice", but it did what was needed to be done. Looking around the battlefield, the Chantry sister gave thanks to Celestia that their battle only saw a few ponies wounded, but they all made it out of such a harrowing experience alive. The militia joined Trixie in her jubilations, cheering and hollering to the night sky, ignoring the burnt corrupted

corpses before them. They were allowed to have a moment of celebration after how many nights of fear and uncertainty.

The pony Fluttershy was expecting to be in complete party frenzy was instead sitting over the downed form of Shale, hair flat as worry was painted clearly on her face. The golem was motionless on the ground, save for the head which was turning this way and that.

“That really, really HURT,” complained Shale, “Why didn’t anyone tell me creatures such as those could actually pose a challenge for my pristine stone hide? Well not so pristine anymore; those ghastly cretins marred my beautiful rocks.”

“Is there anything we can get for you, Shale darling?” Rarity offered, looking over the burnt marks all along Shale’s rocks. The golem rolled over onto its hooves, but each movement appeared slow and deliberate, as if it was still in great pain.

“Lyrium would be appreciated,” Shale answered, “The raw stuff is best, not that diluted nonsense unicorns drink in potions. I can use it to repair the damage. Though I could use some magical aid to speed up the process, and it would make me grateful to the ponies. Please.”

Fluttershy smiled at Shale as she and the others helped apply lyrium from the leftovers of Pinkie’s grenades over the golem’s wounds. With the aid of Rarity’s magic, the essence of magic closed the cracks and fissures along Shale’s hide, as well as clearing the scorch marks left by the Rage demons. Fully healed, or repaired as Shale insisted on the act being called, the golem rose up to its full imposing height, shaking off the dirt and ash like a dog shaking off the rain.

Once they had collected themselves and the militia had settled down from their victory, everypony looked up at Red Apple Castle as it stood overlooking the land below. “The others are going to need our help,” Fluttershy said, waving a hoof at the dreary castle above them, “We need to hurry.”

Nodding in agreement, the defending half of their party began a slow ascent up the hillside with Pinkie pointing out all the places where she laid her landmines, in fear that not all of them detonated. When they did find an

explosive that was still whole, the pink earth pony insisted on stopping for a moment to safely disarm and remove the landmine so that nopony would get hurt.

Fluttershy looked up at the cliff-side fortress and trembled. Somewhere inside was the source of the zombies and demons, and it was likely to be as monstrous as that Maleficar Hubred they fought in the Unicorn Tower. The pegasus prayed that her friends were safe and having better fortune inside the castle than her group did outside.

Applejack led the way in the dark passage from the brewery to the castle, with Twilight following behind with a light from her staff brightening the underground hallway. Spike was behind her, flaming sword in hand while Rainbow Dash took the rear. The smell of the earth all around them permeated the secret passage.

“What I don’t get is why couldn’t this be any bigger?” Rainbow tried to stretch her wings, but the tips scraped along the earthen walls.

“Ain’t no earth pony thinkin’ they needed to make a pegasus comfortable underground,” Applejack retorted, “And you better get comfortable under the dirt. When we have to get on down to Orzamule to bring the treaties to the donkeys, everything is underground.”

That was something Twilight was interested in. The books she could find on the donkeys and their underground kingdoms were few and far between, and even those tomes that did have entries were sparse at best. “Have you been to Orzamule before, Applejack?” she asked, her typical curiosity now getting the best of her.

“Been there once with Duncan a long time ago,” answered the former templar, “The donkeys like the Grey Wardens, since it’s us that fight the ponyspawn as often as they do, being so close to the Dark Tunnels and all. Sturdy folk, but they’re very different from ponies. All rocky colours, like brown and such. Some of them jacks, that’s stallions to us, have long whiskers they tie into braids. Don’t have cutie marks, but they seem to have some kind of system to workin’ out a donkey’s special talents. Hard working

to boot, but they are very big on tradition. They built an entire city under a mountain. Boy howdy, if that ain't impressive ah dunno what is."

Hearing Applejack's description of Orzamule made Twilight want to go there herself. Building a city under a mountain would mean that the donkeys were impressive architects and miners to pull off such a feat as that. "What did you and Duncan do in Orzamule?"

Applejack looked over her shoulder to Twilight, a sad look on her eyes, and then resumed her gaze towards the other end of the tunnel. "He brought me an' the other recruits to Orzamule to show us the Dark Tunnels," she answered, "We've seen a lot of frightenin' things in our journey, but the Dark Tunnels take the whole apple pie. You know how we hear the heartbeat of the ponyspawn to tell how close those varmints are? Down there, that's all you hear. Thousands on thousands of ponyspawn in one place, doing only Celestia knows what down there. We didn't go very far, but we fought a few ponyspawn here and there. Duncan said this is where we go when our time is up."

Twilight raised an eyebrow in suspicion. "What do you mean 'when our time is up'?"

"Oh, 'spose Duncan didn't get a chance to tell ya." Applejack took a deep breath before continuing. "You know the Warden's have a lot of secrets which would scare away recruits, like the Joining. Well, here's another one: the moment we take in the Taint, we get around thirty years, tops. And that's if we're lucky."

Twilight stopped dead in her tracks and from the sound of Rainbow Dash bumping into Spike, the dragon knight did the same. "Twilight only gets thirty years to live?" Spike balked, looking up at his friend with concern in his eyes.

"Wardens may have mastered the Taint, Spike, but it's still festerin' in us," Applejack explained, "After thirty years, Warden just becomes a monster like the rest o' them 'spawn. So, when they know their time is up, they come down to the Dark Tunnels and kill as many of 'em as they can. One last hurrah before they bite it. Warden's always figured it was the best way to go."

Thirty years. Twilight had those two words roll through her head as she closed her eyes, trying to shake away the chill that was running through her spine. She only had thirty years to live, if she survived near constant battles against the ponyspawn. She only had thirty years until she became a slaving beast just like the ponyspawn, and was expected to commit suicide by throwing herself to their waiting claws and tusks.

Everything simple in life is gone now, Twilight thought, her eyes simply staring ahead without focus, *Duncan made me a Grey Warden, which means life is short. Hubred attacked the Tower with demons and Maleficar. Could I have survived that? I don't know what to think anymore. I don't know what to do anymore.*

There was a tug on her robes which snapped Twilight back into the present. She looked down to see Spike staring at her with sad eyes welling up in tears. "I'm sorry Twilight," he spoke softly, his voice catching his own words, "I'm so sorry. I'm the one who pushed you into joining the Wardens, to leave the Tower. It's all my fault."

Twilight looked at her dragon charge, smiling weakly as she cradled his large head against her with a hoof. He did not break down or cry, likely something to do with his new found title, but instead they stood wordlessly for a moment. Ever since hatching Spike from his egg with magic so many years ago, the two had been inseparable. Now there seemed to be a deadline for the pair, something the two knew was going to happen due to Spike being a dragon and Twilight a pony. It was now much more obvious and sinister than ever conceived.

"Don't worry Spike," Twilight whispered, as much for her own benefit as for the baby dragon, "It's not your fault. If it weren't for Duncan, the Grey Wardens, you, we wouldn't have been able to stop Hubred and the Maleficar. We wouldn't be on this quest to stop the Blight. If anything we should be glad everything was set in motion as it did. Don't be sad Spike. Thirty years is still a long time."

"I guess so..." Spike did not sound totally convinced, but the tears were wiped away and he appeared ready to continue with his weapon of choice in his grip.

“Come on,” Twilight continued, “We still have a long way to go, and not a lot of time. We’ll cross all our bridges when we get there but for now, let’s worry about crossing this tunnel.”

As they resumed their slow walk through the tunnel, the ground around them shook as the muffled sound of explosions could be heard through the earth. Bits of dirt fell onto the infiltrating party, who gazed upwards.

“Pinkie.” They all said in unison, recognizing the distinct sound of their earth pony friend’s signature explosives detonating above their heads. The sounds of the traps being sprung signaled that the zombie army was beginning their attack and that they were very close to the castle.

The party moved with purpose as they traversed through the underground passage, until Twilight’s magical light revealed a door in the darkness. When they reached a door, Twilight took a step back, allowing her friends to take forward positions as she readied a spell through her staff. While the majority of the undead were fighting in the town, there was still no telling as to how many were left to defend the castle and whoever was commanding the dark magic within.

Once inside, Twilight noticed that they were inside a cellar, filled with barrels each containing cider of different varieties. While they were inside, the smell of rotten flesh overpowered all other senses, making the ponies and dragon companion reel back at the stench.

“Smelly demons, stinking ponyspawn, now this,” complained Dash as she held a hoof against her nose, “Why can’t monsters take the form of killer buckets of turnips? Lethal bags of flour, anything that smells better than this.”

“Quite yer bellyaching,” Applejack snapped back, “We still have to find Macintosh and Applebloom. If we’re in the cellar, that means we have to get past the dungeon, the barracks, and then header on into the Arl’s stateroom. Then we can search the castle better from a center location.”

It was the best plan they had with Applejack’s knowledge of Red Apple Castle. They formed a single file line again with Applejack in front, leaving the cellar and moving through the castle halls. The castle was dark and musky, the stench of death permeating through the air and blood staining

the floor and the walls of castle. A massacre had occurred here that had seen to the deaths of countless ponies, servant and soldier alike.

They approached the door Applejack had said would lead to the dungeon of Red Apple Castle, with the former templar opening the entrance slowly, craning her neck through the door to peek at whatever would be waiting for them. Twilight was able to poke her head through, seeing several closed cells with bared doors and a single guardspony turned to face the door on the other side of the dungeon. Applejack shook her head to the others, raising a hoof to her mouth in a *shhh* motion, and then pointed at the guard again.

“Hng...nnng...itchy...itchy...” The guard was wobbling on his knees, muttering and grunting to himself as he stood in front of the doorway. With one hoof, the guard scratched against his coat, the sound of skin peeling away echoing in the darkened dungeon depths. The guard looked at piece of his own flesh before popping it into his mouth, munching away at his own skin.

“Itchy. Tasty.”

The sight of a pony eating its own flesh made Twilight’s stomach feel like doing back flips and somersaults. Unfortunately, Spike was more audible as he gagged loudly, causing the zombified guard to turn its head around in an unnatural angle. Applejack and Rainbow Dash craned their necks for their weapons when the zombie began to shriek. The door behind the carcass guard burst open, with more zombie ponies rushing into the small hallway, jaws opened wide and ready to bite on living meat.

Blades rang out as they were pulled out of their scabbards as Rainbow Dash, Applejack, and Spike moved to meet the undead foe. The quarters were too tight and closed in for many of Twilight’s spells to work, as they would prove a danger to her friends more than they would the enemy. All she could do was watch as her friends fought the disgusting monstrosities who attacked violently and with hunger for flesh.

As Twilight waited for an opportunity to lend a hoof to the battle, the flow of magic around her began to ripple as energy from the Veil breach poured out. She spun around, just in time to see a writhing mass of rags with a

glowing orb for a face appear into existence, gazing with hunger through its single energy eye.

“More flesh and magic to consume, my brothers,” the Hunger demon called out, its voice like an echo throughout the dungeon, *“Quickly, before the master senses their presence and forces her hoof against us! We must feed now or wait for leftovers...”*

While the zombies were being felled by strength of arms, the demons now surrounding the group would prove a much greater threat. While shaped as ponies, the demonic shades could move their twisted gaseous-like bodies in a way no pony could ever achieve. They slid across the floor of the dungeon, hissing loudly as they engaged in battle against the fighters of the group. Three Hunger demons surged towards Twilight as they shouted their ravenous cries for the unicorn's magic.

Eyes furrowed, the lavender mage focused her magic into the cone of arcane arctic wind, blasting the demons with ice until their very rags were covered in icicles. The shades continued to press forward, no different than Rage demons in their voracious appetites for flesh, but were unable to avoid Twilight's continued barrage of magic.

What Twilight did not expect was how drained she was after the use of such spells. She fell to her knees after the last of the Hunger demons that attacked her had shattered into icy shards, panting heavily as the last bolt of magic struck the creature's physical form. Even in being banished to the Fade, Hunger continued to feed on the spells she had used, leaving her in a weakened state, every muscle in her body aching as the rush of battle was fading.

“Twilight!” Spike rushed to her side, brandishing his enchanted blade as the shade he was fighting followed, leering at them both with its glowing eye. The young knight swung his sword at the demon, only to find that the creature was weaving around the strikes with twisted ease.

“What do I do Twilight?” Spike asked while continuing to protect Twilight from the demon.

Twilight looked up, focusing not on the physical world but of the lines of magic that flowed throughout, trying to find an obvious weakness in the

Hunger demons. All of the Fade monsters' energy, their very essence fed into the single orb of an eye in the center of their heads. It must be the only focus keeping the entire demon's body together outside of the Fade.

"The eye," Twilight said loudly as she stood up, loud enough not only for Spike but for Applejack's and Dash's benefit as well. "The eye, Spike! Go for the eye!"

Spike said nothing in acknowledgement, only gripping his sword with both claws as the dragon continued to stare down the demon before him. Twilight winced as the demon raised a shadowy hoof to strike, worry over Spike's safety already channeling a protective spell from her horn.

Spike took a deep breath and blew a stream of green flame from his mouth into the face of the Hunger demons. The creature of the Fade recoiled blind, pressing its hooves to its orb, blinded by the fire. When the demon looked up and its vision clear of flames, it shrieked in pain as Spike jammed his sword into the orb, the magical ball of essence bursting in blue light. The rags that were once a Hunger demon fell to the floor, with Spike smiling in triumph.

The two martial ponies followed Spike's example in their own ways. Applejack turned quickly on her hooves, slamming her hind legs into the face of her abyssal opponent. As the demon reeled from the bucking blow, the Grey Warden earth pony drove her blade home. Rainbow Dash made use of her agility despite the tight quarters, easily dodging the Hunger demon's attacks until she was right on top of the creature. Long dagger ready, she impaled the demon's focus sidelong; the effects were still the same as the rags lost all power and sunk onto the floor.

Twilight gave a sigh of relief as she raised a lyrium potion from her saddlebag, looking over the dungeon to make sure it was cleared of enemies, both undead and demonic. The battle in the hall had attracted the attention of the denizens of the cells, earth pony and pegasus alike looking out from the bars holding them in the cold castle. Several appeared to be simple castle staff, dirty and covered in dry blood. One of the prisoners, an earth pony just barely a mare, called out to the party in desperation.

"You... you're not zombies, or those other monsters!" She looked like she was ready to burst into tears at the sight of the living, "Please, you must

help us! My father, the blacksmith must be worried sick! We've been trapped here for so long!"

"Hold on," Twilight said, turning towards the zombie dungeon guard. With her magic focused on the guard's belongings, the lavender unicorn was able to lift a set of keys from his bag, moving the keys towards the cell doors and unlocking them all one by one as Applejack and the others helped the ponies inside out of their cells.

"Thank you so much for saving us," the young mare said, bowing her head low, "First Arl Macintosh is sick, then Lady Applebloom becomes insane and has that...thing with her. Every night more of those monsters would come for us, one by one. They were never seen again."

"Ah still don't believe it," Applejack said quietly, "Not little Applebloom. She was so sweet last time ah saw her. How could this have happened?"

"Those unicorns had a hoof in it... no offense," the mare offered, bowing her head once again to Twilight, "She threw the little one in the dungeon with us, but the older unicorn she... twisted. Like something out of nightmare."

That sounds too much like an abomination, Twilight thought before heading over to the cell where the small unicorn would be. "Rainbow Dash," she said, looking over her shoulder, "Can you help these ponies find the tunnel while I investigate this unicorn?"

Rainbow nodded, calling for the prisoner ponies to follow her back to the cider cellar. As she left, Twilight moved the set of keys towards the barred door, unlocking it and swinging it open gently. In the corner of the cell was a little white filly unicorn, shrouded in a ratty old cloak but still shivering in the dark. She looked up at Twilight with bloodshot eyes and tear stains on her face; one of her eyes was black and bruised from a terrible blow, almost swollen shut.

A frog seemed to have leapt into Twilight's throat as she looked over the filly before her. Never had she seen a child so battered as this one; not even the templars in the Tower had resorted to such violence. What she could see in the white filly's eyes was stark terror. Twilight knelt down

towards the young one, trying to smile and bring some ease into the situation.

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” Twilight said, wishing Fluttershy was here to help the poor child. Perhaps some of Fluttershy’s mannerisms rubbed off on Twilight to help create an air of calm and safety to help the unicorn filly become a little more comfortable around a much bigger mare and her well armed allies. “The monsters are gone now. I’m Twilight Sparkle... a friend. What’s your name?”

The filly looked up, still shaking before burying her face into her cloak. Twilight looked to Spike, who simply shrugged, not knowing what to do. Applejack was staring intently at the fledgling unicorn, likely trying to figure out what this child had to do with Applebloom’s madness.

“Don’t worry,” Twilight said softly, trying to coax some sort of response, “You’re safe. We won’t let anything hurt you. Could you tell me your name?”

The filly turned towards Twilight, fresh tears flowing from her eyes. “Sweetie Belle,” she said in a quiet voice, coarse and dry. Twilight smiled and then turned to Applejack.

“Can you get her some water please?” she asked. Applejack nodded, leaving the cell and returning a moment later with a bowl with some water in it. Sweetie Belle looked on at the bowl before standing up. She hobbled towards the bowl, one of her forelegs obviously broken. Applejack’s expression softened at the sight of such a maimed filly.

“Ah’ll get’er some apples from the cellar,” the blonde Warden said, “She looks like she could use some food. Also bring Dash back.” Twilight nodded, focusing her attention on Sweetie Belle were drank the water as if it were ages since seeing the liquid. For all she knew, it had been.

“Sweetie Belle,” Twilight began, snapping the filly’s attention towards her, “We came to the castle to see if we can find and help Applebloom and Arl Macintosh, as well as many ponies as we could find. Could you tell us what really happened, please?”

Sweetie Belle turned in an attempt to hide her face, but quickly looked up at Twilight with eyes of desperation. "You can help her, can't you?" She was definitely pleading now, the tears still flowing freely, "You're a nice unicorn, you can help her! Please, it's my entire fault, my fault, all my fault..."

Twilight stared at the wall as Sweetie Belle wept in her forelegs, unsure what exactly she should do. She had few encounters with children, often too busy studying or practicing magic in Tower with just her and Spike while the foals were ushered in their own classes. She often directed them to the Senior Enchanters whenever they had a question on magic, not wanting her studies interrupted or deviated. Now she had to calm a hysteric filly down if she was ever going to discover what the exact troubles that befell Red Apple Castle were.

"We'll do whatever we can to help," Twilight promised, stroking Sweetie Belle's mane in an effort to calm both their nerves, "We need to know what happened. The other prisoners blamed you and the other unicorn though."

"They should!" The white mageling shouted, "If it weren't for me, Applebloom would never have turned mean. If it weren't for me, we'd never have been able to use that unicorn's book and caused all this."

"One day, a unicorn came into the castle saying he was the replacement for the old court wizard. Some of the ponies said he was recommended by Arl Maim. Macintosh let him in, but then he got real sick. The unicorn then told the knights that the only way to cure him was an old legend, so they went out right away. Applebloom didn't want to wait, so she, Scootaloo and I crept into the unicorn's room and used his book of spells."

Sweetie Belle took a deep breath before continuing. "We found some spells, but they were scary. I tried to warn against it, but Applebloom wanted to do anything to help Macintosh. So I helped cast one of the spells in the book to give Applebloom a horn just like mine. We thought two unicorn horns would help the spells work faster, work stronger. But when Applebloom got her horn, her eyes started to glow too, and her voice became just as mean as she was. She started making monsters starting with Maim's wizard, and then attacked the town! I tried to stop her but...but..."

She broke down yet again, and while Twilight was absentmindedly trying to soothe the crying filly, her thoughts turned to the direst situation the news could bring. *A false horn*, Twilight summarized as her mind raced to find a solution, *that which allows any pony to cast powerful magic, and be a victim to the dark side of the Fade.*

What was she going to tell Applejack, that her little sister had become possessed by a powerful demon, and was responsible for all the death and destruction in Red Apple Acres? It would break Applejack's spirit worse than the loss of Duncan and the Warden at Ostequus. Yet Twilight could not hide what they would encounter, nor could she hide the painful methods of removing a false horn.

When Applejack returned with some apples for Sweetie Belle with Rainbow Dash, Twilight motioned for her fellow Warden to follow closely. Once they were in another cell well away from prying ears, she told Applejack what been done to Applebloom. As expected, Applejack paled, but did not lose control of herself or her templar abilities.

"Can we..." Applejack faltered, appearing to contemplate the stone floor of the dungeon before returning her gaze to Twilight, "Can we help Applebloom? Get rid of that false horn?"

"It is possible, but very dangerous," Twilight said, "False horns are not easy to create, which makes the fact that a filly could conjure one all the more surprising. They are much more difficult to remove though, since they latch on to a pony's mind and 'Fade self'. It would take several unicorns days to unravel the magic involved and there is the risk that Applebloom could be permanently damaged. They could enter the Fade to remove the horn from there, but we both know how dangerous the Fade is."

"There's more. It also sounds like she is possessed by a demon, and a powerful one too, which will make the removal process even more difficult. While several unicorns remove the horn, another would have to enter the Fade and combat the demon directly. Otherwise we would have to..."

"Don't say it," Applejack barked, holding her fury in if only barely. She choked on

her words as the fatal possibility dawned on her. "Don't say it. We'll find a way to save Applebloom. Somehow. We just gotta, Twi."

They both left the cell to find Rainbow Dash and Spike waiting for them. They stared for a moment, though their faces were downcast. They had heard Applejack shouting no doubt. Twilight's horn began to glow as she shut the iron door to her cell tight. "We'll find a way to save Applebloom," Twilight said as much for Applejack's benefit as well as Sweetie Belle, "But your injuries are too severe for you to escape. Once we secure the castle, we'll send our friend Pinkie Pie to make a healing poultice."

Sweetie Belle nodded in defeat as she took her place back in the corner of the cell, ignoring the apples Applejack had brought her. Twilight knew all too well that Sweetie Belle had given up to her fate, that one of the prisoners freed would tell the village of Red Apple including the Chantry, and that they would summon the templars to take Sweetie Belle away, if not worse. To the eyes of the Chantry, she would be condemned as Maleficar and sentenced to die.

Rainbow Dash took point as they made their way out of the dungeon in silence. The halls appeared deserted, with nary a sound made, not even that of shuffling hooves save for the party's own. They followed Applejack's directions around the castle until they made their way to the guard barracks, which they discovered was empty.

"I don't get it, though I guess we should be grateful," Rainbow Dash said as they made their way past the beds, "Why would all of Red Apple's knights leave for some legend? What about all the soldiers?"

"You heard what Braeburn said," Applejack replied, "Most of the soldiers are fighting Maim and Loghoof's soldiers, while the other knights are looking for the Mane of Stars. There are just too many fronts, not enough ponies for them all."

Like us, Twilight thought as they made their way through the barracks and back into another hallway. They could see orange light under a large door that Applejack said lead into the main throne room, where Arl Macintosh would hear the cases of those who lived in the Red Apple arling. As they drew closer to the door, the sound of mirth and joy could be heard past the

solid oak, with the stomping of hooves in some kind of rhythm echoed through.

“Sounds like a party,” Dash said, only watching the scene as Applejack’s eyes narrowed. With a hoof she opened the door wide, gasping at the sight. What they all saw stole the words from their mouths into thin air.

Instead of the undead, a group of ten soldier earth ponies who were still very much alive surrounded the room, smiling and stomping their hooves in some sort of musical beat. In the center of the great hall was Braeburn, dancing on his hind legs and singing a kind of bawdy song involving the flanks and haunches of Chantry sisters that would turn Fluttershy three shades of red.

Sitting where the Arl would be during times of peace was a little filly with an olive coat and red hair with a matching red ribbon. Her eyes did not hide the presence of magical power, as they shone with eerie violet light. Just as Twilight feared, from Applebloom’s forehead was a large horn made completely out of energy, with several tendrils at the base disappearing into her skull. She was laughing and jumping along with the stomping hooves, flanked not only by the young pegasus Scootaloo, but also by a lumbering mass of veins and mutated limbs and pustules that made for an abomination.

“dON’t yOu See how MUCH fuN we aRE HAVING, ScooTAlOO,” Applebloom said, or rather a disturbing mash of a young filly’s voice with that of a deep guttural speaker, “If onLy SWEetiE BeLLe were HERE to jOiN uS!”

“Sweetie Belle is really hurt Applebloom,” Scootaloo said, “We really should help her after what... happened.”

“I’ll hEIP heR wHeN I FeEL LiKE it,” Applebloom snapped, causing the abomination to turn its “face” towards Scootaloo with malevolent intent, “wHeN I FeEL LiKE it! yOu haVE sUcH prETTy wINGs, ScooTAlOO. yOu wouLDn’t WANT me to SNAP tHeM wOuLD yOu? NoPONY tELLS me what TO DO!”

“Nooooo pony! YEEHAW,” Braeburn shouted, rearing up on his hind legs, “Ain’t nopony tellin’ her what to do, I tell ya what!”

“What the hay is Braeburn doing?” Applejack said in a low whisper as they watched the bizarre scene unfold before them. Twilight watched with eyes sensitive to magic, taking note how the lines of energy from Applebloom’s false horn were being focused towards the abomination, which in turn was using a powerful mind control spell on Braeburn and the living guards.

“They’re enthralled by demon magic,” said Twilight as she held Applejack back from charging in blind, “This makes things much more difficult. We can’t hurt Braeburn or the guards, they’re under magical influence.”

“Then what do we do?” Dash poked her head around the corner, “We have to stop them somehow, and those ponies are not going to just let us canter on in.”

“The abomination looks like it’s acting in place of a staff for the demon to channel its magic. If we take down the abomination, maybe that will break the mind control. Maybe.” Magic was always finicky when concerning demons and Dark Arts, with the Tower teaching unicorns that encountered such dangerous magic to always assume the worst. In a situation like this, Twilight wanted nothing to do with the worst case scenario.

Before they could construct a plan of action to stop the possessed Applebloom, Braeburn turned his head to where they were speaking, a large silly-looking grin forming on his face. “Well lookie here! We got ourselves some guests!”

The party straightened as they realized Braeburn was talking to them. The element of surprise now lost, the party walked slowly into the hall being watched by the grinning faces of the corrupted Braeburn and Applebloom, while the rest of the pony guards watched in their own daze. The abomination looked on at Twilight with hunger, smacking lips hidden beneath mounds of twisted flesh.

Twilight held her breath as she began to focus a spell around her horn, subtle enough to hopefully have the abomination and the demon ignore her workings while they focused on their own spell works. Thankfully, Applejack stepped forward to her possessed sister in an attempt to get through to her, though Twilight was silently thankful that this could be used as a proper distraction.

“Applebloom!” The blonde earth pony stepped closer, ignoring that several of the guards had drawn weapons, “It’s me! Yer big sister Applejack! Don’t you recognize me? By Celestia, what have they done to you?”

“I’M HAVING fUn, deAR slsTER,” the demon said, waving a hoof in an arc in front of her, “ALL oF ReD AppLE beLoNGs to ME. I HAVE aN ArMy, I HAVE sErVAnTs, I HAVE POWER. buT ALL oF MY fUn is beiNG RUINED! PoNIES beAT MY ArMy, MY sOIdIeRs! dO yOu kNOW hoW diFFiCUlt it is TO PULL thOsE DEMONS frOM the FADE? ALL MY haRD wOrK, WRECKED!”

“AND I STILL. DON’T. HAVE. MY CUTIE MARK!” Those last words bellowed throughout the room, causing Applebloom’s cursed eyes to arc with power. The abomination hissed while Braeburn’s eyes matched the fury marked on the corrupted filly. Scootaloo shook but remained where she was at Applebloom’s side.

The magic quaked around Twilight as she kept her attention on her arcane weaves. She just needed a little more time...

“This ain’t you Applebloom,” Applejack pleaded, “You’re a sweet little filly, who will grow up and have her cutie mark before you know it. But all these demons, this magic; I don’t understand Applebloom. So many ponies got hurt real bad out there. What happened?”

There was a shift in power as the glow in Applebloom’s eyes began to wane, instead showing two normal yet terrified amber eyes. “Big Macintosh was sick,” said Applebloom, “We tried to help him. We needed magic to do it. I told Sweetie Belle to give me this here unicorn horn so I could help as well.”

“NOW IOoK at ME,” The demon’s voice returned in full force, yet Applejack did not budge as the violent violet glow returned, “I AM ARLESSA of ReD AppLE! I HAVE POWER! IT ALL BELONGS TO ME! I cOuLD KILL MaCinTOSH wiTH oNe WORD. yOu SaW whaT I dId to SWEEetiE BeLLe, wHO tRiED to STOP ME. I WILL DO THE SAME TO YOU! I WILL DO THE SAME AND WORSE!”

"I don't believe a cockamamie word! I don't believe Applebloom would do anything to hurt another pony, least of all her friends and family! Whatever critter is holding out inside her, get the hay out right now, even if I have to dive right into the Fade and buck you out myself!"

The fire in Applejack's eyes seemed to have been enough to give the demon pause; just enough for Twilight's spells began to unfold. It was creative use of her favoured barrier conjuration, but as the shield formed around the party and expanded outward, pinning all the guards, Braeburn, the abomination, Applebloom, and unfortunately Scootaloo against the wall. They squirmed against arcane shell as Twilight called out to Applejack.

"I can't hold this forever," Twilight said, already feeling the strain of holding the shield while the abomination and the demon inside Applebloom began their work to unravel the shield in earnest, "We don't have the Litany of Dawn, so you have to use your templar skills on the abomination to break the mind control! When the abomination is weakened, Rainbow Dash and Spike have to go for the kill!"

"What about Applebloom?" Already Applejack's eyes began to shift from green to completely black as the anti-magic engulf her. The stress of maintaining the spell with so many forces working against her was causing tremendous pain in her horn, yet Twilight pressed on, knowing all too well wait failure would lead to.

"We have to draw the demon out and defeat it," Twilight yelled, watching as the false horn was swirling with demonic energies, "I'm sorry Applejack, but it's the only way to make Applebloom calm so we can save her."

Applejack cursed, and then galloped to the abomination. Twilight brought the shield down, her staff coming close to her as the soldier thralls realized that they were no longer held back by magical force. They were slow to react as the templar Warden tackled the abomination in full force, the spell of mind control ceasing as anti-magic choked the arcane power, mud snuffing the flame.

The attack by Rainbow Dash and Spike was quick and brutal. As Applejack rolled away to confront her tainted sibling, the combination of assassin and dragon knight made bloody and burned work of the abomination. The

creature that was Maim's chosen unicorn howled in pain, before slumping to the floor a scorched and slashed mess.

