

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 its 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 your 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 were 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 Flemeth's 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 enchanter's 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 its 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 enchanters 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, Hornshield 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 it is 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.