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. 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.

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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 muddied 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 returning, “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 to 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 hay,* 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.