With the abomination slain, the guards and Braeburn seemed to have snapped out of their stupor, looking around with dazed and confused expressions as to what was going on. There was no time for an explanation as the possessed Applebloom stomped her hooves in frustration, her voice further twisted into something completely different from that of a demon or a filly.

"I have what I want, and you all dare try to take it away?" The voice was soft, husky, yet venom dripped from every word, *"I have given this filly the desires held by every pony, she has accepted me, and I will not let this one go. I want her as my host, mortals, and I will reduce everything around her to ash before you take her away from me."*

Applejack watched in horror as purple flame flowed from the false horn, wrapping itself around Applebloom like a wreath, burning away the red ribbon as her body began to glow just as violet as her eyes. Her small frame then began to expand, growing larger until it was slightly larger than the ponies when the light shimmered away.

Standing before the party seemed to be a mare with pale mottled skin and a twisting snaking tail. Her legs were long and spindly ending in clawed hooves and instead of a mane, the creature had a large crest of bone and violet fire trailing down her back. Her eyes shone violet, just as they did before, but with wicked flames dancing in the iris. The false horn still pulsed with powerful magic on her forehead.

"A Desire demon..." Twilight gaped as the young filly was replaced by a monster of the Fade. The demon before them laughed as she took a step forward, claws clicking against the stone of the castle floor.

"Burn." From the Desire demon's mouth came a great stream of fire, igniting anything on fire as it streamed outward. One guard who was still confused was caught in the flames, screaming in pain and terror as he flailed, the metal of his armour melting into his own flesh. Twilight and the others dove to the sides of the room in an effort to avoid the fiery attack.

Applejack stood up and charged towards the demon, her special hat blowing off her head as they collided. The flames ceased as both demon and Warden wrestled on the floor of the room, the creature of Desire unable to concentrate on her otherworldly fires. The demon howled as they fought, biting and clawing at Applejack's flesh as the earth pony tried to get the advantage on the ground. The two broke their clinch and stood upright, staring each other down.

"Git out of my little sister's body right this instant, ya yellow belly coward!"

"*Never,*" the Desire demon said rearing up on her hind legs, "*The child's body is mine to command, to control!*"

Applejack sighed before rearing up herself. "Then this is gonna hurt me a lot more than it's gonna hurt you." Faster than Twilight could tell, her fellow Warden spun around and extended her back legs with force, hooves connecting against the face of the Desire demon. The Fade monster flew, colliding against the wall with a loud *thud*.

As powerful as Desire demons were with magic, they were frail in comparison to other creatures of the Fade. Coupled with possessing the body of a little filly, the body of the demon was weak and easily felled. The prone form of twisted demon began to glow, transforming once again into the unconscious filly Applebloom.

While the rest of the ponies stood stunned as to what exactly had occurred in the Arl's meeting hall, Applejack paid no heed, rushing to her sister's side, cradling the small form in her forehooves. "I'm so sorry," she whispered, avoiding contact with still reverberating false horn, "Ah didn't mean to hurt ya Applebloom. Everything is gonna be okay, ya hear? Everything is gonna be okay. We'll fix ya, we'll fix ya."

Twilight looked around and began to help with damage control as ponies moved around in silence. The guards dragged away their burnt companion as well as the corpse of the former court wizard out into other rooms, while Dash kept herself busy trying to calm down Scootaloo. Spike moved to the great doors, opening them a crack before they swung wide, allowing not only the morning sun into the hall, but the rest of the party as well, galloping at full tilt to see if they had made it in time.

“We beat back the zombies Twilight,” Pinkie Pie said, “Those rotten nasties won’t give anypony any more trouble, no siree Bob! Which is funny, because I don’t know any Ser Bob now that I think about, but I bet somepony kept telling a Ser Bob ‘no’ and that’s why we have that saying...”

Shale stepped forward, one hoof loud enough to get Pinkie to stop for a moment. “What the pink pony is trying to say is that we have attained victory, and many villains were squished. The day or night as it were, is ours.”

“What about you Twilight,” said Fluttershy, “Did you stop the source of the zombies? Is everypony safe?”

Twilight looked back at Applejack holding Applebloom close, and then shook her head. “The day may be ours, but there is still a lot to do.”

There was always more to do.

Chapter 15

Uncertain Paths

Applejack let out a loud yawn as she walked through the halls away from Applebloom's chambers, having spent the majority of the day there just watching over her kin who slept soundly in her bed, though the false horn had still not gone away. Adjusting her favourite hat, Applejack tried her best to appear calm and collected before all her friends, but knew it was simply not meant to be. The bags under her eyes were enough to tell the story that the earth pony did not rest.

Only because she wouldn't sleep, not when there was still a threat to the lives of her loved ones. Even though Applebloom was asleep, it was only thanks to the combined spells of Trixie and Rarity, who used an incantation and a charm respectively to keep the little filly calm, as well as to hold the Desire demon within at bay.

A great mercy was that her friends and Braeburn were really doing their best to bring Red Apple Acres under control. The Bann of Appleoosa returned to the front where his soldiers were fighting the combined might of Loghoof and Maim, only to return shortly after discovering that many soldiers had switched sides during the conflict or even outright deserted, enough to cause the opposing force to retreat. Many of the soldiers held distaste with Maim's actions, while many more were simply disgruntled that the two nobles had not paid them their stipend.

Fluttershy had joined the town's Chantry in helping with the healing process, serving the wounded and helping the lost in finding their loved ones, while later on presiding over countless final rites. So many proud ponies gone, all slain by a plan cooked up by Arl Maim and executed by sending a troublesome rogue unicorn to Red Apple with Loghoof's approval. Their plan had worked, in its own way; Red Apple suffered greatly from the plot by Maim. Applejack gritted her teeth in anger; both would answer for their crimes.

Macintosh was still sick, his forehead incredibly hot with fever, but otherwise silent and unmoving except for the continuous rise and fall of his

chest. His eyes were closed and his face was as serene as ever. Whatever sickness gripped the Arl of Red Apple would not let go without a fight.

Applejack had brought in Rainbow Dash to investigate what could have brought on the illness, only to discover that the Arl's favourite chewing grass was laced with something called "deathweed", and apparently there was enough on the grass to take down a buffalo. Macintosh was no buffalo, yet the fact that he was alive and still fighting the sickness was more than enough to show that the Warden's older brother was more than match for any weed, deadly or otherwise.

Still, he was going to need a miracle to ever wake up. As far as the healers were concerned the deathweed poisoning was incurable, thus many had already given up hope on Macintosh's recovery. There were already whispers that Loghoof would use his power as regent to install a new Arl of Red Apple, one that was loyal to him once Macintosh died or was deemed unfit to defend his arling.

The burden of everything that had occurred in such a short time weighed heavily on the farm pony's shoulders. Applejack and Twilight were, as far as they knew, the only two Grey Wardens in Equestria to stand against the Blight. They had no official government support, instead being branded as traitors by a traitor sitting on the throne. They were able to recruit the unicorns to the cause to fight the ponyspawn, but there was still uniting the donkeys of Orzamule and the Pegasi of the Eastern Dales to the grey banner.

Applejack was also the king's daughter, which would lead into conflict with Blueblood's wife Queen Armeria. Red Apple also needed a member of the Apple family watching over the recovery process after the undead attack.

"What tree did ah buck to get all these bad apples," Applejack said in a quiet mutter as she traversed the halls of the castle. Up ahead in the hall she could see Rarity approach her, a look of concern on her face as the witch's daughter cringed at the sight of the earth pony's fatigued face.

"Applejack, dear, you look simply awful!" *Rarity was never once to mince words*, Applejack thought as she walked with Rarity, *but how is that really supposed to help me feel better?* "You simply must get some sleep. A bath too while you're at it, and I'm sure we can mix something to help your

complexion, the puffiness under your eyes is quite atrocious. Maybe at least a few strokes from a brush for your mane?"

"Ah don't need any cleanin' when we got bigger apples to bake, ah tell you what," Applejack snapped, pointing a hoof at the Rarity on the right. *Wait, when have there been two Rarities?* "I just need to know that my brother and sister are gonna be okay, okay?"

While her words were filled with strength, her body was now openly rebelling, Applejack letting loose a long, loud yawn as a symbol of her fatigue. Rarity crossed her hooves, not saying a word as she nodded her head to a large mirror in the hallway.

"Oh hey, it's that there big mirror Blueblood liked," Applejack said as she turned to her reflection. The sight of her face made the former templar reel back. She knew she had bags under her eyes, but didn't expect those bags to be black, wrinkly, and appearing to be filled to the rim with lumpy apples. Bloodshot eyes stared back at the reflection in front of her, with one eye seemingly trying to droop, only to perk back up and begin the cycle anew.

With a heavy sigh, she turned to her unicorn friend, though they did not see eye to eye. "Maybe yer right, Rarity," Applejack said in admission, returning her gaze to the mirror, "Ah guess ah do look like a tree racked with fungus. But Red Apple needs me, and so does the party and the Wardens and..."

"And you will help no pony if you don't take care of yourself first." Her words were fierce, brooking no argument, yet there was no harshness underlined, instead only a tone of great concern. "I know you want to be there for everypony, but in this ragged state, you'll fall down flat on your face. Rest for a few hours at least; we'll come by right away and get you if anything happens at all."

Applejack conceded, following Rarity back to the guest chambers. Once they arrived, both ponies said farewells before going their separate ways, Rarity to help with maintaining Red Apple and Applejack finally getting some much needed rest.

As the door closed behind her, Applejack fell onto the bed, her hat falling off her head with little grace as it landed on its side. She rolled onto her

back, looking up at the blank castle ceiling. With a heavy sigh, the earth pony closed her eyes in an attempt to let sleep overtake her.

Her nerves said otherwise. Applejack was not the kind of pony to simply sleep when work had to be done, but the prissy pony was right in that if she didn't recover from her fatigue, she could bring more harm than benefit to the rebuilding effort.

Think about what yer friends are doing, Applejack thought as she closed her eyes, they're doing their gosh darnest to help ya, and you need to be in top shape to help them. Inside the quiet bedchamber, she focused her thoughts on the journey and where it would take their party next, if only to distract herself from the present and allow sleep to rule for a few hours at least.

Twilight awoke with her head pounding once again, groaning as she made her way to the wash basin to give her face a quick dunk. The water was warm and refreshing at least, giving her a feeling of cleanliness after a long night of travelling in the dirt and fighting monsters. The stench of death still lingered in the halls of the castle, but there was a new air of calm around the castle now that the ponies who worked the building were striving to return it to a state more familiar.

She left the guest room that was offered and began to make her way down to the court hall where she was going to meet her friends to discuss where to move on from here. Out of the corner of her eye, Twilight saw Rarity turn away from another of the guest rooms, her eyes marred with concern.

"Oh, good morning dear," Rarity said, "I was just making sure Applejack got some well-deserved rest. She's been up all night watching over Applebloom and the Arl. I do hope we can find a way to help both of them. My ward and Trixie's incantation will last a long time, but still..."

"We'll find a way," Twilight said with reassurance, "We'll find the book of spells used by the unicorn Arl Maim sent over and see if we can't find a reversal spell. Then we'll head to the Chantry and ask for help from the sisters there to find the Mane of Stars."

Rarity stopped in her tracks, appearing dumbfounded. "You actually want to go after an old legend?" Twilight nodded her head as she continued walking down the stairs, being careful to avoid the castle staff still busy with their duties.

"Flemeth was supposed to be a legend," retorted Twilight, "But it turns out she's real. In any event, I don't think we have any other options. The Arl needs to be healed, the demon expelled from Applebloom, and what we have available just isn't enough."

"What about traditional means of exorcism?"

"The Desire demon is heavily attached to Applebloom through the false horn. If we remove it, we could risk brain damage, if we go into the Fade, we could risk being possessed ourselves or hurting Applebloom. If we had the help of the Tower, it would be easier but..."

"That would mean exposing little Sweetie Belle and likely Dinky as well, something I will not allow." Twilight raised an eyebrow as Rarity stepped in front of her, "If the Tower comes here, they bring the templars. They'll take away Dinky and likely do something horrible to Sweetie Belle, and I will not stand by and let the templars do what they want because of some Pride demon possessed ruffian painting the images of apostates everywhere."

Twilight looked on as the unicorn with the violet mane kept walking. "If the Mane of Stars is what we need to find, then that is what we shall find," Rarity said, "I will follow your lead Twilight, though I want you to consider that we should do our best to save everypony we can. None of this was their fault: not Arl Macintosh, Applebloom or Sweetie Belle's. They are victims, and we should do what we can to make sure they are not victims a second time."

Rarity turned away then, heading in the direction of the dungeons where Sweetie Belle still hid, leaving Twilight alone in the halls of Red Apple Castle. She let out a heavy sigh as she turned into the court hall, noting that Bann Braeburn was giving officers orders while Trixie was in a corner, apparently flustered. When the blue unicorn saw Twilight approach, her horn began to glow, levitating a large book upwards. At least, what was left of a large book. Twilight's ears drooped, knowing all too well what this meant.

“We found this in the wizard’s chamber,” Trixie said, “There is nothing readable left of the book. The demon must have torched it after taking the filly as its host. Reversing the spell is going to be very difficult, even for someone as wonderfully gifted as me.”

Twilight said nothing as she began to pace the room, trying to gather her thoughts as to what their next move should be. Without the Arl, they could not stand up to Loghoof and Maim as long as few other nobles stood against them. They could ask Braeburn, but one Bann was not going to convince the majority of the Bannorn, and the Teryn had the support of the much better equipped Arlings. Applebloom needed to be healed, but all methods she could think of were too dangerous. They needed a miracle.

They were going to go after a legend. “Trixie,” Twilight said at last, “Wait here while I gather everypony and bring them back here within the hour. I’m also going to the Chantry to talk to the sisters there about the Mane of Stars, and yes I am planning to go after a myth.”

Before Trixie could say anything in protest, Twilight was already galloping out of the main hall’s doors and rushing towards the town. She passed by several guards who turned to see a sprinting unicorn dash past them as if there was another crisis. Her staff floated by her side matching speed perfectly as she bounded out of main gate and onto the hilly road.

Pinkie was on the road with Rainbow Dash in the sky in an effort to remove the landmines from the road. The pink pony had her nose buried in a map, pointing out one area with a hoof.

Rainbow swooped down the ground, gripping a large rock in both hooves and hovered to the point where Pinkie indicated. As Twilight neared the bomb-removal duo, Pinkie looked up at the incoming mage, then back to her map of mines, then back up with a look of fear.

“Twilight! STOP!” The jarring shout from the grenadier made Twilight skid across the ground to a halt. She looked down to see an ornate round shell on the ground, the trigger raised high and ready for a waiting hoof to detonate it. Twilight’s eyes bulged as she looked down at the lyrium-based explosive, stepping away slowly. One more step and she would be blasted to pieces.

“See? This is why I don’t like making landmines!” Pinkie stepped carefully on the path towards Twilight, pushing against her body until she was well enough away. Rainbow dash flew over to the mine, looking at Pinkie who nodded a signal. With a grunt, the cyan pegasus dropped the large rock onto the mine. Twilight shielded her eyes with a hoof as a blast of smoke and blue fire erupted from the bomb.

“I am so sorry!” Pinkie clung to Twilight, tears brimming in her eyes, “You almost got blown up by my work, and if anypony got hurt by anything I make I would feel so awful not only that but if it were you I would never forgive myself but we needed to trap the path to beat the zombies but you almost got hurt and...and...”

Twilight hushed the sobbing pony who stuck close to her side, trying to bring the situation under control. Dash had landed next to them, patting Pinkie’s shoulder with a hoof for some measure of comfort. “Don’t worry Pinkie, everything is fine,” she said in an effort to calm Pinkie down, “I’m sorry I made you make those landmines. I didn’t know how strongly you felt against them. I’ll never force you to make something you don’t want to make ever again against ponies.”

We do what we must. The words of Duncan and the purpose of the Grey Wardens told Twilight that her word to Pinkie would become broken if they needed to make use of the explosive traps again. Could Twilight keep such a promise that Pinkie need not make such dangerous weapons? All around her on the dirt path was the telltale sign of the effect the mines had on the incoming battle. She had heard of the attack on Red Apple and what role the defenders played, including how the mines had thinned out the marauding undead.

“We’ll adjust our tactics next time,” said Twilight, “We’ll try to find an alternate solution if we can. I’m just glad and very proud to have such a responsible pony out here removing the hazards to make sure nopony else gets hurt.”

“And you, Dash, thank you for helping Pinkie. I’m sorry I rushed right into such a dangerous zone without thinking and worried the both of you.”

“Don’t worry about, Twi,” Dash said, “We got everything here covered. That was actually the second last mine. Once we get the one I was gonna blow, we’ll be ready for whatever else we need to do. Isn’t that right, Pinkie?”

Pinkie’s tears dried quickly, grabbing both Dash and Twilight in a big hug. “As long as we are all together, we’ll keep winning and saving ponies and then we’ll never need to use bad bombs ever ever forever again and we’ll have a big party and ponies can be happy again!”

When the last landmine was safely disposed of, Twilight went about telling Dash and Pinkie her plan to find out everything she could about the Mane of Stars. Dash expressed doubt about going after something that may not exist, but Twilight had expected this. What she did not expect was Pinkie agreeing with the idea that the Mane of Stars existed, and was just waiting to be found.

“Somepony once told me ‘all myths are true, but few are accurate’,” Pinkie said as they walked together down the path towards the town, “If the story of the Mane of Stars has been around for so long, why shouldn’t it be real? Ooh! Maybe the Mane grants wishes! Oh, I could wish for the must supertastical party ever and everypony could be invited! Or maybe I could wish for all those mean ponyspawn become not-so-mean, and then have super - duper -fantastic - completely - off-the-hook party of all time!”

It was a refreshing thought filled with optimism that made Twilight smile with her friends, enjoying the typical line of thinking Pinkie brought forward even if it was a little too hopeful or completely bizarre. There was also some measure of wisdom to be gleaned from the earth pony’s words, and after seeing unbelievable things such as demons, ponyspawn, the Fade and Flemeth herself, perhaps the Mane of Stars was real as well.

They left once they made it to the town, with Pinkie and Dash returning to the castle while Twilight continued on her way to the Chantry. This was not a meeting Twilight was looking forward to; for the most part the Chantry sisters she met in the Tower were condescending if not outright cold towards her and the other unicorns. It likely didn’t help that they had the templar order to maintain whatever hold they wanted over the Tower. With the exception of Fluttershy, Twilight did not know how sisters outside of the Tower acted. Even after saving the town, there would still be distrust because the core of the attacks was caused by a unicorn. There was some

hope that they would be at least somewhat similar to the kind pegasus Twilight had come to rely on.

She found some comfort in seeing the Chantry no longer as packed as it once was, with all the ponies who had hidden away inside having returned to the township proper. There were still many injured ponies inside, as well as those simply paralyzed by fear of the outside world. Many of the fillies and colts Twilight had seen when she first arrived were gone, but the few that did remain still held despair in their eyes. Loved ones were lost during the darkened nights, never to be heard from again.

If Twilight was going to help any pony young and old, she was going to need help finding the Mane of Stars. As she approached the assembled Chantry sisters, Fluttershy among them noticed Twilight and walked towards her, her soft smile bringing a new light to the entire Chantry.

“Oh, hello Twilight,” Fluttershy said, ignoring the disdainful looks of the other sisters, “I hope you had a good rest. What brings you to the Chantry? Has something happened to the Arl and little Applebloom?”

“There hasn’t been any changes, and what I’m about to suggest is going to sound...” Twilight stopped for a moment as Fluttershy watched with expectant eyes. *Is this going to sound far-fetched to a pony like Fluttershy who claimed to have received a vision from Celestia herself and seen the firebird, the herald of Sun Goddess inside her dreams?* If anypony was likely to support Twilight’s notion it was the pegasus Chantry sister.

Twilight explained her plan to find the Mane of Stars to Fluttershy, hoping that the yellow pegasus could use some connection with the Chantry to find out as much information as she could. Once Twilight finished, Fluttershy considered the plan for a moment before asking the unicorn to wait as she walked over to the other sisters. They spoke for a moment before splitting into several directions, each going into different rooms of the Chantry. As they went their separate ways, Twilight looked over the books in the shelves that sat in the main hall, if only out of curiosity as to what the Chantry taught compared to that of the Tower.

Among the several volumes of the Chant of the Sun and Moon were several history books as well as anthologies of stories and legends. Nothing that seemed to have any practical value even though it was likely

that the Chantry controlled education throughout Equestria. Even compared to Equestria's Tower and all the other Towers across the world, the Chantry would have the greatest gathering of scholars and researchers to educate the masses and learn more about the world. There had to be at least several scholars who found some headway in discovering the Mane of Stars.

Twilight levitated a book titled "History of the Imperial Age". It was a record of the old world during the height of Imperium rule and its fall to not only Luna, but the Second Blight. As Twilight flipped through the pages, several entries caught her attention. One was about rise of the First Blight and the how it decimated the northlands of the Imperium:

After the ascension of Luna to join her sister in the Seat of the Heavens, the Unicorn Imperium splintered into two distinct factions: one that had converted to the new Chantry of the Sun and the Moon, and another who still held on to the worship of the Old Gods, despite their draconian masters having been banished by the power of Luna. The two factions continued to fight a bloody civil war, until the first breach in the land opened and spewed forth the dark tide that was the ponyspawn.

The Imperium was ravaged a second time by the ponyspawn since their rise, now a shattered empire that has never been able to recover its power since. The First Blight turned its attention to Filais and Yokefelach, tearing the land apart as they neared victory. In an act of desperation, the newly formed Chantry called for all the faithful nations of the land to unite in a holy gallop to fight against the ponyspawn. They also extended an olive branch towards the Walkers of the Grey, who for years had been looked on with suspicion.

The Walkers of the Grey were long known to being the most capable and skilled in battle against the ponyspawn, however little was known about them since the rise of the evil tide except that a small group of Walkers had better fortune against the monsters than the majority of Imperium forces. The Imperium had declared the Walkers heretical and even in league with ponyspawn they fought often against, and despite the fall of that empire, the feelings of mistrust lingered still. Many of their practices that were known, such

as ritually marking their bodies with the blood of ponyspawn were deemed bizarre, and even Chantry scholars today wonder if the Grey Wardens continue these practices of their ancestors. There were many instances recorded that the Walkers took the blood of the ponyspawn to use in dark rites, but this is only rumor, even amongst the Grey Wardens of today. The Walkers were exiled to the Dark Tunnels, where they carried out their battles and rituals in secrecy until the First Blight spilled into the land above.

The gesture of peace was accepted, and special rights and protections were given to the newly formed Grey Warden order for as long as they fought with the Chantry against the ponyspawn. This includes their Right of Conscription, the promise that the order would not be used as bargaining chips in politics against other nations, as well as the formation of treaties with the various nations, including the pegasi of the Eastern Dales and the donkeys of Orzamule.

With the defeat of the First Blight and the complete collapse of Imperial rule over the world, this marked the end of the Imperial Age and the beginning of the Exalted Age, which saw the growth of the Chantry expand far beyond the borders of Equestria and Filais, its influence being felt as far as Pura Raza and the Free Plains...

The Grey Wardens had a large effect on history, but just like anything else, what the Wardens had enjoyed was easily forgotten if convenient. The situation now, as well as the supposed rebellion in Equestria caused by the wardens was more than enough testament to that. Still, Twilight was grateful that the treaties she held had been honoured by the Unicorn Tower, with hope still high that they will be honoured again by the donkeys, pegasi, as well the support of Arl Macintosh and his influence with the rest of Equestria's nobility.

Yet as she skimmed through the text, there was no mention of where the followers of Luna had buried her remains including the Mane of Stars. She searched through several more books and found nothing on the subject. It was as if the entire legend was simply word of mouth, or simply disregarded as meagre fantasy.

As Twilight put the books back neatly on the shelves, Fluttershy approached with a small bag filled with several scrolls of parchment. The

other sisters joined them, some bearing scrolls as well, while others came empty hoofed. Twilight thanked them and began opening the scrolls one by one, wincing at the apparent chicken-scratch that was the excuse for writing. While it was true that not every pony could write as neatly as a unicorn with magic, she had seen several ponies write just as well with proper mouth work and a quill.

What notes she could read belonged to a “Brother Biblio,” and they detailed how he travelled all across Filais and Equestria to find the Temple of Luna, where the Mane of Stars was supposedly protected.. The sisters said that Biblio was a scholar from Filais who spent his life looking for Mane of Stars and had stopped by Red Apple months before heading to Trotterim to visit the main temple there and then apparently he travelled north to the Frosttop Mountains.

“They say Brother Biblio kept reciting this Twilight,” said Fluttershy as she pushed another sheet of parchment to Twilight. It appeared to be a hastily drawn note, with a short message that sounded more like a piece of poetry. Fluttershy leaned in close to read the note for herself as Twilight recited the note aloud:

*“Strength of heart, strength of the mountain,
The underkings carved her tomb there.
Fierce her fury, fierce as the gale,
The sky lords summoned the storm there.
Long trek south, long to her first home,
The earth walkers brought her stars there.
Words of the Chant, words of power,
The Fade dreamers protect her there.
Here she lays, here she waits,
To follow her path and meet her there.”*

Strength of the mountain, Twilight mused to herself as she lifted her map out of her saddle bag to look it over. Brother Biblio had travelled to the Frosttop mountains which made sense as they were the largest mountain range in the highlands. Records from the Tower spoke that they were very dangerous, not only due to the chilling temperatures but all manner of strange and ferocious creatures living there.

The templars and the various unicorns who came back with stories of the outside world had said anypony who ventured into deep the Frosttop mountains were never heard from again. If the followers of Luna were going to hide the Mane of Stars anywhere, there would be the best place to ensure the relic never fell into the wrong hooves.

The underkings must have meant the donkeys, but they were known for their reclusion. Luna must have done something to have the donkeys wish to construct her tomb in the side of a mountain. Or maybe it was even inside a mountain, like how Applejack described Orzamule.

Fierce as the gale would indicate the powerful blizzards that made climbing the mountain nearly impossible. A temple on top of a mountain with such storms protecting the summit would make accessing the tomb a difficult trial, if not a lethal one. The sky lords would have referenced the pegasi, the only civilization Twilight knew of that had control over the weather. Now that power had been lost to time and centuries of warfare seeing the pegasi numbers become ever thinner.

If they did decide to climb the Frosttop mountains, they would be up against the very forces of nature, something completely unpredictable and savage when in comparison to the ponyspawn and demons of the Fade. They would have to traverse through the range and hope to stumble upon the tomb. As far as plans go, this was shaping up to be the most foolhardy.

Long trek to her first home also pointed to the Frosttop Mountains only because it was recorded that Luna was born in Equestria, or was often quoted as longing to return home to Equestria during her campaign against the Imperium. If there was any good news, it was that they wouldn't have to travel to Filais or another nation.

Words of power must indicate that unicorns placed spells on the tomb to protect the Mane of Stars. Twilight shook her head in frustration as she looked over the poem and the rest of Biblio's notes. "Where did this poem come from?" Twilight turned to the sisters, trying to hide her dread of where they were likely going to find a legend.

"Biblio kept reciting the poem," said one of the sisters, "When we asked which holy or poetic text it came from, he smiled and said he wrote it himself after all the clues he discovered. He appeared to live only for the

Mane of Stars, everything about his life as he told it was about finding the relic.”

“And now we have to find him to find the Mane of Stars,” Twilight said, looking at Fluttershy. “How am I going to convince the others that this isn’t some wild goose chase? What if we get to the mountains and nothing is there? This isn’t like climbing a tower or getting to the heart of a castle.”

“Is that doubt in its voice? I thought it would have a plan the moment it figured where we need to go.” The condescending voice with an echo could only have come from Shale as the golem pony walked into the Chantry, its heavy hooves crushing the stone floor beneath it with powerful clops. The sisters quickly backed away with frightened eyes despite Fluttershy smiling at the golem as Shale moved to join the pair.

“It has confronted pony spawn, demons, and now zombies,” Shale said while looking down at Twilight from its tall stature, “Surely a mountain is no great threat. It will also have the Strong and Mighty Shale by its side, so that means victory is assured. Do you like that title? The loud one inspired me to come up with something for myself, though I believe it fits me than ‘Great and Powerful’ fits the it.”

Twilight covered her face with her hoof as her magic furled up all of Brother Biblio’s notes and the poem, tucking them away in her bag. What was Shale going on about already having a plan to climb a mountain? As far as the lavender unicorn was concerned, that was the entirety of their plan. It was the only hope they had to save the Arl and Applebloom. It was a shot they would have to take.

“Do you think we can find the Mane of Stars Shale?” Twilight asked the golem. Shale laughed, a hollow, reverberating noise that was more incredulous than anything

“I have no particular interest in such mundane relics squishy ponies put stock in,” Shale said, “After all, I have myself to believe in. As the only golem in Equestria, I like to believe I should be considered a grand relic to be seen with awe and fear. As far as climbing a mountain is concerned, I will be with it, and the others will be with it I am sure. Strength in numbers and all that and if there is one thing I know it is strength. Even if I do constitute the majority of it all.”

Shale was right. Twilight could count on the support of all her friends to challenge the mountain and find the Mane of Stars. Their journey was going to take them to depths of the earth and to the dark reaches of the Everfree Forest: what was a mountain compared to the other two? Danger was behind every tree and shadow that lurked their path, a mountain would be no different.

“All right,” Twilight said with a smile towards the golem and the yellow pegasus, “We’ll head back to the castle to meet with the others and then we’ll figure out the best way to navigate the Frosttop Mountains.”

They left the Chantry to find themselves out in the midday sun. They walked with Shale doing most of the talking, mostly gloating about past battles that the golem remembered, but when pressed about how the stone pony could remember such battles and not its history, Shale somehow shrugged it away as “remembering the good parts.”

As they made their way into the main court hall, the rest of the party were already standing around and chatting, waiting for Twilight to arrive. They stood around Twilight, with Applejack stepping forward towards the unicorn mage.

“We’re going to find the Mane of Stars.” Both Twilight and Applejack said this in unison, which only elicited a smile from the two Wardens. It warmed Twilight’s heart that she and Applejack were sharing the same thoughts about finding the myth. Confidence was rising knowing that the Grey Wardens were united in this endeavour.

“I’ve found out where a Chantry scholar named Brother Biblio went searching for the Mane of Stars,” Twilight explained, drawing her map from her saddle bag, “He went to the Frosttop Mountains, leaving a clue in the form of a poem.”

Twilight levitated the small parchment page and brought it to the eyes of the other ponies. They each read the poem, their faces appearing to mull over the words written by the educated monk. Spike was the last one to read the poem, who quickly returned it to Twilight with a puzzled look in his eyes.

“That mountain range is extremely dangerous Twi,” Applejack said, “We’re gonna need a lot of cold weather and mountaineerin’ supplies. Not tryin’ to be a negative nelly, but I don’t know how well all of us can climb those peaks. The unicorns of the group aren’t really physical specimens if ya catch my meanin’.”

“We’ll have to manage.” Twilight brought up her map to show how they were going to progress to the mountain range. They would take Ditzzy’s boat north across Lake Blackwater past the Tower to the northern edge of the lake. Then they would hoof their way to the northern passage leading to Frosttop mountains. From there, it was a search for the right mountain top where the tomb was being held.

A shiver ran through Twilight’s spine as an image of a cold snowy wilderness ran through her head. Biting winds the likes she had only felt when they were under control. Nights that defined deep freeze. Wild animals that survived the harsh climates on ferocity and bloodlust for any pony foolish enough to wander through their domain. If they found the temple where the Mane of Stars, what sort of defences would they encounter? Would they be stopped the moment they stepped through the hallowed halls of an ancient tomb?

“Those mountains sound scary,” Fluttershy whispered. Pinkie Pie wrapped her foreleg around the former bard with her usual broad smile on her face.

“Just think about how much fun we could have!” The pink earth pony always seemed to find a positive spin on any situation. “We could have a mountain climbing party! We can sing hiking songs, and play outdoor games! Ooh, we can build snow ponies and have snowball fights and do all sorts of fun snowy things! Oh Twilight and Trixie have never seen this snow, this is going to be so great! And once we find the Mane of Stars, we can make wishes for parties and happiness and laughter and...”

“And once we find the Mane of Stars, we’ll use them to heal Applebloom and Arl Macintosh.” Twilight looked to see all her friends stand around her expecting something else. “You all believe we can find the Mane? That we can find a legend? What if we go to the Frosttop Mountains and find nothing?”

“Darling, we are going to have to cross that bridge once we get there,” Rarity said, “Legends have some measure of truth to them, and a single pony scholar from the Chantry had to be on to something if he set out on this journey alone. I think together we’ll have much better odds.”

Looks of confidence surrounded Twilight, each pony ready to leave on a moment’s notice. Twilight smiled at her friends, telling them to gather whatever supplies they felt were going to be necessary. They would need warm clothes, plenty of food and water as well as means to melt snow into drinking water while in the mountain range as well as climbing supplies such as hooks and ropes. It was quite the list, but all of it was going to be needed if they were going to survive the climb, much less actually make it to their goal.

They split into several directions throughout the castle and back to town to find the needed supplies for the trip, except for Shale and Twilight. Shale shrugged when Twilight gave it a confused look.

“I don’t need supplies,” Shale said plainly, “No need to eat or be close to heat. Perhaps I shall find some lyrium in the event the unspeakable occurs. I have enough cracks and crevices enough as is simply by age. Age! I am still a young golem after all. I have appearances to keep up.”

The rock pony walked out with quaking hoof steps, leaving Twilight alone in the large room. Her face broke into a smile, until she couldn’t help but giggle as she went about her own business to prepare for the long journey north.

“So this how it’s gonna be, Mac,” Applejack said to her comatose brother, trying not to see the pained expression on his face as his breathing was incredibly shallow and weak, “We’re goin’ to the northlands, to them Frosttop Mountains. We’re gonna find the Mane of Stars, and we’re gonna heal you and Applebloom real well, ya hear? You’ll be back on yer hooves real soon. We’ll find it, even if we have to go to BlackCanter and back. Everything’s gonna be all right, ya hear?”

Applejack leaned in and kissed her older brother on the forehead, something she had not done since she was a filly. It was what she should

have done when she was taken by the Chantry to become a templar. This was not how their reunion was supposed to go, but it was enough for now. They were going to find the Mane of Stars, even if it killed Applejack. Which was likely to happen on such a damned fool errand.

Damned fool errand ah'm agreein' to, she thought as she left the Arl's bedchambers and headed towards the castle armoury to begin preparing her supplies. There was no point in fussing about it further; the look Applejack saw in Twilight's eyes told her that the path was decided and without any argument to challenge her, they were going north.

There were only a few guards in the armoury, but they were quick to help out Applejack find all the gear she was going to need. One thing she never thought about was the quality of her armour, having not looked into getting her simple splint mail repaired since Ostequus. Many pieces were bent and damaged if not outright missing, and the armour would not last another fight against any enemy whether it was a calculating solider or a savage thelock.

The earth pony Warden decided to replace her armour for proper protection, not only against weapons and claws, but against the frozen cold of the northlands. There was plenty of winter gear unused during the middle of summer, including plate armour with a woollen quilt undershirt. She fitted the armour on with the help of the guards, until Applejack was decked in the best protection she had ever worn. The plate was heavier than what she was used to, but there was a certainty that she would get the hang of wearing thick metal sheets on her frame.

Applejack looked around the armoury, thinking about grabbing a few extra pieces of armour for her friends. She asked the quartermaster for some help in finding the right armour sets, being directed to suits of chain and reinforced leather used by lighter infantry and scouts. It might take some convincing on her part, by Applejack was sure she could get Fluttershy into some light chain mail under her Chantry robes. Ponyspawn were no fools, and often made a beeline for anypony with a bow. She was also able to find a heavier suit of chain with metal plating that Pinkie could wear, whereas a suit of scout armour of reinforced leather would give Rainbow Dash added protection but still keep her vaunted mobility.

There was nothing she could find that would not over encumber the unicorns of the groups. Simple heavy wool cloaks were all she could think of as protection against the elements. They did have their magical barriers and shields to protect them, but this thought only brought a good chiding from within Applejack; she should be making sure that there was no need for them to use their spells to protect themselves.

Next Applejack looked over the weapons. She found a new sword for herself to replace the dull blade that she had used since Ostequus, one that not only held its sharp edge, but also bore the Red Apple symbol on the pommel. The sword bit felt right clenched in her teeth compared to the common blade she used for a long time. A good Red Apple blade for a good Red Apple pony.

The orange earth pony found an applewood bow for Fluttershy to replace the ash bow she had when they first met in Ponyring, as well as a quiver of arrows. Applejack then found a sturdy mace for Pinkie with a heavy but well-balanced steel head. The others didn't need weapons from the armoury; the unicorns had their staves, Rainbow Dash had her mother's dagger, and Shale was a cantering battering ram.

With aid, Applejack loaded a chest with all the gear she had picked out and pulled the container on a wagon out of the castle towards the dock. It felt good to do some simple work for a change rather than fighting monsters. Pulling a wagon filled with apples was something the young mare missed. Simple pleasures, simple burdens. Not the weight of an entire nation and its ponies on her shoulders.

It came to her surprise that Braeburn galloped up to her side as she was going down the hill path, matching her trot as she descended the beaten road filled with craters. "So you and all them mares are really gonna go head 'em on up north," he said, looking over at his cousin with a hopeful eye. Applejack simply nodded as she carefully traversed the damaged path.

"That's right," Applejack replied, moving through the town heading towards the docks, "We're gonna find the Mane of Stars. Might take us a while, so I'm leavin' Red Apple in yer hooves until we get back." Braeburn was well known for keeping Appleloosa a prospering part of the Bannorn, and the ponies there respected their Bann, even if he had a history of eccentricity.

He was just enthusiastic about seeing ponies prosper, which eased any concerns that Red Apple was being left unattended.

"I'll take good care of Red Apple till ya git back, cousin." Braeburn smiled. Together the two pushed the chest onto the ship with Ditzzy's help. With their cold weather gear safely stowed onto the ship, it was now time to work on navigation. Wasting time on Lake Blackwater simply would not do in Applejack's point of view.

"All right Ditzzy," Applejack said as she kept the grey pegasus's attention on her, "We are goin' north to the Frosttop Mountains. North, got it Ditzzy?"

"North!" she repeated, "We're sailing north!"

"Not south, we're already south, can't go much further south than this in a boat. Not west either, we already went west. Did some good there, don't need to go west though. East is right out, ya hear?"

Ditzzy nodded slowly. "You just want me to go north. Not any other direction. Just north."

"That's right!" Applejack smiled at Ditzzy, "Just pretend there are a lot of tasty muffins north. Them oatmeal flavoured ones ya like so much. Do you think ya can get us north if there are tasty muffins over yonder?"

"I know I can!" Ditzzy flew up to the helm of the ship, the hunger for baked treats on her mismatched eyes clear and apparent. "All aboard! Next stop: the muffin north!"

Hopefully with Ditzzy now under some measure of focus, they could make it across the lake with haste. With the lives of Macintosh and Applebloom in the balance, there was no time to waste getting lost on the lake. Applejack stayed on the boat helping Ditzzy and Dinky prepare as the rest of the party milled onto the deck while Braeburn said his goodbyes before heading back to the castle. Once again, all the ponies were ready to go except Shale, who stood back on the dock.

"It seems we are at this impasse once again," the golem said, looking up Twilight with an expectant look, "I'd rather not slog my way a lake again.

Couldn't it remove half of the useless junk in the hold? It is carrying the only golem in Equestria after all."

Twilight had a glint in her eye as she stepped towards the golem that made Applejack smirk. "Don't worry Shale," she began, "I have just the right spell for you that will make your trip on the boat as comfortable as possible."

Her horn began to glow, encasing the golem in a violet glow. Shale began to protest loudly as the magic lifted it much like any other object Twilight lifted with her horn's power. It was a strain, Applejack could see, but it seemed to work. The golem was lifted in the air and hovered to the center of the ship.

"This is degrading!" Shale glared at Twilight, who simply smiled.

"This lets you travel with your friends," she said, "Rarity and Trixie will switch off when I feel tired. Now we can get going."

The anchor was raised and the sails were lowered. As the wind took the ship off the dock and onto the lake proper, Applejack stood on the bow and saw the beckoning mountains ahead. Legends surrounded the Frosttop mountains, but fear gripped her heart wondering if they would become nothing more than myths on the winds if they failed.

Spike stayed in the cargo hold, feigning sleep as Twilight lowered him into the same basket he used as a bed during their trip from the Tower to Red Apple. Even if he wanted to sleep, the baby dragon would not let dreams of gemstones and Rarity enter his head, not when he was faced with the truth he had caused.

I pushed her into the Wardens, Spike thought as he rolled around in the basket staring blankly, I'm the one who shortened her life. She says it's not my fault, but she's just saying that to make me feel better. To put on a strong face for the rest of the group.

They had come so far and the threat of the pony pawn loomed ever closer over their heads he could not think of going up to Twilight and asking her to quit, to leave the Warden business to Applejack or the Wardens from Filais

or anypony else. She would refuse, saying they made it this far on the road, might as well continue on.

As the dragon tried to get some sleep, his mind raced for any solution he could find to make Twilight's life a little easier, a little better. Try as he might, Spike could only roll around in his bed, every idea dashed because he was too small or did not have the ability to accomplish them. There had to be a way he could do something. There just had to be.

Chapter 16

The Challenge of the Mountain

"I SEE YOU."

Twilight galloped through the battlefield as fast as her hooves could carry her. Bodies of the dead and dying lay strewn across the landscape as the darkened sky boomed with thunder. Hard rain fell from the storm clouds above, making the field of strife muddy and brutal to traverse on.

The smell of smoke and ash filled her lungs as she tried to locate Applejack. Trotterim burned behind her, under siege by the hoard ponyspawn as countless minotaurs tossed burning boulders into the city. Ponies screamed, trying to flee only to be swooped upon by swarms of screamers and donlocks. Their tormented wails echoed as they joined in the twisted harmony of chaos and death.

The Grey Wardens had raised an army. They were fighting the ponyspawn. They were losing.

"GIVE IN TO HOPELESSNESS. YOU CANNOT WIN."

The ponyspawn chasing her were getting closer, their sharp tusks and fangs eager to rend flesh from bone. Twilight could not stop galloping to fight them off, Applejack needed her. Her staff was broken and her breathing was ragged as she continued to make her way to where Applejack and the others were fighting. An explosion knocked her off her hooves and sent her sailing into the air.

Two ornllocks approached from the west, their horns blazing with power. Twilight gave out a cry as the thelocks pounced, biting and clawing at her coat as she struggled to escaped. She tried to fire off a spell, only to watch the bolt of energy fly off harmlessly.

"BEHOLD THAT WHICH YOU FACE. BEHOLD THE DREAD THAT BLANKETS THIS WORLD IN FIRE AND BLOOD AND DESPAIR."

Suddenly the ponyspawn ceased their savage attacks. One of the monsters grasped Twilight's mane with its bloodied mouth and forced the magical mare to look upward. From the sky came a great beast on terrible wings, its huge form shadowing the land as its roar making the land shake. The ponyspawn hissed and roared in unison with the dragon, rearing upwards in celebration of the coming of their master.

The arch demon landed, which caused the land around its massive form to quake as dust and ash was pushed by the upward draft from its wings. Twilight gasped as it loomed its huge head over to her. Twilight ignored the creature's jaws, focusing on what it was holding in its talons. With a careless toss, the broken body of Applejack was flung towards Twilight, bouncing across the ground and sliding towards the Warden in a sickening angle.

"YOU ARE NOTHING TO MY KIND, PONY. WE WERE GODS ONCE. WORSHIPPED AND FEARED. THE DREAD WE PLACED IN THE HEARTS OF ALL MORTALS ECHOED THROUGHOUT THE WORLD. WE WILL TAKE BACK OUR THRONES, OR WATCH AS THE WORLD BURNS AROUND US."

As Twilight looked on with horror at the body of her fellow Warden, her heart pounding and her breathing shallow. She would be next, and then the Equestrian Grey Wardens would be no more. Their army was defeated, they did not discover the cryptic ritual left by the Wardens of old, and now fate decreed they would all perish.

She bowed her head as the dragon roared triumphantly into the storm-filled skies, tears mixing with the rain as she prepared for the end. The arch demon reared back its long neck, a ball of black fire forming within its mouth.

"THE LIGHT AND THE GREY SHALL END, AND THIS WILL MARK AN ETERNITY OF DARKNESS. DESPAIR, MORTAL. YOU HAVE NO HOPE."

A stream of ebony flames flowed from the arch demon's mouth and engulfed Twilight. The pain was immense as she writhed on the ground, her flesh burning alive as she yelled out only to have no words or even sounds escape her lips. There was no hope; nothing could defeat something so powerful. It was all a fool's errand, everything...

“Twilight? Twilight! Wake up! It’s just a bad dream, a nightmare! You have to wake up!”

Twilight’s eyes shot open at the sound of Applejack’s voice along with the strong earth pony’s hooves shaking her unconscious body awake. The lavender mare launched herself upright in the bedding on the deck of Ditzzy’s ship, eyes wide as she looked around. It was still night, with Luna’s crescent moon along with the thousands of stars hanging in the sky.

Her chest hurt and as she wiped a hoof across her brow, she was surprised to find it soaked in sweat. She tried to speak, but her voice was coarse and her throat dry. Applejack lifted a small bowl of water for Twilight, who caught it in her magic and drank the water as if she hadn’t had a drop to drink in weeks.

When she finally took a moment to look around, Twilight noticed that everypony was looking at her with fearful eyes. “What... what happened?” she stammered, looking at Applejack, “I felt it. Everything was real. The images, the pain. I saw you die. I saw you *die*!”

“It’s just the arch demon tryin’ to get inside yer head, Twilight,” Applejack explained, “It’s part of bein’ a Warden. Trust me, it ain’t easy...”

Anger surged across Twilight’s features. “Another part of being a Warden? Just like the Joining? Just like how our lives are cut down to thirty years? Now *this*? Nightmares, from the arch demon itself! Is there anything else about the Wardens I need to know? Anything else Duncan should have told us?”

Applejack’s ears fell flat as the words struck home, sharper than any dagger. “Ah’m sorry Twilight,” she said, “Duncan made us swear to secrecy. He should have been the one to tell you everything.”

Twilight turned away from Applejack, trying to fight back more tears as memories of the nightmare get pushing back into the fold. “I felt it, Applejack. I felt every pain. I smelled the ash, the blood, I screamed with every claw and fang. And the black fire... by Celestia, the black fire. We can’t beat something like that, something so terrible, so evil.”

“Now snap outta it, Twi,” her fellow Warden said, resting a hoof on Twilight’s shoulder, “That critter said a lot of crazy stuff. Lots of despair and dread and all that, right?” Twilight nodded slowly, still hearing the echoing boom of the arch demon’s roar. Applejack offered a small smile, but it did not bring any comfort with it.

“I get those nightmares too, sugarcube,” she said in admission, “It’s just the way the archdemon tries to break us, tries to make us give up on the fight. It’s only gonna get worse too. Bad dreams like those mean the archdemon’s real close, getting ready to join its horde. Lucky we haven’t seen any big nasty dragons flying around, just Spike.”

“Hey!” The baby dragon gave Applejack an indignant look, “I can really nasty if I want to. I have sharp teeth and can breathe fire too!”

“Silly Spike,” Pinkie Pie said, pressing Spike’s cheeks together with her hooves, “You’re still an itty bitsy dragon. Now the archdemon probably sounds something like this!”

Pinkie reared up on her hind legs, waving her forelegs in a threatening motion as she bared her teeth. “Rawr!” she said in a mocking tone, “I am the fearsome archdemon! Fear me and my fearful fearing-ness! Rawr!”

Rainbow Dash leapt up, taking an offensive stance in front of the Arch Pinkie. “I, Rainbow Dash and the others, will stand tall to defeat you! Hoof em up, Archie, let’s get ready to rumble.”

The two ponies playfully growled at each other as their friends looked on with confused and amused looks on their faces. Each ‘hit’ was an exaggerated affair as they acted out their respective roles of villain and hero. Twilight felt the twinge of a smile creep onto her face as she watched the impromptu performance, Rainbow now exhibiting her rendition of everypony’s combat specialty.

“It’s Applejack with a hard buck to the head!” she said aloud as she mimicked the signature hind hoof kick of the blonde earth pony, “Then here comes Rarity with a lightning bolt!”

“An immaculate bolt, no doubt,” Rarity chimed in, peering over Flemeth’s grimoire. Rainbow ignored her, moving on with her motions.

“A grenade from Pinkie takes out his eyes while Shale comes in with a big head butt! Fluttershy fires an arrow all the way from the back, but it still strikes home! Trixie’s shield protects everypony as Twilight moves in with the weird Warden ritual thing on the small piece of parchment! Ooh! Parchment cut!”

“Now bringing in the final blow with all the speed and skill of a champion pegasus pony,” Rainbow Dash said as the fiendish Pinkie Pie’s eyes swam about in confusion, “With a blitzy buccaneer blaze so awesome ponies everywhere have to avert their eyes, she brings her dagger in deep for the kill! STAB!”

With the act of piercing the pink arch ponys flesh done, Pinkie Pie clutched at her heart with both hooves as she fell over in feigned death. “Oh what a world, what a world!” she cried out as she kicked her hooves in the air, “I am vanquished by the power of friendship! Oh woe is me! Blargle! Grrraahhhh!”

Pinkie shut her eyes tight as her tongue rolled while Rainbow struck a heroic pose. Only the sound of the boat passing through the water could be heard around them as the party stood dumbstruck at the performance. The energetic earth equine opened one eye, looking around at her friends as she tried to stifle a chortle. Whatever weak barriers against laughter Pinkie had constructed were felled with ease as she exploded in a fit of giggles. Rainbow Dash soon followed, rolling on the floor of the ship and laughing audibly at their little game.

Everypony smiled and laughed together as they enjoyed the antics of Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash, with the exception of Shale still voicing it’s dissent on being suspended in midair. Twilight walked over to the stone pony and Trixie who was channeling her magic, offering to take up the duty of keeping Shale aloft and not sinking the ship with its massive body. The lavender mage would not to fall back asleep now that she had both the memory of the archdemon and Pinkie’s performance, but she could give Trixie the forty winks she needed before they made it across the lake.

“Thank Celestia,” Trixie said as she released her spell as soon as Twilight’s magic wrapped around the golem, “This thing was giving Trixie the worst migraine.”

“That’s ‘Superior and All-Mighty Thing’ to it, thank it very much.” Shale’s glare did nothing as Trixie huffed off to the makeshift bedding on the deck to catch some much needed sleep. Shale’s attitude did not change much under the influence of another unicorn.

“You do realize it will take all of my vast and impressive will power to resist the urge to squish you all for this indecency.”

“We’ll be on solid ground soon enough Shale,” Twilight reassured, “If it’s worth anything to you, I apologize for doing this to you. No pony, golem or otherwise, should be as constricted as you are now.”

“Is that what it believes?” Shale looked down at Twilight with a stern look in its glowing eyes, “From what I have learned of its current world, the moment you are all born there are chains that bind worse than my control rod, simply because I had no choice in the matter of what I was forced to do, despite wanting to crush my old master’s skull so very much. Of which I am glad I finally did.”

“Don’t you have any happy memories?” Twilight wondered aloud to the floating golem. Shale’s eyes turned dark as it appeared to close them in contemplation.

“Happiness was never something I was allowed to possess for myself, unicorn,” Shale replied, “I remember my old master and all of his commands. I remember being sold to him by a donkey merchant. I remember being frozen in the Dark Tunnels without light crystals to show the way. So all I remember is darkness. Perhaps during my time in the dark underground, I had gone slightly mad. Allow me to also add that being suspended in midair like this does not help with my overall state of mind.”

Twilight’s mind began to imagine being the in the Dark Tunnels all alone just as Shale described. Matching the loneliness of the underground in addition to the lurking horrors Applejack mentioned, Twilight couldn’t help but shudder at the thought of simply sitting alone in the Tunnels and being

completely aware of everything around her. Perhaps Shale had gone insane from living under the earth for who knew how long.

The air went silent as Ditzzy's boat continued to traverse Lake Blackwater, with the Frosttop Mountains clearly visible from the deck. Twilight's breath caught in her chest as she finally took in the site of such grandiosity. They were the majestic kings of nature as they towered over the heads of ponies everywhere, their snow covered summits appearing as crowns overlooking all the land.

Somewhere on that mountain was a temple lost to both the elements and time, where the Mane of Stars was being held. Twilight watched as the mountains became even more ominous and foreboding as the ship drew near the northern shore of the lake. Alerting the party to their arrival, she readied them to leave the boat the moment it hit shore.

The boat landed across the shore much more softly than it did when they mistakenly made it to Stablesire, with Ditzzy lowering the gangway onto the shore. With her magic, Twilight lifted the stone pony away from the deck, setting the golem gently upon the shore while Rarity moved the chest of gear Applejack had compiled in Red Apple. Upon opening the container, the white unicorn recoiled in disgust at the assorted pieces of armour and clothing, gingerly levitating a heavy cloak like a dead rat.

"You can't honestly expect me to wear something like this," Rarity complained, "It completely clashes with my mane! I absolutely *have* to make adjustments."

"Ain't any time for your prissiness, Rarity," Applejack said as she tossed the heavy suit of chain intended for Pinkie Pie to the pink pony, "We're mountain climbin', not canterin' the streets of Trotterim."

Rarity huffed but did not say anything more, quickly moving thread and needle from her bag with some yarn to give the cloak a new hem. Twilight shook her head at her friends, somewhat amused that they could squabble about form versus function in battle armor as she replaced her own tattered Tower robes with the heavier gear from Red Apple. It may not look appealing, but the new clothes were very warm, the protection they offered

from the chill from the northern winds made her very grateful Applejack had compiled such an assortment of gear.

As the others put on their new sets of armour and readied cold weather supplies, Twilight levitated the map from her bag, looking over the illustrated parchment. Being held by the same magic was the poem written by Brother Biblio, which she looked at while studying the map.

Twilight turned her gaze to the mountains, trying to see if they could see something built into the side of the cliff face. Try as she might, the lavender unicorn could only strain her eyes trying to see past the blizzards that were striking around the mountain. Only an outline of the actual landmass could be seen through the storms that ravaged the surface.

"It's so... big," Fluttershy squeaked as she looked up at the mountain range. Rainbow Dash sighed with exasperation as the timid pegasus pony stopped putting on her new chain shirt over the woolen tunic.

"It *is* a mountain, you know," the rogue said, "They're supposed to be big."

Whatever bravado ran Rainbow's wings did not leak over to Fluttershy as she continued to stare hide eyed at the monument of nature. "It's so... steep."

Dash covered her face with a hoof. "Fluttershy, mountain. Mountain, Fluttershy," she introduced half-jokingly, "Don't they have mountains in Filais?"

"Not giant, scary mountains covered in blizzards that are so high it looks like they pierce the clouds." Fluttershy pointed a hoof at one tall mountain in particular, "Like that one. See how that point goes right through the clouds?"

Twilight looked back on the shadow of the mountain through the storms, looking at the summit that the Chantry sister had indicated. The summit was hidden under blizzards that surged amidst the top while the clouds around the top were a darker shade than those surrounding the mountain range.

“There,” Twilight said as she looked to the party, “That mountain is the one we need to search for the Mane. The poem said that the relic would be protected by storms, and those look like the fiercest ones.”

“Are you sure?” Rainbow asked while looking up at the mountain. Twilight shook her head. She needed to come up with something to give some sort of confidence to the others, if not for herself.

“No. It’s just my educated guess.” As much as it pained Twilight to admit, it was true. She was working on a hunch from a poem and what her eyes were telling her, yet nothing could change the fact that everything, even the legend itself was simply guess work. She guessed that they had to climb this mountain, she guessed that it would be up in the Frosttop, and she guessed that the Mane of Stars could do what the legends said and heal Arl Macintosh and Applebloom of their afflictions. Twilight tried to not let her frustrations show, but they were there deep inside and bubbling within.

There was only one way to go. Up.

“Come on,” she said, walking away from Ditzzy’s boat and towards the Frosttop Mountains, “We still have some walking to do before we reach the range, and we won’t make it just by standing here being scared of a big hill. The only way across and up the mountain is one hoof in front of the other. Let’s go.”

The trek across the land leading into the hills before the mountains had taken up the rest of the daytime and even extended through part of the night when Twilight called for a half to their march so they could set camp. As camp was being set, Twilight looked towards the first sign of snow, walking off to examine the strange powdered ice with Spike in tow. From the corner of her eye, she could also see Trixie following, equally intrigued by the frozen water.

She prodded the snow with a gentle hoof, taking in the new discovery with all of her senses. The snow felt cold to the touch, though nothing too uncomfortable and even made a slight crunch noise as the snow compacted against itself. Twilight chuckled despite herself, watching as

Spike and Trixie were mimicking her and exploring the snow themselves in much the same way.

Everything was new and exciting to the former denizens of the Unicorn Tower. Now that they had stopped for a moment, Twilight was able to look around the outside world with a wonder that simply could not be explored when running from one battle to the next.

Together with her friends, Twilight had crossed Lake Blackwater, seen ancient ruins of the Imperium, met kings and generals, and traversed a castle. The things she had seen, smelt, touch, tasted would make her the envy of many a unicorn within the confines of the Tower.

With every pleasant experience came the shadow of the journey. The ruins of Ostequus, while still majestic, would forever have their memory tainted by the betrayal of Loghoof, the loss of Duncan and the Grey Wardens, and the fall of the king. The Potpourri Wilds would be remembered as the first place she had encountered the ponyspawn, as well as her first real battle. She would remember the encounter with Flemeth, and how the old swamp hag chilled her to her soul with those cold yellow eyes and aura of immense magical power.

Not even the Tower, which Twilight thought she had known all her life, was safe from bloodstains in her memory. Between abominations, Maleficar, and being trapped in the Fade, it was a wonder how any happy moment was remembered amongst all the corpses and Dark Arts that would permeate through the Tower for years to come. Red Apple would also be stained with terrible memories of zombies and a possessed filly who only wanted to help her older brother.

There was, however, a light in all Twilight's travels. She was doing something good for the world in combating the ponyspawn and learning much more in the field of strife, rather than snug away in the corners of the Tower with books that likely would never have been updated. She had met an assortment of wonderful friends in places where the young mare would likely never have guessed.

Twilight could look to Applejack for her dependability, Rainbow Dash for her devotion to the group, and Fluttershy for being a source of caring in a world that rebuked such efforts. Rarity was always giving her time and

energy to help the others with whatever they needed even if they didn't know it, and Pinkie could always be counted on to raise everypony's spirits. Trixie was a kindred spirit even if the blue unicorn would never admit it, and Shale was not only strong, but also blunt in both words and actions. Like a rock to the face, it may be unpleasant, yet it was also as plain as day, something as reliable as the stone of which the golem was carved..

They were friends who had travelled far with her and rarely doubted the path they took. Twilight could count on them during the quest to unite the ponies of Equestria, as long as they were together.

Or so the lavender mage thought when she turned to say similar words to the party, only to be on the receiving end of a snowball to the face. After Twilight had wiped the snow from her face, she saw Pinkie giggling like a schoolfilly as she bunched up another projectile, gripping it in her tail and whipping it towards Spike.

Twilight smirked as her horn began glow, levitated several small mounds of snow and rolling them up in spheres of perfect dimensions. With a small amount of force she threw the snowballs at Pinkie, who deftly dodged them with ease and laughter. The snowballs continued to sail until they struck both Applejack and Rainbow Dash.

"Oh no!" Twilight gasped as she watched the not amused faces of her friends wipe the snow from their hides, "I'm so sorry, I was aiming for Pinkie!"

"Yer right about one thing, Twi," Applejack said with a dark look as her hooves worked on bunching up a snowball for herself.

"You will be sorry," concluded Rainbow Dash who had already made a ball of snow and had it gripped in her tail. Applejack hollered her battlecry as the two mares began to pelt both Twilight and Pinkie with snowballs. Spike joined in the fray as the battle of snow continued to escalate. Soon Trixie and Rarity were made victims of the icy onslaught, only to become soldiers in the winter warfare, using their magic much like Twilight had to hurl great orbs of cold weather projectiles. Only Fluttershy refused to become involved, simply sitting by the campfire and cheering with her quiet voice for both sides of the conflict to prevail.

“What in the name of the Stone is going on?” Shale looked at the impromptu battle with what could only be guessed as contempt on the stony features of its face. Only too late did Shale realize that, by entering the field of the snow wars, Pinkie had concluded that the golem was now an enemy combatant, tossing several snowballs in sequence at their rocky companion.

What could be seen on Shale’s eyes could only be described as unbridled fury. Or resentment, Twilight wasn’t sure. The golem said nothing as it shook its massive body free of snow, turning on its hooves and walked away, muttering profanities Twilight wasn’t even sure were real words. A snowball from Rainbow Dash snapped her attention back on the battle, flinging a flurry of snow towards her friends-turned-opponents.

Suddenly a rumbling in the distance brought everypony to high alert. Twilight summoned her staff and readied an arcane bolt, only to release it when Fluttershy took to the sky with a scared look on her face and a bizarre word squeaked from her lips.

“Snowball!”

It was not a snowball that came bounding down towards the ponies, but a veritable snow boulder as twice as tall as they stood. “Victory is mine, ponies!” came a voice from behind the snowboulder, with an all too gleeful Shale pushing the great orb towards the party with force.

Once again Twilight found a smirk on her face as she looked to Rarity and Trixie. Similar smiles spread across their faces as their horns began to glow with magic in tandem with Twilight’s. An aura of white, blue, and violet light surrounded the rampaging snowball, lifting it up with the power of the arcane, much to the surprise of its maker. With a nod to her fellow magical mares, Twilight began to channel her will into the snowball as it hurtled towards the golem.

The snowball crashed into Shale with a loud *splat*, smothering it in snow from hoof to head. Shale appeared to fume as its head emerged from the snow, another torrent of imaginative curses seemingly foaming from its mouth.

Then the least expected noise expected emerged from Shale. The golem began to laugh, slowly at first, only to break into raucous laughter. Pinkie was the first to join in, rolling on the snow in a fit of giggles, followed soon by Rainbow Dash until everypony was laughing at the golem entrenched in the snow, their snowball fight, and just laughing because it felt good. For the first time in a long time, Twilight was laughing with her friends, forgetting about the dangers of the mountain before them for one night. The mountain was not going anywhere, and it could watch over their joy before testing them with its challenges.

Twilight had always considered the quest she was thrust upon to be of colossal proportions. Travelling the vast expanse of land that was Equestria, meeting ponies both kindly and malevolent, facing monsters terrifying and cruel and discovering wonders unimagined. She knew the quest would be like climbing a mountain, with a large and powerful and angry archdemon waiting on the summit.

With the exception of the archdemon, she did not expect things to be taken so literally. They had awoken to a morning of bitter cold, the winds blowing from the Frosttop Mountains whipping exposed flesh with the harsh frozen currents. The winds and the cold temperature made flight for the pegasi impossible as Rainbow Dash discovered her wings had been covered in small icicles as she shook violently from the chill.

A few moments of spending time near the heat generated from Trixie's staff, and enough time for Rarity to stitch together some wing-sheaths, and the pegasi were as comfortable as they could be. Granted, Twilight could tell that none of the ponies were comfortable, although Spike and Shale were unfettered by the cold. Spike passed it off to being a dragon with a fire in his belly, and Shale, being a golem, shrugged off the climate due to being made of nothing but rocks and lyrium.

The party kept the group together with the unicorns acting like the points of a triangle with their staves floating high, being used as both beacons of light in the blizzards and sources of heat to ward off the cold. While it was effective in keeping them together, the mountain seemed to counter their efforts to retain heat with even harsher winds.

The snow Twilight had marvelled with only a day ago was now something she wished she hadn't seen in forever and a day. Trudging through the snow was difficult as every hoofstep dug deep, burying her legs in a foot or so of snow. Her breath had also become her own worst enemy. As the struggle to traverse the snow covered paths on the side of the mountain became more difficult, she started breathing through her mouth, with the exhaling vapour clinging to the fur on her face and freezing due to the cold air.

Her friends were not having it any better. Applejack was constantly going deeper into the snow due to her larger frame and heavy armour weighing her down. Pinkie was constantly stopping to rub her hooves together, her teeth chattering loudly as the chills dug its way into her bones. Rainbow could not stop swearing oaths at the mountain for taking away the use of her wings, only to stop her ascent as she bundled down against the snowy ground, taking deep breathes to steady herself.

The first to fall to her side was Fluttershy, who landed against the snow with a barely audible *thud*. Rarity had rushed to her side, bringing her staff with the heat spell close while the others stood still in the biting blizzard.

"I'm so sorry," Fluttershy gasped as she was helped back to her hooves, "It's just so... cold. So... hard to climb."

"Ain't no need to fret any," Applejack said, helping Fluttershy to her hooves and wrapping her cloak around the yellow pegasus, while leaving herself more exposed to the elements.

"What about you?" Fluttershy asked her benefactor through violent shivers and chattering teeth. Applejack merely smiled as she used her hoof to support her friend.

"Ah'll be right as rain," she said, though her own shaking was more visible now, "Ah'm a right big pony. Ain't no snow or wind gonna stop me none. Lean on me, Fluttershy, until yer strong enough. I'll help ya carry on up this here mountain."

While the weather was not going to stop them, the effects were slowing them down nonetheless, with Fluttershy leaning against Applejack as they continued their trek and the storms intensifying during as they climbed. It

was now Twilight's turn to curse as her hooves punched right through the snow again; there was seemingly no end in sight up the steep path on the mountain. There was no sign of an ancient temple or tomb housing the remains of a goddess. There were not even signs of any life on the testament to nature. As far as the lavender Warden knew, they were the only living beings on the mountain, and even that was now in jeopardy.

My guesswork about the Mane of Stars and this mountain is going to get us all killed. Twilight cursed herself a second time. She could have tried the risky exorcism on Applebloom, and they could have tried seeking out healers and other scholars to find a cure for the incurable deathweed.

Despair...

Twilight shook her head vigorously, ignoring the words of the archdemon that haunted her nightmares. The monster wanted her to despair, to give in to her fear, to give up and die without ever bringing the fight to the monster. She would not do such a thing, not when so many lives depended on it. She would not give up; Spike would never have forgiven her if she gave in now.

Trixie fell next, her staff burying itself in the snow next to its master. Twilight went to her aide with her own staff, trying to get the dazed and confused Trixie out of the snow. The magician kept babbling incoherently, with only bits and pieces of speech making sense.

"Should never have followed you... never have left the Tower... ponyspawn, demons... just so tired... never expected this, never wanted... this."

"She's utterly delirious," Rarity said, lowering her own staff towards Trixie for added heat, "We need to find some shelter to rest."

"I know," Twilight replied, looking around the mountain for shelter, "We just need to find a cave. Trixie needs something to keep her warm in this blizzard."

"I have an idea, dear, even though I don't like using her spells." Rarity tossed off her cloak with her magic, tightly wrapping the heavy material around Trixie like a cocoon. The white unicorn's horn then began to glow,

until her entire body glowed bright with the power of magic. Twilight was confused by what Rarity meant, but quickly began to understand that her fellow unicorn was channeling the unique shapeshifting magic known to her and the Mare of the Mire, Flemeth.

Rarity's limbs then began to shift and change, her legs becoming thicker as well as her hooves becoming large clawed paws. She greatly expanded her bulk and her coat became much thicker and longer, turning into soft, warm fur. Her entire head became larger and wider with a large jaw filled with sharp teeth. In what appeared to be seconds, Rarity the unicorn had become Rarity the grizzly bear.

"If you could do that all the time, why not stay in the form when we were already walking up this mountain?" Twilight studied her friend's new form, noting that although Rarity had used Flemeth's spell to look like a bear, she was still Rarity inside the fur. The upturned and clearly indignant snout in the air was more than enough evidence to support that. (heh)

Bear-Rarity growled, tilting her head to her back, indicating where to put the discombobulated and delirious Trixie. With a flick of her glowing horn, Twilight levitated the weakened body of the blue magician, laying her gently across the back of her bear friend.

"Ah think ah like ya that way," Applejack said with a smirk. Rarity-turned-bear merely growled as they continued their way down the path. Pinkie and Dash couldn't help but laugh at their friend's choice of form, brought on by strange magics, while Twilight only wanted to study such spellwork for due to her own curiosity.

Twilight approached Trixie, hoping to give her unicorn compatriot some comfort despite being on the back of a shapeshifter. "Trixie," she began, trying to find the right words to say, "We have to stick together. I know the journey has been dangerous..."

"I want to go home," whispered Trixie through tired eyes. She was still fading despite the warmth of the bear and the extra coverings.

"Stay with us Trixie!" Twilight panicked watching Trixie continue to babble on as her eyes drooped, attempting to go into cold-induced sleep. "What

about Dinky? Didn't you say she was going to be your apprentice? You're a senior enchanter of the Tower! The Great and Powerful!"

"Great... and... powerful..."

"That's right! The Great and Powerful won't let a little thing like cold mountains bring her down! She's going to train her first real pupil to become a great magician just like her! She's going to help the Grey Wardens save Equestria! But she can't do that if she falls asleep on the mountain and never wakes up!"

Despite all her hope, Trixie's eyes did indeed close. She was still mumbling, but for how long Twilight did not want to comprehend. A lump formed in the violet mage's throat until she saw the staff of the senior enchanter float beside its master. Twilight could only mutter a quiet prayer in thanks that Trixie was all right and that that mountain had not claimed anypony. Yet.

The truth still remained that they needed to find some shelter to rest in; especially as the skies were growing darker, indicating night would befall the mountain soon. With the coming of night, the temperatures would also dive into well below freezing, and without proper shelter they would all collapse like Fluttershy and Trixie, leaving Spike and Shale alone on the mountain.

Such a thought of leaving the baby dragon alone by dying on the mountain steeled Twilight forward. There had to be some sort of naturally occurring cavern they could use. Someplace large enough for them all to fit and for a magical fire to keep them warm through the night. As they trekked through the ice and snow, the only thing they saw from the mountain was strong rock and durable stone, with no crevice to be found under the snow.

"Plan B," Twilight announced as she looked to Shale, "Shale, I need you to make a cave for us. I know it's asking for much, but you're basically a pony shaped mountain. Could you find a weak segment in the rock and make us shelter?"

"I am made of stone," Shale answered, "That does not mean I can command rocks. If it is something it needs, then I suppose I could try something for it." The golem approached the rocky cliff side, tapping a

stone hoof against the wall apparently listening for something within in the mountain.

They stood there for what felt like hours shivering in the cold as the biting winds whipped around them. Twilight kept low to the ground as she watched Shale work on the wall, doing her best to conserve heat despite the chill around them. If they did not find a place to warm up soon, the mountain would surely become their tomb as well as Luna's.

We're close, Twilight thought as she looked up to the summit, *somehow I know it*. She pulled the poem of Brother Biblio from her bag and began to look over it again. They were at the mountains of Equestria where the earth walkers brought the Mane of Stars. That much she was certain. They were facing the storms brought on by the skylords of old to protect the mountain from intruders. There was still no sign of the temple built by the underkings though. The mountain looked completely unchanged.

Unless...

"Applejack," Twilight said as she approached the earth pony Warden, "You said Orzamule was a city built in a mountain right?"

"Well, yeah," Applejack responded, "But ah sure hope you ain't expecting any donkeys around these parts. Orzamule is way over west, near the border with Filais. Also that city was built under that mountain rather than in it."

"What if they built the temple in the mountain though?"

Applejack paused to consider this. "It's worth a shot, but how are we gonna to know where to look?"

The Fade dreamers, Twilight remembered, the poem meant unicorns. *They left spells of powerful magic to protect the inside of the tomb. Maybe I can see the lines of magic in the incantations...*

Twilight focused her sight to look beyond the physical world, to see the lines of magic drawn from the Fade. Instead of simple lines, or even complex patterns to indicate spellwork, she was blinded by bright blue light as everything about the mountain from the snow, the rocks, and even the

clouds overhead were charged with magic. The shearing blue light sent Twilight backwards in pain, falling into the hooves of Pinkie Pie as she returned her senses to normal, rubbing her eyes as bruise-like spots dotted her vision.

“The entire mountain is supercharged with magic,” said Twilight, exasperated from the short ordeal, “I can’t find the magic from the temple. Of course! The defenders would have done this to prevent the Imperium Magisters from finding the temple so easily. To stop those unicorns still loyal to the empire Luna toppled.”

“What do we do?” Pinkie said, sounding as uncertain as Twilight felt. The scholarly Warden could only shake her head.

“I don’t know.” She was admitting defeat to Twilight, saying such words. No plan, nothing to act on, nothing decisive to work towards. She didn’t know what to do.

The sound of smashed stone broke the ponies from their melancholy as Shale reared up and slammed both hooves into the rock face. Again and again the pony of rock struck the cliff until a hole in the natural wall was open. Shale took a few hoofsteps backwards only to ram the side of the mountain again, making the breach big enough for Spike to crawl through. Another ram against the wall and the hole was big enough for a pony.

“Open says me,” Shale said before ramming for a third and final time, careening into the breach it had created. Quickly Spike followed the golem inside, looking around before motioning the ponies inside.

The mountain then decided to help usher them into their new-found shelter, as a loud rumble echoed throughout the cold air. Fluttershy’s eyes went wide as several pounds of snow began to fall from the higher points of the cliffs.

“Avalanche!” she screamed, giving enough signal that it was time to gallop away from being buried in tons of snow and ice. Twilight channeled a protective barrier with her horn, shielding her friends from the falling frozen fragments. One by one they made their way into the hole in the wall, until all that was left was Twilight and Applejack.

As soon as Applejack was inside, a large shard of ice of fell onto the barrier, the icicle breaking into pieces but causing the shield to pulse in response. The sudden shock from the crash sent Twilight reeling in pain as the shield threatened to collapse.

"I gotcha Twi!" Applejack dove in front of Twilight, wrapping her forelegs with that of the mage. The others soon joined in, with Rainbow Dash biting on Applejack's tail and Pinkie biting down on Rainbow Dash's. Together they pulled Twilight into the newly made cavern just in time as the shield failed and the snow and ice covered the entrance sealed tight.

"Didn't expect that to happen," Shale remarked somewhere in the darkness. Twilight groaned as she got to her hooves, looking around only to be encased in pitch black. Her horn began to glow a bright light, revealing the cavern and all her friends inside, catching their breath from the close brush with death by avalanche.

While the cave was not warm to say the least, it was a shelter that would protect them from the brunt of the frigid winds of the north. The rocky ground was also greatly preferable to that of the snow as a foundation to set up camp.

Twilight's horn glowed bright again, this time summoning a small orb of fire that hovered in the center of the cave. Quickly the party stood around the fire for warmth, with Pinkie scooping up some snow from the avalanche inside a pot and placing it over the sphere of magical flame. The collected snow quickly melted, with Pinkie distributing the water first to Fluttershy and Trixie before collecting more ice.

They sat in silence as they drank the hot water and ate their rations, surrounding Rarity in an effort to stay warm. To Twilight it was an odd thing seeing that this was the best position on the mountain they have ever been since starting from the base. As far as they knew, they were trapped inside a cold mountain rather than trapped outside. This was a good change; the winds did not slash at their skins and they could walk on rock without fear of collapse.

At least, that was what Twilight was hoping for.

There was something bothering Twilight about the cave. Shale was strong yes, but breaking into a mountain was a last ditch attempt to find shelter. She didn't expect the golem to actually break through the rock and find a cavern they could use. It was too coincidental. Too good to be true.

She was too weakened by the journey to explore the cave further, though Spike and Shale did not look worse for wear and could easily traverse the cavern to see if it extended deeper into the mountain. The thought of sending Spike so far away on his own, even if he had a pony of stone as an escort, made Twilight uneasy. Fear of the unknown stayed her tongue. Fear of losing her oldest friend.

Twilight closed her eyes and took a deep breath, trying to gather both her words and the courage to speak them. She called both the little dragon knight and the stone warrior over to her as the rest of the party attempted to rest and even get some sleep.

"There is something wrong with this cave," Twilight began as the two before her gave their utmost attention, "And what's wrong is that it's so right. We can't send ourselves into the caves. Fluttershy and Trixie still need to recover, and we are all tired."

"You can count on us Twilight!" Spike gave a salute, eager to prove himself once again. Shale raised a rocky eyebrow at the situation, even though Twilight was ready for the golem's arguments.

"You want just the two of us to go into the darkest depths alone without the possibility of reinforcement?" Twilight had not thought of that, but now that it was pointed out, it was something that couldn't be avoided. All she could do was nod slowly.

"Don't worry about it you big old rock," Spike said confidently, patting a sputtering golem who refused to acknowledge that it was aging, "We'll find our way around this mountain no sweat."

Shale could only mutter a slight "indeed" as Spike was already well enough ahead into the dark shadows of the cave. Twilight reached out with her magic, wrapping her levitation spell around the golem and lifting it just inches off the ground to prevent movement. Shale tried to protest only to be met by Twilight's fierce stare.

"If anything happens to Spike at all, Shale, I will reduce you to rubble." She could hardly believe herself, actually threatening another pony, let alone Shale. Spike's well being was paramount, and Shale was going to safeguard that no matter what happened in the caves.

The golem appeared skeptical, before allowing a smirk to somehow form on its face. "Consider me impressed, purple one," it said after Twilight released her hold on its body, "We will not engage any potential squishes without due cause, I assure you."

"I trust you Shale," Twilight replied, "Good luck."

Shale *harrumphed* before bumping the dragon onto its back. With Spike's flaming sword as a torch, they descended into the dark depths of the mountains until only a light could be seen from the sword. Eventually that too faded into the darkness. Twilight gasped a bit too loud for her liking seeing the light diminish, but this was necessary. It was needed to continue the journey.

She returned to the group, only to see everypony was asleep around the lying form of Rarity still in the form of a bear. Twilight couldn't help but stifle a laugh at the sight. Giving the orb of fire a quick recharge, she joined the party lying against the bear, covering herself in her cloak.

Rarity suddenly growled, pointing a claw at some scratch marks she left on the ground. Twilight looked, reading the words *We will never speak of this ever on the ground*. "Don't worry, mama bear," Twilight joked as she nestled against the warm form of her transformed friend, "My lips are sealed."

"Twilight? Twilight, wake up!"

If there was one thing Twilight was grateful for, it was this time, her sleep was not visited by images of the archdemon or some other monster. The second thing she was grateful of was that it was Spike that awoke her, looking just the same as he did when they left for the cavern depths.

Twilight quickly roused herself and the others, taking a moment to check on Fluttershy and Trixie to make sure they were all right. They admitted a case of the sniffles, but a quick drink of some of Pinkie's concoctions from her big book made any illness slowly leave the body. Applejack and Rainbow Dash were fully alert, while Rarity was still sleeping very much like a bear in a cave thanks to the shape shifting magic of Flemeth.

The look on Spike's eyes was concerning however, which motivated Twilight to get up quickly. He appeared stricken by some sort of sight as his eyes were wide and nervous, constantly looking behind his shoulder back into the depths of the mountain's innards.

"All right, all right, we're up," Twilight said, still groggy and looking back at her blanket and the orb of fire with want in her eyes, "I'm glad you're both okay. What happened down there? You must have found something?"

"Perhaps it is best to show all of the its that we found directly," Shale replied before turning away and heading back down the path with Spike still on its back. After a moment of rubbing the sleep from their eyes and Rarity transforming back to her unicorn self, the party followed close behind, even though many were still weakened from exposure to the deep cold.

With staves alight with magic, the party journeyed again into the natural halls within the mountain. Their hoofsteps echoed throughout the cave, with only the occasional sneeze being released from a pony's nose breaking the near silence. Twilight looked at the walls of the cave, noting that they were becoming less random and more uniform as they made their way deeper, as if a careful hoof had a hand in manipulating the ways of the mountain.

This has to be it, Twilight thought, this has to be halls of the underkings in Biblio's poem. Spike and Shale found the temple!

A faint orange light at the end of the tunnel they were travelling in gave Twilight pause. It was too dim to be the light of the sun, but still enough to see the cave entirely. When Shale continued to trot into the light, Twilight gave a sigh of relief that it was still safe.

When they entered the illuminated hall, the party of ponies gave a collective gasp to discover that it really was a hoofmade hall, constructed with expert masonry and stone work. While she was no architect, Twilight

could appreciate the effort into building such a temple inside a mountain. While this hall was relatively plain and without decoration, one thing stood out that brought a bright smile to Twilight's lips.

High above the archway was a statue of Luna, still pristine after centuries of being hidden within nature's sovereign, still looking down on those who passed the archway and into the temple proper. Twilight could not believe her eyes as she stared at the effigy of the moon goddess. They had done it. They had found the resting place of the Mane of Stars.

"Yes! Yes! Yes! YES! YES!" Twilight reared up and began prancing around in a circle, overjoyed with the discovery of a lifetime. Even through the cold winds of the northlands, suffering through sickness and pain, they had managed to discover a long lost relic of the past. What the Chantry would give to find this temple and all the artifacts within? Twilight found herself eager to explore and study the temple itself.

Her friends celebrated in their own way, some on the discovery, others simply by staying alive. "Well ah'll be a donkey's auntie," Applejack exclaimed looking up at the statue, "This really is it. We found it! Now we just gotta find that Mane of Stars and bring it back to Red Apple! Big Mac and Applebloom are gonna be saved!"

"Oh my," Fluttershy gasped, "This must be a sign from Celestia and Luna."

"Sign or not, I'm just glad this trip wasn't a total waste," Rainbow Dash said, discarding her wing sheathes and stretching them to their full wingspan, "Still, I hope this place gets exciting soon. Everything seems boring so far." Twilight balked at Rainbow's comment, wondering how travelling through a blizzard while climbing a treacherous mountain.

"It won't be boring once we have a Temple Finding Party!" Pinkie Pie was already buzzing about what kind of party she could hold for such an occasion, until a calm hoof from Rarity slowed the energetic pony down.

"Remember the spectacular festivities we'll have once this journey is done and over with, dear," reminded Rarity, "Still, I am inclined to agree with Rainbow Dash, for a rare instant. This temple *does* seem rather plain. Perhaps it becomes much more luxurious the closer we get to the relic?"

Shale stomped one mighty stone hoof onto the ground, wanting everypony's attention on it and Spike. They said nothing as they continued past the entrance way and deeper into the temple. Twilight raised an eyebrow but said nothing, only following the dragon knight with a golem for a steed.

When Shale finally stopped, Spike hopped off its back and pulled Twilight's robes, leading her towards a vast chamber within the mountain. Twilight was expecting a room of religious iconography, of benches and pews for reverent ponies to pray in. She had expected books and tomes from a time lost to memory and legend.

She did not expect to find a chamber filled with eggs. Dragon eggs to be specific, noting their large size and colouration of crimsons and blacks. Spike looked at Twilight with sad eyes, before returning his gaze to the countless eggs each containing a young dragon similar to him. Several eggs were lying in pits of hot coals, while other eggs were being held aloft on pedestal cradles.

What was more distressing were the tables with assorted tools lining the surfaces. Callipers, bonesaws, various rods and needles and blades. They were not in the best condition, but they also did not appear to have been abandoned. Every tool was used recently, as there was no dust buildup around them, and the condition of the eggs showed that there were clearly living whelps waiting for their time to hatch. There was only one conclusion.

The ponies were not alone in the mountain.

Chapter 17

A Dog and Dragon Chapter

Twilight examined the eggs closely while the rest of the party wandered about the rookery, warily watching the eggs or the pathways for any signs of disturbance or intrusion. It was still unknown who, or what else was dwelling in the mountain, but the evidence of such dangerous and bizarre tools around the eggs, as well as weapon racks nearby, indicated that the denizens were well armed and very interested in the eggs of dragons.

As the eggs sat on their jewel encrusted pedestals, Twilight focused her senses to become more sensitive to magic, seeing that the eggs were almost literally wrapped in lyrium. She could not find rhyme or reason for this, but so little was known about dragons; even Spike was considered an enigma. He would have been studied if not for his own demeanor and Twilight's insistence that she was doing her utmost to 'research' him, if only to keep Spike away from the poking and prodding of scholars from other Towers and the Chantry.

That was the only research Twilight was proud not to turn in a paper for.

What was known about dragons in the modern age was that it was that sightings were being reported on with greater frequency. They had long since been considered near extinct after being hunted down by skilled groups of warriors after the Imperium converted the once mighty empire away from dragon worship and towards the Chantry. Dragons were very large and terrible beasts that could spew flames from their gullets and wreck havoc throughout the world with little effort. Several towns and villages in the Yokalach and northern Filais were wiped out by a single rampaging dragon before it was felled.

Rumours of the intelligence of dragons went to both ends of the spectrum. Several scholars noted instances where dragons acted as simple-minded predators, using their vast size and power to steal cattle and attack ponies for a meal, while others reported dragons that created cunning plans to throw off pursuers and hunters. The presence of Spike indicated some dragons were capable of speech, though if anypony had conversed with a

dragon, they did not live long to tell the tale. Shockingly the rarest sighting indicated that the largest and most powerful of all dragonkin were capable of using magic to a degree that even a trained elder unicorn would envy. Twilight simply alluded that Spike was incredibly intelligent due to his upbringing around other intelligent ponies, and that any dragon could share his wit and sharp tongue if they were raised in that sort of environment. She had no basis that this was true of course, but it was nice to believe she had some sort of influence on the baby dragon's intellectual aptitude, no matter what range he was capable of.

The rookery they were in now was filled with eggs of all sizes, with several dozen eggs seated in beds of hot coals. They were all red with black spots, and almost as tall as Spike. Twilight levitated a small rod made of glass from the table before tapping one of the eggs on the coals very gently, careful not to disturb the lines of lyrium around the eggs, lest they cause damage to the creature inside. Sure enough the shells were soft, and still needed the heat of their mother or, as the caretakers of the eggs had decided to use, hot coals.

Twilight brought the rod towards an egg being held aloft in a pedestal. She gently tapped the egg, listening intently for the sound of glass against the shell. Just as she expected, the shells of the suspended eggs were much harder, the glass instrument harmlessly bouncing off the protective layer. These eggs were ready to hatch soon.

It was becoming clear that whoever was inside the mountain and maintaining the eggs were taking them from a dragon to use for a purpose Twilight could only guess. What was more distressing was that somewhere close was a high dragon, the largest, oldest and most powerful variety of dragon, and that it would be out there, hungry for prey or angry that its eggs were being taken from it.

Spike was staring at the eggs, moving between each one and pressing his head against the shells he could reach, listening for the infant dragon within them. "Twilight," Spike asked, looking up from the eggs, "Is this where dragons come from? Is there where the Tower got my egg?"

"I don't think so, Spike," Twilight answered, "Your egg was purple and green, just like you are. These are much different from the egg you were hatched from." In truth, Twilight did not know where Spike's egg had come

from, only that Wise Eyes had met a strange merchant selling the egg and purchased it out of simple curiosity.

“Do you think they could be like me?” Spike asked. It was a fair question; he had only known ponies all his life and would likely jump at the prospect of meeting another dragon. Twilight did not know enough about dragons to answer what would happen if he were to meet another.

“I can’t say,” she said with a sad look, “You were raised in a different environment, Spike. I don’t know what would hatch from the eggs.” *I’d rather not find out*, Twilight thought guiltily. Without knowing who was taking care of the eggs, there was always a chance these dragons would become hostile and attack. If they did, she would be forced to slay them in front of her young ward.

The party eventually left the rookery alone, leaving all the tools and eggs where they found them as they left the great chamber into a long hallway lined with light crystals. As they walked, Twilight noticed that the walls were adorned with intricate carvings of both ponies and dragons in various scenes, those of them working together, of ponies enslaved by dragons, and dragons being hunted down by ponies. As rudimentary as they were, the scenes displayed by the carvings were very graphic, making Twilight’s stomach lurch.

Fluttershy gasped as she looked below the artwork in the stone, pointing a hoof at the writing that was left embedded in the mountain. “It reads just like the Chant of Sun and Moon,” Fluttershy said, “I had to study the Chant when I was in the cloister, but nothing sounds like this!”

Applejack leaned in close to the markings, squinting at the words and nodding her head in agreement. “They right drilled the Chant in our heads back in templar training,” Applejack added, “So ah know it like the back of my hoof, and ain’t none of *this* on that.”

Twilight also read the markings closely, reading the words of the Chant off in her head as she compared the writing on the wall to the original religious work. She had studied the Chant herself if only to get the sisters and templars off her back, but still took the lessons within to heart.

What she was reading seemed more like a history lesson from another time, completely at odds with what the Chantry was teaching. A thought sprang to mind as Twilight read the wordings; what if the temple was not lost but merely forgotten due to conflicting lore?

Twilight took a breath, as she moved to the edge of the hall, reading the words aloud for all to hear. "Let it be known for all who venture into these halls, those who read our words, and those who listen with both ears and souls know the truth of the final days of the Imperial Age. Know that these are the halls of Luna, the halls of the stars themselves, and the halls of Nightmare Moon."

"Nightmare Moon?" Applejack asked, but Twilight ignored her, focusing on the name alone. No history books or even religious text Twilight had read ever had the name "Nightmare Moon". The name sent chills down her spine, however, similar to the power she felt around Flemeth. Twilight continued reading.

"After the Time of Chaos, a time lost to history, the Unicorn Imperium rose up and conquered the land with spell, sword, and dragonfire. The powerful sorcerer Exarchs ruled the ponies of the world with iron hooves and the strength of demons."

The diorama of stone above the words showed an image of the land, where small ponies bowed to tall unicorns dressed in fanciful robes and powerful armour. All paled in comparison to the next scene, where these mighty sorcerers bowed their knees to carvings of dragons.

"Yet it was the Old Ones, the six dragon gods who existed since the Time of Chaos, who truly ruled the Imperium. Their power was vast and potent, and their wrath swift and terrible. While they wore masks of benevolence, their cruelty was felt across the world without end. These are their names:"

Twilight shivered as she turned to the carvings of the names of the dragon gods. There was a cold bite against her ears, then the passive brushing of the air, making it feel like lips pressing against the flesh. Fear replaced the intimacy of such an act. She looked around at the others who also appeared cold and shaking. They were also appeared uncomfortable as if they had felt the same spectral lips across their skin.

“Palakash, Dragon of Virtue.”

Deception...

Twilight jumped, as did the others. They looked around wide eyed, sharing the same look of terror as the unseen voice had spoken to them through icy lips so close to their ears. They said nothing, only looking at Twilight who turned a shaking head back to the edifice. She could not hide the fear in her voice as she continued.

“Galonomei, Dragon of Charity.”

Avarice...

This is insane, Twilight thought as her breathing stopped for a moment, what kind of temple is this? Why am I so frightened by these names? How is everypony feeling the same fear I am? Are these the protective spells of the temple left behind? Are they trying to frighten us so that we turn tail and flee?

Twilight tried to turn away, but now there was a compulsion to continue, to read the names of the Old Ones aloud for all to hear. Whether it was the magic or her own need to know, Twilight continued to read the names of gods long dead.

“Mezzerak, Dragon of Zeal.”

Betrayal...

“Lianari, Dragon of Grace.”

Destruction...

“Uthemiel, Dragon of Mirth.”

Despair...

“Asha’Bellanar, Dragon of Victory.”

Instead of the voice whispering another word, Twilight's heart stopped as a cold, cruel laugh echoed from within her. The others looked either in shock or in horror, with Fluttershy trembling in a corner and Pinkie and Dash holding each other in fright. Only Applejack seemed to shake off her fear to stand defiant against the fear they had all felt.

"Ah don't know about ya'll," Applejack said, "But ah'm bettin' my bottom bits that this is some kind of trap to keep ponies away from the Mane. Maybe a test to see if they are worthy, ah don't know. Keep readin', Twilight. We'll be okay. Just gotta stay strong."

Twilight nodded and then turned her attention back to the wall. Now the pictures showed carvings of Celestia and Luna from beyond the Veil and even beyond the Fade, looking down on the dragon-ruled world with sadness in their eyes.

"The Regents of the Sun and Moon influenced the world and the ponies from the Fade who heard the Chant with a subtle hoof in an effort to show them to live life in harmony with the world and each other. They watched as the world was ruled in the oppressive shadow of the Old Ones and how the ponies suffered under them. The Sisters could not interfere directly, as the Old Ones were great and powerful, using their own blood to act as a seal against Celestia and Luna. With powerful dark arts fueled by dragon blood, the Sisters could not aid the world, only offering words of wisdom through dreams of the Fade."

"With an act of desperation to free themselves from the yokes of the Imperium and its dragon masters, the followers of the Chant spilled their own blood to counter the wards used by the Old Ones. Celestia recoiled from such use of blood magic, but Luna vowed to make ponies free from servitude and pain. With the seals temporarily weakened, She descended from on high and became mortal."

Fluttershy shook her head as Twilight finished reading another panel of stone. "This can't be right," the yellow pegasus said, "The Chant says that Celestia was able to open a door between the Fade and real world, and only Luna could descend. There was nothing said about Old Ones, only that the Imperium worshipped dragons. There was also definitely nothing about using blood magic to open the way."

Somepony isn't telling the truth, Twilight decided as she moved to the next panel, *whether it is this temple or the Chantry. I don't know which is worse*. The next stone carving showed the image of Luna doing battle against the dragons to a stalemate, neither side ever gaining ground. It was then that Luna transformed into something more fitting for war and battle, something much larger with great power, and much more sinister.

“Luna did battle against the Old Ones, yet could not vanquish them, as they were still creatures belonging to the world. She offered them clemency many times if only to give the ponies mercy, but they refused and took their fury onto the mortals. Unable to reason with Old Ones, Luna felt she had no choice but to become the very power she had sought to defeat to match the might of the dragons combined. Channeling the magic of the dark side of the moon, she became the dreaded Nightmare Moon and, in quick succession, defeated the Old Ones in battle.”

“Despite victory, Nightmare Moon could not slay the Old Ones permanently. Instead, she destroyed their bodies and sent their souls into the blackest pits of the Dark Tunnels, sealing them with powerful magic so that they could no longer be a threat, all except for Asha'Bellamar, who fled from battle and hid her essence from Nightmare Moon. The Imperium was Nightmare Moon's to command and control as she saw fit. A dictator had toppled the tyrants.”

As the ponies moved on to the next panel of carvings, the looks on the faces of Applejack and Fluttershy showed great concern over what they were hearing. Many of them had grown up knowing only the Chant of Sun and Moon, thinking that Luna had sacrificed herself to stop the Imperium. Now there was doubt where there was none, trying to decipher for themselves which version they were hearing was true.

Twilight contemplated the implications of such a temple and the works within if it were ever truly found by other ponies and the discoveries brought to light. Knowledge of this type was dangerous and could prove schismatic to the Chantry and ponies everywhere. There were enough wars in the world including those against the ponyspawn; they did not need to add more.

The panels continued, this time depicting Nightmare Moon being struck by six rays of energy from six magical stones, each being held by a different

pony, with Celestia watching over the act in sadness while a dragon watched from afar. The edifice next to it connected what they discovered in the temple to the common readings of the Chant: the execution of Luna at the hooves of the Imperium.

“Because peace and harmony were not brought to the world by Nightmare Moon’s victory over the Old Ones, Celestia sent her most powerful magic, the Elements of Harmony, to be held by bearers worthy of the artifacts. These bearers did battle against Nightmare Moon, banishing the darkness within from Luna and restoring her. Weakened, Luna was easily overwhelmed by Asha’Bellanar and those in the Imperium still loyal and devout to the Old Ones. Luna, as well as the Elements of Harmony, was sentenced to burn by shadowflame at the stake.”

“The executioner took the mane of Luna as a trophy, giving the hair as an offering to the Dragon of Victory. As the flames consumed Luna, the last Magister Exarch of the Imperium, Lexicon, took pity on her suffering, converted to her cause, and slew her with his own blade. This act allowed Celestia to use her power to raise Luna to her Seat, destroy Asha’Bellanar, and bring about the end of the Imperial Age.”

When Twilight stopped reading the text, she noticed that they were now on the other of the lengthy hallway facing a large pair of oak doors. The text and the artwork ended, leaving only the room beyond to continue the tale made by the sculptors of old.

Before she could open the door, Rainbow rushed in front of her, holding Twilight’s hoof in place while looking at the door with cautious eyes. The assassin shook her head at Twilight before pointing a hoof at Shale to come closer.

“What’s going on Rainbow?” Twilight asked only to be silenced by the cyan pegasus’ hoof. All the ponies remained silenced with only the sound of Shale’s grumbling being heard. When the golem was standing in front of the doors, Rainbow Dash motioned for the rest of the party to fall back.

“I can hear something from behind the door,” she whispered, only to be met with Twilight’s incredulous gaze.

“It could just be the descendants of the temple’s guardians.”

“They are not ponies. I don’t hear hooves.” Rainbow then drew her dagger, while the rest of the party followed suit and readied their weapons. Twilight swallowed hard as she brought her staff to bear as they watched Shale stand in front of the door.

The golem looked backed at Rainbow who nodded slowly. Shale gave a sigh before rearing upwards, slamming both stone hooves into the door, knocking it clean off its rusted hinges and onto the ground with a powerful slam. From the dust came several arrows and spears which struck at Shale, only to bounce off the golem’s mountainous body harmlessly.

“I hate the speedy one,” Shale muttered before dust settled, revealing the attackers not to be ponies, but no sort of equine at all. Instead they appeared canine, similar to the wardogs used by the Equestrian military except much larger and standing upright. They were all armoured with plated mail, the emblem of the moon blazoned on their hauberks, and carrying varying heavy weapons such as war hammers and axes. They wore thick helms that completely covered the upper portion on their heads.

“The intruders brought a stone walker with them,” shouted one of the guard dogs, raising his hammer high, “they are allies with the underkings! Stop the heretics! Crush the unbelievers! Protect Luna!”

Twilight tried to argue that they were not an enemy, but the dogs barking and howling drowned out any other noise. Shale promptly charged out to meet their challenge, followed closely by Rainbow and Applejack. Despite not being an overly religious pony, Twilight still disliked that they would be fighting in what was one of the most pertinent holy grounds for the entire Chantry.

Fight they did though, as the dogs did not let up their attack despite Twilight’s protests. While not as nimble as the ponies, they proved to be quite strong, cracking the stone walls and floors with each powerful swing of their weapons. Their jaws moved about, snapping at any limb that moved too close, giving an additional powerful weapon with their heads.

The advantage they did have over the dogs was that they outnumbered them and had a varied group against a troop of soldiers. Wanting no further bloodshed, Twilight brought up her shield, just as she had against the

possessed Applebloom, separating the party from the angered guard dogs who struck at her shield with heavy blows.

“Stop!” Twilight looked at both sides with eyes filled with frustration. “We came here to help ponies, not start a fight with... with... whatever you are! This is supposed to be a temple, isn’t it? Not a battleground!”

“These creatures are called Diamond Dogs,” Shale said, looking incredibly annoyed that it was being blocked off from potential squishing, “They are a subterranean race just as the donkeys and ponyspawn are. I remember something about them, mostly fighting them in the Dark Tunnels. Now I am remembering the incessant barking. I do wish to crush them into a fine paste before they can yap again.”

Well, Shale is recovering its memory, that’s always nice, Twilight thought, noting her thoughts were becoming as sarcastic as her words. All this warfare was making her cynical. The Diamond Dogs continued to snarl and growl, baring large teeth, but at least their barking stopped and they were listening. At least, that was the hope.

“Nothing in Brother Biblio’s notes or the poem said anything about Diamond Dogs as guardians of the temple,” Twilight said, keeping a careful eye on both the guards and Shale who seemed to seethe with anger towards the canines, “You said you wanted to stop us? That we were heretics and you were protecting Luna? Do you mean the Mane of Stars?”

The diamond dogs glanced at each other with blank expressions before huddling together, speaking amongst themselves in hushed tones. Twilight watched and waited, looking over at the golem who was so eager to take the fight to the temple guardians.

“I’m going to lower the shield,” Twilight said, making sure her voice was loud enough so that everypony, as well as the dogs, could hear her, “We will defend ourselves if provoked, but we mean no harm. That means no squishing, Shale. At all.”

Shale huffed, stomping a hoof in defeat before turning around and lumbering to the back ranks of the party. One of the diamond dogs took a moment to sniff the air around Twilight as soon as the shield was lowered, but otherwise making no further action besides a few growls and muttered

words. The guards then put away their weapons, motioning with a paw to follow close.

“We will bring you to the Alpha,” one of them explained, “He will decide how much further up the mountain you will go. Stay close. You may ask questions, but we choose if we answer. No complaining. No whining.”

“Who would do such a thing?” Rarity said nonchalantly as she examined a hoof for dirt, keeping well away from the dogs by taking a place near Shale. They walked in silence through the halls of the temple. Twilight noted that it seemed more in line with a soldier’s barracks than a place of worship. Weapon racks and armour stands lined the halls, as well as tools scattered on the ground. Bones of animals littered the floor, making Fluttershy gasp at every skull they passed.

Considering how the dogs had sharp teeth suited for the tearing of meat, it was no surprise that they hunted and trapped meat for their own diets. It was distasteful and made Twilight’s stomach lurch, but even creatures such as these dogs needed to eat somehow. Several guard dogs were sitting on the floor simply gnawing at the bones, trying to get some sort of meal from the leftovers of their hunts.

What Twilight did find both interesting and disconcerting was that while they were travelling further into the mountain temple, the scenes etched into the walls did not change. They were all about the time of the Imperial Age, of the Old Ones, and of Nightmare Moon’s victory over the dragons. She was expecting the tale to continue the deeper they went, but instead was met by the same iconography. The lavender mage tried to reason as to why the builders and artisans chose to do this, but simply could not fathom what ponies of old were thinking when they designed the place.

The group had one altercation as they made their way higher up inside the mountain. The walls were strewn with several containers holding countless precious and semi-precious gemstones. In baskets and buckets, chests and trunks were filled with every type of gem imaginable. From rubies to sapphires, garnets, beryl, and of course rare diamond, the diamond dogs had unearthed a king’s ransom worth of precious jewels.

Rarity and Spike both began to enviously eye the gems that were being pushed around by several smaller dogs, some sort of worker class Twilight guessed. A small dribble of drool leaked from the sides of Spike's mouth as he eyed a particularly large opal.

"That looks delicious," the little dragon said, reaching out towards the gem. One of the guard dogs snarled, snatching the opal away before the dragon could take a bite. Rarity also backed off from the jewels as the canine warriors blocked their way.

"These are for the whelps and as an offering to our protector Luna!" The dogs quickly resumed the escort to the center of the mountain, but their growls were understood perfectly. Spike fled back to the safety of Twilight's shadow while Rarity huffed that she was being denied precious gemstones.

While she understood that the dragon whelps they were incubating would need the gems for sustenance, Twilight wondered why they would offer gems to an alicorn of godlike power. Was it a simple ritual, or more? Her inquisitive mind had to know.

"You mentioned that Luna protects you," she commented, causing one of the guards to look back at her, "What do you mean by that? The Chantry have said Luna ascended a thousand years ago. Even the walls of this temple state she was burned at the stake by the Imperium."

"Luna protects us in the mountain," the dog replied flatly as they came up to two large wooden doors, "She covers us in her wings and strengthens us for the coming trials. No more questions. We are close."

While it sounded like something from a religious text, there was something else inside the voice of the guard dog that gave Twilight pause. Nothing in the Chant of Sun and Moon said anything about Luna's protection alone. What of Celestia, and the two sisters working in tandem to protect all life in the world?

They soon entered a massive circular room, with a higher level branching off to several sections of the mountain and one stairway continuing upwards towards the summit. Unlike other areas of the temple, the construction was shoddy and the quality could not compare to the expert

stonework seen throughout. Whoever built this had done so in a hurry, and Twilight suspected the craftsmanship belonged to the diamond dogs.

"I have a bad feeling about this," Rainbow muttered as she looked up at the edges to the massive chamber, "A big round room like this feels like the arena in Pura Raza. Bad things happen in arenas when you're not in the stands."

Before Twilight could comment further, one of the guard dogs howled, the noise echoing throughout the makeshift area. Several doors opened above them as the guards left, the sounds of barking dogs rushing throughout the temple. More and more of the diamond dogs poured onto the edge of the arena, barking and shouting curses. Twilight looked to see where their escort went, only to find they were now alone and surrounded.

"I... I don't like this..." Fluttershy squeaked as the dogs' barking became louder. Twilight cursed herself for believing they could avoid conflict. Perhaps they could still remedy the situation once the alpha showed up, but for now she had led the ponies into a trap.

From the top of the arena came the thunder of heavy pawsteps shaking the arena. The dogs stopped barking at once as the largest dog amongst them stepped forward into view. Twice as large as the biggest guard, the alpha male was massive compared to most creatures, smaller than a minotaur but nearly as wide, with his height and muscles being emphasized by spiked armour. In his hands was a giant hammer which was as long as he was tall, with a large head perfect for crushing stone.

What was most striking about the dog were his eyes. They were pure red with little black irises, similar to that of a reptile. They looked down on the party of ponies with contempt and hunger, a long slobbering tongue slipping out between his jaws, licking his lips with sickening anticipation.

"We seem to be having a lot of guests lately," the alpha male remarked, picking up a hunk of meat from a platter offered by one of the lesser dogs, "All of them ponies, all of them looking for a false relic. All of them claimed by the mountain. Speak pony, and be quick."

“False relic?” Applejack asked, eyes already blazing with anger at the words of the alpha dog, “We didn’t come all the way up this mountain just to find a false relic! My kin needs that Mane of Stars, and we need it now!”

“You will be silent when Alpha Lockjaw speaks!” The leader of the diamond dogs hefted his hammer high above his head, appearing menacing and powerful. Twilight’s eyes narrowed in defiance; while they were not going to start conflict, she was not about to have her group pushed around by anypony or anyone.

“A false relic sought after by heretics who do not believe in Luna’s glorious return!” began Lockjaw, motioning a paw at the assembled mass of dogs around him, “This temple was long abandoned when the diamond dogs first arrived, having fled from the donkeys in the Dark Tunnels. Hunted by the donkeys who were jealous of our riches on one front, slaughtered by the ponyspawn on another. The Dark Tunnels were no longer safe for my kind. Our ancestors came here to this mountain, and here we found gems to rebuild our glory. It was not enough. We could do nothing but watch as dogs perished in the harsh shadow of the mountain.”

“We were suffering here on this mountain. We hunted for game, but there was barely enough for so many dogs, thus we suffered and died from starvation and sickness. We tried to find repose in the words etched in these walls as our gods had abandoned us, but no divine comfort could be given to our fallen. First the elders began to die and then the pups, in pain and agony the likes of which we did not encounter since the war. Slowly but surely, our numbers dwindled.”

“The true light that turned our fortune was finding Luna and her gift to us. We found the dragon eggs. With the Lyrium we unearthed, we could bend the drakes to obey us, to bring about new meat for the young and create a new army to retake the Dark Tunnels! To conquer and kill the donkeys just as they slew us!”

Large heavy doors opened all around the party, with the ponies falling flank-to-flank as the hiss of serpents echoed in the dark halls leading into the arena. From the shadows came three large drakes, powerful male dragons with long slender bodies, sharp talons and razor fangs. Though they lacked wings and the sheer size of full grown dragons, drakes were just as dangerous to any pony as their stronger sisters.

Each drake was leashed by three dogs holding thick nooses, struggling to control the writhing creatures. Spike's eyes widened as he looked on at his massive cousins, unable to fathom just how large they were compared to him. Twilight was more concerned as to why they were being brought out. A show of force, or was this truly a trap?

At the sight of Spike, the drakes hissed and growled, snapping their jaws towards the party and tossing their heads about with force. Dragons were known to be very territorial creatures, especially amongst their own species, with most nesting and feeding grounds belonging to much larger females and the drakes getting scraps. Spike, no matter how small and completely different he was to them, would have been seen as a challenge.

"These drakes are the first to successfully mature and grow large. They will be given to Luna, and then we will have more eggs, more drakes, and soon, real dragons." Lockjaw looked up at the mural in the ceiling of the arena, smiling with delight at the thought of ravaging the underground with an army of dragons and dogs.

"The greatest gift Luna has given us is not this temple, nor the dragons," Lockjaw continued, pointing a claw at his crimson eyes, "It is blood all of the blessed chosen drink. The blood of the ascended. The blood of Luna."

"What?" "Impossible!" "No!" The responses were varied but the feelings behind them were the same. Confusion and disbelief ran rampant on the faces of the ponies, none more clearly than on the Chantry sister Fluttershy. She looked at Twilight for an answer or simple guidance, fear of the dog's words marring her features.

Twilight looked at Lockjaw and his eyes, piecing together the words of the alpha dog as well as the sights within the mountain temple. They were raising the dragonkin within the mountain for an army, supposedly given to them by Luna. They offered Luna gemstones as tribute, and supposedly drank her blood to obtain her blessing.

"The high dragon that lays all the eggs," Twilight said, looking Lockjaw dead in the eyes, "You think the dragon that lives on this mountain is Luna!"

“We do not ‘think’, heretic!” Lockjaw bellowed as he pounded his hammer on the stone floor, “We know it to be true! Luna has been reborn in the skin of the enemy she has vanquished and returned to her final resting place to find her believers! The ponies were not here, so she showed her favour to the diamond dogs!”

Lockjaw wiped the spittle from his mouth, before turning to one his soldiers. He barked some orders in a tongue Twilight did not recognize, and watched as the soldier yelped and dashed into a hallway. Several moments later the guard returned, carefully carrying a small crystal phial holding dark blood within.

The alpha dog lifted the phial to its nose, lifting the glass stopper for a moment and wafting the smell of the blood, clearly desiring the contents while barely resisting the urge from devouring the blood himself. He held the phial in one open paw, as if offering it to the ponies below.

“Perhaps we can make believers of you yet,” he said, “You seek the Mane of Stars, the false relic at the summit of the mountain. There you will find a smaller temple, and within that a spirit known as the Guardian. No dog has been able to enter the temple and return because of this guardian who protects the Mane. Any we send is either returned to us, or does not return at all. The Guardian does not know of you and will let you enter. Once you are inside, take the strands of the Mane that you need, and then pour the blood of Luna onto the Mane. Without the power of the demonic artifact, Luna can take her place on the summit of the mountain, where the lyrium is richest. There the eggs will grow to become those of true dragons.”

“You did not want violence between us,” Lockjaw threatened with a sneer, “This will cement our cooperation and you will still have the strands of the Mane you seek. Unite the blood of the present with the mane of the past, and not only will our victory over the donkeys be assured, but we will also pledge our dragons to help you! Think of the destruction you could wreak upon your enemies with our combined might!”

Twilight held up a hoof, a motion to request to speak. “I’ll need to confer with the rest of my group,” she said. Lockjaw nodded, turning to speak with his own people as Twilight gathered the rest of the group around her.

Twilight herself felt at odds, which she explained in detail. The dogs were offering great power in the form of drakes and even dragons under their command which would surely tip the battle in their favour against the ponyspawn and their archdemon master. It also meant possibly defiling the remains of a goddess. Never had the Wardens saying of “do what we must” felt so vile.

“Having dragons on our side would be pretty awesome,” Dash suggested, keeping a wary, yet thoughtful eye on one of the drakes, “I just don’t like the idea of doing that to a pony’s body, even if it’s just a mane.”

“We need to cure Applebloom and Macintosh,” reminded Applejack, who also looked conflicted, “Ah never thought we would pay this sort of price. Ah may have hated bein’ raised by the Chantry to be one of their templar, but ah have nothin’ against the Chant or Celestia and Luna. This seems wrong Twilight. Mighty wrong.”

“We can’t do what Lockjaw says,” Fluttershy stated in a much more raised voice than usual, much to the surprise of the party and the anger of the dogs within earshot, “I know a lot of this seems strange and awful, but we can’t defile the Mane. Think about what it would do to the world if it were ever found like that, or never found at all! It was a symbol of hope!”

A symbol of hope that has already claimed the lives of countless knights and a poet scholar, Twilight thought to herself. Still, Fluttershy was right. They did not know enough about the Mane of Stars to judge whether it was real or not, and definitely not enough about the diamond dogs to believe their word was worth anything.

“It is too similar to blood magic for the Great and Powerful Trixie’s liking,” the boastful magician added, eying the phial of dragonblood critically, “Anything related to the Dark Arts gets her personal seal of disapproval.”

“They may be big and smelly,” Pinkie chimed in, “But there is something about their eyes that makes me think they are big meanie mcmeanerpants, and they are not wearing any pants!”

“I do not know much of the Chant,” Rarity said, deciding to add her two bits in the discussion, “But I must agree with Trixie, for once. Not about the Dark Arts, but something around here feels too similar to the workings of

Flemeth. It was not until I felt the magic at work around the drakes and the dogs that I felt the same malevolent energy as I have sensed around her.”

“Never trust a dog,” Shale growled, never once taking its eyes off Lockjaw, “The large one may sound intelligent, but underneath the false brain is a savage ready to gnaw on your bones.” The party was therefore in agreement; they would not defile the Mane of Stars with dragonsblood. The question was what would the diamond dogs do, and seeing the aggressive actions of the alpha and his soldiers, there was no doubt in Twilight’s mind that battle was sure to come.

As the mage Warden began to silently weave a spell of protection around the party, she looked at the drakes and their dog masters. Lockjaw was awaiting their answer, and had both paws gripped tight in warning around his war hammer. Twilight took a deep breath, spell ready to be launched at a moment’s notice.

“We have to decline the task you want us to perform,” the lavender unicorn announced, keeping her protective spell prepared, “We don’t want to fight you, but we cannot perform something so close to blood magic on a relic that may or may not be real. There is a chance the relic is real, and it would be an act of sacrilege the likes no pony has ever committed to defile the mane with blood. We refuse.”

Lockjaw regarded the purple pony and the group for a moment, before nodding to the dogs who were handling the drakes. “Just as the heretics before you, then,” he said, surprisingly calm until Twilight noticed he foamed from the mouth.

“Heretics make good eating. KILL THEM! CRUSH THEM! I want their blood in my bowl before the day is through!”

A new chorus of barking and growling dogs rang out throughout the arena as the drake handlers released their charges, shouting orders to attack the party. The drakes obeyed, hissing with anticipation as they advanced, their claws digging into the ground beneath them. The guard dogs attacked as well, launching a volley of spears and arrows at the group.

Twilight reacted quickly, erecting her shield in time to catch the first projectile assault. Trixie’s horn and staff began to glow as well, forming

another barrier to overlap the one Twilight had cast. They were now protected from attack, but could not counter their enemies as long as they were in the shield.

I tried to avoid fighting, Twilight thought as both her and Trixie's intertwined shields were being pelted by all sorts of crude weapons, I don't know these dogs. I didn't even know their kind of species existed. Are they all like this? Is this why the donkeys warred with them? They are not ponyspawn or demons, I shouldn't be fighting them.

"Are you going to just sit there and contemplate your hooves all day?" Dash asked with a voice filled with annoyance, "We have to fight now! Chastise yourself later, after we avoid being eaten by dragons!"

The assassin pegasus was right. It was them or the dogs, and too many ponies in Equestria needed them to succeed in their quest. She began to channel the shield to act as a concussive force, just as she did against the Desire Demon in Red Apple. It would knock the dogs off their paws and give the party a chance to counter attack.

Twilight began to shift the spell into the force needed, wordlessly merging strands of magic that made up her shield and Trixie's together. The white-maned mage realized this and began to help, twisting the arcane bands properly while Twilight fed them power. It was interesting that the two who had gone on as unknown rivals back in the Tower would work so harmoniously together; Twilight brought the raw magical power of her special talents, and Trixie crafted the power with technique.

The others were preparing to fight as well. Applejack and Rainbow had their blades out and ready, while Pinkie primed a large grenade, twisting the arming mechanism to detonate in a few moments. Fluttershy shook with fright as the drakes drew ever closer, but the presence of Shale standing in front of her seemed to calm her somewhat.

"As the meek one stood for me against the demons, so too shall I stand in front of it," Shale said, looking over at Fluttershy, "I do not wish to be in anypony's debt. Ready your arrows, pegasus."

Rarity's horn glowed bright with magical power as the staff moved in between the group, marking the ground in a white light until it took the form

of a powerful glyph. While she had not personally seen the white unicorn's glyph in action, Twilight did learn that it was another facet of Flemeth's magic at work. As per Rarity, however, the glyph was highly intricate as the staff swept across the floor like pen on parchment.

Before Twilight could give the word, Spike tugged on her robes to get her attention. The dragon knight did not have his sword out and blazing, and the look on his eyes spoke of grave concerns. "Twilight," he said, looking at the drakes that clawed at the shield, "Those are dragons just like me. I don't want to fight them. I can't fight them. Isn't there anything we can do to help them?"

Her fears were confirmed as she looked at Spike with sad eyes. More powerful than seeing the eggs in the rookery was the sight of mature drakes, giving a good example of what sort of dragon Spike would one day grow up to be. Now they were forced to fight and likely slay them, or be devoured themselves. Even if they could remove the influence of the diamond dogs, they would become little more than wild beasts hungering for flesh as well as gems, just as it seemed the dogs had trained them to act.

"I'm sorry Spike," Twilight said, turning her gaze back to the oncoming battle, "It's us or them. I didn't want to come to this, but this is how Lockjaw forced it. I'm so sorry."

The shine of the burning blade was all the answer she needed from Spike. Those his eyes were filled with doubt and worry, his loyalty to his friends won out. With the party ready to fight, the Warden nodded to Trixie. Both horns and staves pulsed with magic, forcing the barrier to expand and push outward, slamming into dog and drake alike.

The diamond dogs were unprepared for such an attack with several of their numbers being knocked onto their behinds, losing or even breaking their bows and spears from the shockwave. The drakes on the other hoof were largely unaffected, whether it was because of some immunity to magic or simply their sheer size. They hissed before lunging forward, long necks craning their heads towards the ponies as their sharp teeth were eager to tear into flesh.

Applejack and Rainbow Dash sprang forward, narrowly dodging the biting head of one drake while cutting its soft underbelly with their blades. Shale charged into another drake, bashing its skull right into the belly of the beast while Fluttershy fired arrows. The third drake was being distracted and warded off by Pinkie's grenades, as well as growling in pain the moment it stepped into Rarity's glyph.

The fighting quickly turned to the party's favour as Trixie began to channel one of her signature chants. As the magic from the chant swirled around them, Twilight could feel her body become lighter and stronger, and also felt warmer as her body took on a shining glow. Everyone in the group took the benefit of Trixie's chanted spell, attacking the drakes with greater fervor. The twin bladed attacks of templar Warden and assassin in tandem with the debilitating glyph by Rarity had worked; one of the drakes fell with a loud quake.

At the sight of one of their precious drakes having fallen, chaos erupted amongst the dogs. Rage that one of 'Luna's' brood had been killed and disbelief that their mightiest weapon was taken down by ponies. The diamond dogs were split as to what to do, with several taking up arms and barking curses, while others fled from the battlefield.

Lockjaw howled as he leapt into the arena with his hammer held tight within his paws as he spat the foam from his mouth. "Heretics! Unbelievers! You will all pay for your sacrilege! I will suck the marrow from your bones and bathe in your blood! Your skulls will be used to bring our offerings to Luna!"

"Wow," Pinkie said as she bounced towards Lockjaw, "You really are a meany mcmeanerpants. And really hammy too, but I guess being evil means your allowed to be hammy!"

The alpha dog growled as he swung his war hammer, but even the mightiest blow from the hammer proved futile against the elusive Pinkie Pie, who deftly dodged the blow, leaving a short fused lyrium grenade where she once stood. The grenade exploded, engulfing Lockjaw in bright blue flame.

The giant dog growled as the explosion burned his fur and flesh as well as melting the armour Lockjaw was wearing into his body. Despite the damage dealt, Lockjaw continued to swing his hammer at Pinkie, the

attacks progressively getting closer and closer. He was moving his body quicker, and though he missed, the hammer was leaving larger craters in the floor.

“Twilight!”

The shout made Twilight spin on her hooves towards Trixie. The chanted glow was gone as the blue magician was being attacked by a drake, one of her hind legs bitten by the male dragon’s sharp teeth. A look of sheer terror was painted on her face as she screamed for help.

Twilight dashed towards the drake, jumping onto the creatures back before wrapping her hooves around the thick neck. Staff floating near, she began to pummel the drake with simple arcane blasts, trying to distract the giant wyrm enough to release Trixie.

The plan worked. The drake let go of Trixie’s leg, now focusing its attention on the annoying magical mare hanging off its scales. The monster swung its head to and fro, trying to dislodge Twilight. All she could do was curse futilely as she was being swung, chiding herself over not coming up with a better plan.

Pain struck Twilight as the dragon’s claws scratched deep into her flank, tearing at her robes and flesh. Her cutie mark was in bloody tatters as she let go of the neck, falling to her side on the ground below. The drake roared triumphantly over the wounded body of Twilight, then thrust its jaws forward for a bite of unicorn skin.

“No!” cried Spike as he moved to block the path between the waiting eager fangs and his unicorn caregiver. With a deep breath, he breathed a stream of green flames into the face of the drake, scorching the eyes of the large predator. The drake reeled back in pain, clutching at its face in its talons, warding off further fiery forays. Spike took advantage of the drake’s temporary blindness, chomping down on the hilt of the flame sword while climbing across the scales of the larger dragon. His claws made climbing the monstrosity easy, and the young knight quickly made it to the top of the drake’s skull.

Twilight could only watch as she laboriously pulled herself up from her injuries. Pinkie had dropped her bag of alchemical materials in the midst of

battle, leaving the poultices alone. Twilight levitated a pair of the healing medicine, one for her injuries and another for Trixie before turning back to the downed unicorn. As she poured the contents of the phial onto her flank, the lavender unicorn looked on in disbelief as Spike struck the male dragon's head with stiff strikes from his enchanted blade. Pure fury was etched on his face as he scorched the drake over and over again, until he finally rammed the blade into the creature's eye.

The drake could only give a weak growl as it collapsed; the flames from the enchantment more than enough to wreak havoc to the inside of its skull. Despite his victory, the baby dragon could barely stand after felling the monster that threatened Twilight. Spike soon collapsed under the fatigue, the burning sword clattering on the ground with its flame snuffed.

Exerting enough power to levitate Spike and bring him closer, Twilight looked on as the combined efforts of Applejack, Rainbow Dash, Rarity and Fluttershy defeated the last of the drakes while Shale moved to assist Pinkie against Lockjaw. With the defeat of their drakes, many of the dogs were fleeing from the arena, not wanting anything to do with the ponies, baby dragon, and golem that slew their prized weapons.

As Twilight limped over to the downed Trixie, she winced as she looked over the wound. Trixie's rear leg was completely mangled; blood flowing freely and bone being exposed by the light made from the crystals of the chamber. Twilight's mage compatriot sobbed as she looked away from her ruined leg, even though Twilight was doing her best to apply the healing poultice to the limb. The red liquid worked slowly, twisting flesh together, but even a full phial was not enough to repair the damage done.

"I-it hurts..." Trixie moaned, tears streaming from her face, "I don't want to lose my leg! I don't want to die! Please..."

Twilight held Trixie hoof, only to have her own foreleg gripped by the blue unicorn's limbs like a vice. She needed Pinkie's expertise on alchemical medicines to help Trixie, but the pink earth pony was still engaged with the alpha dog.

Lockjaw was moving faster and stronger now, even though he had suffered grievous injuries. Whatever mirth held by Pinkie was soon lost as the alpha dog's hammer inched ever closer. Even Shale had to be careful, knowing

all too well that while blades and arrows were not a threat to its rocky hide; a good hammer blow could cause Shale to crumble.

“I can do this all day and all night, ponies,” Lockjaw said, as those still capable of fighting surrounded him, “The blood of Luna makes me strong! I am a reaver of heretics!”

Pinkie reached for her belt with her tail, clicking a grenade ready and tossing it into the air. Before Twilight or anypony could say she missed, the grenade detonated, shaking the rocks and stalagmites free. Gravity took over as the stone fell, one after another crushing Lockjaw under their weight. One stalagmite pierced the arm of the massive dog, forcing him to drop his hammer and cover his head.

The cave-in worked to smother Lockjaw, but it was also working to crush the ponies. They could go to the doors of the arena, but they would likely be sealed to prevent their escape. Twilight looked up to a large upwards staircase that Lockjaw had pointed to; that passage would lead to the summit of the mountain.

“The stairs!” Twilight shouted, “We need to get up those stairs! Rarity! Help lift Trixie!” Twilight tried to move quickly up the rocks, but the wound to her flank had not healed, and the extra weight from Spike made climbing the rocky side of the arena difficult.

Suddenly the magical Warden felt her body lifted from the ground, hooves dangling as she was carried away from the ground. To her left was Rainbow Dash while to her right was Fluttershy, both pegasi holding the unicorn aloft as they made their way to the staircase.

“Don’t worry Twilight,” Fluttershy said with a smile, even though her eyes were darting from Twilight to the falling rocks around them.

“We got you!” Rainbow added as they carried Twilight and Spike to safety. Rarity had already leapt up the rocks to higher level followed by Applejack and Pinkie. Shale was last as the white unicorn used her magic to levitate the wounded Trixie out of harm’s way.

Before Pinkie could join her friends, the massive paw of Lockjaw sprang from the rubble, grasping her hind leg as the alpha dog leered from beyond

the rocks. "Heretics!" he growled, "I won't let you bring harm to Luna! I won't let you take away our destiny!"

"Do shut up." Shale reared upwards before slamming both hooves into the face of Lockjaw, pressing the giant dog deeper into the rubble. Unceremoniously bumping Pinkie onto its back, Shale made their way to the top of the mound, with the entire party finally escaping the cave-in.

The party looked haggard and weary from the battle, but worse was the cave-in had sealed the way down the mountain. They were trapped, with the only way out was to the summit. Twilight couldn't help but smile however, as that meant they were finally on their way to the true tomb of Luna where the Mane of Stars awaited them.

However, the damage from the battle was dealt. Twilight's flank still felt tender, but at least her wound was easily healed. Trixie's leg was irreparable, and she was likely to be lame permanently. The worst case would be to remove the leg entirely.

The blue unicorn did not want to say anything, refusing all attempts of condolence and conversations with a sharp word and a dirty look. The pain in her face spoke volumes of what the injury had done, not only physically but mentally as well. She spoke not a word as she was being carried by Shale through the tunnel.

"Twilight," Rarity said as they walked slowly through the upwards cavern, "Look ahead."

Twilight did, seeing that they were almost at the exit. She could see the stars and crescent of the moon high in the sky. They were close to the outside world since Shale forced their way into the mountain.

"Twilight, dear, look again," Rarity pointed a hoof, "Was there not those awful storms when we were climbing this simply ghastly mountain?"

"Maybe the storms passed," Twilight replied, though she was unable to believe her own words. The storms were made by the pegasi skylords of ages lost, charged by magic to storm forever. They could not see the clear sky on their way up the mountain, and there was no sign that the storm was simply going to lull itself over. As the party left the cavern and back into the open air,

Twilight could see the effects of the storms; they were still raging strong, but against the outside of the mountain. Instead where they stood was perfectly calm, where even the air was comfortable.

They all stopped and gasped at the sight on the top of the mountain. Laying in wait on the summit was the most regal, most majestic, most powerful appearance any of them had ever seen. Something so large and so grand had to belong to something great, and there it was, waiting for the ponies to gaze upon the might of centuries.

"That temple is real pretty!" Pinkie chimed in as the ponies stood slack-jawed. "But get a load of that!"

There, sleeping on a ridge of the mountain near the tomb of Luna, final resting place of the Mane of Stars and long sought after treasure of pilgrims and believers everywhere, was the most powerful destructive force the natural world had ever seen. The high dragon.

Chapter 18

Riddles and Regrets

Twilight watched the sleeping form of the high dragon carefully as the ponies made their way towards the temple. The great beast was dozing off somewhat peacefully, its tail waving against the wind while dark smog rose from its nostrils. The dragon's deep breaths could be heard across the small valley that was between the true temple of Luna and the tunnel from where the party had just arrived. Underneath the dragon was a hoard of treasures, an assortment of gold and jewels as well as several artifacts and shining weapons. The high dragon clawed at its bounty while in deep slumber, tossing several coins off the edge of the ridge the mighty wyrm used as its nest.

They all gaped at the gigantic red dragon sleeping soundly until Applejack stepped forwards towards the temple. "Come on, y'all," she said as she trudged through the snow on the mountain summit, "Ain't no use starin' and gawkin'. Let sleeping dragons lie and all that. We're real close to the Mane."

Twilight agreed, and the party continued on their way towards the true tomb. It was hard not to stare at the high dragon though, especially for Spike who could not wrest his eyes away from his much larger brethren.

"Is that what my mom looks like Twilight?" Spike asked as he sat on the mage's back. Twilight looked at Spike and then back to the high dragon, trying to picture a beast with large spines across its back and a horned crest on its head, only green and purple like her favoured assistant.

"I think so Spike," she answered, trying to decide how best to answer the question. Would Spike want to go and seek out the high dragon that laid his egg? Maybe find the merchant that had sold his egg to the Tower to find his dragon matriarch? Find other dragon eggs and whelps similar to him?

Twilight couldn't bear the thought of losing Spike, but unlike battle against the ponyspawn, it would be something she could not stop if Spike truly wanted to search. He had every right to find his own family, though Twilight

did not think most high dragons were too broken up about their eggs being taken. The fact that the diamond dogs had rookeries full of them seemed to indicate this particular high dragon had no love lost for her brood.

All around them the storms continued to surge, yet the calm on the actual summit spoke volumes about the powers held by the pegasi skylords of old. That their storm was still protecting the tomb of Luna after hundreds of years was a testament to incredible knowledge, but also a reminder of what the pegasi had lost. Twilight felt saddened that such knowledge was apparently lost to the mists of time, though her two pegasi friends did not seem so broken up about it.

Twilight rolled her eyes. They were too busy focusing on the dragon of course.

"For something so big and awesome looking, it sure has the right idea," Rainbow said, "I could use with a power nap right about now."

"A dragon is not awesome, Rainbow Dash," Fluttershy replied, hiding behind Shale, only taking peeking glimpses of the dragon, "High dragons are scary and mean and..."

"And so are ponyspawn and demons." Rainbow sighed in exasperation.

"What's a dragon compared to the whole Blight or the Fade? We've gone up against things no pony in their right minds would stand against. You helped fight!"

Fluttershy gave an audible gulp. "Yes. Those were small, and mostly pony sized. This is different. That dragon can eat one of us in one bite, or could breathe fire and roast us, or roar and toss us off the mountain, or use its big scary claws, or..."

"That's enough now, ya hear?" Applejack called to the back, "Yes, that dragon there is real big and real scary. But it's also asleep, so if we mosey into the temple, find the Mane and leave right quick, we won't have to worry about it wakin' up and wantin' a snack."

They continued in much-needed silence until at last arriving on the steps of the great temple. Despite the storms and the considerable passage of time,

the temple still looked pristine and shining in the dark of night, a beacon unparalleled in today's age of battered buildings. Every marking and word was clear and readable, even though Twilight could not translate the ancient text.

"This is it," Twilight breathed as they gazed upon the massive doors of the temple, "This is the final resting place of Luna. The home of the Mane of Stars."

"Welcome, pilgrim ponies." A voice, calm yet powerful, echoed through the doors. Unlike the voice that spoke to Twilight and the others in the temple when she read the names of the Old Ones, this voice filled the lavender unicorn with warmth, hope and courage. The doors opened wide, revealing the dark halls of the tomb until they were illuminated in a faint blue glow from crystal orbs hanging from the ceiling.

A visage of an earth pony formed from the darkness, with the shape of a strong armoured warrior comprised of a constellation. The pony of stars bowed to the party, almost in reverence before returning his gaze upwards. Twilight caught her breath at the sight of the starry equine; this was one of the wonders she had hoped to see on her journeys.

The pony of stars pulsed with magic, but each wave felt welcoming rather than warning. This was likely the Guardian that Lockjaw had mentioned, yet despite his title, Twilight felt no threat from him. She looked to her friends, who all seemed to bask in the warmth from the Guardian. Fluttershy did not look afraid or shy in the least, and even Shale seemed pleased to meet the sentinel of the tomb.

"For the first time in my long vigil, pilgrims have met the challenges of the mountain, of the storm, and of the temple. In life I was Hauberk, Element of Loyalty and follower of Luna against the Old Ones. Now I am Judicator of the Gauntlet and Guardian of the Mane of Stars." Hauberk bowed again, this time with the party reciprocating in acknowledgement.

"I have watched many a power climb this mountain, only to be felled by the storm," the Guardian continued, "I have seen my children and their descendants dwindle until there was no more. I could do nothing as the dogs arrived and in their foolishness saw the dragon as Luna reborn and cut down other pilgrims before they could reach this place. To you,

Applejack, I am sorry for the loss of the knights of Red Apple. And you, Fluttershy, I am sorry for the loss of Brother Biblio of the Chantry. They were good ponies, who wanted to help their lord and bring light and hope to the world."

"Wait a minute," Applejack said calmly, "How do you know all this? We just met!"

"The stars in the sky speak, young one," Hauberk answered, "I know of you all from what the stars have told me. I know you and Twilight Sparkle are Walkers of the Grey, or Grey Wardens as the order is now known. I also know Twilight Sparkle holds doubt in her heart that this quest to defeat the Blight will end in failure, and that she will be at fault. I know you, Applejack, fear the weight of the legacy thrust upon you, and that you feel you cannot bear the burden of your father's crown. I know of your friend Pinkie Pie, the guard who lost her family but seeks them out. I know of Rainbow Dash the assassin, who lives with internal conflict as a result of her actions. I know of Rarity the unicorn who follows in the steps of the Mare of the Mire, even though she refuses to admit it. I know of Fluttershy the bard, who still holds fear of every creeping shadow."

"I know of Trixie the magician, who still doubts her talents and abilities and fears their dark nature. I know of Shale the golem, who struggles between wanting to recover its memories and wishing to forget completely and enjoy ignorance. I know of Spike the dragon, who bears the burden of guilt with him and will not let it go."

The words of the Guardian struck the listeners hard. Twilight looked around, watching as her friends looked away while taking in the words of Hauberk. She knew the journey would bring new weights to their shoulders, but she never realized how their old burdens still dragged them down.

What Hauberk said about her was true, when Twilight stopped to think about it. As much as she hated to admit it, she did fear that their quest was doomed. There were so many places to go, so many ponies to meet and convince. There were also many challenges to face and many battles to fight. All that they needed was to lose one, and all of Equestria would be covered by the evil tide that was the ponyspawn.

“You have come to this place on a noble quest,” continued Hauberk, “To save the lives of Arl Macintosh and Applebloom. Know that you will be able to enter the temple and face its trials.”

“Please wait,” Rarity interjected, “We climbed this horrible mountain, suffered the storm, and did battle against those *atrocious* dogs, and now we have to face more trials? Haven’t we done enough?”

“By the will of Celestia and Luna, the trials must be completed.” On this Hauberk would not budge, punctuating his statement with a stomp of a hoof.. Twilight groaned inwardly as Rainbow made her complaints known. There always seemed to be more challenges to overcome.

Twilight stepped forward onto the steps of the tomb, feeling the cold alabaster stone under her hooves. She took each step with respect, fully knowing that she was the first pony in years to ascend the steps, not including the dogs that had tried to enter and defile the relic within. Every hoofstep made her heart skip a beat, not about the upcoming trials, but rather about the wonders they were all about to encounter. Everything about the temple was a mystery, and Twilight wanted to plumb its secrets and study every stone.

When she finally made her way to Hauberk, Twilight was amazed at what formed the Guardian’s body upon closer inspection. The stars that made up his constellation were brilliant orbs of light, as if she was staring into the depths of night sky closer than she ever thought possible. Swirls of gas, dust and energy could be seen around the clusters, while blue lines linked the stars together like a simple skeleton.

Hauberk chuckled, catching Twilight off-guard. “The curiosity of youth,” he said, “How I miss that. Today is truly a wonderful day for us all. Come. The tomb and the trials await you.”

The rest of the ponies made their way up the steps except for Shale, who still had Trixie on its back. When Twilight turned a puzzled eye towards the golem, Shale could only sit on the snow, casting a careful glance at the sleeping magician mare, though not resting soundly.

“The loud one’s wound is great,” Shale said, “Admirable if I had been the one to cause it, but no good for traversing a tomb of tricks and traps. I have

no need for such religious nonsense. I will stay here with it and keep it safe, relatively.”

Before Twilight could give thanks, Pinkie bounced over to Shale, dropping off several bottles of poultice as well as other concoctions at the golem’s feet. While Pinkie rattled off the exact usage of the medicines, Twilight looked down to Spike, noticing that he also did not take foot on the steps. His gaze was still fiercely locked on the high dragon nestled away on the rocky ridge.

“Aren’t you coming Spike?” Twilight asked, “We’re here. Don’t you want to explore the temple with us?”

“I can’t, Twilight,” Spike replied with a shrug, “I just... can’t.”

“As young as the dragon is, he is still a dragon,” said Hauberk, “All dragons carry the blood of the Old Ones, from the smallest eggs to the mighty high dragons. In the time of Luna, the Imperium used Reavers, those who drank dragon blood, to take on their power as their most feared assailants. They cannot enter, for the spells within will keep them out to protect the Mane of Stars. It is this that prevented the corrupted Diamond Dogs from entering the sanctuary. I am sorry.”

Twilight did not want to leave Spike alone, and especially from such a discovery as the tomb of Luna, but they did not have much of a choice. As long as Shale was with Spike and Trixie, and as long as the high dragon remained asleep, there was no threat to them. She hoped.

She nodded to Shale, who responded with a smug nod of its own, seeming to remember all too well the words Twilight had spoken the last time she left her ward with the golem. Twilight embraced Spike one last time, holding him tight before letting go and returning to the steps that the magic would not let him climb.

Once they were all on the stairs, Hauberk turned into the temple proper, closely followed by the six ponies. As they made their way into the antechamber, the heavy stone doors magically closed behind them, causing Fluttershy to squeak and Dash to go for her dagger. Twilight’s heart beat thudded louder, but she did not feel afraid of a trap. The soft

blue glow of the crystals hanging overhead gave a sense of calm as Hauberk turned towards them once again.

“Before you all continue further, know that this is the first trial within the tomb of Luna,” Hauberk began, looking over the ponies assembled before him, “I will ask you all a question and all you must do is answer with clarity and honesty. I ask for nothing more, nothing less.”

“That’s it?” said Rainbow in disbelief, “That’s the dangerous first trial? Just asking a question? I thought temple trials were gonna be hard. If that’s all, then come on! Lay it on me!”

The Guardian regarded the cyan pegasus with a critical eye. “Rainbow Dash of Equestria, of Pura Raza. Assassin of the Wonderbolts. You journeyed from afar to return to your homeland to escape the ravages of life in Pura Raza. Here you hoped to escape from the memories of the day your mother died, which you saw in every house and every building belonging to the Council of Six. I ask you this: do you hold regret in your heart of what you have become?”

“What I’ve become? I’m awesome! I’m great! I’m better than ever!” Despite the confidence she portrayed, Rainbow’s ears flicked backwards as Hauberk continued to stare her down, clearly unsatisfied with her answer. Twilight bit her lip as she watched the question; if the cyan pegasus didn’t answer the question truthfully, all their journey up the Frosttop Mountains would be for nothing.

Dash trailed off her tirade as every ounce of bravado fell from her lips into nothing, looking away from the constellation guardian. Rainbow Dash closed her eyes as both her ears and wings drooped low. Hauberk simply stared at her, saying nothing as Dash mulled over what he had asked.

“I’m what my mom never wanted me to be,” Rainbow said at last, looking up into the starry depths of the Guardian’s eyes, “Mom was a killer, an assassin for a group no better than the Shadowbolts, especially under Reinhardt. He made the Shadowbolts look like charity workers once he took Despiadado’s spot on the Council, and I helped him get there. I became just like my mom, taking bits and killing ponies. Maybe I was angry at her, for not telling me the truth. For dying. Maybe I’m angry at myself.”

Dash took a deep breath before continuing. "I do regret what I've become. I'm everything my mom never wanted me to be. I can't take back the lost years though, and what I don't regret is finding all these great gals. Sure we met kind of bumpy, but I know they have my back with anything, in a fight, or in the Fade, or anywhere. I'll *never* leave any of them hanging."

The Guardian simply nodded his head as he smiled, showing no sign that Dash had either completed or failed the trial. What Twilight did notice that Rainbow Dash seemed brighter, as if a great weight was lifted off her shoulders. That must have been the purpose of the trial; to clear the mind of pilgrims of any doubt and have them face their regrets before continuing. Twilight couldn't help but shudder at what question Hauberk would ask her.

"Pinkie Pie of Equestria," Hauberk said to the pink earth pony, "Guard of Ponyring, bringer of merriment to those around you. You lived life to the fullest with your family, bringing joy to all you could. You also did your best to avoid conflict, fearing the unhappiness it would bring onto others. To that end, you encouraged a compromise between your sisters to stay in Ponyring, but found it was too late when the ponyspawn attacked. Do you regret your decision, or lack thereof, leaving your choice to fate alone?"

Pinkie's mane and tail deflated, much like they did during battle or when she was depressed or angry. She looked up at Hauberk with sad eyes, tears already forming. "Yes," she replied, though her voice cracked she still held back sorrow, "I do regret not making a decision sooner. I thought the danger wasn't big enough to worry about. I thought everything was going to be fine and that the army was going to win and we could hold a big party with balloons and cakes and ribbons and everything. One decision made me lose track of my family, and who knows where they are now? I don't!"

Her mane and tail then bounced back into curly proportions. "What I don't regret is the same thing Dashie doesn't regret!" Pinkie continued as she stretched her forelegs to grab everypony and bring them in for an impromptu hug, "I made lots of super nice friends, and they are the best friends anypony could have. I know they're going to help me find my family, even if it takes us from party to party! I believe in them, and they believe in Pinkie!"

Hauberk chuckled at Pinkie, who also appeared brighter than usual. "Such joy. I have not seen such for centuries." He then turned to Rarity, who

seemed to be more interested in admiring a hoof than paying attention to the questions asked by the Guardian, "Rarity of Equestria, of the Potpourri Wilds. Mare of the Mire..."

"I'm sorry, dear, but that title is already owned by an unscrupulous and rather dingy pony," Rarity interrupted, reinforcing her spell to protect her from dirt, "She may be dirty, but Flemeth is my adoptive mother, and the true Mare of the Mire. I may have been raised by her, but I still have standards."

"Is that true?" questioned the spirit pony with a raised eyebrow, "You know of Flemeth's magic of shapeshifting. You know of her glyphs, of her runes. You have finished reading the grimoire of Flemeth. Do you regret the knowledge you have learned, and the danger that knowledge will pose to you and your friends?"

Rarity shut her eyes and closed her ears, trying to block out the words and even the presence of Hauberk. When she finally opened her eyes, she sighed heavily, looking at the ground as if it was the most depressing thing she ever laid her eyes on.

"You were right, spirit," Rarity began, "I am following in the hoofsteps of Flemeth, though not in any way I could recognize. I have learned powerful magic and simple spells, and wanted to bring a new level of beauty to ponies in a way Flemeth never understood. I wanted to live like the Filesians did, while still maintaining what made me different from her. Giving to ponies, not just taking. When she sent me on this journey, I thought she wanted me to learn and grow, as she did. After reading her book..."

The white unicorn turned to the rest of the party, levitating the thick black grimoire and placing it on the floor. "This book is a puzzle, and the result frightens me. I wish I never knew what was inside. It is a ritual Flemeth uses every time her mortal body is ready to die. She raises a unicorn filly and then takes that body for her own. The more powerful the filly, the better for Flemeth. I'm that filly."

"What I truly regret is that I know what Flemeth will do if I try to escape her. She is vengeful, and she will hurt all of you to get to me. I could not bear the thought of her hurting my friends. I'm scared."

This answer appeared to have been enough for Hauberk, but it certainly was nothing compared to the shock felt by Twilight and the rest of the party. Knowing what Flemeth had planned for Rarity was frightening to say the least. Unlike Dash and Pinkie, Rarity did not seem more uplifted from expressing her regrets. If anything, she seemed darkened, huddled away to wallow in her own despair. Twilight wanted to ask Rarity for more information, maybe using her special talent with magic to help combat the Mare of the Mire's strange and twisted ritual, but Hauberk had already moved on to Fluttershy.

The yellow pegasus shrunk under the gaze of the tomb's sentry, holding her amulet of sun and moon in her hooves as Hauberk loomed over her. "Fluttershy of Filais," he said, ignoring Fluttershy's squeaks of fright, "Sister of the Chantry. You have supposedly been visited by Celestia herself through dreams and prophecies. Such is a bold claim when Celestia has been silent since the time of Luna. Do you regret not showing courage in Filais as you have when you interpreted your dreams to match your own conclusions?"

Fluttershy hid behind her pink hair, shivering as she mewed her response. Hauberk simply kept his gaze until the Chantry sister rose from her seated position, looking around at her friends for support before matching eyes with the spirit guard.

"Yes," she answered like the others, "I should have stood up to Artistic Finish earlier. I should have stopped being a bard when I knew I was happy living with the General, with Lady Elegant, with Glorieux and Magnifique. I should have shown courage during my escape from Filais. I caused so much trouble, so much pain, all because I couldn't stand up for myself."

"Twilight said I was brave, but I didn't believe her at first. I was terrified by the monsters she was supposed to fight, and I hated fighting anything at all. But when I saw a friend in trouble, I knew I had to make a stand or lose them forever. I made my choice, just like I did when I had the dream, and when I saw the firebird. I don't regret that choice."

"Such bravery does you credit, Fluttershy of Filais," Hauberk said and then turned to Applejack who stood tall, waiting for her turn to be questioned. "Applejack, heir to the Throne of Equestria. You, who bear the burden to

defeat the Blight, restore your siblings to good health, and soon to face a succession crisis against the widow of the King. Do you-

"Ah regret alotta things." Applejack was quick on the draw, narrowing her eyes towards Hauberk who was taken aback by such brashness. "Yeah, I regret not telling Macintosh and the advisers where to stick their plan to send me to the templars. Ah regret getting all wound up and breaking my mama's amulet just to prove a point. Ah regret not being with Duncan to the end, if ah could help him or even save him."

"What ah do know is that regrettin' don't solve nothin'. You start lookin' back; you ain't lookin' forward where yer eyes should be and where yer hooves should go. It may have taken me a while to learn all that, but if there is anything that I've learned on this mess of a journey is that. Learn from yer mistakes; don't stay with em like a stick in mud."

Hauberk seemed to smile at Applejack's quick response. "You will make a fine queen for your ponies," he said, "Should you accept your crown." Twilight gulped as Hauberk turned to her, feeling herself grow cold in anticipation of the question he was bound to ask.

He looked Twilight over for a moment, from horn to hoof with a cocked eyebrow. "You seem hesitant, Twilight Sparkle of Equestria," the Guardian said, "You have seen what I asked your friends. You should be well prepared with a response to my question."

Twilight tried to speak, only to fall into silence with Hauberk's raised hoof. Waiting for Hauberk to ask was nerve wracking, leaving Twilight to jumble all the possible responses in her head at once. There was of course the chance he would ask something she would not have an answer to.

Sucking in another breath of air, Twilight tried to remain calm as she waited for the question. All the Guardian of the Gauntlet had asked was a truthful answer to a question. That was it, just the plain and simple truth. It sounded easy, but Twilight wondered if it was something Hauberk cared for, or if the answer was something she was supposed to face on her own.

"Like Applejack, you bear the burden to defeat the Blight," Hauberk said at last, "Unlike her, this destiny was thrust upon you by Duncan. Regret is born from choice, Twilight Sparkle, or choosing not to at all. To act or to be

indifferent is a choice we all face. All of your friends made a choice, which lead to their regrets. So I ask you this now; what do you regret?"

Twilight's ears folded back against her head, expecting this question but not having a direct answer for it. "I regret a lot of things," she replied softly, as images of her journey flashed before her eyes. Every pain she could have avoided and every hurt she made with her magic against others. Just as the Guardian said, everything she had done in the quest to defeat the ponyspawn was her choice.

That was it. That was the truth of the question. "I regret a lot of things," Twilight spoke much more clearly, lifting her head up and shaking the melancholy from her thoughts, "Sometimes I made the wrong decision. Would I want to go back and make the better choice? Of course I would. But I won't regret the fact that everything up to now was decided by me. I made the choice. I will make the choice again."

From the center of Hauberk's body erupted a blinding white light, engulfing the room completely. The party averted their eyes from the flash, Twilight wondering if she failed the trial. She had answered the question truthfully; what if Hauberk was not satisfied with the answer?

When they could open their eyes again, Hauberk was gone and they were still in the antechamber. The only difference was that the door leading deeper into the tomb was now opened wide with the blue glow of hanging crystals giving only enough light to allow them safe crossing.

"You have passed the first trial," came the disembodied voice of the Guardian of the Gauntlet, "Proceed to the Hall of the Elements, where those who followed the will of Celestia and Luna will give you the second trial. Sun and Moon protect you all."

Without another word, Twilight stepped forward down the antechamber towards the next hall with the rest of the party in tow. As much as she wanted to confirm that they were all right from the questions posed by Hauberk, especially Rarity, forward was the only way to go, for now, until they found the Mane of Stars.

The Hall of the Elements has breathtaking.

The entire room was expertly carved from stone, just as the rest of the tomb was, but adorned in marvelous statues crafted from the finest crystal. All appeared to be polished to a mirror sheen, and they bore scenes of happiness and joy compared to the imagery of war and death in the lower temple. The hall was decorated with six statues of ponies, each carved from unique crystal: two earth ponies, two pegasi, and two unicorns. Each stood in a different pose, but all held a small stone orb near them with a different marking on it. They also had stone plaques with carved markings, though they were not written in any language Twilight understood.

Like the antechamber, the door on the other side of the hall was closed and likely not to open until the second trial was complete. Without the guidance of Hauberk, it was up to them to find the trial and complete it.

As the rest of the party split up to search the hall, Twilight was able to bring Rarity to a corner. The white unicorn still looked deeply upset from the ordeal of answering the question of regret. Rarity gave a look that plainly showed she did not wish to talk, but she was quickly pushed aside, leaving the two unicorns to talk in private.

“Everything I said was true,” Rarity began, “I am scared of what I learned from that black book. Flemeth is going to take my carefully perfected body. I mean, did you see her? She’ll make it all wrinkly and baggy and *old*.”

“This isn’t about just the looks though, isn’t it?” Twilight wanted to skip past the superficial aspect that Rarity always seemed so focused on and delve into the truth of the matter. Rarity sighed, looking away from her fellow unicorn.

“Flemeth is powerful and malicious, Twilight dear,” she said, “If she takes over my body, what if she goes after you and the others? I don’t care what happens to me, though I will admit I am frightened as to what happens to ‘me’ once she completes her spell. It’s the thought of harming any of you that pains me the most.”

“Don’t worry Rarity. We’re all here for you. We’ll figure something out to stop Flemeth and her magic.”

“I wish it were so simple,” Rarity sighed softly, “No use worrying about it in here. Let us help the others search. I must admit the décor of the tomb is rather appealing ...”

They convened a short while later, noting that there was nothing in the hall except for the statues and words of text on the plaques beneath them. Twilight studied the plaques carefully, noting how similar they were to the scrap of parchment found with the old Warden treatise. Twilight grumbled in frustration; she couldn’t read the text on the parchment and now she couldn’t make heads or tails of the same ancient writings on the statues.

Pinkie leaned a hoof against one statue, tapping her chin with another hoof in deep thought. The idea that Pinkie’s gears were turning in contemplation made Twilight simultaneously appreciative of the effort and afraid of what those efforts would bring about. Knowing Pinkie, she would solve the problem with a muffin, a grenade or both: a party, in other words.

“I know!” Pinkie shouted in triumph, “What if we ask them nicely? Think about it, if Hauberk has been here for so long, maybe the temple itself just wants a friend to speak to! Those dogs were all ‘grr!’ so it wouldn’t do anything for them!”

Before Twilight could argue about talking to solid crystal statues, Pinkie was already bouncing about and talking to the motionless ponies. “Hi there! We were wondering if you could show us the second trial, please. It would be super great if you could!”

In what seemed like a response to Pinkie’s request, the stone orbs held by the statues began to glow, along with the writing on the stone pedestals which bore the statues. They watched in awe as the words shifted into readable Equestrian, the statues themselves becoming illuminated with powerful magic.

“Incredible,” Twilight breathed, looking at the stone edifices with awe, “Wait...” The unicorn opened her bag and pulled the small parchment with the strange ritual. Holding it up, she counted the six points on the page then looked up at the statues, realization dawning on her as she excitedly waved the ritual about.

“This! These ponies! This is what the Wardens wanted us to find!” Twilight’s eyes were lit up as she explained her discovery to the others in earnest, “Look, six points, six heroes, six Elements of Harmony! Now we just need to find out how they used them.”

“Maybe this will help,” suggested Pinkie, pointing at the writing underneath the statue of a strong-looking earth pony warrior who looked very much like Hauberk. They all huddled in front of the statue, watching in wonder as the old writings from ancient times glowed bright, shifting until they formed words in readable Equestrian. After the words were done changing, Twilight was able to read them clearly:

*“The bonds we forge are true as steel,
Never bending under our zeal,
Never falter in your conviction
To your friends give all devotion.
What am I?”*

They all stood silent for a moment as they considered the riddle posed by the statue of Hauberk. Even Pinkie Pie had found pause. It was odd to be posed with a riddle in the middle of the temple, though it made sense that this was the second trial by how it was being delivered. It also meant that failure would mean ejection from the temple and failure to collect the Mane of Stars. *It seems Luna favoured the clever*, Twilight mused as she concentrated on the enigma. Showing her impatience and frustration, Rainbow Dash glared at the statue, stomping her hoof.

“How many trials do we have to go through?” she demanded, pointing a hoof at the statue of the crystalline equine, “We can’t spend our time answering riddles! Give us the dragon! At least then we can get some action and finish this quick! I thought we were supposed to save Equestria from the ponyspawn, not play guessing games.”

“The trials are to test the worthiness of all those who enter,” said Fluttershy, “Not just anypony can come in here and take a strand from the Mane. We have to show that we are both ready and worthy to receive the Mane.”

“Ugh, fine. The answer is loyalty.” Twilight wanted to shout out a warning or deny that this was the answer, seeing as how Rainbow had responded to the riddle too quickly. It was only when the orb by the statue of Hauberk

began to glow, as well as the smile on the starry earth pony's face, did Twilight realize that the cyan Pegasus had given the correct answer. The words on the pedestal also shifted from forming the riddle into something new.

"Loyalty," read Twilight, "The ties that bind us, as we choose them. When the First Blight took the land by storm, it was our loyalty to Luna's memory that we were able to stay true to being Elements of Harmony. Most importantly, it was what allowed us to stay true to each other."

I'll never leave my friends hanging. Twilight looked at Rainbow Dash, wondering if the pegasus had just pulled the answer from the air or if she knew the response to the riddle from the beginning. It was the right answer, to which Twilight was grateful that her friend knew what she was doing, even if her delivery left something to be desired.

There was something about the Elements of Harmony that seemed oddly familiar, though what it was, Twilight could not make heads or tails. They were a powerful form of magic that had defeated the dark side of Luna in the form of Nightmare Moon and were somehow linked with defeating the First Blight. Perhaps they were a weapon to be used against the ponyspawn or other such evils.

"Look, another riddle," Rarity pointed out, who approached the statue of a rather bulky earth pony, although Twilight could not tell the gender. Rarity waited as the words shifted with magic, before reading the next riddle aloud:

*"Great the bounty at our hooves,
An act of virtue this does proves
To give to those who lack the way,
Offer them the light of day.
What am I?"*

"Generosity, darlings," Rarity answered with a smile, as if she knew the answer before Twilight could even consider the conundrum, "Some of us do lead blessed lives. It simply is not enough to have or want, but we should do what we can to give as well, no matter what form that giving takes."

The statue of the earth pony seemed to have accepted the answer, the orb under its left hoof shining with a magical aura just as the one with the statue of Hauberk. The name of the earth pony was revealed to be “Keystone,” and the riddle changed into information on the Element.

“Generosity,” Twilight announced, “After the fall of the Imperium, we gave everything to the ponies affected by the war against the Old Ones. Money, food, time; all was freely passed to those unfortunate. When the First Blight raged, we saw that generosity return to us tenfold in the form of a great alliance to fight back against the Archdemon.”

Answering questions and conundrums was all well and good, but these were not the kind of trials Twilight was expecting. There did not seem to be an element of danger in giving the correct response, unlike climbing the mountain and weathering the storms. The only threat was failure and being sent back the way they came, rather than a grisly demise Twilight envisioned and an ancient temple employing a great variety of traps to keep undesirables from the relic. Of course, being sent back in shame at failing the trials would also be devastating beyond repair. This was something the lavender unicorn would do her best to prevent.

“Here’s another,” Applejack said, looking up at a rather dainty looking pegasus mare statue, “Looks like a confusin’ one. Here goes:”

*“Like perfect crystal, neat and sleek
The answers sought are nothing meek
Never bring out lies and slander,
Only truth of utmost candour.
What am I?”*

“Well that’s easy,” Applejack chimed, “The answer is the best policy: honesty. Ain’t no fancy words like slander and candour gonna confuse me.”

Another impressive light show of magic revealed the name of the pegasus to be “Crystal Clear”. The orb of stone she held in her right hoof glowed the same as the others. As with the others, the riddle turned into a lesson from the past.

“After the Ascension, we thought our time as Elements of Harmony were done. The Old Ones were defeated and the Imperium no longer had the

power to hurt the world. Then the ponyspawn attacked, which only thrust us into battle once again. We were weary of war and fighting, and only wanted peace. We had to be honest with ourselves first and foremost however, and we all knew our place was against the ponyspawn and staying true to each other.”

With three stone orbs glowing bright with energy, all that remained was to answer three more riddles. Two statues of unicorns and a second pegasus were left amongst the ancient elements, their riddles forming as the party moved on to a unicorn wearing an ornate robe and a highly detailed staff, with the stone orb being used as the focus on the magical implement.

There was something about the air of the Hall of the Elements that caught Twilight’s attention, a feeling of being watched. It was not a vile or paranoid feeling, but rather like the feeling that the spirits of the past were showing pride at how much progress Twilight and the party were making inside the temple.

Without another word, Fluttershy stepped forward to the next riddle, her features becoming more solemn as she spoke:

*“To those hurt and in great pain,
Life can seem like such a bane,
All it takes to do your part,
Is a warm smile and a gentle heart.
What am I?”*

“Those words sound a lot like the Chant,” Fluttershy realized, looking over to her friends. “The part where we are told to be kind to one another, even in the darkest of times. It must be kindness.”

Just as soon as Fluttershy answered the riddle did the orb on the staff emit the familiar bright light, with the name “Exarch Lexicon” forming on the pedestal. Many stood agape as they read the name, the lessons of the Chantry echoing as the title of the unicorn before them rang bells.

“The unicorn who slew Luna out of mercy,” Applejack recalled, “How did he become an element of kindness? Maybe there’s a clue where that riddle was.”

“Kindness,” Twilight read aloud, “It was considered a kindness to slay Luna while she suffered, to end her misery as she burned in the shadowflame of Asha’Bellanar, Dragon of Victory. The most stalwart of the Old One’s servitors, the disciple who had given everything by the dragons and was the most powerful Magister in all the Imperium, stopped the executioner’s pyre and slew a goddess. Instead of being punished for this act, he was granted the Element of Kindness, not just for what he did, but for the kindness shown to him by the other Elements who did accept him, though it took some time. Lexicon did then show kindness by offering to repair the world with his magic, and heal the wounds caused by centuries of rule by the Old Ones.”

Twilight stopped reading the passage on the stone, taking time to consider the implications of the words. Lexicon was often called the redeemed villain by the Chantry, a unicorn heretic that led the entirety of the unicorn race into heresy, only to redeem himself through a single act of mercy, not of kindness but out of fear for his soul. What would the Chantry say when they discovered the statue here, showing them the truth of his actions?

It was no use pondering the actions of a unicorn who was not here to defend himself properly. They turned to the next statue, that of a pegasus balancing herself on the stone orb on one hoof while looking up at the sky with a smile on her face. Pinkie bounded over to the statue, jumping up and down as the words became readable.

“Ooh, ooh! Can I read this one next?” Pinkie asked, but before Twilight could give the go-ahead, the pink earth pony was already reading the riddle with some added mirth:

*“All it takes is a little giggle,
That sets my mood all a wiggle,
A simple sound of joyful mirth,
That we know straight from birth.
What am I?”*

Pinkie burst into a fit of giggles as she rolled on the stone temple floor, apparently enjoying the wording of the riddle. Despite her lack of answer, or because of it, the orb the statue pony was standing on ignited its light, joining in with the other four stone spheres. On the pedestal came the

name of the Pegasus pony, "Surprise", as well as the words of wisdom that took the place of the enigma.

"Laughter," said Twilight as she read from the magical etchings in the stonework, "This simple light that can overcome any darkness, banish any despair. Through her smile, they learned to laugh again, to live life again. Not even the mighty forces of the Archdemon could crush their spirits."

Five riddles answered, with five lights shining from the carved stone. With one riddle left, Twilight approached the final statue of a unicorn mare in a simple robe, and waited for the old runes to become readable Equestrian. As she did, she felt a sort of kinship with the unicorn being held aloft by stone, or at least some sort of familiarity. Wonders of what the stone unicorn had lived through wandered through her head, but as the words of the last riddle shone through with clarity; Twilight turned her attention to the task at hoof. The magic spoke to her, and she wondered if this was the same feeling the others had when posed with the other challenging plays on words.

*"From the mountains to the Everfree,
This spark unties all harmony,
Holding true this one ideal,
The gentle spark we all feel,
From the Fade our gift aligns,
But with your friends this truly shines.
What am I?"*

Twilight paused for a moment as she considered the riddle, mulling over the words. The last five spoke of the virtues loyalty, generosity, honesty, kindness and laughter. What was this riddle trying to say? Something that brought all the virtues together? The only clue seemed to be mentioning the Fade but...

Wait... From the Fade, our gift aligns... does the riddle mean magic? As Twilight wondered, she looked at the words closer, trying to find some sort of meaning. As she considered what purpose her friends had in making the "answer" to the riddle shine, she also began to remember how much she had learned about magic since the journey began. She had learned the true nature of the power she harnessed through her horn, as well as how it could twist a pony into a monstrous abomination. She also learned of the

wonders she could accomplish, like bringing motion to a golem or protecting her friends with new and amazing spells.

“Magic.” Twilight answered at last, looking up at the statue of the unicorn with determination. The answer was accepted, as the stone orb near the unicorn glowed with arcane power, with the name “Dewdrop Dazzle” forming at the pedestal upon which the ancient hero stood. The riddle twisted its markings, allowing Twilight to read the contents.

“Magic. That which unites the dream world with the physical. That which allowed the Imperium to rule as masters of the world through the gifts of the terrible Old Ones. That which called to Luna and brought her to our world. That which allowed the Elements of Harmony to awaken and defeat evil. A Walker of the Grey who held the gift of magic brought ponies together and ended the tyranny of Nightmare Moon. A Walker of the Grey who brought the Elements together once again to expose the heart of the Archdemon of Destruction and ensured its end. Know of the sacrifices made in the name of harmony, and remember them. Know that the Elements will return when a force of darkness dares threaten them that no mortal pony can overcome on their own. Know that only ponies united in Loyalty, Generosity, Honesty, Kindness, Laughter, and Magic can awaken the magic and bring peace to a shadowed land.”

The Elements were used to defeat the Archdemons, and Dewdrop Dazzle was one of the Walkers, one of the first Wardens! Twilight had to calm herself after this revelation, her heart beating fast as new hope swelled within her heart.

Before she could express her elation, the six glowing stone orbs rose up from their statues, and a beam of light fired from their centers. Each beam struck the door on the other end of the hall with powerful arcane energy the likes Twilight had never felt before. Charged by the magic from the orbs, the door opened, revealing the next chamber which was shrouded in complete darkness.

Twilight put her thoughts on the Elements of Harmony as the door to the next hall, and therefore the next trial, was made open to the group. The darkness proved intimidating, and one of her bolts of light was quickly consumed by the shadows.

“I guess there is only one way to find out.” Taking a cautious step, the lavender unicorn stepped through the doorway and into the darkness as her friends followed her, until the sound the door closing and the utter loss of light elicited a sharp squeak from Fluttershy.

Then the ground vanished beneath them, the ponies screaming as they fell into oblivion.

Chapter 19

Fires of the Gauntlet

Applejack rubbed her head with a hoof as she struggled to get back up. One moment they were finished with the riddles in the last hall, the next they had passed through the door and fallen into a pit. She supposed that the next trial would have been a doozy, but they were never warned of that first step being one as well.

“Where the hay am I...” Applejack trailed off as she looked where she was standing. A better phrase would be where she *wasn’t* standing; despite being upright with an apparently solid surface under her hooves, the former templar was not standing on anything. Instead she appeared to be floating in the middle of a vast night sky, with only the stars and the moon as her company.

The words would not come out; but then, Applejack could not decide what would be fitting for what she was seeing. It just seemed so impossible that she was standing tall and firm in the sky, despite how otherwise empty it was. At first she thought it was the Fade, only to decide against it. There were no signs of trickery so far from demons, and something about this place felt safe, or better yet, right. This felt just the same as the Fade, where the illusion felt real and perfect.

It would have been much more comforting if the others were with her, to have Twilight’s reassurance or even Rainbow’s bravado. Applejack looked around, seeing no sign that her friends were with her, or anywhere close. Considering that “close” could be anywhere in the sky, there seemed to be no other answer but to go forward.

Only which way was forward? To that, which was back, or even down or up in the center of the night sky? There were no roads or paths to follow, and every time Applejack looked down, she just felt herself getting dizzy trying to look into the abyss of space.

“Come on Applejack,” the Warden said, trying to bring her nerves to bear, “Just like the mountain. One hoof in front of the other. Find the trial and move on. Applebloom and Macintosh need ya.”

Just as she was about to take another step on the seemingly invisible floor, several stars above her twinkled bright with white light until they formed an outline of an object in the sky. *Looks kinda like a ball?* Applejack thought as she watched the constellation continue to shape itself, with three stars forming around the top in a slightly curved line.

Oh now I see it. If that's a stem, then that must be an apple! What does it mean though? Stars don't just move on their own. Is this part of the trial?

As Applejack pondered, the fruit made of stars slowly began to descend from the sky, growing smaller and smaller until it finally landed gently before her. Applejack didn't know what to do with the apple, prodding it carefully to see if it was real. It certainly felt like an apple, and a part of Applejack wanted to bite it to discover the authenticity of the fruit.

The stars then swirled again, breaking the imagery of the apple until it reformed into a simple circle. More stars joined in, making out sharp points. Applejack turned away from the image, knowing all too well what it was.

“That there's a crown,” she muttered, wondering if her friends or the spirits could hear her, “Ah know what yer trying to do. Yer trying to get me to put that there crown on my head. Well ah don't need it, and ah don't want it. You can take it back. Ah ain't no queen.”

The crown rose up, dashing in front of Applejack. More stars descended around her, forming a circle as she watched them take on the shape of a pony from the hoof up. The figure before her was tall and strong, a stallion with regal eyes and full stature. The crown sat upon his head as if it belonged there, until the image of the old king looked on at Applejack and smiled.

“A true monarch chooses not the crown to bear,” he said, “They instead choose the task of becoming king or queen because it is best for their ponies. You belittle yourself, my daughter, when I see the makings of a wonderful queen. You listen to the counsel of your friends, which marks you as wise, you show courage in the face of danger, which marks you as

brave, and you seek to aid others without thought for yourself. This marks you as benevolent.”

“When I was your age, I did not want to be king. I wanted only to see the Filesians expelled from Equestria and then live a life of adventure. It was my friends who showed me what I could do as king. Your friends will help you just as mine helped me.”

“What if ah can’t do it?” Applejack said, looking cross at the starry image of the old king, “What if ah make a mistake? What if the ponies hate me?”

“What if you fail to recruit all the races under the banner of the Wardens?” retorted the monarch. He chuckled, and then continued, “You will find being a queen is much easier than being a Warden against the Blight. Do not worry so much about the what-ifs, or else you will go mad and paranoid. Become a queen of today, and you will be one sung for the ages.”

“Remember, Applejack,” the king said, lowering his head so the crown would slide off, “Though we did not know each other for long, I will always be proud of the mare you have become. You are my daughter, and you have the strength of kings in your blood. I put my faith in you that you will do what is right. Honesty is our best policy; always remember to practice it with yourself first and foremost, and be more generous to yourself. You are a good pony, and will make a fine queen.”

The stars of the old king burst, returning to the night sky leaving only the crown behind. After hearing the old king’s words, Applejack didn’t look at the crown the same way. Instead of a burden, she was beginning to see potential. It was a tool, just like a plow or a shovel. May look nicer than shovel, but the idea was the same. Instead of moving rocks and dirt around, a crown could move ponies around, get them to do what was important real quickly, as long as she didn’t dig too deep or abuse her shovel.

She laughed despite herself. “Ah’m looking at a crown and seein’ a shovel,” she said, before taking off her hat. Maybe this was the purpose of the trial, to accept who she was and stop denying what she could become. Still, she didn’t like the idea of taking off her pappy’s hat and putting on some sparkly bit of gold. Unless...

Taking the crown in her teeth, the blonde earth pony set the piece of jewelry around the center of her hat. It fit perfectly, allowing both pieces of headwear to complement each other nicely. Softly biting down on the brim of the hat and giving a flick of her neck, the hat and crown combination twirled in the air until it landed perfectly onto her head.

Applejack had expected the crown to be heavy, maybe not in a literal sense, but in a strange place where apples made of stars fell from the sky anything was possible. Instead the crown only added a little to the weight on her head.

A light shone in the distance in the shape of a doorway, almost beckoning for Applejack to enter. With a smile on her face, Applejack galloped towards the archway of light, feeling her friends' presences on the other side. They were waiting for her, and Applejack always came through for her friends.

"Oh my."

Fluttershy had always admired the stars. They always seemed so serene and calm when compared to the bustle and hustle of the cities she lived in. Even during her time in General Puissant's manor, she could not see the stars as clearly as did now with the street torches burning bright throughout the night. She felt at ease in this strange place in the night sky, though she was worried about all her friends after they fell through the passageway.

"I hope everypony is all right," she said, though with nopony around she did start feeling a little lonely. She enjoyed moments of solitude, perhaps more so than many ponies, but even one as shy as the Chantry sister desired the company of others. Having endured so many trials with the party from the Unicorn Tower to the mountain, Fluttershy had come to appreciate their very presence. They made her feel better about herself, when compared to mentors like Artistic Finish who were cruel and deceitful.

If I start walking one way, I'll be sure to find them. Fluttershy decided heading in any direction was better than waiting, hopefully finding either her friends or the end of this trial. Still, she could stop once in a while and take in the sight of the stars. Maybe there was a clue there, and if Twilight could see the same sky, she would be sure to decipher it and bring them back

together. Twilight was a smart, brave pony. If anypony could solve this, it would be her.

The stars above shone with crystal clarity, forming a constellation Fluttershy was unfamiliar with. From the shape, the yellow pegasus could see a butterfly outline form, then suddenly came to life without warning. The massive picture of stars fluttered down towards her, shrinking until it was the size of the real life insect.

The butterfly landed on Fluttershy's nose, causing her to giggle as the light tickling sensation crept all over her face. "Hello," she said, looking at the tiny perched creature, "I'm Fluttershy. You are a very pretty butterfly. I'm sorry I don't have anything to give you, I don't know what celestial critters like you would eat."

Before she could continue, the butterfly flew off her nose, dancing in the air until the stars of the wings moved about to show a new shape. More stars were added to the new constellation, turning into a dress fit for a pony mare of Fluttershy's size. It was a beautiful dress, but also a familiar one; the same that Lady Elegance had given Fluttershy before being called to report to Artistic Finish. Immediately the wonder and joy given by the butterfly was gone, only to be replaced with sorrow.

"Why are you showing me this?" Fluttershy said in a barely audible whisper, "That dress was so lovely, and it was a gift from another pony to a pegasus. No pony does that, especially in Filais. I was content. I could have lived safe and sound in the manor. I should have stood up to Finish earlier."

"Do not be so hard on yourself, Fluttershy," came a voice. The stars moved on their own, taking the shape of a unicorn mare wearing the dress of stars. The distinctive posture of Lady Elegance was clearly defined, and Fluttershy found herself bowing with respect, much as she did in Filais to the lady of the general's household.

"There is no need for that, dear," said the Lady as she raised the pegasus' head upwards with a hoof, "We are equals now, no longer lady and servant. Though I do wish it was under better circumstances."

"I'm so sorry for all the trouble I caused," Fluttershy said, "I must have brought you and the general so much grief."

"Do not pain yourself on what has happened. Know that we are all safe, including the little ones. My husband is a general after all. His mind is sharp, from long hours of chess. Artistic Finish could not harm him even if she tried."

Fluttershy breathed a sigh of relief at the news. If there was any fear she had since being betrayed by the bardmistress of Filais, it was that the general and his family would come under harm. There was no way to get word of how they were in the prison, and during the escape communication was impossible. Sending messages from Equestria was also out of the question, lest they were discovered and somehow traced back to her.

"Please heed my words," Lady Elegance continued, "You are the kindest soul I have ever known, and with all the darkness in this world, it needs a light to shine, no matter how small and faint it may become. You are a light that is neither, Fluttershy, no matter what you believe. The children loved you because of your warm smile and gentle heart. It is the same reason why I and my husband saw as you more than a simple nursemaid. It is the same reason your friends look to you, as a beacon they can follow when the world is grim."

"But the world is so dark and frightening," Fluttershy said, hiding her fearful face from behind her pink mane, "I don't know how to keep going some days."

"Darkness always ends, Fluttershy," said Elegance, "Only if we bring a light to that shadow. You must be strong, and know that you are not alone to hold the flame high. Show the world that it can be bright."

Lady Elegance is right, Fluttershy thought as she considered the words, I have to be brave and be a light for everypony. I have my friends; they can help me aid this world. They believed everything I said, everything I am. I can believe in it too.

Before she could thank Lady Elegance, the stars burst, rising to the night sky. As the stars took their rightful place, a white light flashed in the

distance, a portal forming to escape the trial and continue on her way. All she had to do was keep her spirits up and move on.

There were no stars. There was no light. There was only a space of darkness, one of complete and utter void. At least, that was what Rarity wished for. She was not alone in the darkness of nothingness, though now she hoped the image before her would simply leave. There was nothing comforting in what she saw. Nothing warm in those sick yellow eyes.

“Hello again, my daughter,” Flemeth said as she stepped through the darkness, “It has been too long.” The unicorn hag had not appeared to have changed at all since Rarity left the wilds; the Mare of the Mire was still as old and wrinkled as she was weeks ago. The hair was still ratty, and her cracked lips were still curled in a frown. Rarity couldn’t help but cringe at the old patchwork dress Flemeth insisted on wearing.

What did change was the aura of magic around the old witch. Rarity had always known her adoptive mother was incredibly powerful, but now the aura was clearly in full force as the very lines of magic bent and warped around the presence of Flemeth. It took all of the white unicorn’s will to keep standing upright. She had to put on a strong stance towards Flemeth, or the old mare would surely see it as a sign of weakness.

“I see you’ve been reading my book,” Flemeth said, eyeing the black tome in Rarity’s saddle bag, “Have we learned anything from it? I did hope you would find the book, but so soon? Colour me impressed.”

“I know what you are planning, mother,” Rarity answered, though she could not hide the uncertainty in her voice, “You won’t succeed.”

“Oh ho! Little Rarity finally turns her teeth towards the hoof that fed her all these years.” Flemeth began to circle Rarity, her magical aura lashing out and striking against that of the much younger unicorn. Rarity grimaced at each ethereal strike, as if her matron was using a lash against her hide. Still, she would not bend her knee. Not to her.

“What, pray tell, makes you believe you can stop me?”

“I have power of my own. I have your spells.”

Flemeth laughed a cold echoing thing that sent chills down Rarity's spine. Then there was another strike from the whip of the arcane. "Power is the only thing that is permanent, dear, if you have the will to make it so. What you possess is paltry compared to the power I accumulated through centuries, millennium."

"I have my friends."

"They will abandon you the first chance they get when they realize the price of saving you." Flemeth's eyes turned cross as she struck again. Rarity's knees buckled, but still she remained standing. "There is but one way to stop me, and that is to slay me. Even if your friends do not leave you in the cold of night, they will not defeat me. If you run, I will find you. Or maybe I will hunt down your precious friends, one by one. It is within my power to do so."

"No!" Rarity would not allow this monster of a mare hurt her friends, and she knew out of all of Flemeth's boasting she would. She would find them and do horrible things to them all unless Rarity submitted.

"Please," she whispered, falling to her knees in defeat, "I'll return to you. Just don't hurt my friends."

Flemeth's smile was something not even the worst of the Fade's demons could ever conjure. The very sight was foul, evil, and showed that the Mare of the Mire had achieved victory. Never had Rarity felt so small and weak than how she felt now. Worst of all, she was ashamed to have come to this; to bow to Flemeth and seeing her not as her mother, but as her master in all things.

For you, my friends, Rarity tried to remind herself. It did not stop the tears from flowing.

"That's a good filly," Flemeth said, keeping her grin wide and unmoving, "Return to your friends. Help them carry out their journey and stop the ponyspawn. Then return to me. Your time is up, and mine continues as it always has."

With that Flemeth was gone, her form ceasing into nothing. leaving Rarity only in the dark void with only a portal leading back to continue on to the temple. She did not move, not while the tears continued to pour out her grief. She would leave when she was ready. Not before. Maybe not even after.

Rainbow Dash was in her own little slice of heaven. Never had she felt as free as where she was now, in the open night sky with all the stars around her. There was no ground to limit her, no obstacles to duck and weave around, just her and the endless expanse of space to go as fast as she could go.

Trials shmials, I'll get to it later, the cyan pegasus thought as she flapped her wings harder against the air, building up more speed. Loop-de-loops, barrel rolls, back flips and twirls, there was no aerial trick she couldn't do here of all places. Nothing was here to get in the way, just Rainbow and her moves. No responsibilities, no worries, no fear. No problem.

I could get used to this. If there was one thing Rainbow Dash would have liked, it was something soft to take a nap on. Her mother always said that Rainbow loved her naps; it was how she had so much energy to pull off all her stunts. Clouds always looked nice and comfy from the ground; it was a shame no pegasus could remember how to harvest them and use them.

She gave her head a quick shake at the memory of her mother; it wasn't going to do Rainbow any good to get depressed. All she had to do was find the trial and reunite with the rest of the party. Still...

It has been a long time. Taking a deep breath, the assassin landed on whatever this place in sky considered the ground as delicately as she could with a single hoof. It was a task on her body as well as mind to stay perfectly balanced on one hoof with her wings extended in the ready position.

Looking up at the sky, she began to remember the old stories of the pegasi, how the old geezers had said that when one passes on, they transcend the sky and join the stars in eternal peace and bliss. While Rainbow had never really paid much heed to such words, for some reason she always wanted to believe her mother was there, watching her from the night sky.

Rainbow stayed in complete balance for a while, finding a point of amusement that all her aerial dance moves had translated well into the life of an assassin. *She never saw me once perform*, a thought came to her as she steadied her breathing, *or did she? She was an assassin, maybe she was watching from the cover of shadows. What if she was always watching and I never knew it?*

Now she would perform for her mother and for all the stars in the sky because she wanted to, not because some fussy busybody wanted to collect some bits. With a flourish of her wings, she bowed her head to no pony in particular before closing her eyes. Even after so many years, Rainbow still remembered the precise movements, the way her wings and hooves would move in tandem to music. *That what was missing*, she thought as she looked at her audience of stars, *music. I'll make do without.*

Jump, flap, and twirl then land. Rainbow paused, taking a breath to remember the next move. As she opened her eyes, the stars in the sky began to move with a cloud of dust forming overhead. She stopped her pose, eyeing the newly-formed cloud carefully as it became a much larger thunderhead, moving ever closer to her position.

Without warning a bolt of chromatic lightning struck near Rainbow, the roar of thunder echoing in the empty sky. Rainbow's heart skipped a beat from the display of force, but did not move or flinch. She was not going to be intimidated by a storm. She had survived all the storms life had brought to her. She would survive this.

Another bolt of lightning struck the same place twice, this time leaving a pegasus mare seemingly made from constellations in its wake, much like the earth pony Hauberk. The pegasus looked at Rainbow for a minute before her lips curled into a smirk.

"Hey hotshot," she said, turning her back on the assassin and taking to the sky, "Think you can keep up?" Before Rainbow could even think of a retort, the cosmic flyer bolted into the night sky, faster than any pegasus she had ever seen.

Faster than any pegasus except her. Gritting her teeth and flapping her wings, Rainbow launched herself after her new-found rival. She was

enjoying this trial for finally being something she was great at: flying. Once she caught up to the pegasus, she would do something about finding her friends. Or celebrate that she was still the fastest, most awesome flyer in the world.

If only catching up to the flying star pony was easier. Her opponent was good, real good. Rainbow Dash was better though, and she was going to show it. With a forceful flap from her strong wings, she began to ascend higher into the sky, still keeping the distance relatively the same. It was a basic manoeuvre for closing the gap, but as long as the pony involved in this trial kept going straight, Rainbow's plan would work.

Once Rainbow could see the pegasus moving just like a shooting star in the sky, she tilted in midair and gave another powerful thrust of her wings. Even though it appeared to be an endless expanse of night, there was still a "ground" which meant there was still gravity to help her build up velocity. With the right angle achieved, she nosedived down towards her fellow aerial racer, picking up impressive speed and closing the gap between them.

Until the other pegasus halted right on the spot, turning around in a nonchalant manner as Rainbow grew ever closer. *Pull up! Pull up!* instinct screamed at her as she flew ever closer. Not wanting to collide with the pegasus or invisible ground, she twisted her body upwards, streaming past the head of her adversary and into an elongated loop in the air. As she landed, frustration crept into her voice as Rainbow wanted nothing more than to deride the other pegasus for stopping their race prematurely.

"What's the big... idea..." Rainbow stopped, the words failing to come out as she looked at the mare much closer than when they she first appeared in that flash of lightning. This had to be some cruel trick by the temple, or another Fade illusion. For some reason though, Rainbow didn't care what it was besides what she was seeing now.

"Mom!" Without a second thought, Rainbow spurred herself forward, nuzzling her mother's mane like she did when she was a filly. A part of her was surprised that the spirit of her mother felt so real, just like back when she was still alive. The other part didn't care; this was her mom, and Rainbow was given another chance to be with her.

A creeping shame came over Rainbow as she pressed herself close to the apparition. "I'm so sorry," she said in barely a whisper, "I became an assassin. Just like you. I ruined everything by being something you didn't want me to be."

Her mother hushed her, stroking the daughter's mane with a tender hoof. Rainbow had never felt as safe as she did now. She didn't want this to end, though she knew it was only the magic of the tomb that had brought her mother back. Eventually, the reunion would have to end.

"You are exactly what I had hoped for, my little Rainbow," her mother said, "You've grown up to be strong, beautiful, and most of all free. Free to choose your own path in life. That is all I ever wanted."

"But I became a killer, a Wonderbolt under Reinhardt, not the heroes I thought they were..."

"And you broke away from them on your own," replied her mother, "You chose to ask for help from new friends, who accepted you. The same friends you leap into danger for, despite not knowing them very long. They are wonderful, Rainbow, and they see you in the same light. You are not a butcher like I was. You are a free mare. You choose where to go in life."

She was right. Rainbow did have freedom, something not a lot of pegasi could claim. She had no debts to a landlord, no oaths to a noble, or any other bind on her hooves or her word. Maybe the Wonderbolts would hunt her down, but unless their names were Soarin' or Spitfire, she had little reason to worry. Rainbow also had her friends, who she could count on, just like they counted on her.

They stayed in an embrace for a time, the cyan pegasus not wanting this moment to drift away. However, the mother soon let go, moving away from her daughter and taking slow deliberate steps back.

"I miss you," Rainbow said. Her mother nodded as the stars that made up her body drifted away.

"I will always love you, my little Rainbow." With those words the stars that made up her body separated into a stream, flowing back into the night sky.

Eyes wide, Rainbow took off from the ground and flew towards them, hot tears streaming from her face.

“I love you Mom! Always!” Rainbow Dashed found herself yelling at all the stars in the skies as she flew, until a doorway of pure light opened on her path. Narrowing her eyes, Rainbow was ready to meet the next challenge head on. She was free to do so.

Pinkie was ready. She narrowed her eyes, sticking out her tongue as she bent forward, ready to spring into action at the next pass. All she had to do was prepare for the right moment to leap. A meteor had caught her eye when she first found herself in this place so much like the clear night sky.

There it is! With a bright smile, the energetic earth equine gave a hop, skip and a mighty jump, bounding into the expanse of space and right onto the speeding meteor. The landing was rough and it took a moment to find two craters for her hooves to fit in, but soon enough Pinkie was holding on tight and loving every minute of this stellar ride.

“Weeeee!” Pinkie’s screams echoed throughout the cosmos, with the stars themselves appearing to cheer her on. If this was a trial to find the Mane of Stars, then this was easy and fun! *Maybe the next trial will be a candy eating contest,* thought Pinkie as she continued to sail through the sky, *Ooh! Or maybe we have to make the spirit of Luna a delicious cake! I hope this place has an oven and ingredients!*

This was fun and all, but somewhere inside Pinkie knew she had to get on with the trial and find her friends. They could come back here and ride the meteors just like she was! “Here trial, come here trial,” Pinkie called out, looking left and right for something in the star-filled sky, “I just want to complete you so I can be with my friends!”

The stars seemed to oblige her, forming the shape of a round constellation in the sky with a trail of stars flowing underneath it. With a push from her hooves, Pinkie moved the meteor towards the star pattern, watching as it became smaller and smaller the closer she became. As the meteor turned around the shape, Pinkie saw that the stars had taken the form of a round, full balloon.

“Just like my cutie mark!” said Pinkie as she moved the meteor to be under the starry party decoration. Balloons were rare to find in Equestria, as the materials had to be imported from so many different regions, so even a single balloon filled Pinkie’s heart with joy. She did not expect the balloon to pop, and she really did not expect another pony like Hauberk to fall from the remains and land next to her on her meteor transit.

Pinkie’s very loud gasp was enough to display her shock at the earth pony who was standing firm and still on the rapidly moving meteor. The flying space rock halted in mid air, leaving Pinkie and her new guest completely still.

“Papa!” Getting on top of the meteor, Pinkie grasped her father in a tight hug, the brightest smile on her face since even she could not recall. “I missed you so much! Mama and Inky and Blinky miss you too!”

“Pinkamina Diane Pie, I missed you as well.” Despite the words, the use of the full name brought Pinkie to full attention and silence. Papa Pie only used the full name ultimatum when he had something important to say. She sat on her haunches, eyes wide and attentive as Papa Pie smoked from his pipe, also made of stars.

“Now, Pinkamina,” said Papa Pie as he looked down on his daughter with a stern eye, “I do worry that you have lost your way. You do know where your mother and sisters escaped to, don’t you?”

Pinkie wanted to turn away from her father’s gaze, but couldn’t. Not while his voice was filled with command, like it always had. Instead her hair fell flat around her head, the colour of her mane and coat darkening.

“I’m scared, Papa,” Pinkie said, “I’m scared that if I go, I won’t find them. Or if I do, they’ll hate me for leaving them, or what if something really bad happened to them! That’s why... That’s why I forgot...”

“I believe the rocks did not just make you forget, my dear,” continued Papa, “I believe you are afraid that if you go to them, they may not be there to meet you, having met a terrible fate. Believe me now when I say your mother misses you dearly and wants you to find them. All you have to do is say where they left.”

They left to where Mama Pie first lived before marrying Papa and sailing across the ocean to Equestria. They left for the place where Mama was born, the city state in the Free Plain and home to the Mustang ponies.

“Geldwall,” Pinkie said, “They went to Geldwall in the Free Plains, across the ocean. But Papa Pie! I can’t go there now!”

“I know you can’t,” said Papa, “You still have a very important task to do.”

“That’s right! My friends still need me!”

“That’s right,” returned Papa, this time with that small smile that spoke of his large heart, “You’ve made wonderful friends on your journey, Pinkamina, and they still need you. After all, if the ponyspawn are not stopped, nowhere in the world will be safe including the Free Plains.”

Pinkie’s colour returned as vibrant as ever. Her papa was giving her the knowledge that Mama Pie and her sisters were still safe and well, if only very far away. He was also giving her his blessing to continue the journey.

“Give your friends all you can,” he said as his form began to splinter into the stars that made his body, “I will always watch over you, Pinkamina.”

“Bye bye Papa Pie!” Pinkie shouted to the trailing stream of stars, “Pies forever till the end! Always! FOREVER!”

With a smile bubbling over her features and a white door way leading ever deeper into the temple, Pinkie bounded over to entrance to the next trial, looking forward to seeing her friends again.

One more spin on a super-fun space rock wouldn’t hurt...

Twilight was right where she always wanted to be: amidst the very stars in the skies that she watched eagerly every night. From this point she could discern all of the constellations from her books: Canis Major, Orion, Andromeda and others. The purity of the night sky was wondrous.

The memory of where she was before entering this open sky caused Twilight to snap back from her wonder. She was supposed to find the Mane of Stars and now find her friends, who were nowhere to be seen.

If I find Polaris, I can keep going north and hopefully find somepony, Twilight thought as she looked up at the sky. Then she looked left, and right, until finally looking down beneath her. With a heavy sigh, she resigned that line of thinking; how could she manoeuvre through the stars when they were all around her?

As Twilight looked around, dozens of stars began to glow brighter than the rest, swirling in the sky as they formed a new constellation that she was not familiar with. Lines of light formed between the stars, until they took on the shape of a triangle. Twilight cocked her head, trying to make sense of the triangle in the sky, noting how the triangle was getting ever closer to her.

As the triangle descended and its form much more defined, the magical mare could see that it wasn't a simple three pointed shape, but rather a fully realized object with a slight curve. *A shield*, Twilight guessed as the star object fell to the "floor" with a metallic clang, despite the lack of floor or any indication it was metal at all. The shield was similar in size and shape to the grey shield that made up her cutie mark after the Joining, with even a small cluster of stars in the center to make the image complete.

"What are you trying to show me?" Twilight wondered aloud, looking down on the shield, "I know I'm a Warden. I know I have a responsibility to fight against the ponyspawn. That's why I'm here; to find the Mane of Stars and heal Arl Macintosh so he can help us."

The star spangled shield rose up, floating before Twilight as if staring at her. The stars in the center split from the main body, shooting past her head as the shield split into two perfect copies, taking their places parallel to each other. The stars then began to take the shape of a pony, with the shields acting as cutie marks. When the form of an earth pony was finished, Twilight could hardly believe her eyes.

"Duncan? This isn't another trick, like in the Fade, is it?"

"I assure you, Twilight Sparkle, this is no trick," said the spirit of Duncan, "I will bring no deception to you or harm. Indeed, this is my only opportunity to shed the light I could not in life. I do not plan to squander it."

Duncan simply sat on his haunches, motioning with a hoof for Twilight to join him. The pair of Wardens sat in silence for a while, Twilight still stunned that the elder Warden was there before her, and not another Fade demon taking his shape. Something about the way he spoke and acted made her feel comfortable and safe.

"I am sorry for many things in my life," Duncan began, "Many, many things. I am sorry for the deaths of Digger and Ser Magni. I am sorry for leading the Wardens into a foolish attack with a foolish king. I am sorry for taking away your life and giving you and Applejack a burden no pony should ever bear."

"Duncan, don't apologize," Twilight said, interrupting Duncan before he could go on, "I know what it means to be a Warden. We do what we must."

"An excuse used for centuries, since the dawn of the ponyspawn." Duncan sighed, looking up at the stars wistfully, "I wish there was a better way, but there is not. Only with an army can you have the numbers to face the ponyspawn. Only with the Elements of Harmony by your side can you expose the heart of the archdemon. Only a Grey Warden can end the Blight. These are truths that are so terrible and so real, that we hid them from the world. We hid them from our own fellow Wardens. Now you pay for our secrecy."

"I don't know what or where the Elements of Harmony are," said Twilight, "I also don't know why only a Warden is the only one who can end the Blight."

"We do not normally tell recruits this, for their own safety and sanity," Duncan began to explain, "It is true I needed you and Applejack to collect ponyspawn blood for use in the Joining, and I already was in possession of the lyrium that would make the concoction stable. There is also a third ingredient, one more terrible than the rest: the blood of an Archdemon."

Twilight turned away from Duncan, both in shock and horror at what she had just learned. Now things were making sense; the ability to sense when

ponyspawn were near, the unnatural power in defeating them, hearing their heartbeats, and of course the nightmare with the Archdemon itself.

Already she could feel her heart thunder in her chest as Twilight turned to Duncan, disbelief stealing the words that should have been said. She didn't know if she was supposed to yell or scream at the slain Warden before her, only that she was feeling sick and the endless night sky she was in was not making things any better.

"The Imperium learned too late that conventional means could not kill an Archdemon," Duncan continued, "Nor could any spell out of their expansive library. When the Archdemon is slain, it will revive in only a few scant hours in the body of another ponyspawn, fully capable of continuing its slaughter. Only the First Walker, the First Warden who had consumed the blood of the Archdemon with greed in his heart knew he had the power to kill the monster."

"I did not anticipate the betrayal by Loghoof. I had thought if we had won the battle the Archdemon would appear. I thought we had more time to teach you the Warden ways. I am but a fool."

Twilight shook her head, placing one hoof on the shoulder of the starry apparition. Duncan was only doing his part as a Warden; no pony could foresee Loghoof quitting the field and the loss of Ostequus. There was no reason to be angry at the dead.

"Duncan," Twilight said, eliciting the long past earth pony to look into her eyes, "I understand now. I understand why the Wardens need the blood, and the secrecy. I was just angry, and scared. I didn't know what to expect or believe anymore. Now I do. I am a Grey Warden, because of you, Applejack and everything I have learned from the journey."

"I also have wonderful friends who are with me until the bitter end. No matter what, I know I can rely on them against any horrors this world will throw at us. We will unite the ponies of Equestria, and find the Elements of Harmony, wherever they are."

Duncan seemed satisfied with the answer, nodding solemnly as the stars that made up his spiritual body begin to drift back into the night sky. He

bowed his head slightly, before dissipating entirely, his voice carrying through like an echo.

“I believe in you, Twilight Sparkle. May the Sisters light your path, now and always.”

A bright light flashed only a furlong away, until it took the form of an archway leading back to the tomb. With a revived smile on her face, Twilight galloped towards the door of light with a proud thought on her mind. Her heart beat not with the blood of monsters, but with the blood of heroes. The blood of Grey Wardens.

With a loud yawn, Twilight opened her eyes and looked around to find herself in a plain stone corridor surrounded by her friends, who were only just waking up themselves. As she rubbed the sleep from her eyes, alarms rang in her head as memories of where she had just been came rushing to mind. Wasn't she just in an open night sky conversing with the spirit of Duncan? What about that white light doorway she had ran through? Could it had all been a dream or another illusion of the Fade?

The rest of the party seemed just as wary, as they looked around the stone hall with looks of confusion or frustration. Many asked the same questions Twilight was thinking, but the lavender unicorn had no answer for them.

“Well, we're still in the temple, so that means none of us failed the trial,” Twilight said aloud, for her own comfort as much as the rest of the party.

“Look here,” said Fluttershy as she pointed a hoof at some markings on the archway in the center. The Chantry sister floated near the words, blowing away the dust with every gust from her flaps until the ancient writing was clear. Just as the carved text in the Hall of the Elements shifted into messages and riddles, the writings shifted in the common tongue, spelling out the words “Corridor of Night's Reflection”.

“So it was another trial,” said Applejack, though her voice did not speak with the same irritable quality it usually held when she was being kept from her goals.

“Best. Trial. Ever.” Rainbow seemed to have a much brighter smile as she lead the way into the next room, with the others also appearing more confident. Twilight smiled as well, feeling stronger than ever, her head not as muddled with negative thoughts on their journey. The sight of Rarity however brought that uplifting feeling crashing straight down.

The white unicorn looked haphazard, her eyes wide and her body shaking. Rarity looked completely terrified, but of what Twilight could only assume with a very educated guess: Flemeth. “What did you see, Rarity?” she asked, only to have those frightened eyes close shut, with Rarity trying to calm herself down and appear in control.

“I’m fine, dear,” she lied, with Twilight keeping a sceptical gaze on her fellow sorceress, “I didn’t see anything important. Nothing significant at all. We should move on, no time like the present, chop chop!”

As much as Twilight wanted to continue her inquiry, Rarity had a point. They were getting closer to the Mane of Stars, and time was of the essence. Together they joined their friends who had stopped, waiting for them to rejoin the party.

They arrived only to find that the path lead to a dead end. They were in a new room, this one circular and wide, with the path continuing into a large hall filled with statues and murals waiting for them on the other side. However, the path from the Corridor of Night’s Reflection ended over a deep abyss, with no bridge to get across. On their side there were several panels on the floor covered in runes, but for what purpose they did not know.

“How are we going to get across this?” said Applejack as she looked down the pit. Twilight followed suit, staring down into the darkness that did not seem to end. Her staff glowed with power, sending a small bolt of bright violet energy down into the pit to see how deep it went. The bolt travelled far until it too was consumed by darkness.

Rainbow Dash scoffed at the chasm, flaring her wings wide. “You landlocked ponies wait here,” she said as she dug into her bag and pulled out a length of rope, “I’ll just fly right over and we can make our own bridge.”

With a strong jump, Rainbow took to the air only to watch as her wings forcibly closed well over the pit. She yelped in surprise as gravity took over, only to be pulled to safety by Applejack, who had her teeth clenched around the cyan pegasus' tail. Once Rainbow was back and safe, Twilight looked to Fluttershy, who also had her wings locked tight, every effort to move them met with failure.

It must be the effect of a spell, Twilight thought as she looked over the empty expanse to the room across. It would be too easy to simply fly across; this was another trial, one they had to figure out if they were going to reach the tomb. Above the passage to the final room was a message that read "Bridge of Faith".

"Split up everypony," Twilight said, "Search the room for anything suspicious. I'm sure there is a way to make a bridge and cross into the next room. We just need to find it."

Though they looked every crack and fissure in the stonework. There was no obvious way to make a bridge. Twilight tried to focus her magic into a spell to help them cross, only to watch as whatever spell she channelled fizzled out before coming to fruition.

"We came so far," Fluttershy said, despair in her voice, "Why would the builders make a trial we can't solve? Oooh... I wish I knew how to help." Without noticing, the meek pegasus stepped on one of the floor runes, causing a large square block of stone to form over the bottomless pit as if from thin air. With a squeak, Fluttershy stepped away from the rune, the party watching as the block disappeared as quickly as it came.

"Wait, that's it!" announced Twilight as she pointed at the other floor runes, "We need to step on the runes and make the bridge. Fluttershy, step on that rune again." As her friend complied, Twilight looked to another floor panel and stepped on it, causing another block to form. This one was transparent however, a mere ghost of the first block.

Rainbow Dash, Rarity, took their place on other runes, causing more translucent slabs of stone to form making a somewhat proper bridge to the other side. Pinkie bounded onto the first block, bouncing up and down as she waited for the next block. "I can see another floor runey on the other side!"

"If we can make it to that rune, maybe it will make the full bridge," Twilight said in estimation. It was the best bet, and the likely the answer to the trial. Applejack stepped on another rune next to Fluttershy, causing the second block to solidify. Pinkie bounded onto the second block, stopping only to wave to her friends.

Fluttershy made an audible gulp as she stepped off her rune to head to the next one, yelping in horror as the first block disappeared entirely. The rest of the party's eyes balked, unable to do anything as Fluttershy stepped back on the rune to see the block not return. Only Pinkie remained undeterred.

"Don't worry so much, girls," she said, bouncing again as she waited for the next block to form, "it's part of the test. I know you won't let me fall."

Ever so slowly did Fluttershy creep onto the next rune with the third block becoming complete thanks to the magic in the room. Pinkie crossed over to the next segment, waving a hoof signalling that everything was all right. Twilight could not tell what was worse; that her friend was hovering over a bottomless pit and the first instance of failure on their part would cause her to fall to her doom, or that the pink earth pony was completely undisturbed by that fact.

As Applejack stepped off her rune and onto the next, the second block of stone disappeared just the same as the first. A long, deep groan echoed throughout the room. "What was that?" Fluttershy said as she looked around, fright painted clearly on her face. Twilight looked down the pit again, only to see large discs of blades slowly emerge from their stone sheaths. Several of these discs began to reveal themselves, only to begin spinning, their sharp teeth glinting in the light from the crystals overhead.

This is insane! Twilight thought as she looked back up to Pinkie, who either did not notice the spinning discs of death or simply did not care. She was two segments away from the other end of the bridge. The unicorn took a deep breath before nodding to Applejack, who took her place on the next rune over, causing the fourth block to become complete.

As Pinkie made her way to the next block, Fluttershy's eyes were filled with tears as they streamed uncontrollably down her face. "I can't do this," she

said, "What if something goes wrong? What if I step on the wrong rune? She'll fall, and I don't want Pinkie to die. I'm scared!"

"We're all scared, sugarcube," said Applejack, "Well, except for Pinkie, but that's because she believes in us. So we gotta believe in her. We'll get her across as safe as an apple in a pie."

Despite her fear, Fluttershy was able to step off her rune and step on the next marked panel. As expected, the fifth and final block solidified, allowing Pinkie access to the other side. What was not anticipated was that the slab under Pinkie's hooves would vanish into nothingness, leaving the alchemist pony suspended in mid air.

All at once they shouted their fear that somehow they had failed and doomed their friend to the pits below, Fluttershy crying out the loudest as the block removed itself from existence. Pinkie looked back with a confused eye as she did not plummet into the pit, only hopping from the invisible block and onto the final stone segment, then onto the rune on the other side. The rune began to glow, and all the stone blocks reformed into a perfect bridge across.

Fluttershy fainted as the rest of the party breathed a sigh of relief. Twilight could still feel her heart thud in her chest as she watched the block disappear. "You silly fillies," Pinkie said as they made their way across the pit, the buzz saws having returned to the stone whence they came, "Didn't you read what the sign said? I knew you would never let me fall."

"Bridge of Faith indeed," Twilight muttered as she looked back up at the wording of the trial. All they needed was to have faith in the words of the Guardian, but more importantly, faith in each other to not let the brave pony who chose to cross fall. She was grateful that Pinkie seemed to have endless faith in her friends. With the path now open to them, the party advanced into the final chamber where their goal awaited.

Nothing had prepared anypony for what they were about to see in the Tomb of Luna. The walls were decorated in intricate frescos that no mortal hoof could ever appear to accomplish. Pristine statues and effigies of both Luna and Celestia lined the hall, each appearing in full glory with wings outspread and faces filled with triumph. The ceiling was painted pitch black,

with the stars being made from only the largest and most dazzling diamonds. The moon was a great mosaic of pearls, cascading the room in luminescent light.

Waiting for them in the center was the coffin made from silver, adorned with ancient Imperium text and partly covered in a black funeral shroud, still whole and unchanged after a thousand years. A large statue of Luna made from obsidian kept watch over the coffin, the glassy surface reflecting the light from the marble idol of Celestia above her, holding an orb of pure light at the tip of her horn. From the orb a beam of light flowed onto the moon, giving the celestial body its light.

The true tomb was a marvel of artisanship and magic the like Twilight had never dreamed. It was a shame that such a temple had to be hidden from eyes, but she understood why it had to be hidden from dragon-worshipping desecrators. It was odd, however, that in this room of magnificent art, in the middle of the room was a large wooden pole, surrounded by kindling and smaller logs, as if waiting to be used for a bonfire.

Applejack did not wait to take in the sight, rearing up on her hind in a victory pose before galloping off towards the silver sarcophagus. "We did it! We did it!" she cheered as she ran, "We found the Mane! Now let's nab us a strand or two and head 'em on back to Red Apple!"

Before the templar Warden could make it to the reliquary, a wall of fire erupted between her and the coffin, the flames stretching out towards Applejack, who managed to skid to a halt in time. The others gasped as the wall of flame stretched all the way to the ceiling, high enough to prevent any pegasus from simply flying over. Using magic to cross the fire or put it out was not an option, as any attempt at spellwork was quickly silenced by the powerful temple enchantments.

"Horse apples!" Applejack cursed as she aimed her anger at the fiery barrier, "We're so close! Why is the temple doin' this now!"

"It must be the last trial," Twilight said, "We have to complete it to get to the Mane."

"Well, what are we waiting for?" Applejack began looking around, seeking out the clues to the next trial just as the party had done for the rooms

previous. Twilight shook her head to clear her own frustrations away; they had travelled and suffered far for the Mane, yet now there was another obstacle.

Pinkie Pie called for the others, who quickly left their search to join her. When they arrived, the pink pony was pointing a hoof at the ground in front of the wooden pillar. Her mane was flat and her colours dull, but they all soon understood why when they read the message left for any who sought the Mane.

“No,” said Rainbow Dash as she looked down at the words, “No. No! We can’t do this! We can’t!”

“This is asking too much!” Pinkie sobbed, “How can it expect us to make this sort of decision?”

Twilight could hardly believe the words on the ground herself. She felt her throat dry up as she read the words over and over, looking on in fear at her friends, then back to the fires protecting the Mane.

*“As she was given to the flame in sacrifice,
So too must a sacrifice be given to feed the everlasting hunger of fire.”*

The final trial demanded a sacrifice to be burned at the stake much like Luna was at the fall of the Imperium. How could they make such a choice, though? After all they been through, one was going to be executed just like Luna. Who was going to choose to be burned alive, and how were they going to live with themselves after?

We do what we must.

“No,” Twilight muttered as Duncan’s words echoed, “We can’t make this sort of decision. We can’t just stand back and watch as one of us chooses to die.”

“I will go,” Rarity said as she stepped towards the stake, “Flemeth has made her intentions well known. I’d rather die by my own choice than be forced to lose everything I hold dear to that witch.”

“Rarity, please!” Fluttershy openly wept as she tried to pull Rarity away from the stake waiting for the sacrifice, “Don’t do this!”

“This is really generous of you, Rarity, but we will find another way!” Twilight called out, but the white unicorn shrugged everything aside. “We can stop Flemeth, just like how we can find another way to get the Mane of Stars and save Macintosh and Applebloom!”

“No. You. CAN. NOT!” Rarity screamed back, her horn glowing bright with magic as the same fearful eyes returned, “Sometimes there isn’t another way Twilight! Sometimes there is only one way. Macintosh will die from incurable poison. Applebloom will remain possessed forever. And you cannot stop Flemeth! You have no *inkling* to the kind of power the Mare of the Mire holds in a single hoof!”

“I am doing this for all of you! Please, don’t make this even harder than it has to be. You are all my dearest friends. I don’t want to see you hurt. Just remember me.” Twilight yelled in objection, only to find her movements to become sluggish. She looked down, finding that she, Rainbow, Pinkie, and Fluttershy were trapped in the glyph of slowness, a spell Rarity had cast during her fit. Twilight did not know an appropriate counterspell, and could only watch as Rarity continued towards the pyre.

Before Rarity could take her place on the sacrificial stake, she came face to face with Applejack. The two stared each other in the eye, with Rarity fighting back tears and Applejack seemingly incredibly calm, almost stone like.

“Can’t let you do that, Rarity,” Applejack said flatly, “Macintosh and Applebloom would never forgive themselves knowing another pony died for their sakes. Even a complete stranger.”

Rarity simply narrowed her eyes, her horn glowing once again from the surge of magical power. Her spellwork fizzled out, however, as Applejack continued to stare her down with the black, anti-magic infused eyes of the templar order. The glyph the unicorn had cast had been dispelled as well, releasing the ponies from its grip.

Twilight barely managed to say thanks to Applejack when the blonde earth pony turned towards the wall of fire, her eyes still black and draining the

magic from the unicorns. "You tell Macintosh and Applebloom that ah love em to death, ya hear? Just like ah love y'all. Goodbye."

Without warning Applejack dashed towards the silver coffin, ignoring the calls of her friends as she ran, her hat falling off her head and drifting to Twilight's hooves. With a shout, the lavender unicorn tried to pull her fellow Warden away, but the anti-magic ceased all her attempts and casting spells. Rainbow Dash sped off to tackle Applejack, only to be met with a sharp buck to the chest which sent the cyan pegasus reeling.

Applejack did not hesitate as she leapt into the flames. The fire was already scorching her skin, leaving ugly burns in their wake as the fires first consumed the ribbons used to tie her mane and tail, then the long hairs themselves were ignited. With both hooves pressed against the side of the silver coffin, Applejack grunted as she lifted the heavy case up and tossed it through the wall of fire.

The coffin for the relic landed with a loud *thud* as it hit the ground. The wall of fire did not die immediately, still lashing Applejack's hide with burning tongues as the flames gradually weakened. The earth pony could say nothing as she collapsed; her body a cruel, scorched mockery of what it once was. Covered in horrible burns, she laid sprawled against the ground, looking up as her friends surrounded her, ignoring the silver coffin altogether. She wheezed with laboured breaths as she tried to move weakly, opening and closing her eyes while Pinkie struggled to pour what seemed to be every poultice she had with her over her friend, to no avail.

"The Trials have ended," a familiar voice cried out, "You have all done admirably. The Mane of Stars is yours to take a strand from." Hauberk descended from the diamond filled sky, until he landed next to the silver coffin, a smile on his face.

Twilight's face contorted with rage as Hauberk beamed at them. "This was your idea of a trial!?" she yelled as her eyes and horn glowed in unison of power unrestrained by tempered emotions, "Take a good look at the cost that was paid! No relic, no goddess is worth this!"

Hauberk looked at the body of Applejack then back to Twilight. She was not alone, as the other ponies had turned their fury towards the ancient Guardian. "She is courageous," he said, "She leaped into fire she knew she

would not survive to protect you all from the pain of having to choose which would be sacrificed. You have all learned sacrifice from this trial, a truly painful lesson. A lesson the Walkers of the Grey know all too well, though not even young Applejack understands the extent of their sacrifice.”

“A thousand years ago, a group of ponies used blood magic to call on Celestia and Luna to save them from the tyranny of the Old Ones. It was not their magic that broke through to the sisters, but instead the act of sacrifice which spurred Luna to action, as the two were unable to cross into our realm so long as the Old Ones exist, just as they cannot return now as the Old Ones have become the Archdemons. To give the ultimate sacrifice must be understood, just as it must be understood by friends who resist.”

Hauberk tilted his head towards the jewel-encrusted sky, his own eyes glowing as a single diamond fell from the ceiling and onto Applejack. The diamond then appeared to melt into the burned body of the earth pony, only for the entire form to glow as well, until a whole and healthy Warden was left in the wake of the powerful healing spell.

“Let no pony sacrifice themselves in the Sister’s names ever again,” Hauberk said as Applejack looked around, utterly confused at what had just happened, “My long vigil has ended. Ponies worthy have found the Mane of Stars and have learned the lessons of the trials. You may all take a single strand from the Mane, and know that Luna’s light will heal all ailments, no matter how severe. The way down the mountain is clear. Return to those who need you, heroes. Save your world. May the light of the Sun and the Moon guide your path, forever and always.”

The Guardian of the Temple bowed to the party before dissipating into the stars that made his body, floating away to the painted sky above until the stars became encrusted diamonds. Her anger abated, Twilight gave a small thanks to Hauberk, and a small hope that he would find peace in the next life.

“Well, uh,” Applejack said sheepishly, looking around at her friends, “Ah guess ah really don’t know what to...”

SMACK. Twilight looked at the shocked expression of her fellow Warden after delivering the strongest hoof-smack she had ever given. *Granted it*

was my first hoof-smack but what they say, she thought as she grabbed Applejack in a tight embrace.

“Don’t do anything so stupid ever again,” Twilight said, breathing hard as she held Applejack tight. Her friend was about to say something when Rarity followed suit and delivered her own hoof-smack, though it was more of a light tap more than anything.

“I would have never forgiven you if you had truly perished,” Rarity bawled, “You stupid, silly pony!”

SMACK. “I’m sorry,” Fluttershy said, though her voice caught between gasps of air, “I was so worried, so scared. Don’t do that again. Please.”

SMACK. “How could you do something so incredibly crazy!” shouted Pinkie who had her face pressed against Applejack’s, though her mane had resumed its poofy nature, “Acrobats on tightropes juggling grenades, that’s crazy! Oatmeal is crazy! This was crazy! You’re supposed to be the sensible one! And you obviously forgot about my super duper party I’m going to have after all this is done, because you did something so crazy like that and the whole thing will be ruined if you or anypony else couldn’t be there because they did something so incredibly crazy!”

SMACK! “What they said!” Rainbow Dash hollered, even though something told Twilight that Rainbow just wanted a turn to smack Applejack as much as to send a message. The orange earth pony rubbed her temple where she was struck gingerly before small giggles escaped her mouth. Then more laughing as she pulled all her friends into a tight hug, saying her apologies along with her fit of joy.

Once they had all calmed down, they all turned towards the silver coffin which somehow returned to its pedestal besides the hooves of the obsidian statue of Luna. They had faced the challenge of the mountain and completed the trials of the Gauntlet. They had found a legend amongst danger. The Mane of Stars was found.